THE TRANSFORMING SELF AND OTHERWORLDLY WISDOM: SOURCES OF POETIC INSPIRATION IN MEDIEVAL NORTHWEST EUROPE

by

TIMOTHY HANNON

(Under the Direction of Katharina Wilson)

ABSTRACT

Certain tales of the medieval Norse, Anglo-Saxons, Irish and Welsh explain the source of poetic inspiration as existing in a world apart, whether that be in the realm of the gods, in the Celtic Otherworld, or with the Christian God. Generally, each culture follows a similar pattern in explaining the process of inspiration, beginning with a binding or a containment in the physical world, followed by danger-tinged contemplation, and eventually leading to communication with the source of poetry. The tales of these four cultures are discussed in terms of this schemata and compared with one another, eventually leading towards an understanding of wisdom that poetic composition may bring to a poet.

INDEX WORDS: Medieval, Poetic inspiration, Inspiration, Poetry, Myth, Legend, Norse, Óðinn, Odin, Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Welsh, Medieval England, Medieval Ireland, Medieval Wales, Medieval Iceland, Medieval Scandinavia, Medieval poetry, Medieval Christianity, Taliesin, Finn, Beowulf

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B.A, The College of New Jersey, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2010

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the literature to which gave it existence: medieval poetry and prose. It is here my thoughts and my joy began, and it is here that they continue:

And from the top of that tower we may look out upon the sea.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to thank my master's committee, Dr. Jonathan Evans and Dr. Elissa Henken, as well as my major professor, Dr. Katharina Wilson. Not only were they sources of advice and encouragement, but demonstrated for me how an academic ought to act. Each served me as an example of how to study literature while at the same time appreciate it for its beauty. I would also like to thank my colleagues, particularly Joseph Leake, whose connections and understandings to the material helped me comprehend many areas in which I would otherwise be lost. And, finally, I would like to thank my fiancée for her constant support and kindness during the writing of this thesis. Through her ear many of the ideas below were developed, leading me to develop an understanding of the importance they play in all literature, art, and life in general. Thank you all.

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Chapter One
Introduction

The speech of the poet is not that of others. The language is the same, the words themselves at times even unchanged from those of common everyday parlance, yet the effect of them is different. The speech of poets flows, their voices sing, and those listening are caught up and held until their spell ceases. Poetry, like all art, is different from other skills and crafts, as it is both impractical while still being wholly powerful. The difference between the language of poets and that of everyday usage, as well as the origin of poetry's power, led to many questions, 'answered' in forms from mythology to aesthetic philosophy. The questions 'from where' and 'why' seems to have been ever frequently upon the tongue, and the medieval period is no exception. The medieval period was a time of change, and the voice of its answers, to this question and others, was tempered by the, at times tumultuous, cultural interactions that were taking place. With the influence of the new, Christian religion slowly making its way to even the farthest reaches of the European continent, the medieval period was a time upon the cusp, when the old and new were meeting in heavy conflict, each questioned in view of the other. And even though the new would win out, few cultures forgot their heritage completely; instead, their brand of Christianity was colored, at times more heavily than others, by their culture's past.

Nor was this ‘cusp’ a few years or even a decade, but instead the entire period, as cultures such as the Irish, who were ‘officially’ converted by Saint Patrick in the fifth century, were still considering the tales of their cultural past when the Icelanders accepted the faith in the eleventh. It was upon this cusp, this movement towards a new religion, though still with eyes held upon the unrecoverable past, that the questions ‘from where’ and ‘why’ were answered for the medieval period. Most frequently these answers were in the form of stories or tales, often including the heroes of the past or present, or else the deities that governed the storytellers’ worldviews.

The poets of the medieval period had a certain amount of power, at times to such a degree that it came into conflict with the developing Christian culture. Words had strength, as they could persuade or command, even to the degree that they *took* command, and the word was the power of the poet. Yet the poet rarely worked alone, as his power came almost always from some Otherworld, be it from Christian God above or the hazel-nut-bearing salmon in the river Boyne. The ability of the poet may come from some encounter in his experiences, from his training or from contemplation of the poet’s joys and sorrows in life, yet the inspiration of a poet, the essence of what made him a poet, came from Elsewhere.

This otherworldly influence is described in many cultures, though particularly in those cultures examined here: those of the northwestern reaches of medieval Europe. The Germanic cultures of England and Iceland, and the Celtic cultures of Wales and Ireland, each came to

answer the question of the origin of poetic inspiration according to the character of their culture. Yet these cultures shared more than just a circle of physical proximity; when viewed together a pattern seems to emerge. Coming perhaps from exchanged language or ideas, or from shared cultural history, or even simply from a similar outlook in life, a set of common concerns seems to exist among these four cultures. The pattern comes as three steps: first the poet is constricted or constrained, held bound by the material world in some fashion. Frequent are images of fetters or chains, though all bindings are related to the physical world, the changing seasons or the march of years. Within this binding there is then a moment when the poet is upon the edge, when he encounters for a brief time another world, apart from the physical, and when he must make a choice. This moment is often associated with meditation or contemplation of the poet's life, a looking-back over the poet's experiences in the physical world, the joys and sorrows of life on earth. It is at this moment when the poet realizes something particular about the physical world, usually that it is mutable or changeable, though often enough unmentioned, and following this realization the poet enters into otherworldly wisdom and poetic inspiration.

To speak of a general pattern for multiple cultures is of course to lose the details, and it is not the aim of this paper to white-wash these four cultures, to distill them down to their bare bones in order to fit them into a schemata conceived eight hundred or so years after the fact. It is in the details that these 'answers' shine and where their fullest interest lies, as it is the details

which explain and exhibit the individual characters of each culture. Some of the beauty of these ‘answers’ comes from their non-adherence to any pattern, and it is not my intention here to fit each and every tale concerning poetic creation into a neat box that will allow for easy digestion. Saying this, to ignore the larger picture is to ignore much of the importance and the power of the details, as comparing two cultures, no matter how distinct, allows one to notice things one may have earlier missed. What this general schemata does, then, for the discussion below is that it provides a frame within and about which the topic of the origin of poetic inspiration may be examined. Each chapter will look at a particular cultural ‘answer’ in its details, while at the same time making note of ways in which it fits the overall pattern. In this way an important part of each culture’s character will be displayed and described, then compared to one another in the conclusion. There the topic of a general schemata will re-enter, and each culture will then speak upon its line.

Chapter Two
The Norse God of Death and his Poets

Introduction

The question of a source of poetic inspiration from the 'Norse' concerns the god Óðinn, and it is upon this god that much of the discussion of this chapter will focus. Before such a discussion can get underway, the term 'Norse,' and the groups it represents, must be more fully explained and understood. Linguistically, the term refers to the groups of Germanic languages spoken in western Scandinavia, particularly Norway, southwest Sweden, northern Denmark and, later but still importantly, Iceland.[1] The dialect of this language that most interests the current discussion is that spoken in Iceland, as it is in this dialect that the Prose and Poetic *Eddas* are written. It is in these texts that many tales relating to Óðinn can be found, and where much information on the pre-Christian pantheon of Scandinavia, as well as perhaps much of the Germanic world, was written down. Indeed Óðinn exists in many different cultures throughout northern Europe, frequently and in more or less the same form. Therefore, when speaking of the 'Norse' religion, one mainly refers to the mythology represented in the two *Eddas* and the skalds which the *Eddas* quote, although also suggesting a larger idea held in the peoples who spoke

[1] Fortson, 328.

languages of the Germanic family.

Snorri and his Edda

Before any discussion of the character of Óðinn can begin, something first must be said concerning the sources from which he is explained. The bulk of his character is found in a work entitled *Edda*, commonly referred to as the *Prose Edda* to distinguish it from the *Poetic Edda*, which will be described later. The *Prose Edda* was written a full two centuries after the conversion of Iceland in 1000, when the country's pagan past was of renewed interest. This interest was not of a purely antiquarian fascination with history, but also because of the highly intricate reliance of contemporary poetry on the myths and religion of the past.[2] Thus, the *Prose Edda,* which could be better explained as an instruction booklet for poets, describes the myths necessary for constructing tale-based kennings (the *Gylfaginning*), common kennings used by skalds of the past (the *Skaldskaparmal*), and illustrating modes and forms of writing such as types of rhymes, meter and allegory. The *Prose Edda* is of further interest in its use of examples drawn from skalds who otherwise would be lost to the darkness of history.

Snorri Sturluson, the author of the *Prose Edda,* also wrote the *Heimskringla*, a history of the kings of Norway. Snorri, born in 1179, was a very influential man and poet in Iceland, being twice elected as the lawspeaker, which required him to memorize and

[2] A more complete description of this form, particularly the use of kennings, will have to wait until the end of this chapter.

pronounce the law of the country to the very letter at least once a year before the national Althing assembly[3]. Snorri's interest in the Norwegian history reflects his interests in contemporary politics and his own people's history, as the Icelanders migrated from Scandinavia during the reign of King Harald Fair-hair[4]. The *Heimskringla* is of interest to the present discussion because of its relating the events in the life and character of Norway's first legendary king, Óðinn, in its first chapters, the *Ynglinga Saga*. Here Óðinn is depicted as a human king with various magical powers, and Snorri generally writes in narrative form what he explains of the god in his *Edda*. Some of the details differ when compared to subsequent writings, and these will be further examined in the following pages.

The other main source for information concerning Óðinn is the *Poetic Edda*. This particular work was discovered in 1643 by Bishop Brynjólfur and contains various poems whose subject matters range from the mythological end-of-the-world tale to legendary accounts of Sigurð the dragon slayer. Many of the poems within the *Poetic Edda*, are quoted in other works, and Snorri frequently pulls from the poems for examples in his *Edda,* as well. The poems, therefore, seem to be, if not in the same form and organization as they appear in the *Codex Regius No. 2365*, at least were well known during the time Snorri wrote, and may be understood to be of the same tradition.[5]

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[3] Sturluson 3, xi.
[4] Jones, 279.
[5] *Poetic Edda*, xii-xiv

The God of War, Death, and Knowledge

For the Norse, poetic inspiration came from the god Óðinn in the form of a drink, usually identified as an intoxicating mead. The figure of Óðinn is an odd one, and at first glance he seems a composite figure. He was born first of the Æsir, one of the tribes of gods, and is called All-Father. In the words of Snorri Sturluson, "Óðinn is the highest and most ancient of the Æsir. He rules all things, and mighty though all other gods are, yet they all submit to him like children to their father." Óðinn is also called 'Val-father,' which is 'father of the slain,' "since all those who fall in battle are his adopted sons.[6]" This reference is to his role in battle as a psychopomp, as he and his valkyries lead those killed and those who die in his name to Valhöll, where they will battle and feast until the final battle at the end of the world.[7] Óðinn also has many names, most of them rather grim, such as Hanga-god "god of the hanged," Hapta-god, "god of prisoners,[8]" and Bölverk, "evil-doer.[9]" Many of the myths in which he plays a part find Óðinn talking to severed heads or causing the death of common men, and in the later sagas he only gives power, ability and weapons to those he later abandons. He is frequently depicted as causing strife between brothers or close comrades.[10]

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[6] Sturluson (1), 21.
[7] Sturluson (1), 31, 54.
[8] Sturluson (1), 21.
[9] Sturluson (1), 63.
[10] Turville-Petre, 51.

The images of death and war are often aligned with that of wisdom and knowledge, generally concerning the occult or ancient lore and the history of the world, in tales concerning Óðinn. Many such tales find Óðinn engaged in tests or contests between others, his opponents either very skilled in wisdom or else children, youths who have yet to begin their lives in full as adults[11]. In *Grímnismál*, another poem in the *Poetic Edda*, Óðinn and his wife, Frigg, find two young princes lost at sea and each trains them individually. Upon their return journey, Óðinn's foster child, Geirrœth, leaps out of the boat at the last minute and pushes his brother out to sea, returning on his own and taking up his father's position as king.[12] Later, Óðinn goes to visit Geirrœth under a pseudonym (Grímnir, 'the masked one') in order to test his generosity, though finds the king both unwelcoming and cruel. Geirrœth, believing that the strange visitor will bewitch him, a suggestion put into his mind by Frigg's handmaiden, puts Grímnir in prison and tortures him, hoping to learn his true identity. While in the dungeon, Geirrœth's son Agnar comes to visit him, taking him a horn to drink and saying that his father did wrong to treat Grímnir so poorly. As he is held over a fire, Grímnir speaks, imparting wisdom upon the lad.[13] Most of this wisdom comes in the form of mythic lore, dealing with the gods and their places in heaven. Other tales in the *Poetic Edda* have a similar central core, though with different "frames," where Óðinn, for one

[11] These youths are almost always the children of kings or nobles, or else warriors that Óðinn wishes to, in a way, take under his wing. It is frequently the case that these two categories combine into one person.
[12] Indeed, it is probably at Óðinn's suggestion that this occurs.
[13] *Poetic Edda*, 53-64

reason or another, expounds wisdom in poetic form. In *Vafthrúthnismál* Óðinn, again in disguise, and the giant Vafthrúthnir hold a contest of questions, the contest ending when Óðinn asks a question to which only he knows the answer ("What did Óðinn whisper in the ear of his son, ere Baldr on bale was laid?"), at the same time giving up his identity. In another poem, *Hárbarzljóð*, another contest of knowledge occurs, this time between Óðinn, disguised as a ferryman, and his son Thor. In each poem, a disguised Óðinn displays his knowledge of lore, either to one of little knowledge or to one who believes that he has a great deal. And, in the end, Óðinn always wins, even in *Grímnismál*, where King Geirrœth, at learning that the stranger in his dungeon is Óðinn, gives him pardon, yet in his excited state leaps up and falls on his sword, killing himself.

Interpretations of such poems vary among scholars. Hollander comments that *Vafthrúthnismál* is "frankly didactic in purpose," meant to lay out for the skalds the ordering of the gods in the pantheon or provide information in the construction of their kennings and poems.[14] Such an explanation has some truth to it, as memorization of the poem, or at least frequent readings, would acquaint a poet with the lore that Óðinn expounds, though does little to explain the rather severe imagery. Some take this idea further, suggesting that the stories are part of the larger idea of Óðinn as initiator in a pre-historical shamanistic cult, and such poems are representations of either trials the initiate has to go through or containers of the

[14] *Poetic Edda*, 42

information they have to know to pass their tests.[15] Whatever the exact reason, it is clear that Óðinn is connected in some way to lore and wisdom in the form of knowledge.

Óðinn as the god of death, war, and poetry

Along with death, war and lore, Óðinn was also the god of poetic inspiration, distributing it to poets in the form of an intoxicating mead. References to a "mead of poetry" abound in Norse stories and poems, the most clear examples of which can be found in the *Eddas*. As Snorri's account is the most narrative, and the most easily understood, the discussion will begin there, utilizing the accounts of the *Poetic Edda* when necessary.

In the *Gylfaginning*, Snorri relates the story in response to the question "How did the craft of poetry come about," and the answer is a tale that can be split into two parts, the first narrating how the mead of poetry was made, the second concerning Óðinn's trials to obtain it.

The mead itself is a result of an argument between the two tribes of gods, the Æsir and the Vanir, an argument that is also told elsewhere, particularly in the *Voluspa* in the *Poetic Edda*. When they had finally come together in truce, they made an agreement of peace, which they sealed and symbolized by spitting into a vat. From its contents the gods made a man called Kvasir, who, seeing as he came from a part of all the gods, was very wise and could answer any question brought to him. He traveled the world dispensing this knowledge, teaching it to others, until he came to be the guests of two dwarves, Fialar and

[15] Glosecki, 144-152

Galar, who killed him. Into two vats and one pot they poured his blood, the three vessels being called Són, Boðn, and Oðrœrir. The dwarves told the Æsir, when they heard of Kvasir's death, that the man had suffocated on his own wise, since there was no one intelligent who could ask him any good question. Eventually, the dwarves lose the mead in another dispute, this time to a giant named Suttungr, who hides the mead in a mountain, guarded by his daughter Gunnloð.[16]

In brief, the tale continues when Óðinn, disguised as Bölverk "the doer of evil," comes to Suttungr and asks for the mead. When he is refused, he bores through the stone of the mountain with an auger and, as a snake, sneaks in. There he lies with Gunnloð for three nights and is given three draughts of the mead, all he needs to drain the two vats and the pot. He returns to Asgard in the form of an eagle, though is chased by Suttungr, also in an eagle's form. Óðinn cuts it close, and though he is able to spit the mead into three pots laid out by the other gods, his pursuer forces him to lose a little "behind him," which is called "the rhymester's share." The rest is given to the Æsir and "those skilled at composing poetry."[17]

The first half of Snorri's tale is important in that it relates from where the drink comes; in other tales it is already present when the story begins. The drink's origin is dual, coming from both the spit of the gods (note, all the gods) as well as the blood of a man. Thus it is not a drink belonging to the gods alone, nor merely a common mead of men, but

[16] Sturluson (1), 61-2
[17] Sturluson (1), 62-4

both at once. Thus the removal of it from the world, first by the murder of Kvasir by the dwarves, then by placing it under guard beneath a mountain, is the hiding of the mead from both of its original possessors. This hiding, moreover, sets up Óðinn's role in the second half of the tale as the seeking agent.

