Egil, the Viking Poet

NEW APPROACHES TO *EGIL'S SAGA*

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Edited by Laurence de Looze, Jón Karl Helgason, Russell Poole, and Torfi H. Tulinius

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11 Bloody Runes: The Transgressive Poetics of *Egil's Saga*[1]

JÓN KARL HELGASON

Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism – to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity.

Georges Bataille

Have you ever wondered how the drink of poetry really tastes? According to Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, it was initially a mixture of spittle of the Æsir-gods and the Vanir. A man named Kvasir was made from this liquid, and after he was killed mead was brewed from his blood and honey. Odin later drank the mead and spewed it out again. He also sent "some of the mead backwards, … the rhymester's share" (Sturluson 1987, 64: "sendi aptr suman mjǫðinn, … skáldfífla *hlut," Sturluson 1998, 1:79), but the better part of it would still have gone through the stages of spittle, blood, and vomit before skilled poets could complete the process of brewing by delivering their wonderful poems.

It has been argued that Snorri shaped this narrative in accordance with his own taste and purposes when he made it a part of the *Edda* (cf. Frank 1981). All the same, his account is an interesting description of the nature of poetic language, crossing the borders between what is pure and impure, creative and destructive. From that perspective, the tale of the poetic mead may have inspired another Icelandic medieval text, that of *Egil's Saga*, which also contains repeated images of blood, mead, and vomit. The goal of this paper is to examine the transgressive poetics of the saga and the impact that it may have on its audience.

The topic suggested itself to me when I heard of a young Icelandic college student who felt sick and had to be excused from class after having heard her teacher read a chapter from the saga. I had not had this experience. On the

contrary, I felt that *Egil's Saga* was an intriguing and masterfully constructed narrative. These different responses puzzled me for some time. How could the same literary text be a source of pleasure for one person and completely repulsive for another? In an attempt to deal with that question, I appropriate ideas from the works of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Georges Bataille. It seems that all of them could have agreed that the scenes of *Egil's Saga* were designed to make a strong and sometimes conflicting impact on the minds and even the bodies of its readers. But most probably they would have disagreed on what images and emotions are in play.

I

In his article "Das Unheimliche" (1919) Sigmund Freud defines *the uncanny* as that domain of the horrific which can be traced to the past: "An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impressions, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud 1966, 55). At the outset, Freud discusses the paradoxical sense of the German concept *das Heimliche*, which refers at the same time to that which is familiar and foreign, mysterious and horrific, even something that has been revealed but should have been hidden. He refers to various examples from the world of fiction to illustrate his point, making a note of the fact, however, that "in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life" (1966, 56). The reason for this, Freud explains, is that through their unusual access to our minds as readers, writers are capable of manipulating our emotions with various descriptions of the uncanny.

The uncanny examples Freud refers to are of various natures, quite a few of which are relevant to *Egil's Saga*. Descriptions of blinded eyes, amputation, and decapitation are all likely to trigger uncanny emotions, in particular if a hand is cut close to the wrist or when amputated limbs show signs of life (1966, 49–50). In *Egil's Saga* we are told that Egil gouged out with his finger one of Armod Beard's eyes, "leaving it hanging on his cheek" (158: "svá at úti lá á kinninni," 228). Egil also chopped off the leg of Ljot the Pale in a duel on the island of Valdero (205: 141) and the leg of another adversary on the island of Saudoy (112; 76–7). He almost decapitated Berg-Onund (168: 116) and in one of his many skaldic verses he boasted: "we made bloody bodies / slump dead by city gates" (84: "létum blóðga búka / í borghliðum sœfask," 121). Early in the narrative, when Egil's uncle Thorolf was raiding a farm in Norway, a man

named Thorgeir ran to a wooden fence surrounding the farm, grabbed one of the posts, and vaulted over it. One of Thorolf's men who was standing nearby, "swung his sword at Thorgeir and chopped off the hand that was holding onto the post" (32: "sveiflaði til sverðinu eptir Þorgeiri, ok kom á hǫndina og tók af við garðstaurinn," 48). The one-handed Thorgeir was still able to escape into the woods. Last but not least, the dispersal of the human body is celebrated in a verse that Skallagrim, Egil's father, speaks after he and his father Kveldulf have killed Hallvard Travel-hard and fifty of his crew: "Hallvard's corpse flew / in pieces into the sea" (47: "flugu hǫggvin hræ / Hallvarðs á sæ," 70).