For this first part of the story, Snorri is our only source, though for the second part there also exists the *Poetic Edda*, which may be used in conjunction with Snorri. It is important to note here that, though both *Eddas* are being used in conjunction with one another, they are not to be construed as coming from the same, single source. The tales that the two texts relate can be very different, particularly in detail, and to use one to fill in the gaps of the other would be to ignore some of the very important aspects of each. Saying this, it is also important not to go too far in divorcing the versions from one another completely, as they both come from the same tradition and the same cultural group. To look at the similarities *and* the differences will allow a deeper reading and multiple, though related, views on the same figure. It is in this way that the *Eddas* ought to be viewed, and in this way I will treat them below.

The retrieval of the mead, though, is not easy, and Óðinn must go in secret to accomplish the task. In order to get to where the mead is kept, Óðinn must bore a hole into the mountain and crawl through as a snake. In the *Poetic Edda*, Óðinn notes that "over and

under were the etin's path; / thus dared I life and limb."[18] Yet the Poetic Edda's relation of the tale adds something else: in stanza 13 of the Hávamál, Óðinn says

Óminnis hegri heitir, sá er yfir □lðrom þrumir,
hann stelr geði guma;
þess fugls fióðrom ec fiótraðr varc
í garði Gunnlaðar[19]

This is certainly odd, since in Snorri's version Óðinn is lying with Gunnloð for three nights, not fettered and, as the 12th stanza notes, dim of mind.

Taken together, the 12th and 13th stanzas may refer to Óðinn's inability to think, and thus escape, in an inebriated state after drinking the two vats and one pot of mead. This may be so, but an examination of the names of the vessels suggests a deeper reading. The only vessel[20] to appear in each of the stories is Oðrœrir, which has been translated by Hollander (although with some reservations) as "exciter of inspiration"[21] and by Ursula Dronke as "stirrer of intelligence, of the spirit of the mind."[22] This makes sense, for that which stirs the intelligence, which stirs the spirit of the mind is inspiration. Oðrœrir, then, is inspiration

[18] *Poetic Edda*, 29
[19] "The heron of heedlessness hovers over the feast / and stealeth the minds of men / With that fowl's feathers fettered I was / when I was Gunnloð's guest." (*Poetic Edda*, 16-7)
[20] It is interesting to note that Oðrœrir, depending on the text, is the name for the vessel or for the drink within the vessel. What we are concerned with here is what Oðrœrir gives, poetic inspiration. I have thus chosen vessel so that the discussion will go more smoothly, though Oðrœrir's dual nature, or at least the confusion, should be kept in mind.
[21] *Poetic Edda*, 30
[22] Dronke, 664

itself, delivered to both the gods and to the poets, the latter who will hopefully use it among their fellow humans by creating poetry.

In addition to Oðrœrir, Snorri mentions the names of two other vessels, Són and Boðn. Són specifically, Dronke defines as "the heathen term for atonement," noting that Óðinn is the only Norse god for which the term is used. Boðn, on the other hand, she allies with Old English *orc*, "a Latin loanword, meaning both 'drinking vessel' and 'Orcus,' 'underworld'." Dronke further allies Boðn with fetters by calling attention to an Etruscan pot featuring "a chained wolfish figure (two human, with wolf-head masks, one, Fenrir-like, wholly wolf) emerging from the mouth of a large round pot to grasp at the living human beings around him. The pot, with its tight opening – *fauces Orci* – clearly represents the prison of the underworld of death."[23] If Dronke is right in her interpretation, the three vessels would represent fettering in the world of the dead (Boðn), atonement (Són), and released inspiration brought back to the world (Oðrœrir), notably the world from whence it came.

This cycle of fettering, atonement, and release is seen later in the Hávamál as well, linked to the earlier passages and to Snorri's tale by Oðrœrir. Here Óðinn is hung by a rope upon the tree Yggdrasil,[24] sacrificed "himself to himself." Upon the tree he is fettered, and the atonement is inherent in his need to enact such a sacrifice. Dronke notes further that

[23] Dronke, 662
[24] Indeed, the word 'Yggdrasil' means Ygg's (another term for Óðinn) Horse. In other words, the gallows (*Poetic Edda*, 36).

Óðinn was considered by the tenth-century scald Kormakr the *haptsœnir*, or the "provider of s*ón* for the *höpt*," or "the atoner for the gods."[25] Yet the question still may be asked: atonement for what? In the Poetic Edda's version of Snorri's myth retold above, the giants come to Óðinn's hall the following day to ask for Bolverk. To this:

> Baugeið Óðinn hygg ec at unit hafi,
> hvat scal hans trygðom trúa?
> Suttung svikinn hann lét sumbli frá
> oc grœtta Gunnlóðo.[26]

What oath Óðinn swore we do not know, though it is probable that Bolverk was not among the gods (or else that Suttungr had slain him), though the second line betrays Óðinn's lie. Hollander notes in his footnote to this stanza that "[t]he oath on the ring attached to the heathen altar was a specially solemn one,"[27] though we are not certain that it is the altar's ring by which he swore. Whatever the case, Óðinn has here been found to be a beguiler, a thief, and a liar. For Óðinn, the first two of these are not that harsh of accusations, yet the third is more serious: how can a god of wisdom and knowledge be trusted if he is a known liar? It may be, then, that Óðinn's act of sacrificial atonement on Yggdrasil is for this purpose[28].

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[25] Dronke, 663.

[26] "An oath on the ring did Óðinn swear: / how put trust in his troth? / Suttung he swindled and snatched his drink, / and Gunnloð he beguiled." (*Poetic Edda*, 30)

[27] *Poetic Edda*, 30

[28] Another interpretation of Óðinn's self-sacrifice is that it is a sort of test, a view that follows along with Snorri's version of the myth. To obtain wisdom and knowledge Óðinn

To return to the Hávamál, following his hanging Óðinn "catches up runes" and then falls to the ground, where he receives a drink from Oðrœrir. Then, thereafter,

Þá nam ec frœvaz oc fróðr vera
oc vaxa oc vel hafaz;
orð mér af orði orðz leitaði,
verc mér af verki vercs leitaði.[29]

What Oðrœrir bequeaths here is insight and wisdom, not specifically inspiration, though still it is from the same vessel as before that he drinks. Yet the two are not as far different as they may seem; insight and wisdom mixed with inspiration is "new metaphysical life for the minds of men, so that they may grow more fertile."[30] New life for the minds of the poets who have a share in Oðrœrir, but also for the rest of humanity, as the wisdom gained by the draught, inspired by the drink, will be in the words of the poems as crafted by the poets. As Kvasir before them, the poets will spread knowledge throughout the world.

Insanity and Poetic Essence in Óðinn's Name

The ideas examined above, both in his character and in the poem concerning him, can be examined further in taking apart Óðinn's name. A full examination of Óðinn, as a

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must prove what it is he is willing to give up, and this turns out to be his very life. This interpretation is mine alone, though it would fit into the usual quest of a mythological hero.

[29] "…began I to grow and gain in insight, / to wax eke in wisdom: / one verse led on to another verse, / one poem led on to the other poem" (*Poetic Edda*, 36).

[30] Dronke, 663

combination of *óð*- and the Indo-European suffix *–no*, shows that he and his exploits are not narratives alone but that they *represent* the process of poetic composition.

To begin, the first part of Óðinn's name, óð-, can be traced back to the Indo-European root **uat*-, **uāt*, which is found attested in Italic in Latin *vātes* and Old Irish *fāith*. Both outcomes can generally be defined as a "soothsayer" or a "prophet," and are further related in that the activity done by either is the same: canere or canid (in both cases, to sing). Thus: a poetic soothsayer, an inspired prophet who sung poems.[31]

The Germanic outcome of the IE **uat*-, **uāt* root is **wōþ*, a root more broad than its Latin and Irish relatives, covering the semantic field from madness to poetry.[32] Some examples include ON *øsa* 'make raving mad or crazy;' OE *wēdan*, OHG *wuoten*, OS *wōdian* "rage, be raving mad or crazy;" OIc *oðr* 'poesie;' and OE *wōþ* "song, sound, voice, poetry[33]." One may, at this list, wonder what type of madness, or what type of poetry, **wōþ* referred to. Such madness, though, may not be the loss of mental control we associate with the world in modern parlance, but instead a control by a higher power, as suggested by the cognates of

[31] Kershaw, 69-70

[32] The connection between 'madness' and 'poetry' does continue in certain respects into Wales, as can be seen by the legends about Cadir Idris, a mountain in Northern Wales, where it is said "It is said that whoever spends a night alone on the summit will come down mad, blind or endowed with poetical powers." (*Oxford Companion,* 64).

[33] Kershaw quotes these from Pokorny, Julius, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern: Francke, 1959.

**wōþ* in Latin and Old Irish discussed above. Thus the general meaning can be said to be "divinely inspired mental activity."[34]

One result of **uat-*, **uāt* in Old Norse comes very close to this definition; *óðr* is "inspired mental activity." This particular word is of considerable interest to the current discussion in that it is the root of the name Óðinn. Oddly enough, there is another god by the name Óðr who Snorri identifies as either the husband or else the bed-fellow of the goddess Freyja. As a traveler, Óðr is rarely at home, causing Freyja to cry tears of gold.[35] Óðr is in some way besides his name connected to Óðinn, sharing his enjoyment of long, lonely travels and being the sometime leader of the Furious Host in southern Germania (under the name Wode), a possession usually taken by Óðinn himself.[36]

The word *óðr* is elsewhere used in conjunction with Óðinn. In the Voluspa of the Poetic Edda, it is used in the process of the creation of the first two humans, Ask and Embla.

fundo á landi, lítt megandi,
Asc oc Emblo, ørl□glausa.

□nd þau né átto, óð þau né h□fðo,
lá né læti né lito góða;
□nd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hœnir,
lá gaf Lóðurr oc lito góða[37].

[34] Kershaw, 71-2
[35] And thus the kenning for gold, Freyja's tears, and the only reason Snorri notes Óðr at all.
[36] Kershaw, 72
[37] "Two without fate on the land they found, / Ask and Embla, empty of might / Soul they had not, sense they had not, / Heat nor motion, nor goodly hue; / Soul gave Óðinn, sense gave Honir, / Heat gave Lothur and goodly hue." (*Poetic Edda 2*, 8).

It is certainly odd that here the god Hœnir, not Óðinn, gives to the first humans *óð*. Hœnir is a very infrequent character in Norse myths, seen most readily with Óðinn and Loki on their travels (such as in the tale of Ottr's ransom), though he does very little. The god is also seen after the final battle of Ragnarok, where there is only one line concerning him: "Þá kná Hœnir hlautvið kiósa," or "Then Hœnir wins the prophetic wand."[38] Such would seem to fit the character of Óðinn, especially in this discussion, and Hollander notes that Hœnir, along with Lóðurr may be hypostases of Óðinn, though Hœnir's "name and function have not yet been explained satisfactorily."[39] Snorri's relation of the same tale is very similar, save that Hœnir and Lóðurr are replaced by Óðinn's brothers Vili and Ve and the gods are not specifically named when giving their 'gifts' (among other, unrelated, differences). Moreover, the second gift given is *vit ok hrœring*. Kershaw, quoting Faulkes, defines *vit* as "intelligence, consciousness," and *hrœring* as "motion, ability to move," and thus the "sense" given by the second god of the trio is "moved consciousness, inspired intelligence."[40]

As seen above, the *óðr* of Óðinn, coming from IE **uat-*, **uāt*, has a very wide usage in Old Norse, particularly in its mythology, all of which must be kept in mind when considering the definition of the god's name. Yet Óðinn is not simply Óðr, or else the situation would be much clearer. The second part of Óðinn's name comes from the West-Indo-European suffix '-no-,' found frequently in the names of gods and goddesses.

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[38] *Poetic Edda 2,* 25.
[39] *Poetic Edda*, 3
[40] Kershaw, 73

Most recognizable of the gods given by Kershaw[41] are 'Silvā-nus' (god of the forest and field-god, from Latin *silva* 'forest, woods') and 'Epo-na' (horse-goddess, from Gaul. **epos*, cognate with Lat. *equus*, horse).[42] The suffix normally indicates membership in a group, though when used in names of divinities, "there will be no question of mere membership. Where the god's name is formed on the base of a grouping of people, the god will be the leader and patron of the group."[43] Such would be the case of Populonia, the goddess of the *populus*, the people. Yet the situation is different when that represented is not a definite group, but a larger reality or an idea. Neptunus, then, presents difficulties because "the element of water cannot be transposed as such into the social domain. In fact here we have an incarnation, not the exercise of authority: Neptunus personifies the watery element, he represents it."[44] The situation here, then, is much the same with that of Óðinn, whose name is a combination of *óðr* and the wIE –no- suffix. Óðinn, then, is not a god who reigns over poets and sacrifices, but the personification of the act of poetic creation, a process described in the myths concerning his quest for wisdom, runes, and the poetic mead.

As a representation of poetic composition, Óðinn and his exploits become a model for poets, both in that the Norse poetic form is bound and intricately tied together, but also in narratives, where the poet himself becomes physically like Óðinn.

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[41] from Meid's 1957 article "Das Suffix –no- in Götternamen."
[42] Kershaw, 75
[43] Kershaw, 76
[44] Kershaw, 11, quoting Benveniste, 1973.

The poet's craft

The idea of fettering as a part of poetic composition is not found only in the myths of Óðinn, but also in the form of Norse poetry itself. The term 'fettering' here is perhaps inappropriate, though, as its connotation is rather negative, and thus it would more befit poetry to describe it instead as being intricately bound within itself, or intricately woven.[45] Verse is further bound by its connections to the lore and wisdom that Óðinn represents, as can be seen best in the kennings.[46]

The poetry of the Norse falls generally into one of two types. The first is that which is used in the Poetic Edda, and thus is termed eddic poetry. The most common form of eddic poetry is the *fornyrðislag*, or 'metre of old lore.' In this type, each line is split into two half-lines by a metrical caesura, though joined by one or two syllables in the a-line alliterating with the first stressed syllable of the b-line. Thus:

hátt blæss **H**eimdallr, **h**orn er á lopti,
mælir Óðinn við **M**íms h□fuð.[47]

where the bolded letters alliterate across the caesura break.

[45] The idea of "woven poetry" is a frequent image in Germanic verse, particularly in Anglo-Saxon literature, where most poets (from that of *Widsith* to *Beowulf* and from Bede to Cynewulf) describe their work as "bound." Anglo-Saxon poetry, indeed, follows many of the patterns as described below, with of course their own cultural style.
[46] See below for a fuller descriptions of kennings, their use, and their relevance to this topic.
[47] "Heimdallr blows loudly, the horn is in the air, Óðinn speaks with Mimr's head" (Gade, 62).

The second type of poetic form in Norse is called skáldic poetry, and though it is descendant of the Germanic alliterative poetry, it is unique to Scandinavia. The alliterative form is similar to the eddic form described above, yet becomes more intricate with the addition of syllable counting and internal rhyme. In the earliest attested skaldic metre, *dróttkvætt*, or 'metre to be recited before royal retainers,' lines must be six syllables long and end in a cadence of long syllable followed by one short syllable. Each half-line, moreover, must contain an internal rhyme, either with different or identical postvocalic environments. Thus:

Heyr **M**íms v*in*ar **m***in*a
(**m**érs f*und*r gefinn Þ*und*ar)
við **g***óm*asker **g**lymja
gl*aum*bergs Egill str*aum*a.[48]

where the bolded letters, again, denote alliteration and the italicized letters internal rhyme. Highly complicated and intricate, *dróttkvætt* existed as a popular form for at least five centuries, from its first attestation in the ninth until it fell out of favor in the fourteenth. It was its strict form, in fact, that kept *dróttkvætt* in use by poets, particularly in the court, for so long. In exchange for gifts, high status, and royal protection, poets would construct *dróttkvætt* in praise of their kingly patrons, poems that the kings assumed would change less, due to the interlocking nature of each word and line, thus continuing their fame far into the

[48] Translation: "Egill, listen to my stream of Mimr's friend's pleasure mountain roaring against the gum's skerry: I have been given the gift of Þundr" (Gade, 63).

future.[49] The conservative nature of *dróttkvætt* had a further benefit, though this for modern scholars, as the language of the poetry can be utilized by historical linguists in the effort to approximate the date of each poem.

As can be seen from the translation of the poem above, composing in *dróttkvætt* required more than strict rules of meter and rhyme. Each poem required the use of kennings[50], a form of metaphor built, in varying degrees, on cultural knowledge. A simple example is 'whale's road,' a kenning for 'sea' or 'ocean,' as whales use the ocean for travel. Kennings can get much more complicated, especially if one or even both of its parts are unknown or confusing; if one had never heard of a whale then the metaphor would be completely lost, the meaning only being possibly gleaned from context. Some kennings, such as 'Grani's burden' or 'Ottar's ransom,' were built on more than references to nature or battle, and instead were built on the myths and legends of the Norse pagan religion. These types of kennings were particularly popular during the thirteenth century when interest in the old religion began to reawaken.[51] A poet's work, then, lay not only in the construction and interlocking of line and word, but also between the poem's subject matter and pagan myths and legends. At times the poet was even expected to compose and perform immediately. An instance in Sneglu-Halla Þáttur, 'The Tale of Sarcastic Halli,' serves here as a good example.

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[49] Gade, 76.
[50] According to the OED, the term "kenning" is "derived from the idiomatic use of *kenna við* or *til*, 'to name after.'"
[51] Gade, 74-5, 84. Northern Europe had been Christian at this point for about two or three hundred years.

King Harald and his poet, Thjodolf, were walking in the town when they witnessed a quarrel between a tanner and a blacksmith, who almost came to blows. Harald commanded Thjodolf to compose a verse about the situation, and when Thjodolf complained that it was "hardly suitable considering that I am called your chief poet," Harald made the stipulation that Thjodolf's poem seem to be about different people than a tanner and a blacksmith, though it ought to "nevertheless identify each one's trade." Thjodolf composed two verses, the second being:

Verse	Reference
Thor of the great bellows threw	*Thor of the bellows:* the blacksmith
from the malicious town	*town of taunts*: mouth
of taunts jaw-lightning	*jaw-lightning*: abusive words
at the giant of goat-flesh.	*giant* (i.e. enemy) *of goat flesh*: the tanner
Gladsome Geirrod of the worn	*Geirrod*: the tanner
skin-scraper from Thor's forge took	*forge*: mouth
with sound-grippers sparks	*sound-grippers*: ears
from that smithy of spells.	*smith of spells*: mouth, its *sparks*: abusive words[52]

The verse is placed on the border of comprehension and confusion, and only a person skilled in the lore of the myths and legends and the ways of kennings would be able to understand its full meaning. In the case above, the situation is humorous, at least for the king and those listening around him, though the necessity of comprehension is at other times dire. During another scene in the same tale, the titular character Halli praises the wife of King Harald,

[52] Hreinsson, 344.

though, because the poem concerns the royal couple's personal union, Halli almost loses his life. It is only due to King Harald's appreciation of bawdy humor that Halli is saved.[53]

Becoming More like Óðinn

In the sagas, poets are frequently represented as having qualities akin to Óðinn, be they physical features or points of character. Stuf, for example, in *Stúfs þáttur hinn skemmri*, is blind as well as ugly and fat. Snorri's description of Óðinn is similar, calling him "grim" while engaged in battle. Opposed to this is Óðinn's appearance when he is outside of battle, where he appears "handsome and beautiful." This dual appearance Snorri attributes to Óðinn's ability to shapeshift,[54] and seems certainly to be related to his role as both the god of death and of poetry at the same time. This dual appearance is seen in the family of Egil Skallagrimsson, a famous poet and the ancestor of Snorri Sturluson. Egil himself is hideously ugly, while his brother is "big and handsome from an early age," continuing the pattern in his family of one ugly and one handsome brother.[55]

As noted above, many of the saga poets are expected to produce poetry on the spot in challenges. Usually these are harmless, such as the one noted at the beginning of the chapter, yet other times the poet, if he does not live up to the expectations of his king, faces loss of favor. In one instance, Einar Skulason sees King Sigurd beating a thief for stealing a

[53] Viðar Hreinsson, 356.
[54] Sturluson 3, 10.
[55] *Egil's Saga*, 56.

goat, and when Einar protests, he is told that he must first compose a poem, though while he is composing it, the thief will be beaten. Einar needs only the time of five strokes before he completes the verse, which happens to be about the situation at hand.[56] Finally, the poet himself might suffer if his poem is not told well, such as in the case of Sarcastic Halli, where twice his life is threatened if he does not compose a good poem.[57] Though the poet does not compose a long, didactic poem, the situation is reminiscent of that of Óðinn in King Geirrœth's dungeon.

Besides poetic challenges, some poets are in possession of magical powers, such as Thorleif in *Þorleifs þáttur jarlsskálds*. In this tale the poet is described as "fully capable at an early age, skillful and talented. He was a good poet," and his opponent, Hakon, Earl of Lade, as being in possession of "magic arts, witchcraft and sorcery, because his wickedness and apostasy were both a great burden to many, and irreparably harmful to their body and soul."[58] Thorleif, to shame Earl Hakon, conducts himself very much as Óðinn might, coming and going in disguise, causing swords to rise up and strike his opponents merely at the sound of his poetry, and to leave through closed doors and unopened locks. Such powers are similar to those described in the *Ynglinga Saga*: "Óðinn was able to cause his enemies to be blind or deaf or fearful in battle, and he could cause their swords to cut no

[56] Hreinsson, 337-8.
[57] Hreinsson, 340-1, 347.
[58] Hreinsson, 362.

better than wands."[59] After Thorleif dies he becomes even more like Óðinn in that he inspires the poetic career of a younger poet while the youth sits outside his barrow at night. In a dream, Thorleif pulls the youth's tongue out of his mouth and speaks a verse, calling to be praised in the first of the youth's poems. When he awakens, the youth returns to his farm and composes the poem, then travels abroad, receiving many gifts from kings and princes.[60]

In this way the poets of the sagas become like Óðinn, not in the sense that they share in his wisdom or lore, but that they integrate the process that he represents into themselves.

Conclusion

The source of poetic inspiration is not Óðinn, as even he must obtain it from elsewhere, either from the runes he 'catches' while on Yggdrasil or from the mead made from Kvasir's blood. Instead, the role of Óðinn in these myths is to represent the *process* of poetic composition and the way in which inspiration, visualized as mead, works within the poet. Verse was bound or intricately woven in form and reference, and this weaving was imaged in the *Eddas* as a fettered god of poetry. Within these fetters was knowledge and lore, the wisdom of Óðinn himself, which must be learned and understood, then delivered, at times within a few seconds of the poem's requesting. Through this, and in fact by this, Óðinn is freed from his fetters, as the poet himself is renewed. In this way the myth of

[59] Sturluson 3, 10.
[60] Hreinsson, 368-9.

Óðinn represents the verse form and the knowledge contained within the Norse poets, used in composing their poetry.

The final stages of this process, the danger and at times pain, followed by freedom, that Óðinn's myths represent are perhaps the most peculiar, even moreso because of their frequent representation in later sagas. It is in these stages though, that the full outcome of poetic composition occurs. That a poem is written is of course of practical importance, particularly in tales such as Einar or Thorleif where the life of the poet hinges on the quality of the poem. But of further importance is the development of the poet himself, who is changed through the process of composition. The knowledge gained through 'unlocking' the lore within a poem is not simply added to some internal storehouse within the mind, but integrated into the being of the poet: the poet is changed because of that wisdom.[61] Just as Óðinn, immediately following his drinking of the mead in the *Prose Edda*, changes into a bird, so too are the poets of the sagas depicted as similar to the god of poetry. Becoming a poet, then, is not only that Norse poets are inspired by the mead, but in drinking what was brought from below the mountain by Óðinn, poets become more like the god whose craft they practice. It is in this way that they face danger, as the process is a relinquishing of the self for renewal, represented well as a "death" and "rebirth" of the god of poetry.

[61] This is true in a similar way for Taliesin as well, whose knowledge is gained through successive transformations into various living and non-living beings. Taliesin is discussed in chapter four.

Chapter Three
Binding to the World Eternal in Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the Norse god Óðinn was discussed as a representation of inspiration in the process of composition. The Anglo-Saxons also saw a god taking part in the poetic process, although the influence of Christian thought and symbolism affected the *in situ* pagan traditions more heavily, both due to an earlier date of conversion as well as a greater focus of scribes on Christian poetry and prose. Fewer tales of the origin of poetic influence exist, as God differs from Óðinn in being the source of all inspiration, not just poetic, and the inherited Christian tradition and ongoing contemporary theological discussion already understood poetic ability as a gift from God. The concerns of the Anglo-Saxons, then, were somewhat different from those of the Norse, and instead focused more on the role of poetics and the inspiration from above in the process of living the Christian life and approaching God and his wisdom. The process of poetic composition becomes for the Anglo-Saxons a conversation between the laws and teachings of the Church on one side and the fading pre-Christian religion and ideals on the other. It is through this conversation, and the contemplation of each culture's interaction with one another, that wisdom may be achieved, and it is this wisdom that is then explored and

performed to an audience, in the hopes that they, too, will follow the path laid out to communion in wisdom with the Christian God.

Poetic Language and Narrative Form

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition there is no treatise on poetic form and construction as there is in the Iceland *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, though there is enough poetry extant to gain an understanding of both the form the poetry took and how the act of creating it was viewed.

Poetry, and narrative as well, is described by the poets themselves as being woven or bound together. Frequent instances of this occur all throughout the corpus, such as in *Beowulf*[62], line 872b, where Hroðgar's poet, in preparation for delivering a poem after Beowulf's victory over Grendel, is described as composing verse "*soðe gebunden*," truthfully bound. Perhaps most famously is Cynewulf's description of the process of poetic composition as "*wordcræftum wæf*," in wordcraft wound.[63] Such examples see poetic composition both as a craft, and therefore comparable to other crafts, and as being able to contain truthful components.

Poetry for the Anglo-Saxons, indeed, was very similar to that of the Norse as described in the previous chapter, save that the subject matter tended towards Christianity

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[62] *Beowulf*, it ought to be noted, makes up part of the unfortunately damaged Cotton Vitellius A XV manuscript scribed in the late tenth to early eleventh centuries. The date of the poem itself could be as early as the eighth or ninth centuries, and is one of the ongoing topics of *Beowulf* scholarship (Bradley, 407-409)

[63] *Elene*, 1237. This poem, along with *The Dream of the Rood* (to be discussed further below) is found in the Vercelli Manuscript, dated to the second half of the tenth century (Bradley, 109).

more than to the Germanic gods. Poetic form was also similar, as it consisted of alliterating half-lines, separated by a caesura, where two accented syllables in the first half-line alliterate with the first stressed syllable in the second. No internal rhyme scheme can be detected. An example of alliterative form can be seen in the opening lines of *Beowulf* which discuss Scyld Scēfing:

> Oft **Sc**yld **Sc**ēfing **sc**eaþena þrēatum,
> **m**onegum **m**ægþum **m**eodosetla ofteah,
> **e**gsode **e**arlas, syððan **æ**rest[64] wearð
> **f**ēasceaft **f**unden. Hē þæs **f**rōfre gebād[65]:

This alliterative joining is not a simple piece of poetic form, as it also joins the two half-lines together in sense. Thus, above, "monegum mægþum" (many people) and "meodosetla" (mead-seat) are joined, connecting the many people of Scyld's court with the act of social drinking in his hall, a very important social event that helped bind warrior society together. This joining can also occur over sentence boundaries, as in line seven above, where "fēasceaft funden" (found destitute) and "frōfre" (relief) resonate in meaning with one another, even though they are not part of the same syntactic unit.

Nor is the narrative itself free from this description. *Beowulf* holds testament to the woven structure of Anglo-Saxon narrative; older scholarship understood its many strains of tale as 'digressions,' even interpolations of a wayward scribe recording bits and pieces of

[64] All vowels alliterate with one another.
[65] Translation: "Often Scyld Scefing withheld the mead-seat of the troops of his enemies, of many people, terrified earls, after first he was found." (*Beowulf*, 4-7)

history wherever he could. If each small tale is taken alone, then the poem does truly look like a mess, for what really does Ingeld have to do with Beowulf? As Klaebur writes, the poem "lacks steady advance," though this assumes that the poem was meant to advance, "steadily or unsteadily. [The poem] is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings.[66]" The poem's narrative is more like a knot than a line of rope, the "digressions," and the sorrowful ends to which the heroes of old came, commenting on the life and death of Beowulf, and vice versa. The audience is to have the tales of Hengest, Finn, Sigemund and Beowulf in their minds all throughout,[67] allowing the poet to add shades delicate and subtle, or at times outright comments, upon the actions, hopes, and thoughts of the characters in the plot. These shadings are what make *Beowulf* more than a simple heroic epic, but instead construct it as a poem commenting on the beauty of what was lost in the old culture as well as the necessity of moving forward into the new.

The act of speech as a whole is also described poetically in terms of binding and weaving, though frequently the images are of *un*binding. In the first line of *Widsith*[68], the poet "unlocks his treasury of words" when he begins to speak. In *Beowulf*, Unferð's speech

[66] Tolkien, 28.
[67] Indeed this was probably the case for its original audience.
[68] This poem, along with *The Seafarer, The Wanderer, Deor,* and many others is found in the Exeter Book, given to Exeter Cathedral by its first bishop, Leofric, who died c. 1072. It is probably safe to assume that the manuscript was written only shortly before it was given (Bradley, 201).

is described as *onband beadūrune*[69] when challenging Beowulf's courage and character by relating his version of the hero's contest with Breca.

Speech described in this way tends to be more poetic, or at least inspired by a strong emotion or deep thought, and comes from the way in which Anglo-Saxons viewed the process of thought and the mind. This view understands the mind as something that takes in what is experienced in the world without and transforms it into something new. An interesting description of this process is found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*[70], when the author writes about the process in which the poet Cædmon composes poetry. While describing the poet's ability to turn any piece of Biblical lore told to him into beautiful verse, Bede compares Cædmon to "one of the clean animals chewing the cud."[71] This "clean animal" is perhaps a reference to the in Leviticus 11:3[72], and thus is not merely a note on Cædmon's working-class status. Instead, Bede uses the image of a cow to describe Cædmon bringing into himself the Biblical teaching presented to him by the monks and nuns and then reworking it within himself into something different (poetic composition), which may then be again "digested" as poetry.

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[69] *Beowulf*, 501a; Translation: "unbound battle-counsel."
[70] Bede completed his work in 731 (Bede, 19), and Cædmon lived c. 680 (Bede, 248).
[71] Bede, 249.
[72] Mitchell, 233, note 16.

The Mind in Anglo-Saxon Thought

Britt Mize, in his article on the mind in Old English poetry, believes that the binding and unbinding of the chest or the mind represents a particular view held by the Anglo-Saxons of their mental abilities. His description is based on words such as *wordhord*, *hordloca,* and other compounds used to describe that which produces words, thoughts and sentiments. Such words have throughout the corpus a very small usage[73], suggesting that they were productive and transparent, at least enough to give evidence for a general thought concerning the nature of the mind.