Another uncanny element that can be applied to *Egil's Saga* is the idea of a double reality. In his article, Freud discusses the literary tradition of the *Doppelgänger* as well as the effect that repetitions of the same circumstances, characteristics, or even the same names in successive generations can have on us as readers (1966, 39–40). In the saga we come across the characterizations of Thorolf, the son of Kveldulf, on the one hand, and of Thorolf, the son of Skallagrim, on the other. The former is introduced on the first page of the first chapter:

> Thorolf was an attractive and highly accomplished man. He took after his mother's side of the family, a cheerful, generous man, energetic and very eager to prove his worth. He was popular with everyone. (4)
>
> [Var Þórólfr manna vænstr ok gørviligastr; hann var líkr móðurfrændum sínum, gleðimaðr mikill, ǫrr ok ákafamaðr mikill í ǫllu ok hinn mesti kappsmaðr; var hann vinsæll af ǫllum mǫnnum. (5)]

His brother's son and namesake is introduced later in the saga:

> He was big and handsome from an early age, and everyone said he most resembled Kveldulf's son Thorolf, after whom he had been named. Thorolf far excelled boys of his age in strength, and when he grew up he became accomplished in most of the skills that it was customary for gifted men to practice. He was a cheerful character and so powerful in his youth that he was considered just as able-bodied as any grown man. He was popular with everyone. (54)
>
> [En er hann fœddisk upp, þá var hann snimma mikill vexti ok inn vænsti sýnum; var þat allra manna mál, at hann myndi vera inn líkasti Þórólfi Kveld-Úlfssyni, er hann var eptir heitinn. Þórólfr var langt um fram jafnaldra sína at afli; en er hann óx upp, gerðisk hann íþróttamaðr um flesta þá hluti, er þá var mǫnnum títt að

> fremja, þeim er vel váru at sér gǫrvir. Þórólfr var gleðimaðr mikill; snimma var hann svá fullkominn at afli, at hann þótti vel liðfœrr með ǫðrum mǫnnum, varð hann brátt vinsæll af alþýðu. (80)]

In this context, one may also recall the similarities between Skallagrim and Egil. They share the role of the ugly brother who is raised in the shadow of the accomplished Thorolf and outlives him. The impact of these two doubles is intensified by the repeated occurrences of the same names throughout the narrative.[2] In addition to Skallagrim, eight characters called Grim appear in *Egil's Saga*, variously related to the family of Egil. The description of the sword given to Egil by Arinbjorn is a case in point. "Arinbjorn had been given it by Egil's brother Thorolf. Before him, Skallagrim had been given it by Egil's uncle Thorolf, who had received it from Grim Hairy-cheeks, the son of Ketil Haeng. Ketil had owned the sword and used it in duels" (133: "Þat hafði gefit Arinbirni Þórólfr Skalla-Grimsson, en áðr hafði Skalla-Grímr þegit af Þórólfi, bróður sínum, en Þórólfi gaf sverðit Grímr loðinkinni, sonr Ketils hœngs; þat sverð hafði átt Ketill hængr ok haft í hólmgǫngum," 195). If we leave out Arinbjorn's ownership, the sword is passed on from father to son, from one brother to another, from Grim to Thorolf or Thorolf to Grim. A different side of this double reality, inherent in the saga, can be seen in the metamorphosis of Kveldulf, Skallagrim, and Egil, who all have an animalistic or even werewolf nature that can take over their human personality under certain circumstances (cf. Holtsmark 1968).

Finally, it should be noted that *Egil's Saga* contains numerous repeated motifs. Baldur Hafstað (1990) claims, for instance, that friendship is one of the main themes of the saga, in which the friendship of equal partners is contrasted with the duties of a courtier to his king. Torfi H. Tulinius (2004, 219–33), on the other hand, sees fratricide as one of the saga's central themes. From a more general perspective, X kills Y is probably the most common narrative element in *Egil's Saga*, with one killing-scene frequently resembling another. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this. Thorolf, the son of Kveldulf, "thrust his sword through the standard-bearer" (36: "lagði hann sverði í gegnum þann mann, er merkit bar," 53–4) of King Harald before the king himself delivered Thorolf the mortal blow. Thorolf, the son of Skallagrim, was more successful when he found himself in a similar situation, as he first killed the standard-bearer of Earl Hring and then "drove the spear through the earl's coat of mail, into his chest and through his body so that it came out between his shoulder blades, lifted him up on it above his head and thrust the end into the ground" (96: "lagði hann spjótinu fyrir brjóst jarlinum, í gegnum brynjuna ok búkinn, svá at út gekk um herðarar, ok hóf hann upp á kesjunni yfir hǫfuð sér ok skaut

niðr spjótshalanum í jǫrðina," 138). However, Egil's brother was subjected to the same destiny as his uncle and namesake: "Thorolf was stabbed with many spears at once and died there beside the forest" (98: "brugðu þegar mǫrgum kesjum senn á Þórólfi, ok fell hann þar við skóginn," 140). In his youth, Egil drove an axe into the head of eleven-year-old Grim, one of his father's namesakes, "right through to the brain" (68: "svá at þegar stóð í heila," 100). At the age of twelve, he also killed his father's favourite workhand (102: 69). Once in Norway, when Egil's boat passed the ship of King Eirik Blood-axe, he threw a spear, "striking the helmsman, Ketil the Slayer, through the middle" (112: "ok kom á þann miðjan, er við stýrit sat, en þar var Ketill hǫðr," 161). Later, Egil killed Frodi, a foster-son of the king, in a similar way: "He lunged at Frodi with his halberd, piercing his shield and plunging so deep into his chest that the point came out through his back" (117: "hann skaut kesjunni at Fróða ok í gegnum skjǫld hans ok í brjóstit, svá at yddi um bakit," 168).

It is possible to use other examples from "The 'Uncanny'" to illustrate the plot of *Egil's Saga* but it is time to turn our attention to the way in which Freud explains the impact of the uncanny. First of all, he suggests that the uncanniness of dismembered limbs, a severed head, and a hand cut off at the wrist "springs from its association with the castration-complex" (Freud 1966, 49–50). Second, he suggests that the image of the double can be traced to the narcissistic stage in our youth – and in primitive man – when the mirror image seems to confirm our immortality. As we mature, the *Doppelgänger* turns into "the ghastly harbinger of death" (1966, 40). But the double may also be a remainder from that period in our youth when the subject starts to divide itself into id, ego, and super-ego. The *Doppelgänger* could then be representative of the super-ego – our conscience or the voice of civilization – seeing us from the outside while still being a part of ourselves. Furthermore, Freud suggests that the

> quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstances of the "double" being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since left behind, and one, no doubt, in which it wore a more friendly aspect. The "double" has become a vision of terror, just as after the fall of their religion the gods took on daemonic shapes. (1966, 41–2)

This last explanation can be applied to the double nature of Kveldulf, Skallagrim, and Egil. Their animalistic tendencies may be seen as representative of those primitive desires that are suppressed in our subconscious and might break out at any moment.

As far as recurrence of the same situations, things, and events is concerned, Freud relates an interesting story about his own experience when he got lost in

a provincial town in Italy. His repeated attempts to find his way led him back to the same narrow street where "painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses" (1966, 42). He found this uncanny, but that experience and other similar ones led him to believe that we, already in childhood have a powerful repetition impulse that may contradict our basic desire for pleasure.[3] The same pattern can be found in the behaviour of people with mental disorders, who in their sleep (and even when awake) re-experience certain traumas from their past. Freud suggests that the aim of the child may be to gain control over a difficult experience by acting it out, but he believes that the repetition compulsion of the mentally disturbed is completely involuntary. The patient is the prey of painful memories, destined to relive the past as an eternally repeated present.

With reference to these ideas, it is tempting to speculate whether the experience we have when we read *Egil's Saga* is parallel to Freud's uncanny walk in the Italian city. Again and again, we come across similar descriptions which are likely to get mixed up in our confused minds as we continue to read. Do we, for instance, make a clear distinction between the deaths of the older and the younger Thorolf, between events leading up to the moment when the latter drives his spear through Earl Hring's coat of mail and those leading to the moment when Egil drives a spear through Frodi or Ketil the Slayer? In my view, the contradictory impact of the saga stems partially from the fact that the author repeats the same narrative functions with such a compulsive insistence that the plot becomes dreamlike (cf. Sigurjónsson and Jørgensen 1987), mesmerizing, and uncanny.

II

In her book *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), Julia Kristeva tries to define the effects of the horror that images of *the abject* can have on us. Like Freud in his discussion of the uncanny, Kristeva believes that various things that we experience in our youth continue to haunt us throughout our lives, but in particular she focuses on the first month of the child's existence when it starts to experience its separation from the mother but has not yet formed an independent identity. At this point, the child feels that it is an *abject*, a term Kristeva coins with reference to the words *subject* and *object*. According to her, the emotions of the child are in turmoil at this stage. It desires to be reunited with the mother but at the same time it is afraid of termination. As a result, the child may enter into a period of complete denial of the outer world, throwing away the things that are around it and vomiting everything that it has eaten (Kristeva 1980, 5–6).

Kristeva claims that food and various kinds of waste, excrement, and garbage are among the things that can trigger the horror of the abject later in our lives. She thus describes her own reaction when "the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasm in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up in the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire" (1980, 2–3). Most of us have shown such reactions, at least in our youth, to one kind of food or another. According to Kristeva, the juices of the body – spittle, blood, urine, sweat, and tears – can cause a similar reaction, as they all have an ambiguous status. These liquids are marginal things, transgressing the boundaries of the body, being both a part of me (subject) and something other (object) (1980, 69). Vomit can be added to this list, as it is on the border between nourishment and excrement.