The usage of these compounds can be split into two groups of binary variables: permeability/impermeability (or the mind repels, the mind admits) and containment/exclusion (or the mind holds, the mind releases). The first of these groups deals more generally with the character of the mind to let in or keep away outside influences, such as God or Satan. Here, poets and homilists discuss the issue upon a spectrum, understanding that the mind has the ability to be either permeable or impermeable, and in varying degrees. A mind, for instance, may be permeated by Satan, as seen in *Vainglory*:

[73] *wordhord* and *ferðloca* are the only words to appear more than five times. Many others appear only once in the entire corpus (Mize, 71).

He þa scylde ne wat
fæhþe gefremede, feoþ his betran
eorl fore æfstum, læteð inwitflan
brecan þone burgweal, þe him bebead meotud
þæt he þæt wigsteal wegan sceolde[74].

The mind would be impermeable to such an attack had the one described not succumbed to the guilt and envy brought about by the will of Satan, and if he had listened to what the Creator bade him do. Such listening to the will of God is a good type of permeability, such as what will occur on Judgment Day, when God will know the thoughts and sins of all humans.[75] This permeability is also seen in *Beowulf*, such as when Hroðgar thanks God for the supporting words of Beowulf after the royal councilor is killed by Grendel's mother.[76] Hroðgar praises another of Beowulf's speeches at the hero's final leaving of Heorat by saying *'Þē þā wordcwydas wigtig drihten / on sefan sende[77].'* It is uncertain here whether Hroðgar suggests that the words given to a *passive* Beowulf, though in any case Beowulf must speak them. In *Elene*, Constantine and God seem to work in tandem to open his mind:

[74] Mize's Translation: "He does not understand that guilt brought about by enmity, hates the better man on account of envy, allows an evil arrow to break the fortress wall: he whom the Creator bade that he should defend that rampart." (*Vainglory*, 35b-39) Note that *Vainglory* is found in the Exeter Book. See note 65 above.
[75] As described in *Christ III*, lines 1036b-1038, 1047-8, 1052b-1056a, 1069-1073a. (Mize, 86-7). *Christ III* is also found in the Exeter Book; see note 65 above).
[76] *Beowulf*, 1397-8.
[77] Translation: "These words the wise lord sent to [your] heart." (*Beowulf*, 1841-2)

He wæs sona gearu
þurh þæs halgan hæs, hreðerlocan onspeon,
up locade, swa him se ar ahead,
fæle friðowebba.[78]

The level of permeability of the mind, then, would be at the hand of the individual. Both Satan and God are constantly talking and sending words to the mind, though the individual must choose which to listen to. Interestingly, Mize notes that the satanic attacks upon the individual focus upon "the desiring, volitional part of the self, which for Old English poets is generally the *mod* (or some aspect of it) and not the *sawol*.[79]

The second of Mize's binary variables is the mind's ability to contain and to exclude, or rather that the mind holds and the mind releases. Often the interplay between these two binaries is examined in the literature, most noticeably in *The Wanderer*, such as on lines 12-14: *Ic tō sōþe wāt / þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þēaw / þæt hē his ferðlocan fæste binde.*[80] Elsewhere the mind is seen as a container that may *healdan forð fyrngewritu ond frean domas,*[81] or that may be *fæste biwunden*[82]. The metaphor may be even more physical in

[78] Mize's translation: "He was immediately ready through the command of the holy one, unfastened his mind-chamber, looked up, as the messenger bade him, the good peaceweaver" (*Elene*, 85b-88a) (Mize, 87).
[79] Mize, 81.
[80] Translation: "I know a truth, that it is an excellent virtue in man that he bind fast his heart." *The Wanderer*, 12-4
[81] Mize's translation: "to hold always the ancient writings and praises of the Lord" (*Precepts,* 72b-73) (Mize, 74).
[82] Translation: "bound fastly" (*Juliana* 234b).

cases such as in *Beowulf*, where that which binds the heart is described as *hygebendum*, "thought-, heart-bindings."[83]

An opposing stance occurs in the poetry that suggests that the heart ought to be opened, that that which has been built up within should be shared in the world without. This is seen most clearly in the opening of *Maxims I*:

> Frige mec frodum wordum! Ne læt þinne ferð onhælne,
> degol þæt þu deopost cunne! Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan,
> gif þu me þinne hygecraft hylest ond þine heortan geþohtas.
> Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan.[84]

Wisdom is here seen as something to be traded, to be given in exchange for other pieces of wisdom. Mize suggests that these lines represent more than a simple exchange between two wise men, but instead that in introducing the Maxims in such a way, the poet is making a general comment concerning society and his community, generally the way things ought to be. The sharing of wisdom, then, leads to a cohesive community. Mize then compares this to the sharing of wealth and gold by the king to his comitatus, an act which binds the two together into a mutually helpful relationship. "If wisdom is a kind of wealth," he writes, "then once accumulated, it should be shared out to provide for the needs of others."[85]

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[83] *Beowulf*, 1878b

[84] Mize's translation: "Inquire of me with wise words! Do not let your mind be hidden, that which you may know most profoundly remain secret! I will not tell you my secret if you hide your mental skill and the thoughts of your heart from me. Wise men must exchange proverbs" (*Maxims I*, 1-4a) (Mize, 75). Note that *Maxims I* is found in the Exeter Book; see note 65 above.

[85] Mize, 76

A middleground for "holding" and "releasing" can be found in *Instructions for Christians*, where the poet explains:

> Se forholena cræft and forhyded god
> ne bið ællunga gelice. ********
> Betere bið þe dusige, gif he on breaostrum can
> his unwisdom inne belucan,
> þonne se snotere ðe symle wile
> æt his heahþearfe forhelan his wisdom.
> Ac þu scealt gelome gelæran and tæcan,
> ða hwile þe ðe mihtig Godd mægnes unne,
> þe læs hit þe on ende eft gereowe
> æfter dægrime, þonne þu hit gedon ne miht.[86]

Knowledge kept within a fool is a good thing, the poet suggests, because, it may be assumed, the words of the foolish have often ruined good plans. Knowledge kept within the wise, on the other hand, is shunned, and the suggestion is that the hoarder of wisdom will come to regret his actions upon his judgment by God following his death.

Nor is wisdom alone all that is dangerous to bind within the heart. Sin, too, may be detrimental to a person if it exists overly long within him. This type of binding is described in *Andreas*, where the poet describes:

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[86] Mize's translation: "Hidden knowledge and concealed possessions are not exactly alike. The fool is better off if he can lock his folly inside, in the heart, than the wise man who always wants to hide away his wisdom for his moment of great need. Rather, you must often teach and instruct, as long as mighty God grants you the power, lest you regret it in the end, after your span of days, when you cannot do it" (*Instructions for Christians*, 69-78) Mize, 78).

Man wridode
geond beorna breost, brandhata nið
weoll on gewitte, weorm blædum fag,
attor ælfæle.[87]

A similar "welling-up" of sin is also described in *The Riming Poem*, where the poet describes:

modes gecynde
greteð ungrynde grorn efenpynde,
bealofus byrneð bitter toyrneð.[88]

Bound sin, then, is much different from bound wisdom. The two sections quoted above suggest that bound "sin" and "agitation" will only grow, will boil to a point that it may spew forth into the world, perhaps even as something that it was not originally. In *Andreas*, the source is the words of sinful men, words that enter the hearts of those listening and cause the reaction described in the selection above.

Sorrow, meditation and movement in The Wanderer

The interplay between Mize's set of binaries 'the mind holds' and 'the mind releases' is not only readily visible in the poem *The Wanderer*, but is also brought to a conclusion. The Wanderer, as described in the poem, is a warrior who has lost all that has bound him to the Anglo-Saxon social world, most seriously his lord, who was apparently lost

[87] Mize's translation: "Sin flourished throughout the hearts of the men, fire-hot malice welled up in the mind: a worm inimical to joys, a fatal poison" (*Andreas*, 767b-770a) (Mize, 85). *Andreas* is found in the Vercelli manuscript.
[88] Mize's translation: "The all-dammed-up bottomless agitation challenges the mind's nature, burns eager for destruction, (and now) bitterly runs forth" (*The Riming Poem*, 48b-50) (Mize, 84). Note that the *Rhyming Poem* is found in the Exeter book.

in battle.[89] It is important that his lord died in battle and not in old age, as the plight of the Wanderer is not that he was cast out for a misdemeanor of some sort, but that, by the act of no man, he was bereft of his social position. Thus he laments fate for bringing about his state and not, as in *Deor*, another man. The Wanderer then cannot blame another, cannot focus his lament upon the deeds of another, but simply must feel sorrow for the *common* plight of man upon the earth. That this is the case may be assumed, for if the Wanderer's lord died quietly in bed, the warrior would simply take up the next in line as his new lord. Some sort of death upon the battle-field may also be assumed in view of the imagery of the poem, especially towards the end, where the poet writes of the fall of an entire house and the destruction of war. In the end, of course, the means by which the lord died is not as important to the Wanderer as the fact that his lord, and the Wanderer's position in his house, is lost.

The movement of the poem is one of considered thought. As Alfred notes in his article "The Drama of *The Wanderer*," the poem describes a process, not a point in time.[90] Instead of a description of a person's state of being, then, the poem describes almost a conversation the Wanderer has in his mind (or perhaps spoken, though in any case the speaker would still be alone). This is shown in line 111, where the poet writes *Swa cwæð*

[89] *The Wanderer,* 22-3.
[90] Alfred, 31-2

snottor on mode, gesæt him sundor æt rune.[91] The final phrase *æt rune* here is key. *Rune* is commonly translated as "consultation" or "counsel," though here, as stated explicitly in the same line, the Wanderer is *sundor*, apart from others. Thus a better translation may be 'in contemplation' or 'in deep thought.' Still, though, whatever the case may be, the poet here is claiming that the poem inscribed above is a series of thoughts, not a description of a state of being or a "snap-shot" character study.

To return to the beginning of the poem, in his initial lament, the Wanderer notes that it is an *indryhten þeaw*, an excellent virtue, to bind one's heart when he feels sorrow.[92] Letting out sorrowful thoughts won't help him nor anyone around him, because *[n]e mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan, / ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman.*[93] As there is no help, those *domgeorne dreorigne*, 'eager for renown' bind their thoughts in their hearts. The Wanderer believes that no good will come from telling another of his troubles, as to complain will not only bring shame upon him, but will do no good; fate is unhindered by weighed shoulders.

Such is an odd sentiment to one who speaks them amidst complaints; the Wanderer seems to be complaining about his plight and the troubles of fate while at the same time telling himself that he should not be doing so, as it will not get him much. In lines 29-34, he

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[91] Translation: 'So said the one wise of heart, sat apart in counsel/consultation.'
[92] *The Wanderer*, 12.
[93] Translation: 'a weary heart cannot resist fate, nor the troubled mind provide help.' (*The Wanderer*, 15-6)

laments how cruel grief is when one has it as his only companion, and how it draws his attention away from the joys he has seen in life, from wound gold and the splendor of the earth. Bound, intertwined in both *sorg ond slæp*, sorrow and sleep, the Wanderer is tortured by images of the past, of the joys he once experienced (ll 37). When those dreams disappear, all that remains is:

fealwe wegas,
baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra,
hreosan hrim ond snaw, haggle gemenged.[94]

It is at this point that the Wanderer understands something. Through his contemplation, he comes to realize first that it is pointless to complain about the troubles in his life, because there is nothing that can be done against the *wyrd* that brings them. Yet all the joys of life, the wound gold, his lord who gives it, and the earth itself, is ephemeral, like a dream. Awakening to this fact, he sees that the earth is actually a lonely place, wound not with gold but with frost, snow and hail. This is the crucial point, as when the Wanderer awakens and sees the world around him, sorrow is renewed, and is renewed often,[95] and high is the chance of being caught in an endless cycle of sorrow and fleeting joy. To feel constant anxiety and sorrow is to lose hope, and to lose hope, in the Christian tradition, is a part of sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. Paul makes a distinction between two types of

[94] Translation: "grey waves, seabirds bathing, spread feathers, falling frost and snow mingled with hail." (*The Wanderer*, 46b-48)
[95] *The Wanderer*, 50, 56.

sorrow in his second letter to the Corinthians when he writes, "For the type of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death."[96] It is this second type of sorrow, the worldly sorrow, which constantly laments loss in the world, in its ephemeral nature, that brings a person, for Paul, to spiritual death. It is this type of sorrow, moreover, that the Wanderer is faced with, as, bound in a cycle of sorrow and hope, *without repentance*, he will remain a wanderer forever.

The Wanderer shows in lines 58-60, though, that this is not the case:

> Forþon ic geþencan ne mæg geond þas woruld
> for hwan modsefa min ne gesweorce
> þonne ic eorla lif eal geondþence,[97]

The world is fleeting, thinks the Wanderer, and the entire world *ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð ond fealleþ*[98]. The world, he knows, cannot bring him joy, for it is ephemeral, nor can he change its nature, though still, in the light of this, he does not fall into darkness. Thinking this strange, the Wanderer continues to contemplate upon the nature of the world. A wise man who grasps this nature must understand a great deal, and walk a rather fine line, as described on lines 64 and thereafter. Yet most importantly, a man may not become wise

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[96] 2 Corin. 7:10

[97] Translation: "Therefore I cannot think (i.e. I do not know) why in this world my heard would not grow dark, when I contemplate the life of man" (*The Wanderer*, 58-60)

[98] Translation: "on each and every day declines and falls" (63).

until he has *wintra dæl in woruldrice*[99]. This description of what a man needs to become wise recalls the prior description of what the Wanderer saw when coming forth from his dream: a world caught and bound in snow and frost mingled with hail. The cold of the earth, and the knowledge of its ephemerality, is necessary to a full understanding of the nature of things. Sorrow, thus, is *necessary* to becoming wise, as Paul noted in his letter. This is the spiritual sorrow that, for the Christian, leads one away from sin and towards salvation with God, away from the *woruldrice* of *wintra* and into the kingdom of Heaven. Thus is the way God created the world, as the Wanderer notes twice, on lines 85-6 and 107[100].

In a final group of thoughts, the poet returns to comment upon the man *snottor on mode*, wise in heart, who has enacted the process of becoming wise in his contemplation. The poem again returns for a moment to expressing one's thoughts, and notes:

> ne sceal næfre his torn to rycene
> beorn of his breostum acyþan nemþe he ær þa bote cunne
> eorl mid elne gefremman[101].

The 'remedy' mentioned returns to the beginning of the poem, where the Wanderer notes that *wyrd* may not be overturned. Thus the poem is saying that a man ought not to keep still his tongue only if he is unwise, but *also* if he does not know how to go beyond the world, to

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[99] Translation: "a deal of winters in the worldly kingdom" (65).
[100] I read here *wyrda gesceaft* as "origin of *wyrd*" and thus the line "the origin of *wyrd* (God) overturns/amends the world under Heaven."
[101] Translation: "a man must not too hastily reveal his anger from his chest, unless he beforehand the remedy knows, with courage to effect." (*The Wanderer*, 112b-144a)

overturn *wyrd*. Only one who has contemplated *through* the sorrow in the world and come out of it towards a knowledge and an understanding of the Heavenly kingdom has true wisdom, and only such a one ought to speak. It was indeed with this sentiment that the poem itself began, as the poet writes:

> Oft him anhaga are gebideð
> metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcearig
> geond lagulade longe sceolde
> hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ[102]

It is with this understanding that we may understand more fully Mize's binaries 'the mind holds' and 'the mind releases.'

The bindings of the earth and the bindings of Heaven

Such images are not found solely in *The Wanderer*, but also elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus. Cynewulf comments that he was 'bound by sin' until meditation and the wisdom of God gave him understanding.[103] The entire poem *The Seafarer* itself runs along similar lines as *The Wanderer*. Here the Seafarer is described as being within the winter-bound world, and a contrast set up between those happily living in the comforts on land (comforts that will eventually fail) and the one who set out on a journey, who contemplates over the nature of things. *Meotod him þæt mod gestaþelaþ*, the Creator

[102] Translation: "To himself the solitary one experiences grace, the ordainer's mercy, though he, anxious of mind, must, far across the water-ways stir with his hands stir the ice-cold sea." (*The Wanderer*, 1-4)
[103] *Elene*, 1243

makes firm that heart in him,[104] he who understands the true meaning of the ephemerality of the world.