When we start to look for images of this nature in *Egil's Saga* the scene describing the dealings of Egil and Armod brings itself to our attention. As host at his farm, Armod first treated Egil and his fellow travellers with large bowls of curds and later offered them strong brew. Egil took copious draughts of the ale but at a certain point he

> started to feel that he would not be able to go on like this. He stood up and walked across the floor where Armod was sitting, seized him by the shoulders, and thrust him up against a wall-post. Then Egil spewed a torrent of vomit that gushed all over Armod's face, filling his eyes and nostrils and mouth and pouring down his chest. Armod was close to choking, and when he managed to let out his breath, a jet of vomit gushed out with it. (156)
>
> [fann þá, at honum myndi eigi svá búit eira; stóð hann þá upp ok gekk um gólf þvert, þangat er Ármóðr sat, hann tók hǫndum í axlir honum ok kneikði hann upp að stǫfum. Síðan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla, ok gaus í andlit Ármóði, í augun og nasarnar ok í munninn; rann svá ofan um bringuna, en Ármóði varð við andhlaup, ok er hann fekk ǫndinni frá sér hrundit, þá gaus upp spýja. (225–6)]

Incompatible drinks, curds and ale, cause Egil to spew. The nausea originates from within the body. In the second instance, it is Egil's vomit that causes Armod to spew. The nausea is caused by an external perception. But is there an end to this domino effect? We as readers experience this scene as it gushes all over our face, so to speak, and it may cause a powerful physical reaction.

Another side of the abject can be seen in the beastly nature of Egil, Skallagrim, and Kveldulf. The abject confronts us "with those fragile states

where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animal and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (Kristeva 1980, 12–13). It is interesting to recall the fight of Egil and Atli the Short from this perspective. When Egil realizes that his opponent cannot be killed with a sword, he tries alternative measures:

> Egil saw that this was pointless, because his own shield was splitting through by then as well. He threw down his sword and shield, ran for Atli and grabbed him with his hands. By his great strength, Egil pushed Atli over backwards, then sprawled over him and bit through his throat. Atli died on the spot. Egil rushed to his feet and ran over to the sacrificial bull, took it by the nostrils with one hand and by the horns with the other, and swung it over onto its back, breaking its neck. (144)
>
> [Sér þá Egill, at eigi mun hlýða svá búit, því at skjǫldr hans gerðisk þá ónýtr; þá lét Egill laust sverðit ok skjǫldinn ok hljóp at Atla ok greip hann hǫndum. Kenndi þá aflsmunar, ok fell Atli á bak aptr, en Egill greyfðisk at niðr ok beit í sundr í honum barkann; lét Atli þar líf sitt. Egil hljóp upp skjótt ok þar til, er blótnautit stóð, ok snaraði svá, at fœtr vissu upp, en í sundr hálsbeinit; (209–10)]

It is striking how the killing of a human being and the sacrifice of an animal go hand in hand here. The method of killing is similar in both instances: Egil pushes Atli backwards and flips the bull on to its back. The difference lies in the fact that he bites through Atli's throat but breaks the neck of the bull. Kristeva suggests that the history of religion depicts the various ways humanity has tried to purify the abject and develop acceptable ways to stage it (e.g., through sacrifices). Art, in particular the art of literature, has in many ways taken over this role of purification (1980, 17). From this perspective, one may speculate whether the text that depicts Egil's double killing may serve the same purpose as an actual sacrifice. The "animalistic" impulses of the audience are being recognized and momentarily we are relieved of our humanity.

The corpse is one more example of the abject that Kristeva discusses. Faced with a lifeless being, she claims, we feel that the borders of our existence are being erased. Human refuse and corpses, she writes, "show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (1980, 3). As already suggested, there are plenty of corpses in *Egil's Saga*, but one of the most memorable descriptions in this respect occurs in the scene where Skallagrim dies of old age:

> At daybreak next morning, when everybody was getting dressed, Skallagrim was sitting on the edge of his bed, dead, and so stiff that they could neither straighten him out nor lift him no matter how they tried. A horse was saddled quickly and the rider set off at full pelt all the way to Lambastadir. He went straight to see Egil and told him the news. Egil took his weapons and clothes and rode back to Borg that evening. He dismounted, entered the house and went to an alcove in the fire-room where there was a door through to the benches where people slept and sat. Egil went through the bench, took Skallagrim by the shoulders and tugged him backwards. He laid him down on the bench and closed his nostrils, eyes and mouth. (120–1)
>
> [En um morgininn, er lýsti ok menn klæddusk, þá sat Skalla-Grímr fram á stokk ok var þá andaðr ok svá stirðr, at menn fengu hvergi rétt hann né hafit, ok var alls við leitat. Þá var hesti skotit undir einn mann; hleypði sá sem ákafligast, til þess er hann kom á Lambastaði; gekk hann þegar á fund Egils ok segir honum þessi tíðendi. Þá tók Egill vápn sín ok klæði ok reið heim til Borgar um kveldit, ok þegar hann hafði af baki stigit, gekk hann inn ok í skot, er var um eldahúsit, en dyrr váru fram ór skotinu at setum innanverðum. Gekk Egill fram í setit ok tók í herðar Skalla-Grími ok kneikði hann aptr á bak, lagði hann niðr í setit ok veitti honum nábjargir. (174)]

Egil's behaviour most certainly is affected by traditional folk-belief in the potential evil powers of the dead, but with reference to Kristeva's ideas it can be suggested that this detailed description of the stiffness of Skallagrim's body reminds us of the borders of nonexistence that close tighter around us day by day.

Finally, these three different examples of the abject – horrific foods, beastly humans, and lifeless bodies – merge into one in many of the verses of the saga. Human beings kill one another and ravens, eagles, and wolves gobble the corpses. It is possible to distinguish between three stages in these descriptions. At the first stage, a sharp distinction is made between the killer and the beast of prey. The killer is often described as a host, even a steward, who invites the animal to dinner. The following example, characterizing King Eirik Blood-axe's achievements, is taken from Egil's poem "Head-Ransom":

> Eirik fed flesh
> to the wolf afresh. (131)
>
> [bauð ulfum hræ
> Eiríkr of sæ.] (190)

At the second stage, the difference between the human fighter and the beast is blurred. The example here is from a verse Egil composes after his brother dies:

> Hring entered the weapon-fray
> and the ravens did not starve. (99)
>
> [helt, né hrafnar sultu,
> Hringr á vápna þingi.] (142)

Instead of the chain of events of the first stage – a man kills another and thereby supplies food for beasts – the actions of man and animal are simply parallel. Finally, at the third stage, a description of the way in which the animals prey on the body replaces the actual killing scene. The following example is from "Head-Ransom":

> Battle-cranes swooped
> over heaps of dead,
> wound-birds did not want
> for blood to gulp.
> The wolf gobbled flesh,
> the raven daubed
> the prow of its beak
> in waves of red. (130)
>
> [Flugu hjaldrs tranar
> á hræs lanar,
> órut blóðs vanar
> benmós granar,
> sleit und freki,
> en oddbreki
> gnúði hrafni
> á hǫfuðstafni.] (189)

Here, the warrior and the beast of prey have merged into one entity. One cannot be sure if Egil is describing the activities of humans or animals, a fight or a feast, someone who is eating or sailing (in the original the beak of the raven is characterized as "the prow of the head" [*hǫfuðstafn*]). We are certainly faced with images of our imminent destruction, but the text itself also deconstructs some of the principal oppositions which underpin our system of signification.

The corpse is at the same time a symbol of death and nourishment; the killing is both a destruction and creation; the subject is concurrently a man, an animal, and an object (a ship). The experience of the abject, as defined by Kristeva, is reflected in the very language of the saga.

III

It may seem that Freud and Kristeva reach far into childhood experience to explain the uncanny emotions and horrors that haunt us, but Georges Bataille reaches even further back in his book *L'Erotisme* (1957) to explain the fears he believes we have of our erotic impulses. His argument is partially based on the difference between the asexual reproduction in elementary organisms and sexual reproduction in more complex ones. Eroticism, he claims, "unlike simple sexual activity is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children"; it certainly is "an exuberance of life" but at the same time "this psychological quest is not alien to death" (Bataille 1957, 11). He explains this paradox with reference to the way in which two nuclei are formed from a single cell. Asexual reproduction means that the original cell ceases to exist but still experiences a continuity of being. "The same continuity cannot occur in the death of sexual creatures, where reproduction is in theory independent of death and disappearance" (1957, 14). Here two individuals create the third one, confirming their destinies as discontinuous beings.

According to Bataille, we desire to create something in death, just as the single-celled organism does at the point of reproduction. This is erotic desire, a desire tormented by fear of self-annihilation. Primarily, Bataille discusses three types of eroticism: physical, emotional, and religious. His aim "is to show that with all of them the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity" (1957, 15). Hence, love-making and sacrifice, ecstasy and death, are all related in his view. Discussing the impact of human sacrifice on its audience, he writes: "In sacrifice, the victim is divested not only of clothes but of life (or is destroyed in some way if it is an inanimate object). … A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one" (1957, 22).

We have already observed the scene in *Egil's Saga* where Egil kills Atli the Short and then sacrifices a bull. Another interesting scene from the saga involving bulls is inspired by an axe that King Eirik Blood-axe asks Thorolf to give to Skallagrim:

> Skallagrim took the axe, held it up and inspected it for a while without speaking, then hung it up above his bed.
>
> At Borg one day in the autumn, Skallagrim had a large number of oxen driven to his farm to be slaughtered. He had two of them tethered up against the wall, with their heads together, and took a large slab of rock and placed it under their necks. Then he went up to them with his axe "King's Gift" and struck at both oxen with it in one blow. It chopped off the oxen's heads, but when it went right through and struck the stone the mount broke completely and the blade shattered. Skallagrim inspected the edge without saying a word, then went into the fire-room, climbed up on a bench and put the axe on the rafters above the door, where it was left that winter. (65)
>
> [Skalla-Grímr tók við øxinni, helt upp ok sá á um hríð ok rœddi ekki um; festi upp hjá rúmi sínu. Þat var um haustit einn hvern dag at Borg, at Skalla-Grímr lét reka heim yxn mjǫg marga, er hann ætlaði til hǫggs; hann lét leiða tvá yxn saman undir húsvegg ok leiða á víxl; hann tók hellustein vel mikinn ok skaut niðr undir hálsana. Síðan gekk hann til með øxina konungsnaut ok hjó yxnina báða senn, svá at hǫfuðit tók af hvárumtveggja, en øxin hljóp niðr í steininn, svá at muðrinn brast ór allr ok rifnaði upp í gegnum herðuna. Skalla-Grímr sá í eggina ok rœddi ekki um; gekk síðan inn í eldahús ok steig síðan á stokk upp ok skaut øxinni upp á hurðása; lá hon þar um vetrinn. (95–6)]