The longing for the earthly world, the understanding of its eventual death, and the transference of that longing to the Heavenly realm necessitates a firm foundation upon the idea that the earthly world is an image of the Heavenly one. This connection is found in often in the Bible, but also in the Anglo-Saxon poetic retellings of the Bible stories. In these poems, God, his Kingdom and the angels are set up to appear as Germanic kings, their lands, and their comitatus. "Adam becomes an unfaithful thane who breaks his oath of loyalty to his heavenly Gift-dispenser, Noah a brave seafarer piloting his hearth-troop through the treacherous sea flood, and Moses a mighty warrior leading his Israelite folk away from a very Germanic Pharoah."[105] Interestingly enough, for the present purposes, following the Fall, Adam is depicted as a wanderer, one who wishes to go on a sea-journey, away from God for his shame.[106] This ought not be surprising, as the retelling of any tale outside of its original society is bound to pick up local coloring. This occurred somewhat frequently in Germanic lands, with such poems as the Old Saxon *Heliand*, where Jesus takes on many saga-like descriptors. With the Biblical stories kept 'safe' in the Vulgate, individual poets appear to have been free to explore alternate ways of telling the story that may make more sense in their own culture, or even for simple creative exploration. The extent Anglo-Saxon corpus

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[104] *The Wanderer*, 108.
[105] Lee, 11
[106] *Genesis A*, 828ff.

contains all the main stories of Christianity, from Creation to Doomesday,[107] and though they are not all extant in the same manuscript, Lee believes that they represent a consciousness of the time.[108] With such a connection set up, the Wanderer (and the Seafarer), with the spiritual type of sorrow, would be able to move from a contemplation of the failings of earthly life to the promise of eternity in the Heavenly kingdom. With the loss of an earthly lord, the Wanderer finds a different, Heavenly Lord.

It is important to note the importance placed on the idea of contemplation in the poems discussed above. The connection between the earthly and Heavenly kingdoms is not necessarily self-evident, nor that sorrow of earthly things will lead with certainty to a connection with God. Were this the case, there would be no danger of the Wanderer failing, of his being caught in the cycle of sorrow, hope, and sorrow, a cycle that would eventually leave hope behind. The process of thought taken in these poems is an active one, and the thinker must have both acted through the 'winter-bound world' and spent considerable time, most usually away from the society of others, in order to understand and comprehend the truth.

The work of the poet and the process of poetic composition

At the end of *The Dream of the Rood,* after the poet has witnessed the pain and the glory of the cross, he is asked

[107] Lee, 15
[108] Lee, 17

> Nu ic þe hate, hæleð min se leofa,
> þæt ðu þas gesyhðe secge mannum,
> onwreoh wordum[109]

The cross gives no definite reason why it wishes the poet to do so, though suggests it is to bring those who hear it and understand the nature of the world from the Christian viewpoint will come closer to God.[110] The cross does not want the poet alone to understand these truths, but all those to whom the poem can be communicated. Thus the reason for the poem's composition is not only for the audience to be entertained by the poem's language and imagery, but also to be taken away by the meaning inherent in the vision. This is also the case for the poems described above, which Anne Savage explains in her article on meditation and Anglo-Saxon poetry:

> Poetry is an ideal form in the Anglo-Saxon period for any devotional subject, but is particularly suited to meditation because it is concise and highly structured, so can be read or heard many times for further benefit and enjoyment, and a poet is able to focus his audience's attention in complex ways with great precision; Old English poetry is rich in diction and imagery which is evocative of particular affective states in an audience. The importance of this affective diction and imagery to the meditation is that it provides the audience with a surrogate experience, through which they are prepared to understand the homiletic truths of the second part. Homiletic language is itself often affective, but in a way which does not involve the subjective, personal experience.[111]

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[109] Translation: "Now, my beloved man, I command you to declare this vision to people" (*The Dream of the Rood*, 95-97a) (Bradley, 162).
[110] *The Dream of the Rood,* 97b-121.
[111] Savage, 94

This is perhaps one of the main reasons for relating any vision to an audience, as a person need not necessarily experience a vision to understand the truths it brings. As Savage describes them, the poems discussed above guide their audience through a thought-process of one who is dissatisfied with the world. This is similar, perhaps, to non-fictional forms of reading, where the reader follows an argument though does not generate that argument himself. The difference here, as noted by Savage, is that the intricate and interesting structure of the poem allows for both multiple hearings and deep considerations of the topics.

It is needless to say, but in order to create this line of reasoning and thought, a poet is required to have gone through this process himself, at least in his thoughts, if not out upon the bow of some winter-beaten ship. Such poetic composition must therefore be preceded first by meditation upon these truths by the poet himself, otherwise the line of argument and thought-process upon which he hopes to lead his audience will fall and fail. This is so at least for Cynewulf, who describes the process of composition at the end of his poem *Elene*:

Þus ic frod ond fus þurh þæt fæcne hus
wordcræftum wæf ond wundrum læs,
þragum þreodude ond geþanc reodode
nihtes nearwe. Nysse ic gearwe
be ðære rode riht ær me rumran geþeaht
þurh ða mæran miht on modes þeaht
wisdom onwreah. Ic wæs weorcum fah,
synnum asæled, sorgum gewæled,
bitrum gebunden, bisgum beþrungen,
ær me lare onlag þurh leohtne had
gamelum to geoce, gife unscynde

mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd begeat,
torht ontynde, tidum gerymde,
bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand,
leoðucræft onleac.[112]

By the grace of God the poet is wise in understanding, though his job does not end so simply. Like the poet of *The Dream of the Rood,* like Cynewulf, and like Cædmon as well, he must unlock his mind and let forth his wisdom into the world. That understanding which God has given him he must then give to others. Kept inside of him it will turn perhaps into "bottomless agitation" that "challenges the mind's nature," though, according to the poet of *Instructions for Christians*, it will cause the wise man "regret in the end, after [his] span of days."[113]

Conclusion

Understanding the source of poetic inspiration as coming from God, the Anglo-Saxons found great joy in examining and explaining the *means* by which a poet composed his work. The discussion above saw the poet meditating on the truth that he had learned from the Biblical tradition, then employing the Germanic alliterative meter and

[112] Translation: 'Thus miraculously have I, being old and ready to go because of this fickle carcass, gleaned and woven the craft of words and for long periods pondered and winnowed my thoughts painstakingly by night. I was not entirely aware of the truth about this thing before wisdom, through the sublime Might, discovered to me in the thinking of my mind an ampler understanding. I was soiled by my deeds, shackled by my sins, harassed by cares, and bound and oppressed by bitter worries before the mighty King granted me knowledge in lucid form as solace to an old man, meted out his flawless grace and instilled it in my mind, revealed its radiance, at times augmented it, unshackled my body, laid open my heart – and unlocked the art of poesy, which I have used joyously and with a will in the world" (*Elene*, 1236-1250a) (Bradley, 195)

[113] *Instructions for Christians*, 77-8.

relating short narratives or homilies that he hoped would bring the audience to a place where they too might discover an understanding. In this way, the poets did not hoard-up their knowledge and their learning, did not keep it as wisdom-misers, but spread it out to those around them, in the hopes of bringing them closer to the God who gave them the ability to compose their poems in the first place.

Chaper Four
The Cooked and Wise Poet of the Irish and the Welsh

Introduction

When the poet receives inspiration, he is never the same. For the Norse, the poet became more like Óðinn, or at the very least was represented in ways similar to him, while the Anglo-Saxon poet acted as a guide, leading himself and his audience to a closer relationship with the source of his inspiration. The Irish and the Welsh believed in some sort of transformation as well, and it is this transformation, this changing self, that is made into narrative and metaphor, falling along the general line of 'cooking.' Neither the inspiration of the Otherworld nor the poet of the physical world can exist in the world of the other as they normally are; some sort of preparation, of changing, must first take place. The ambivalent nature of contact with the Otherworld is seen in the symbols of inspiration, the salmon and the cauldron, which can scald or burn the poet, or else contain potent poison when at the same time delivering their abilities.

Before any discussion may continue, it is important to note a difference between the Irish and the Welsh cultures. This chapter has taken them both, under the title of

'Celtic[114],' as their approaches to understanding poetic composition and inspiration are very similar, and placing their individual details side-by-side may prove to be more illuminating than separating them and then comparing them later. The two cultures, though, ought not to be understood either as the same, albeit displaced from one another, or even simple historical derivations from an original culture. This discussion, then, ought not to be understood as attempting to find the common ground from which each culture most certainly has sprung, but instead to examine the derivations and individual details that have grown, and thus understand more of the two cultures in question.

The Privilege of Being a Poet

As discussed in the previous two chapters, poets held a great amount of power. For the Irish and Welsh, this power was made manifest in more than narrative, but was written very closely into the laws and societies of the two cultures. For not only was the poet a store-house of fascinating tales told for the sake of entertainment, he[115] served primarily as a keeper of cultural knowledge, which included general history, the genealogies of the noble houses, and the exploits of the heroes of the contemporary and historical warriors.[116] As in other orally based cultures, the poet was expected to be able to recite the information he kept

[114] The term "Celtic" is something of a problem, as the Celtic language family is one spread from Ireland to modern-day Turkey. I use the term to refer to only the Insular Celts, and particularly to the Irish and Welsh cultures.
[115] Along with Ford, who claims that most poets were male (Ford, xvi), I use the pronoun "he," though mostly for expediency's sake. Female poets did exist, as Ford briefly notes on xviii.
[116] Ford, xvi

stored within his mind without error, and in this way he acted as a binding agent for all of society. Kings who wished to exert their authority relied on their lineage, which was remembered by the poets, information the king's subjects needed to know as well if they were to follow him. Warriors who rushed out to battle, believing that their exploits, if they were heroic enough, even if they themselves were killed, would be remembered by future generations relied on poets to compose poems and tell them at feasts and other gatherings.

The prestige of poets can be further noted in the Irish and Welsh law, not only for the simple fact that laws were memorized and recited by poets, but also for what privileges the laws themselves granted poets. Irish law recognized two categories of poet, the *fili* and the *bard*, the latter being of an inferior rank than the former. Within the *fili*, though, were seven more ranks, the highest of them, the *ollam*, who were given the same honor price as tribal kings. The Welsh poet was of similar stature, the *bard teulu* ('household bard') being one of the twenty-four members of the king's court. The highest ranking member of the bards was the *pencerdd*, the 'chief of song,' who held his lands free of rent and duties and was given a high income.[117]

The high status given to the poets in both Irish and Welsh cultures comes a great deal from the information they kept memorized and recited when necessary, but also because of the ability to make or break reputations of heroes and of kings, for the role of the poet was

[117] Ford, xviii. For the Welsh information, Ford quotes Jenkins 1990.

both to praise and to satirize. As noted before, warriors relied on the poet to note their exploits and compose poems concerning battles fought and victories won. Kings also wished for the praise of a poet, wanting to join the famous kings of the past in the tales of the future. Yet the poets were also capable of satire, and for this they were feared as much as they were respected. A bad reputation would dash desired fame into dust for kings, not only for the future but for the immediate present, as what warrior would fight for a king heavily and truthfully satirized by a poet? This ability to satirize was not for the damaging of a reputation alone, but had a direct effect on the body of the one satirized as well. In some tales, those who are truthfully satirized at times grow boils upon their faces and die from humiliation, such as in the case with Nede and Caier. In this Irish tale, Nede satirizes his king, Caier, who the next day grows a red, a green and a white blemish upon his face. Caier flees and Nede (as was his plan) is able to usurp the throne. Nede eventually feels remorse for Cair and searches out his victim, who upon seeing the poet dies immediately of shame.[118]

Elsewhere the poet is able to make friends and companions fight and kill one another, such as in the Irish tale *Fled Bricrenn*, or Bricriu's Feast. Here Bricriu, the court satirist, prepares a feast for the king and his warriors. Conchobar, the king, knows that Bricriu is merely attempting to bring them all together to cause infighting and problems, all for his own enjoyment, and so declines the invitation. Bricriu persuades Conchobar by telling him that

[118] Ford, xxix

unless the king comes, the satirist will "stir up strife…between the kings, the leaders, the heroes of valor, and the yeomen, till they slay one another, man for man, if they come not to me to share my feast.[119]" The king and warriors attend, and despite even with all their precautions and knowledge of Bricriu's intent, the satirist is still able to cause arguments between the three champions of the Ulstermen and their wives. Both cases demonstrate the perception of the power of the poet's tongue to shame and cause strife among those around him.

This power came with certain limits, as defined in law as well as fictionalized in tales. Were a poet to use satire without the strict boundaries of law, such as to satirize without just cause or to lie, the poet would find a serious punishment, either by monetary fine or loss of his position. In certain tales an unjust satire is revisited upon the poet himself in the same way he intended it for the one he satirized.[120]

The power of a poet's words is also seen in the Welsh tales of Taliesin. When the poet's patron Elphin is captured and held captive by the king, Taliesin goes to court and prevents other poets from singing praise of the king before his high seat by pursing his lips and making "a silly sound by strumming his lips with his fingers." This causes the king's poets to make similar sounds as they attempt to praise their lord. Eventually Taliesin is noted to be the root of the problem and is brought before the king, where Taliesin brings such

[119] Cross, 255.
[120] Ford, xxviii, though it would be good to have an example here.

fear upon him that Elphin is set free. By his words alone Taliesin breaks Elphin's fetters and sets his lord free.[121]

Thus the poet was a very powerful member of society, and his power lay within the words he used. It is not a surprise, then, that tales were created to explain the method by which poets obtain such tremendous powers. A frequent image in such tales is the act of cooking, usually in a cauldron of some sort. What occurs during and after this act of cooking depends on the particular tale and the particular culture from which that tale comes, and so here we will break from speaking generally about Celts to commenting more specifically on the individual cultures.

Transformation of the Poet

At the moment the poet received his power of inspiration and ability, the poet was changed. This transformation was a mental or a spiritual change, depicted metaphorically as a physical transformation. The most common physical transformation was the movement from extreme ugliness to overwhelming beauty, or complete inability (such as muteness) to full ability to utilize both human speech and inspiration.

One particular story that demonstrates this is the "Spirit of Poetry," found in Cormac mac Cuilennáin's glossary, written by the king and bishop of Cashel in Munster, who died in the early tenth century. The words and names defined in his glossary are, at times,

[121] Ford, 23.

accompanied by a narrative which demonstrates the definition given. These tales, which perhaps would be shuffled away by some modern academics as mere 'folk etymologies,' in fact allow insight into some very particular areas of medieval Irish culture. Indeed, the tale of "The Spirit of Poetry" accompanies the word *prull*, which means "great increasing and enlarging," and is of minor concern to the tale itself.[122]

The narrative of "The Spirit of Poetry" follows the poet Senchán Torpéist, the chief poet of Ireland. While on the Isle of Man, accompanied by fifty poets and many apprentices, he meets a "weird, unnatural-looking lad" of repulsive appearance who asks to go with them. "Truly, if anyone pushed on his forehead with his finger, a gush of putrid matter would spurt out and run down to the base of his neck. A rough membrane covered his head right down to his shoulder blades; it looked as though the grey matter of his brains had burst through his skull. His eyes protruded like the eggs of a blackbird." And this is only half of the descriptors given. Still, he tells Senchán that, "'I will be more valuable to you than any one or two or the entire bunch of fools who surround you!'" Later, the lad proves his words to be true, when Senchán meets an old hag on the shore who challenges Senchán. None are able to answer, save for the lad, which enables Senchán to recognize the hag as the daughter of Úa Dulsaine, for whom Senchán and his followers have been searching throughout Ireland. Finally, when they near their homeland, the lad suddenly changes, and is described as

[122] Ford, 38-9.

"radiant, regal, great, broad-eyed, valorous…His curly hair was yellowish-gold, like gold thread, wavy as the spine of a harp," and bearing the clothes and equipment worn by few outside of the *síd*. Cormac ends his entry by noting "and he [the lad] was never seen from that time on. Therefore, there is no doubt that he was the spirit of Poetry."[123]

All throughout their literature, the Irish excel in physical descriptions, usually at the extremes, as seen above. Such descriptions are not only a means to bring the audience closer to the tale, but also reinforce important points. The lad who Senchán finds, at first, has such taut, or else thin, skin that his brain is about to break free, and this description also suggests that he has little or no skull. This failure to gain full physical form is contrasted later with his ability, which becomes visible only after the lad answers the hag's question (which then allows her to be recognized and brought back into her proper station in life) and as the group nears Ireland. Then, his form becomes "the most magnificent and elegant…that ever adorned man."[124] The very power of poetry, as seen in Cormac's tale, is not that it is more beautiful than the physical, but that it can *change* the physical, that its power is so great that it brings the physical into it and makes it beautiful as well.