Even if this is, in the context of the saga, a description of butchering, it may serve the same purpose for the reader as a sacrifice. We see how the animals are destroyed, like inanimate objects. This is emphasized by the fact that an inanimate object, King Eirik's gift to Skallagrim, is also destroyed at the same time. In addition, Skallagrim's method of beheading the two bulls in one blow resembles a rite. We are faced with two headless animals staggering on their feet for a moment or two before falling to either side. In the ensuing silence of this description we should be able to experience the continuity of all existence, as Bataille puts it.[4]

In his discussion of sexual intercourse, Bataille suggests that it is an act of transgression of various social constraints. In that context, he compares a lover to a blood-stained priest, stripping his victim of her identity. Even though *Egil's Saga* has many facets, its author does not show explicit interest in depicting people in a sexual act. We are, for instance, told only that Thorolf, son of Skallagrim, and Gunnhild, wife of King Eirik, struck up "a close friendship" (64: "[k]ærleikar miklir," 94). Similarly, it is reported that Egil and the daughter of Earl Arnfinn sat next to each other on her bed for a whole night,

drinking "and got on well together" (84: "ok váru allkát," 121). A little later, when Thorolf marries Egil's foster-sister Asgerd, the author is completely silent about their first night together. In fact, the point of view in this part of the saga sticks to Egil, who fell ill at the farm of Thorolf's friend Thorir, and was unable to join his brother at the feast.[5]

Does this mean that there is no sexual eroticism in the saga? Not quite. Interestingly, Egil recovered soon after Thorolf had said goodbye to him, and instead of going to the wedding he went with Olvir, one of Thorir's farmhands, to another feast. It is reported that Thorolf and his men sailed on "a large, well-equipped longship" (72: "langskip eitt mikit," 105) to the farm of Asgerd's father in Sognefjord, but Egil and Olvir and twelve other men went in "a row-boat" (72: *róðrarferju*, 106) towards Atley. At this point, the narrative forks into two separate paths. One is visible and consists of images of violence and destruction. The other is concealed, but one can imagine it to consist of images of love and unity. Together, these two narrative paths make one "erotic" plot.

In order to prepare the reader for the subsequent interpretation, I want to shift the focus momentarily to Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades." In an article primarily dealing with the moral subtext of this celebrated tale, Richard Gregg devotes some pages to a "pattern of erotic mystification" within the narrative (Gregg 2000, 616). The keystone to this pattern is a bedroom scene in which Hermann, a young engineer in the Russian army, encounters Countess Anna Fedorovna. He has discovered that this 87-year-old woman knows a secret that enables her to name three winning cards in succession at a gambling table. He has persuaded her young and beautiful ward, Lisaveta Ivanovna, to let him into the Countess's house one night while the two women are away at a ball. Lisaveta, who thinks that Herman is in love with her, has explained how he can find the Countess's bedchamber and go from there, through a corridor and a narrow winding staircase, to her own bedroom. Instead, he waits in a study next to the old woman's bedroom and when she returns from the ball, he watches her disrobe, witnessing "all the loathsome mysteries of her dress" (Pushkin 1966, 292). When she has put on her gown and night-cap, he finally reveals himself and asks her to tell him her secret. He even goes down to his knees, entreating her not to deny his request, but when the Countess remains silent he stands up saying that he will force her to answer:

> With these words he drew a pistol from his pocket. At the sight of the pistol, the Countess, for the second time, exhibited signs of strong emotion. She shook her head and raising her hand as though to shield herself from the shot, she rolled over on her back and remained motionless.

> "Stop this childish behaviour now," Hermann said, taking her hand. "I ask you for the last time: will you name your three cards or won't you?"
>
> The Countess made no reply. Hermann saw that she was dead. (1966, 294)

In simplified terms, Hermann can choose between two different paths once he has entered the house; one leading to young Lisaveta and possibly also to love, the other one leading to the old Countess and potential fortune. Gregg remarks that even as Hermann takes the second path, the critical bedroom scene "may be viewed as both climax and caricature: at once replete with erotic innuendo but wholly devoid of erotic content":

> Specifically: the bedroom itself, the nocturnal hour, the handsome young male intruder, the woman's disrobing before his eyes; her "inexplicable" excitement on perceiving him; his kneeling pleas; his exposed *pistol*, her *supine* position. Whereupon, recalling the Elizabethan meaning of the word, the woman *dies*. In sum, what we are offered here is a caricatural pantomime of lovemaking, as empty of erotic substance as the bulletless pistol, which the hero brandishes, is empty of murderous purpose. (2000, 616–17)

Now we can go back to the scene of *Egil's Saga* that takes place in Atley. Instead of reading about the marriage of Thorolf and Asgerd, we follow Egil, Olvir, and their fellow travellers approaching a large farm on this island owned by King Eirik and run by his good steward Bard. When the visitors met Bard, he led them "into a fire-room which stood away from the other buildings" (72–3: "til eldahúss nọkkurs; var þat brott frá ọðrum húsum," 106). There they could dry their clothes. When they had dressed again, a table was laid "and they were given bread and butter, and large bowls of curds" (73: "ok gefinn þeim matr, brauð ok smjọr, ok settir fram skyraskar stórir," 107) as twice Bard has stated he had no ale in his house for his visitors. The chapter ends by suggesting that the whole band of men have gone to rest: "There were plenty of mattresses in the room and he invited them to lie down and go to sleep" (73: "Hálm skorti þar eigi inni; bað hann þar þá niðr leggjask til svefns," 107). Until this point, one can assume that the two narrative paths run parallel, except that the food in Bard's fire-room is probably not as fancy as in the wedding feast in Sognefjord.

In the beginning of the next chapter the point of view is no longer with Egil but in the main room of the farm in Atley, where King Eirik and his wife Gunnhild were taking part in a feast "because a sacrifice was being made to the *disir.* It was a splendid feast, with plenty to drink" (73: "ok skyldi þar vera dísablót, ok var þar veizla in bezta ok drykkja mikil inni í stofunni," 107). Eirik asked where Bard had gone and when he was told that his steward was

attending to Olvir and his men in the fire-room, the king ordered someone to fetch them all right away. When they entered the main room they were immediately served ale, and as the night wore on "many of Olvir's companions became incapacitated; some of them vomited inside the main room, while others made it out through the door" (73–4: "þá kom svá, at fǫrunautar Ǫlvis gerðusk margir ófœrir; sumir spjó þar inni í stofunni, en sumir kómusk út fyrir dyrr," 108). It is not reported that Egil vomited. In fact, he drank heavily from Olvir's drinking-horn and then delivered a verse suggesting that Bard had deceived them by saying he was short of feast-drink. Unlike his companions, Egil spewed poetry instead of vomit. Bard was by no means happy to be called a liar and he got Queen Gunnhild to assist him in mixing poison into Egil's draught, intending to put an end to the spewing of words from his mouth.

> Egil took out his knife and stabbed the palm of his hand with it, then took the drinking-horn, carved runes on it and smeared them with blood. He spoke a verse:
>
> I carve runes on this horn,
> redden words with my blood,
> I choose words for the trees
> of the wild beast's ear-roots;
> drink as we wish this mead
> brought by merry servants,
> let us find out how we fare
> from the ale that Bard blessed.
>
> The horn shattered and the drink spilled onto the straw. (74)
>
> [Egill brá þá knífi sínum ok stakk í lófa sér; hann tók við horninu ok reist á rúnar ok reið á blóðinu. Hann kvað:
>
> Rístum rún á horni,
> rjóðum spjǫll í dreyra,
> þau velk orð til eyrna
> óðs dýrs viðar róta;
> drekkum veig sem viljum
> vel glýjaðra þýja,
> vitum, hvé oss of eiri
> ǫl, þats Bárøðr signdi.
>
> Hornit sprakk í sundr, en drykkrinn fór niðr í hálm.] (109)

The uncanny power of the runes possibly saved Egil's life here, but at the same time the drinking-horn can be seen as a *mise en abyme* of the saga as a whole, which is all reddened with blood (cf. de Looze 1989). But even though the drinking-horn was shattered, the feast continued, to the point when Egil finally was ready to leave.

> Olvir was on the verge of passing out, so Egil got up and led him over to the door. He swung his cloak over his shoulders and gripped his sword underneath it. When they reached the door, Bard went after them with a full horn and asked Olvir to drink a farewell toast. Egil stood in the doorway and spoke this verse:
>
> I'm feeling drunk, and the ale
> has left Olvir pale in the gills,
> I let the spray of ox-spears
> foam over my beard.
> Your wits have gone, inviter
> of showers onto shields;
> now the rain of the high god
> starts pouring upon you.
>
> Egil tossed away the horn, grabbed hold of his sword and drew it. It was dark in the doorway; he thrust the sword so deep into Bard's stomach that the point came out through his back. Bard fell down dead, blood pouring from the wound. Then Olvir dropped to the floor, spewing vomit. Egil ran out of the room. It was pitch dark outside, and he dashed from the farm.
>
> People left the room and saw Bard and Olvir lying on the floor together, and imagined at first that they had killed each other. Because it was dark, the king had a light brought over, and they could see that Olvir was lying unconscious in his vomit, but Bard had been killed, and the floor was awash with his blood. (74–5)
>
> [Þá tók at líða at Ǫlvi; stóð þá Egill upp ok leiddi Ǫlvi útar til duranna ok helt á sverði sínu. En er þeir koma at durunum, þá kom Bárðr eptir þeim ok bað Ǫlvi drekka brautfararminni sitt. Egill tók við ok drakk ok kvað vísu:
>
> Ǫlvar mik, þvít Ǫlvi
> ǫl gervir nú fǫlvan,
> atgeira lætk ýrar
> ýrings of grǫn skýra;
> ǫllungis kannt illa,
> oddskýs, fyr þér nýsa,

rigna getr at regni,
regnbjóðr, Hávars þegna.