This changing of physical deformity to ability (in these cases poetic) is also seen in the tale of the poet Amairgen, the first of the sons of Mil to set foot in Ireland.[125] Amairgen

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[123] Ford, 39-42.
[124] Ford, 42.
[125] Ford, 35. The story of Amairgen is told in the 11th century *Lebor Gabála Érenn,* or "The Book of the Taking of Ireland."

differs from the Spirit of Poetry in being human, and also in not becoming radiantly beautiful when he opens his mouth. As a youth, Amairgen is similar in appearance to the Spirit, with the added difficulty of being mute:

> "He reached the age of fourteen without speaking. His belly grew till it was as huge as a big house, sinewy and fat. The snot ran from his nose into his mouth. His skin was black, his teeth white, his face pallid. His legs and thighs were the size of the handles of a smith's[126] bellows. His feet were cloven, under huge gnarly ankles. He had high cheekbones and a very long face. His eyes were dark red and sunken, under long, hairy eyebrows. The hair on his head was rough and spikey, and his back was humped, bony, and scabby. And so he was not handsome."[127]

One day the poet Athirne sends his servant Greth to deliver an axe to Amairgen's father, Ecet Salach, but finds only Amairgen and his sister at home. The hideous youth suddenly speaks, for the first time in his life, and asks Greth "*In ith Greth gruth*,"[128] among other things. Greth is so frightened by this that he runs back to his master, who believes that Amairgen will surpass him as a poet, and therefore sets out to kill the boy. The reason for this rather severe response is not related in the story, nor do editors Ford or Carey suggest an explanation. One possible explanation is that going from complete muteness to being fully capable of speech displayed an innate skill at words. Further, "*In ith Greth gruth"* alliterates both in the letters 'i' and 'g,' which perhaps shows a further skill at word*play*, which Athirne

[126] Amairgen is twice related to a smith: through his father, a famous smith in Ulster, and in appearance. In this he is similar to many Norse poets, as discussed above.
[127] Ford, 36.
[128] Translation: "Does Greth eat curds."

(correctly) interprets as showing Amairgen's poetic ability. Regardless of the reason, Amairgen's father, upon hearing the story from his daughter when he returns home, fears for his son, and so makes a clay likeness of Amairgen. It is this image of Amairgen that Athirne destroys instead of the body of Amairgen. After much argument, Athirne takes Amairgen as a pupil, and after he becomes ill with age, Amairgen takes over his position as poet.[129]

Of particular interest here are the acts of Athirne, who out of fear that the young Amairgen will usurp him, attempts to kill him. A simple act of hiding away is not enough, and Amairgen's father feels it necessary to cast a likeness of him for Athirne to destroy. It is only *after* this likeness is done away with that any peace can be made, and only then that Amairgen can begin his training as a poet and, despite his ugliness, begin to work wonderful verse. The point of transformation, therefore, is when Amairgen is 'killed,' his old self destroyed.

In the Welsh tales, a similar movement from ugliness to ability occurs, though the movement is more transference than transformation. The earliest recorded version of this tale is told in a sixteenth century work written by Elis Gruffudd, who notes that the tale is known "widely" in Wales. The story tells of Ceridwen, whose son is nicknamed Afagddu, meaning "utter gloom," because of his terrible appearance. In order to save him from a life

[129] Ford, 35-7.

of ridicule at and perhaps even exile from the court, Ceridwen prepares a cauldron of herbs, boiled for a year and a day. This cauldron will bear within it the most potent poison in the world, save for three of its drops, which contain the spirit of prophecy.[130] Ceridwen has two assistants to help her in her task: a blind man who stirs the concoction and the youth who leads him, Gwion Bach, to keep the fire going. When the day finally arrives, Ceridwen puts her son next to the cauldron and goes to rest, but when the three drops spurted out, Gwion Bach pushes Afagddu away and receives them instead. The cauldron then bursts forth, spreading the poison over the land and waking Ceridwen in the process. Gwion Bach, with his newfound prophetic ability, foresees the wrath he will face, and flees, soon followed by Ceridwen. The chase that follows is one of constant transformations, with Gwion Bach changing into various animals (generally those which can run quickly) and Ceridwen taking the shape of each animal's predator.[131] Finally, Gwion Bach changes into a grain of wheat and hides, while Ceridwen changes into a "black, tailless hen" and eats him. This makes Ceridwen pregnant and, after nine months, she gives birth to a son, who becomes the poet Taliesin.[132]

The Welsh and Irish tales of transformation differ in various ways, one of the most interesting being that the "spirit of prophecy" is stolen, not innate within the poet. From

[130] That this is the spirit of *prophecy*, and not *poetry*, should at the moment not matter. The full reasoning for this will be discussed both below as well as in the conclusion to this thesis.
[131] Whether it was the prophetic drops that allowed Gwion Bach to transform, or if he had the power beforehand, is unfortunately not related in the text.
[132] Ford, 15-6.

what can be told from the text, Ceridwen's son does very little to help in the process of cooking the cauldron's mixture, and of those who are involved, only the youth who stokes the fires receives it. This suggests, at least, that one cannot patiently wait for the spirit of prophecy to be bequeathed to him, but must perform some action or take part in the process in some way.

Within the tale of Gwion Bach are also two instances the changing of names, or the use of pseudonyms; both Ceridwen's son (originally Morfran) and Gwion Bach receive new names that link them to their physical features and the characteristics they represent. The meaning of Afagddu was above mentioned as 'utter gloom,' a name that says as much about his appearance as his prospects for the future. The name that Gwion Bach receives after his own transformations is Taliesin, which he receives when the basket carrying his baby-form is found by Elphin, who is looking for salmon on Samhain[133]. Upon seeing the boy, Elphin cries out "*Tal iesin*," understood as "What a radiant brow!" The baby has the ability to speak, and says "Taliesin is it!" and thereafter is called Taliesin.[134]

The name 'Taliesin' is, as noted in the story, made up of two parts: a first, *tal* meaning "brow," and a second *iesin*, meaning "fair." Interestingly, the first part, *tal*, can also mean "to catch," as in "to catch a fish,"[135] and thus the name Taliesin might also mean

[133] Samhain is the day when the physical world and the Otherworld overlap most fully and when the people of the *síd* can cross over to the surface of Ireland, and vice versa.
[134] Ford, 17.
[135] Ford, 14.

"a fair catch" or "catching fairness." This of course would make sense as much as the 'radiant brow,' as Elphin was at the river catching salmon when he found the boy. Catching salmon, moreover, occurs in Irish tales as well, particularly in the tale of the youth of Finn mac Cumhaill, who on this occasion also has his name changed.

Originally Finn was called Demne, the name given to him at birth. He soon became ill and developed from this illness a physical deformity which resulted in a sad epithet for a young boy to have: "[t]here the scurvy came upon him, and therefrom he became scald-headed, whence he used to be called Demne the Bald."[136] Later on in the story, *Macgnímartha Finn*[137], or "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn," Demne is twice renamed, both times as Finn because of his 'radiant brow."[138] The first time he is renamed he is playing hurley with the youths of Mag Life. When asked by the local chief who the youth was, they tell him "Demne." When asked to describe this Demne, they say he is "a shapely fair youth." Thus, he is Finn the fair.

Demne's second renaming is again as Finn, and this time the renaming occurs when he obtains poetic inspiration. While traveling, Demne finds a lone man in the forest fishing in the Boyne at *Linn Féic*, or Fec's Pool. The lone man bears the name Finneces, or 'the beautiful [radiant] poet.' It has been prophesized that he would eat the salmon of Fec and

[136] Cross, 362.
[137] The story of Finn's childhood is told in *Macgnímartha Finn,* or "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn," found in the Laud 610 manuscript of the Bodleian Library. The manuscript is from the fifteenth century, though it is generally dated to the twelfth. Cross and Slover date it later, placing it in the large timeframe of 1200 to 1350. (Ford, 3; Cross, 360).
[138] *Finn* means "radiant."

that thereafter all things would be known to him. When Demne himself obtains this wisdom instead, by burning his finger on the cooking salmon and putting it into his mouth, Finneces demands the boy's name. Demne gives him his name, though Finneces shakes his head and tells the boy, "No, Finn is thy name…and to thee was the salmon given to be eaten, and indeed thou art the Finn."[139] In this tale, Finn does not only receive his name, but is given it in transference from another. Again, as in the Welsh, it is Demne, the youth, not the master, who does the cooking, and, therefore, receives the spirit of prophecy or the fish of wisdom. Both Ceridwen and Finneces are asleep during the cooking, and although they did the work of preparation and patient waiting, it is the one who watches the fire, the youth who does the cooking, who receives the ability.

Cooking the Poet

In two of the tales noted above, those of Taliesin and of Finn, the poet is involved in cooking when he receives his abilities. As noted above, the cooking is done, in both cases, by the soon-to-be-poet, while the preparation is done by another, in both cases a master who is well versed in the power that the cooking will provide. That the master is asleep is also important, as the youth must be fully present, without the otherwise human master around him, to receive from *elsewhere* the inspiration and the ability. The ability bequeathed in the 'cooking' comes not from developed culture, but from another world.

[139] Cross, 365.

In the case of Finn, the salmon on which he burns his finger comes from the Irish Otherworld. It is there that nine hazel-nut-trees grow which contain *imbas.*[140] The nuts upon these trees then drop into a well and are eaten by salmon. Thereafter they are taken out into the rivers of Ireland, particularly (at least in two cases) to *Linn Féic* and the River Boyne. Here, if one is skilled and patient enough, the hazelnut-bearing salmon will appear, and can be caught.

Finneces is not the only seeker of this wisdom, although Finn seems to be the only one to have achieved it. Another hero made this attempt, namely Cú Chulainn. Two versions of the story exist[141], and in one he is in the actual act of hunting the salmon when he finds Senbecc of the *síd* floating in a boat down the river, while in the other it is Senbecc himself who is searching for the hazelnut-bearing salmon. In both, though, Senbecc gets the better of Cú Chulainn and puts him to sleep with his harp music.[142] In the second version, Senbecc recites a poem:

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[140] As this word is problematic to some degree, and explained below, I will now only gloss it as "supernatural enlightenment," following John Carey, though this definition is also problematic.

[141] Both version are given in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, the translator John Carey. Version A is from the Stowe Manuscript No. 992 from about the end of the fourteenth century, and is given in *Revue Celtique* vi, pgs. 182-4. Version B is edited by E. J. Gwynn in *Ériu* xiii, pgs. 26-7, and although it is found in a seventeenth century manuscript, Gwynn notes that the language is "Old Irish throughout."

[142] Good music, especially from the *síd*, is noted as putting those who listen to sleep, even if they are in great pain.

I am not a lad, I am not a man,
I am not a child in learning.
The mysteries of God have made me gifted.
I am Abcán, a sage of learning, a poet from Segais.
Senbec is my name, Ebrecc's grandson from the *síd*.[143]

In an article on salmon, otters and eels, Joseph Nagy comments on the salmon's connection to wisdom and the Otherworld, but also on the animal's relation to madness and martial ability. Both traits can be seen easily in Cú Chulainn, whose ability to go into a warrior frenzy not only increases his power and ability in battle, but also drives him to the point where he would attack his own people were he not adequately calmed down.[144] Nagy's discussion, however, centers around the connection between three mystical animals, the otter, the eel and the salmon, and how in Irish mythological and legendary tales they work in similar ways. One of his many conclusions is that the three animals act as containers or retrievers[145] that may bring something good (as in the case of the salmon) or something bad (such as certain cases where the eel brings poison). This ambivalent nature appears in the story of Finn and the salmon, where he obtains both prophetic and poetic ability as well as injures himself.

The Welsh tale differs from the Irish in placing the magical abilities and knowledge not particularly in the material components of the cauldron's stew, but also in the preparer of the stew herself. Ceridwen is noted to be the wife of a nobleman in the early days of King

[143] Koch, 67.
[144] Cross, 151.
[145] Nagy 1, 140.

Arthur, though this does not mean that she is necessarily human. It is noted that she "was expert and learned in the three arts: magic, witchcraft, and sorcery," skills which she uses to prepare her son's stew. These skills, along with herbs gathered "on just the right day and hour," as well as her hard work and cunning, create the stew. Ceridwen herself, or at least her knowledge, would then be an important component of the stew, which suggests for her a further identity. A Cyridwen mentioned in the Black Book of Caermarthen is presented as a goddess of seeds, including those "of poetic harmony, the exalted speech of the graduated minstrel."[146] This Cyridwen is also associated with a cauldron, and therefore it is probable that they, if not the same character, at least share a connection to one another.

In these ways what was received from the Otherworld is then cooked, prepared so that the youth may consume them. Consumption is an important word, as both Gwion Bach and Demne take into them what is cooked through their mouths. In the case of the former, Elis Gruffudd describes the three drops as simply "landing on Gwion Bach."[147] It is uncertain whether this means that he caught them in his mouth, or, as in the case of Demne, they landed on his finger which he then put in his mouth to cool the burn, yet what is important is that Gwion Bach internalized that which was cooked. In this way, what was prepared from the skills of the master was taken into the body of Gwion Bach where, like all other food or drink, it was made part of the self. The youth's poetic ability is not an external

[146] Scott, 158, quoting Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales,* I (1868), 500.
[147] Ford, 16.

thing, but something that must be made part of him, must join with him, and it is this process that initiates Gwion Bach's transformations, the end of which creates him anew as Taliesin.

In the case of Finn, Demne burns himself when checking whether or not the salmon is finished cooking. The pain of him putting his finger (most usually his thumb) upon a cooking salmon causes him to thrust his finger into his mouth, and it is at this point that he obtains poetic inspiration. Later, Demne, renamed as Finn, eats the entire salmon, and forever after, when he wishes to know some piece of information, must put his thumb under his 'tooth of wisdom,' at times even chewing to the very marrow.[148] The act of cooking here, though, occurs not only while the salmon is over the fire, but more importantly at the moment Demne's finger is burned. It is Demne, therefore, not only the salmon who is "cooked," and it is in this way that he is able to speak prophecy and know otherwise unknowable information. Cooked in this way, Finn's thumb is now performs a link to the Otherworld, and whenever he wants to use his ability, he chews his thumb, symbolizing the internalization of the *imbas* within the salmon. His thumb, then, acts as a "gateway" or a "bridge" to the Otherworld.

The idea of Finn's finger as a gateway to the Otherworld is seen in other stories relating the origin of his prophetic ability. Most of these tales see Finn already the leader of the *fían*, with Finn or someone else cooking food over a fire. A member of the *síd*, at times

[148] Nagy 2, 22.

invisible, comes and steals the food, causing Finn and others to give chase. The thief runs into his *síd* and attempts to close the door, though at the last moment Finn reaches in, catching his thumb in the slamming door. Some tales have it that a woman walking by with water from a well spills some on Finn's thumb while it is caught in the door.[149] Here the water (or even the vase carrying it) acts as the means of transference, with the well in the *síd* still acting as the source of inspiration.