Egill kastar horninu, en greip sverðit ok brá; myrkt var í forstofunni; hann lagði sverðinu á Bárði miðjum, svá at blóðrefillinn hljóp út um bakit; fell hann dauðr niðr, en blóð hljóp ór undinni. Þá fell Ǫlvir, ok gaus spýja ór honum. Egill hljóp þá út ór stofunni; þá var niðamyrkr úti; tók Egill þegar rás af bœnum. En inni í forstofunni sá menn, at þeir váru báðri fallnir, Bárðr ok Ǫlvir; kom þá konungr til ok lét bera at ljós; sá menn þá, hvat títt var, at Ǫlvir lá þar vitlauss, en Bárðr var veginn, ok flaut í blóði hans gólfit allt. (110–11)]

The text enveloping this verse echoes in various ways what has already taken place at the farm. Bard's body is shattered by Egil's sword, just like the drinking-horn that Egil had shattered earlier with the aid of poetry, blood, and runes. Instead of the poisonous drink that was spilled onto the mattresses, Bard's blood is now pouring out. Facing Bard, like a mirror reflection, Olvir lies in his own vomit; they look so similar that people first believe that they are both dead. This mirror-image within the visible path of the narrative can furthermore be seen as a travesty of the unity which is supposedly taking place during this very night in Sognefjord.

In the scene at Atloy, the focus is on Egil's drinking-horn. It is a vessel for a liquid – ale – which can be nourishing but can also cause nausea, or even death. In their original function, horns are the deadly weapons of animals – Egil referred to them as "ox-spears" (75: "ýrar atgeira," 110) in the verse quoted above. When he prepared to slay Bard, he tossed away the horn and grabbed hold of another weapon, his sword, which he has kept under his cloak. Echoing the scenes where Thorolf killed Earl Hring and Egil killed Ketil and Frodi, "he thrust the sword so deep into Bard's stomach that the point came out through his back" (75: "lagði sverðinu á Bárði miðjum, svá at blóðrefillinn hljóp út um bakit," 110). The violence can hardly be more graphic. Bard is turned into an inanimate object, resembling at the same time a shattered drinking-horn and the lovers at the moment of sexual satisfaction (*la petite mort*, as the French say). The narrative seems to be "replete with erotic innuendo" (Gregg 2000, 616).

IV

In this paper, I have highlighted certain mentally and even physically disturbing aspects of *Egil's Saga* with reference to the writings of Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Georges Bataille. If these three theorists are to be trusted, the narrative and the imagery of this medieval saga are in some sense uncanny,

contain variations of the abject, and also belong in the sphere of the erotic. I opened my analysis with reference to the myth about the mead of poetry, as it is presented in the *Prose Edda*. That myth has indeed many of the same elements I have identified in *Egil's Saga*: amputation (nine slaves cut each other's heads off), metamorphosis (Odin turns himself into a snake and an eagle), and repetitions (in particular recurring killings). The poetic mead itself is a multiple abject (spittle, blood, vomit). Even the scene in which Odin, in the shape of a snake, crawls into an auger-hole and the giant Baugi tries to stab him with an auger erotically foreshadows Odin's three nights with the giantess Gunnlod (cf. Kress 1990, 284–5). Together these two texts encourage further speculations about the nature of poetic language and its impact. To what degree, for instance, is our reading experience an emotional and even a carnal experience? Irrespective of the answers to this and other equally challenging questions, we have to agree that *Egil's Saga* is a complex tissue of powerful impressions. It is indeed one of these classical and excessive narratives that takes us to the edge of a precipice and tempts us to jump.

NOTES

1 A revised version of Jón Karl Helgason, "Rjóðum spjöll í dreyra: Óhugnaður, úrkast og erótík í Egils sögu." *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992): 60–76.

2 For a complementary discussion of recurring names in the saga, see Tulinius's essay in this volume.

3 Freud addresses this paradox directly in his article "Jenseits der Lustprinzips" (1920), where he describes how small children sometimes repeat a painful and difficult experience, such as separation from their parents.

4 It is worth noting how the axe as a signifier has two different signifieds. The bloody blade of the axe, which Skallagrim inspected at the end of the sacrifice, may have reflected the face of Eirik Blood-axe. The axe is a symbol of the king, Skallagrim's abuse of it reveals his hatred of Eirik. Additionally, the author refers to the axe as *konungsnaut*, playing on the ambiguity of the words *nautr* ("gift") and *naut* ("bull"). Ambiguity of this kind is not only common in *Egil's Saga* but is also one of the main characteristics of poetic use of language, according to Bataille.

5 For further discussion of this episode, see Oren Falk's essay in this volume.

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