"Cooked" or "prepared" in such a way, Taliesin and Finn are now both upon the borderlands between the physical, material world and the Otherworld. Part of them is still human, perhaps most of them, but a small portion, either internalized through the act of swallowing or localized at a part of their body, acts as a gateway. This recreates the poet as one who can move from one world to another in a way similar to his ability to move between social groups, as discussed at the beginning of this present chapter. This 'border-walking' is perhaps most apt for the character of Finn, who acts as the leader of the *fían*, an extra-social military group. Most of the tales dealing with Finn find him interacting with the people of the *síd* or else doing battle with the Sons of Morna, particularly Goll, the one-eyed, who killed Finn's father. In regards to the latter, in fact, much of Finn's youth is spent avoiding the sons of Morna, who wish to kill him. Thus a large portion of his youth was spent away from the normal walks of society, and when he obtained the leadership of the *fían* by

[149] The various versions of this tale, too many to note individually, are related and discussed by Robert D. Scott in his work *The Thumb of Knowledge*, particularly in his first two chapters.

displaying bravery and cunning in the face of danger, he remained apart. It is this position upon the threshold, both within and without ordered society, as well as between the physical and Otherworlds, that allows Finn to gain information and knowledge from both worlds, and which makes him useful among humans as well as among the Tuatha De Dannan.[150]

Prophecy and Poetry

Much of the discussion above has put on hold the coincidence of prophetic and poetic abilities, as for the Celtic tales discussed, these two abilities are inseparable. In general, the ability gained through the 'cooking' of the self, or the internalization of cooked material, is a connection to another world. Whether this world is similar to the Irish Otherworld, where reside the people of the *síd*, or some other realm entirely, there are two important characteristics that are focused on in these tales: first, it is apart from the mundane world, and second, being in contact with that world *alone* allows one to obtain knowledge or wisdom that one otherwise would not possess. This gained wisdom or knowledge, though, is not then noted to be used in the construction of poetry, nor do the tales attempt to reconcile the two. In the case of Finn, after gaining prophetic ability, Finn recites a poem about summer "to prove his poetry" and then leaves and finds a master poet to train under.[151]

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[150] Nagy 2, 23. A particularly good image of this "usefulness" is found in *Acallam na Senórach*, where Finn is described by Cailte as being often approached by various visitors, from kings and princes of the sons of Mil to members of the Tuatha De Dannan, who seek his help in various matters.

[151] Cross, 365.

Poetic and prophetic ability seem to be, at least in the tales, part of the same thing, received in a single package with the spirit of poetry or the burning of the thumb on the salmon.

It is at this point that the discussion will split, first to consider how the Irish tale of Finn enacts this connection between the prophetic and poetic, and then to the Welsh, where the nature of Taliesin's wisdom will be further examined.

Finn and the Three Requirements of Being a Poet

In *Macgnímartha Finn*, after Finn eats the entire salmon of wisdom, it is noted that he obtains "three things that constitute a poet: *teinm laida, imbas forosna,* and *dichetul dichennaib*,[152]" with the first, the *teinm laida* as being more directly connected to his thumb chewing. With these three abilities Finn is thus qualified to be a *fili*. The word used here for "qualified" is *nemthigidir*, which John Carey derives from the noun *nemed*, meaning "legal privilege,' 'immunity,' 'holy thing,' or 'sanctuary,[153]' and indeed, the learning of these is considered in Irish tradition to be one of the founding requirements of the status as a poet. As noted in the introductory discussion, the position of poet came with it not only respect but also privilege and power, and with the position came a great deal of learning. Scott notes that the requirements first appear in an excerpt to the commentaries on the *Ancient Laws*.[154]

[152] Cross, 365.
[153] Carey, 41.
[154] Scott, 97. Scott believes that these commentaries come from the tenth century.

What these necessary abilities actually involve is much more confusing, as frequently their descriptions are either nonsense, difficult to translate, or else in need of certain amounts of interpretation. To begin, *imbas forosnai* is described in the above mentioned commentaries on the *Ancient Laws* as "abundant knowledge of the learning *given by* the tutor to the pupil.[155]" In *Cormac's Glossary*, on the other hand, which Scott dates to the late ninth to early tenth century, describes a somewhat more involved process:

> *"Imbas Forosna* 'Manifestation that enlightens:' discovers what thing soever the poet likes and which he desires to reveal. Thus then is that done. The poet chews a piece of the red flesh of a pig, or a dog, or a cat, and puts it then on a flagstone behind the door-valve, and chants an incantation over it, and offers it to idol gods, and calls them to him, and leaves them not on the morrow, and then chants over his two palms, and calls again idol gods to him, that his sleep may not be disturbed. Then he puts his two palms on his two cheeks and sleeps. And men are watching him that he may not turn over and that no one may disturb him. And then is revealed to him that for which he was (engaged) till the end of the *nomad* (three days and nights) or two or three for long or the short time[156] that he may judge himself (to be) at the offering. And therefore it is called *Imm-bas*, to wit, a palm (*bas*) on this side and a palm on that around his head.[157]"

The term *forosnai*/*forosna* seems to have the agreed definition by commentators as 'illumination,' though *imbas* is much more difficult. Above it is defined as something like "a palm on either side of the head," and thus *imbas forosna* is

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[155] Scott, 97. Italics belong seemingly to the text, though in any case are Scott's.
[156] The translator is here confused, and marks this passage with a (?).
[157] Scott, 98-9.

"illumination between the hands."[158] As noted in the description of Cú Chulainn's fishing in the Boyne, *imbas* could also be 'supernatural enlightenment.' Nagy believes the term comes from an unattested **imm-fess*, or 'great knowledge,' though claims the ritual to seem authentic.[159]

Finn also learned the *teinm laida*, which is described in the commentaries on the *Ancient Laws* as "shining" or "understood" [*teinm*] poem [*laid*].[160] This is interpreted later on in the text as:

> "[t]he chief poet, i.e. the learned poet who explains or exhibits the great extent of his knowledge…by composing a quatrain without thinking, i.e. without studying….At this day it is by the ends of his bones *he effects it*, and he discovers the name by this means. And the way in which it is done is this: -When the poet sees the person or thing before him, he makes a verse at once with the ends of his fingers, or in his mind without studying, and he composes and repeats at the same time….the poet placed his staff upon the person's body or upon his head, and found out his name, and the name of his father and mother, and discovered every unknown thing that was proposed to him, in a minute or two or three.[161]"

From this description, it seems that the process of *teinm laida* to acquire knowledge is done with a wand or a stick. This process is given two examples in *Cormac's Glossary*, the first being of a blind poet using his 'poet's wand' to obtain the identity of a bare skull found on

[158] Scott, 100.
[159] Nagy 2, 26.
[160] Scott, 97.
[161] Scott, 103.

the strand of Inver Bece, the second that of a lap-dog. Strangely, Cormac here glosses *tenm laido* as 'illumination of song."[162]

Quite a bit of confusion exists between *teinm laida* and *imbas forosnai*. Both Ford and O'Rahilly note that *teinm laida* is "chewing on pith or marrow,[163]" though this seems to be how *imbas forosnai* was described, though instead of marrow it is raw meat. Even the author of the commentaries to the *Ancient Laws* notes that "the same thing is revealed by means of them," but that they are "performed after a different manner, i.e. a different kind of offering was made at each.[164]" Whatever the case, it is important to note that each involves learning things that were previously unknown or hidden.

The final required ability is the *dichetul dichennaib*, which Cormac describes as "*Dichetal do chennaib* 'extempore incantation,' however, *that* was left, in right [or, 'for the sake'] of art, for it is science that causes it, and no offering to devils is necessary, but a declaration from the ends of his bones at once."[165] Scott believes that the act of composition through the ends of the bones or the fingers refered to a rite where the fingers were put into the mouth.[166] Were this the case, the *dichetul dichennaib* would be the particular ability of the three practiced by Finn, even though the tales refer to it as being *teinm laida*. Scott bases this suggestion on the fact that both *imbas forosnai* and *teinm laida*

[162] Scott, 105.
[163] Ford, 46.
[164] Scott, 103.
[165] Scott, 107.
[166] Scott, 112.

were noted to have been banned by St. Patrick, due to their reliance on the summoning of demons, which *dichetul dichennaib* was not. This would lead to the confusion between the three that occurs throughout the available texts, and also lend reason to why Finn chews his thumb when enacting his obtained wisdom from the salmon.

John Carey, though, traces the three-fold requirements back to emendations made to *Bretha Nemed*, through the *Trecheng Breth Féne*. In the original text, Carey notes, the requirements are the same except for *teinm laida*, which is replaced by 'the singing of *anamain* of four varieties," a verse-form mentioned in various sources as the requirements of an *ollam*, or a master poet.[167] Thus to the requirements is added a knowledge of (perhaps standard) verse-form. Carey further argues that *dichetul dichennaib* may have lacked any supernatural associations, the phrase *do chennaib*, which *dichetul dichennaib* is based on, means 'at once.[168]' This requirement of immediate composition is seen in the description of *dichetul dichennaib*, as well as *teinm laida*. Thus, gathering these with *imbas*, he notes that the requirements for the position of poet were probably "technical expertise (*anamain*), improvisational facility (*dichetul dichennaib*) and inspiration (*imbas*)."[169] This is quite possible, and added to Carey's argument is the fact that, after Finn received his prophetic and

[167] Carey, 44.
[168] Carey, 45.
[169] Carey, 47.

poetic ability from the salmon, he "went to Cethern, the son of Fintan, further to learn poetry with him.[170]"

That the three requirements were so confused and, at times, overlap one another, shows perhaps another view of poets and prophets: that they shared many abilities with one another. *Imbas forosnai* seems to be particularly and purely prophetic, while *dichetul dichennaib* seems mostly concerned with the ability to compose without a great deal of forethought or planning. *Teinm laido*, on the other hand, seems to be a combination of these two, having the ability to prophesize while at the same time requiring an immediate incantation. It may have been, then, that *imbas* was given at the time of inspiration (for Finn, when he burned himself and put his finger in his mouth), and this *imbas* had various practical uses in the physical, human world. In the case of the latter, the one imbued with *imbas* was required to learn technical skills to shape this inspiration into constructed verse, and the 'improvised faculty' would be a description of one connected more closely than others to the internalized *imbas*. Any attempt at setting down law or requirements would force abilities and characteristics, which the poet may have seen flowing more easily together, into distinct qualities, to rationalize them and make them applicable over a large area.

Whether or not this is true is left unfortunately beyond the present sources available, and the interpretation given in the paragraph above is merely guesswork. Still, it is

[170] Cross, 366.

interesting to note that, as the situation stands, prophetic and poetic ability were not described in the narratives under discussion as being distinct from one another; both Finn and Taliesin are poets as much as they are prophets.

Taliesin and the Nature of Knowledge

Often the wisdom that Finn receives from chewing his thumb allows him to know the identity of an otherwise unidentifiable person, such as in the case of Lomna, Finn's Fool. In this situation, Finn and his companions find a skull and wonder whose it is. By putting his thumb under his tooth of knowledge, Finn comes to learn that the skull belongs to Lomna.[171] It is this type of knowledge that Finn most generally comes across while using his thumb-chewing ability, the knowledge that delivers an identity or tells the story of some happening. Taliesin, on the other hand, demonstrates multiple forms of knowledge and wisdom, which can be separated into physical/mechanical knowledge and essential knowledge, or wisdom of the true essence of things.

As noted above, following Gwion Bach taking the spirit of prophecy instead of Afagddu, Ceridwen chases the youth in a series of transformations. That Gwion Bach knows Ceridwen means him harm the youth realizes through his newfound abilities, though whether or not he was before able to transform into different animals and materials is not stated in the story. His transformations do come into play elsewhere, namely in the poems

[171] Ford, 52.

of the "Book of Taliesin." Many of the poems related questions to their audience in a way similar to those Óðinn asks to his captors or his challengers. Frequently these questions ask about the beginning of the world, the way in which it works and how things are formed. Such questions assume both that their audience does not know the answer (or at least that the knowledge is not readily knowable to a vast majority of people) and that Taliesin himself knows the answer. As Marged Haycock notes, "[t]he most foolproof, economical, and entertaining way of conveying omniscience (without the tedium of learned discourse) was either through bold assertions of unrivalled knowledge – 'I know (gogwn) this or that' – or else, as is far more common, through questions which imply that Taliesin alone knows the answer."[172] Thus while Finn demonstrates his skills by identifying the unknown, Taliesin, like Óðinn, visits those famed in wisdom and challenges them, proving through questions and statements, not in full explanations of their answer, his vast knowledge.

Yet the knowledge that Taliesin proves is not always of the same quality, and can be split into two separate categories. The first is, again, much like the questions of Óðinn: how was the world formed? In what way does the world work? What was the first language? Such questions can be answered if one possesses lore, a thing that can be learned easily as much from a master as from a book. And, at times, Taliesin does in fact answer these questions, particularly in *Hanes Taliesin*, where he narrates the different historical events that

[172] Haycock, 22.

he has witnessed over his many transformations, from being "with my Lord / in the heavens / when Lucifer fell / to the depths of hell" to being "with my Lord / in a humble manger" and "in the air / with Mary Magdalen."[173] These were the things he learned, due to witnessing them firsthand, *before* his final transformation into Taliesin. Both in the poem of *Hanes Taliesin* noted above, as well as in *Kat Godeu* of the "Book of Taliesin," the poet's various transformations always come before he takes the three drops of the spirit of prophecy. This is of course narratively obvious, as Taliesin's transformations would have to have come before him becoming and being named as Taliesin, who speaks the poems in both sources, yet it also must be noted that the three drops changed something in him. In the opening of *Kat Godeu*, Taliesin notes that he "was in a multitude of forms / before I was unfettered" before listing many particular stages of his transformation, such as a sword, a droplet in the air, and the radiance of stars.[174] Taliesin's transformations were not only as people, as is suggested in being "in the air with Mary Magdalen," but also as the physical components of the world itself. With this changing of one form to another, Taliesin (or whatever he was) gained an intricate understanding of the world and how it works, but this was all before, when he was bound and fettered. This is strange, as changing from one form to another seems to be the definition of being unbound, of being able to take any form that was physically possible, yet when these changes *stop* is the moment when Taliesin describes himself as

[173] Ford, 24-5.
[174] *Legendary Poems,* 174.

being unfettered. This, I argue, is the moment he obtains the spirit of prophecy, and when he gains not experiential knowledge, but true knowledge of the essence of nature.

This second type of knowledge is visible in questions that truly have no answer, or at least no answer in normal, human language. Such questions are similar to the following, taken from *Prif Gyuarch Geluyd*:

Pan daw nos a dyd?	Where do the day and night come from?
pan uyd llwyd eryr?	Why is an eagle grey?
pan yw tywyll nos?	Why is the night dark?
pan yw gwyrd llinos?	Why is a greenfinch green?
mor pan dyuerwyd?	Why does the sea surge?
cwd a nys gwelyd.	You don't see where it goes.[175]

To take one as an example, the question "why is a greenfinch green" has no ready answer. Science today may be able to put forth an answer concerning pigments, or perhaps that color arises from a gene of some sort, but the material, mechanical method by which a bird is green does not answer *why* the bird is green. It answers *how* it is green. The difference is that the greenfinch is characterized by its color, that part of its very being and the beauty of it that makes it noticeable to humans. The same is true for the question "why is the night dark." Of course, the answer is the lack of sunlight, but this, again, is only answering *by what means* the night is dark, not *why* it is dark. For this question there is no answer, although it is of extreme interest to humans, and perhaps it is for this reason that so many cultures tell stories to try to explain such quandaries. Questions concerning the "essential" parts of nature

[175] *Legendary Tales*, 54.

cannot be answered easily, as they have no material part that can be pointed to and taken away from it. No human hand can reach into a greenfinch and pull out an organ that makes it green to study it and see how it works, for its character is all of itself. To lose its surging-ness the sea would become something that it is not, would lose an essential part of itself that characterizes it as the sea. In this way the knowledge of Taliesin has gone beyond the mechanical knowledge of the universe, how it is made up and how it works, as well as the lore known only to those who lived during the world's creation. Taliesin's newly gained knowledge, instead, is of the most intimate type, and is therefore not even able to be explained in words. Only a poetic question, suggesting an answer without directly giving it, is able to direct attention towards the ability that the poet has reached.

Conclusion

It is not a simple matter to obtain that which the poets understand. In Irish and Welsh tales, poets must first go through a process in order to gain their abilities, must be "cooked" in order to approach the wisdom of the Otherworld. Without this preparation, any otherwise normal human would be in grave danger, as suggested by the potency of the poison left in Ceridwen't cauldron after the three drops sprung out. As with the salmon, poetic and prophetic ability is as dangerous as it is beneficial, frequently scalding the one who wishes to touch it.

It is in this sense that the Scottish and Germanic analogues are interesting, as few of them tell of any poet. Perhaps the most famous, that of Sigurð the Volsung, tells instead of a young hero who kills a dragon. The set-up thereafter seems the same: Sigurð's foster-father tells him to cook the heart of the dragon and wake him when it is finished. When Sigurð burns himself on the heart and puts his finger quickly into his mouth, he suddenly is able to understand the speech of birds, who warn him that his foster-father is planning to kill him. After slaying his sleeping companion, Sigurð rides off with the dragon's treasure, only to meet a Valkyrie who teaches him occult wisdom and tells his future.[176] No connection to poetry exists, although the *Poetic Edda*'s account is, of course, poetic, and is further quoted in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, an otherwise prose narrative. Other versions of the tale, both Germanic and Scottish, have the hero imbued with invincibility, although there is always a small part that was missed, by which the hero is almost always killed.[177]

The Otherworld, whether in the Christian or pre-Christian context, never left those who encountered it the same, and the image of 'cooking' is a very apt one. The hero Finn is most well known for his thumb-chewing, perhaps because it is the most easily recognizable and noticeable part of his stories, but also because what he gained through learning the ability

[176] This tale is told in various sources, particularly the *Saga of the Volsungs*, pgs 65-71, and the *Poetic Edda*, pgs 370-401.
[177] These other versions are discussed in Scott's *The Thumb of Knowledge*, and are too many to recount fully here.

and gains through using it permeate his entire character. For Taliesin, his great wisdom has allowed him to understand the world in a way that is perhaps closest to that of the governor and the creator of all the world. And it is because of this understanding and this wisdom, along with his technical skills as a poet, perhaps, that his verse is so beautiful.

Chapter Five
Conclusion

To attempt to bring the four cultures together in a single whole in order to find a general theme is dangerous, as any such discussion will immediately require one to ignore the details. It is in the details, not any general account, that the true life of a tale exists, just as any person is fascinating for their individual character and views towards life, not simply because they are human. Yet to say that looking at these four cultures in view of one another is useless would go too far, as both what each culture shares and how their details differ can give insights that one would not otherwise have if one viewed a culture alone, in separation from those that grew and thrived around it. If there are similarities, one may assume any number of conclusions: that the two cultures shared some sort of historical past, before they recognized themselves as distinct peoples. Or perhaps cultural borrowing took place, as tales travel and change to fit their audience. Or, if none of these could occur, then one may even be able to claim some sort of characteristic of humanity as a whole, though in the current discussion, tucked into a small corner, both in place and time, of our world, we would only have a small piece of the puzzle. Thus this chapter will proceed with a focus on the details of each culture, with a view broad enough to see each of

the four cultures, in the hope that they will move each detail in different ways, and, in the end, realize more of what is so fascinating and so beautiful about these tales.

The process

The tales of poetic creation as described in the preceding chapters, at their most general, describe the *process* of obtaining the poetic ability. Poetic speech is different from normal speech, containing in some cultures power within itself. It is not surprising, then, if the human mind is seen as desiring an understanding of the functions of the world around and within it, that such stories were created. They seek to explain or examine a process in a metaphorical way, as no words of simple explanation would suffice. Nor is it surprising that, in many cases, these tales were told in the poetic form they were themselves exploring; no plain means of communication would do.

More specifically, each of the tales examined above laid out a general dichotomy between physical and 'spiritual.' The word 'spiritual' here is used with some reservation, as there is no good word to describe something that opposes the physical and material world while at the same time has some form and existence itself. 'Non-material' would be wholly insufficient because it suggests a reality too far opposite from physical reality. 'Spiritual' here works because it fits these general requirements, though under no circumstances should it be confused with a necessarily Christian 'spirit' nor a quasi non-religious 'feeling' of 'something else.' Instead, the 'spiritual' that I here oppose to 'physical' is meant to refer to

a world beyond or without the physical, material world that we humans can see and touch with our hands, though which is in some way connected to our reality. For the Anglo-Saxon material this is more easily connected to a Christian idea, as the spiritual and physical worlds are set up distinctly in the Christian idea of the universe. The movement described in these tales is between the dying, fallen world on Earth to the eternal, everlasting world with God. For the Norse and the Celtic tales, the idea of the Otherworld becomes somewhat more tricky, as the lands apart from those of normal human life are reached through physical bridges or else contain material components. The path to the realm of the Norse gods, for instance, lies over the Rainbow Bridge, and Óðinn is able to enter the Underworld on a horse (albeit a horse with eight legs). The Irish find part of their Otherworld under the ground, which exist as places at least physical enough to have doors in which Finn can get his thumb caught. The Welsh Otherworld is similar, though Annwn may be a land under the sea, if not under the ground. How these Otherworlds interact with the normal, material worfsld of humans depends at times on the needs of the tale itself, although the deeper one goes in search of the root of poetic inspiration, the less and less the connection and the similarities with the material world.

The movement of each of the tales, is from something material (tactile, experiential, observable) to something 'spiritual' (Otherworldly, unexplainable by words, often sublime). This process is not always direct, and often enough involves many back and forth movements.

This is the case with the Norse tales, where the mead is first a liquid (the spit of the gods), then made into a man (Kvasir), and then into a liquid again (his blood, the mead). It is then placed far under a mountain, where Óðinn must retrieve it by cunning and magic ability. It then re-emerges into the world of the gods, then to the world of humans, and finally, in the mouths and chests of the poets, back up to Óðinn again. Surely this is a tangled mass, with many Otherworlds (that of the gods, the dwarves, below the mountains, etc.) and many lines crossing one another and then returning to their source. Yet perhaps what must be understood is that the tale is a metaphor for a process, not a single, momentous act nor a series of events that once took place and are now but history. Each act of poetic composition re-enacts the tale within the poet, each is an intoxication by the poetic mead, each is a meditation on the branches of Yggdrasil. This is similar for the other tales as well, though is perhaps most readily seen in the Irish tale of Finn. Even after being burned by the cooking fish, and even after eating it, Finn is still required to put his thumb in his mouth and chew on it every time he wishes to gain knowledge or learn wisdom. Nor is it merely a ceremony, re-enacting in memory the act as opposed to the act itself, as at times he is described as chewing this thumb down to the marrow of the bone. Thus each time Finn puts his finger in his mouth he is *recreating* the event which gave him the power of prophecy and of poetry. Again, the same occurs in the Anglo-Saxon tales, where the meditative act is recreated and re-enacted each time the song is sung or heard. For Taliesin, the movement is

from a series of transformations to a form in which he can obtain knowledge of the essence of the world and the individual parts of it.

As a process the act of poetic composition has three general steps, though again the details may be different for each culture or even for each tale. First there is the physical world where the poet exists, where the poet is somehow constricted, bound, or fettered. Within this fettering there is either meditation, deep thought, suffering, danger, or any combination of the four. Through this process the poet is either given knowledge and wisdom or led to the Otherworld where they may be obtained.

Again, this is a very generalized description of what goes on in the tales of four rather distinct cultures, though hopefully through their discussion, below, their details will become more apparent and their differences and similarities can open new insights into their individual characters.

Constriction and Fettering of the Poet

The fettering of the poet is most easily seen in the cultures of the Germanic tradition discussed above. The Anglo-Saxon and Norse poetic form, as well as the words used by poets to describe their art, is described as bound, joined, or intricately woven. Óðinn himself is bound in all tales concerning poetic ability, from his being literally bound upon the worldtree Yggdrasil to his being contained in the court of Suttungr. In fact, both Óðinn and the mead are frequently noted as being mixed or joined in some way. Kvasir is formed

through a joining of the spit of the gods, and so again after he is 'broken' when killed by the two dwarves.

For the Anglo-Saxons, this binding is specifically to the physical world itself. The wanderer is bound to the world he longs for in the past, his liege lord and his hall, while the seafarer is actually physically bound by hail and ice while upon the prow of his ship. The physical world contains them, and they must endure it until they reach their deaths.

For the Celtic traditions, the word "constricted" works better than "binding" or "fettered," as the path to poetic or prophetic ability is a very narrow one. Ceridwen must boil particular herbs at particular times of the day and night, and must keep it bubbling and stirred for a year and a day, and even then only three drops contains the spirit of prophecy. Further, Gwion Bach's final transformation is contained, as he is eaten by Ceridwen and grows within her for nine months before being reborn as a child.

The tale in which Finn is burned by the salmon is similar to that of Gwion Bach and Ceridwen's cauldron, and Finn is elsewhere constricted in the tales which find him chasing a thief into the síd mound. In these his thumb is caught in the door and jammed, and it is only by recreating this (or his burn) that Finn is able to use his abilities.

When constraining or binding occurs, so does some sort of danger, either to the poet's physical well-being or to his spiritual essence. Ceridwen's cauldron is full of virulent poison, though it contains the spirit of prophecy, and Óðinn must 'sacrifice himself to

himself' in order to obtain the runes while hanging from Yggdrasil. The idea of sacrificing oneself so that one may be freed is found in Christianity as well, expressed by Taliesin in *Kanu y Cwrwf:*

Llaryaf yw Trindawt:	The Trinity is the most generous of all:
gorwyth medw medwhawt	it made the drinkers intoxicated
...Amkeud yor teithiawc,	…the rightful God said,
'mi hun a'm gwarawt.'	'I myself have ransomed myself.'[178]

Kanu y Cwrwf (ln. 40-1, 47-8)

Viewed in full, not Óðinn's, nor Christ's death is truly dangerous, as thereafter both will rise renewed from their old selves (and poets or humanity as a whole with them), while the danger of the moment is very real. For the Anglo-Saxon, the danger is the Christian danger of losing the soul to the devil, of not coming through life and arriving at the gates of Heaven, welcomed by God. Thus this is not a physical danger but a 'spiritual' danger as described above.

The danger Finn faces when he tastes the salmon from his burned finger is, on the other hand, a very physical one, and is a trait prominent in both the Irish and non-Irish analogues as well. In the *Macgnímartha Finn*, Demne is on the run from his father's killer when he finds Finneces, and in other texts he is wanted by the king. This is noted by Scott in Scottish analogues, and in the Norse version Sigurð only realizes the danger he is in after

[178] *Legendary Tales*, 363. Haycock notes that this is either in reference to Luke 23:37, 39, etc.: 'If thou be Christ, save thyself,' or perhaps, as seems more probable, Mark 10:45: 'to give his life a ransom for many.'

he burns himself on Fafnir's heart and can understand what the birds are saying. In both, though particularly with Sigurð, is seen the ambivalent nature of the gift, as the one whom the hero fears ought to be the one who protects him.[179]

The danger at this stage in the tales has two characteristics: that of fear and anxiety and that of the possibility of physical or spiritual death. This is to be expected, as at this stage the poet or the character is beginning their encounter with the Otherworld, or else the source of inspiration, and is being pulled from their place in the physical world. For those who obtain knowledge or wisdom along with their poetic ability, this fear may be the realization of the broader universe, outside what was originally understood. Gaining poetic ability is not simply a movement from one country-side to another, but one into an entirely different mindset and view of the world. This is particularly seen in the tales of Taliesin and those of the Anglo-Saxons, where a line exists between what was known before (multiple forms for Taliesin, the purely physical world for the Anglo-Saxons) and what is known after (the nature of existence, God himself). Thus if these tales are also explanations of the process of poetic composition, then the danger and anxiety involved are not only functions of the stories.

[179] Sigurð's slayer is his foster-father, Regin.

Meditation and Suffering

While those in the tales are fettered or constricted, something important occurs. It is here that poetic ability is imbued to the one bound and in most cases it is not given passively, though even when it is (such as in the case of Finn), there is still some action that must be taken in order to awaken the ability (Finn must chew his thumb, at times to the very marrow of his bones). In the Welsh, Anglo-Saxon and Norse traditions, the characters involved must go through either a test or meditation. The wanderer and the seafarer must think through their lives and what is before them, and while Beowulf is preparing for his death he looks out and contemplates the old work of giants, great structures upon which his own society is founded.[180] Both Taliesin and Óðinn, like the poets of their respective cultures, must undergo challenges and tests, and in the end always come out on top, being much more skilled than those with whom they are contending.

The testing and meditating is connected together in all but the Anglo-Saxon poems in the image of a cauldron, which in the Celtic material is particularized into the image of cooking. In this cauldron the raw materials of poetic composition are mixed together, both physical and spiritual, generally represented as some sort of 'food,' such as salmon or herbs. The physical component is the world around the poet, the actions of others, events of history, even the mechanical method of constructing poetry. For example, Welsh poets, at times,

[180] Beowulf, ln. 2717.

went with their lords to watch battles and thereafter more accurately represent their exploits in song, and many Celtic poems (Finn's first poem that he ever composed among them) are nature poems, taking their images from the world around the poet. For the Norse poets, this 'food' was the lore and knowledge of the gods, their exploits, and the makings of the worlds; indeed the very material that Snorri explains in his *Edda* as making kennings. In this sense the cauldron could be seen as representing the poet himself[181], or at least wherever poetic composition takes place. The question is, then, where such composition, such 'mixing' takes place, though unfortunately no tale explains where a poet's work is done.

The image of a cauldron representing both the raw materials of life and the process of gaining wisdom, is seen in an interesting work in Irish called *The Cauldron of Poesy*.[182] The poem[183] explains the inner-workings of poets in the image of three cauldrons (Coire Goiriath, Ermai, and Sofis) in three different positions (upside-down, right-side up, or sideways). The process of learning is described thus:

> What then is the origin of poetry and every other knowledge? Not difficult: three cauldrons are born in everyone, a cauldron of Maintenance, a cauldron of Motion and a cauldron of Knowledge. The caldron of Maintenance is the

[181] This interpretation, of the poet himself as the cauldron, does not work perfectly, particularly in the Welsh material, unless of course a person is seen as containing hideously strong poison and only three drops of Otherworldly or divine nature.

[182] The text is actually a combination of an original poem and commentary, at times explanations, with interlinear glosses. The manuscript comes from the sixteenth century, although the text itself may be easy old as the second half of the ninth century (Breatnach, 52).

[183] The text itself comes from a later period and belongs to only one of the four traditions discussed, but works well to summarize the ideas concerning the cauldron and will help illuminate the discussion.

> one that is born face up in a person at first (and) from it is learning imparted in early youth. The caldron of Motion, then, which is after it, magnifies. It is what is born on the side in a person [i.e. laterally, sideways]. The caldron of Knowledge is what is born (to a person) in the prone position and from it is imparted the Learning of every poem. The caldron of Motion, then, is face downwards in every second person, i.e. in the ignorant; on its side in bards and versifiers; it is face upwards in the *ánshruith* of learning and legal satire. (Every single satire does not cause destruction.) Face downwards the caldron of Motion is in him until sadness or joy turn it.[184]

Basically, the first cauldron is rightside-up when born, containing what it is holding. Then, as the person learns (or at least, as the non-ignorant learn), this begins to tip and spill out its contents while the cauldron of knowledge fills. This process, as noted above, occurs as sadness and joy overturn the cauldron of Motion. The text lists four different sadnesses: longing (for home), grief (for a friend), the pangs of jealousy and of pilgrimage for God's sake. The text also lists two divisions of joy "by which the cauldron of Knowledge is turned, divine and human." The human joys are somewhat strange, being "pleasure at the jealousy of cuckolding (i.e. of the lover) and joy at (the restoration) of health, and at freedom from anxiety at all the goading which there is until one turns to poetry. Strange, both that there seem to be only three, and also because they make little sense. Liam Breatnach translates the lines, instead, as: "(i) the force of sexual longing and (ii) the joy of safety and freedom from care, plenty of food and clothing until one begins *bairdne*, and (iii) joy at the prerogatives of poetry after studying it well, and (iv) joy at the arrival of *imbas* which the

[184] Henry, 125.

nine hazels of fine mast at Segais in the *síd*'s amass and which is sent upstream along the surface of the Boyne…"[185] Divine happiness is: "a visitation of grace to the caldron of Knowledge which turns it upwards, and from this there are divine and human prophets and commentators of grave and service together." Finally, the text notes: "But it is from outside the caldron that they bear these to them, although it is inside that it has been brought to pass."[186] Poetic ability is encouraged, then, from without, though formed within.

The process, then, is that a young person is stimulated by the joys and sorrows of life, as well as by learning the ins and outs of the poetic craft. Then, with that which he has gained, he creates poetry. This description, though, is missing a step, and that is the so-called 'divine spark,' the crisis and the climax of each of the discussed tales. That moment of burning, of having one's finger slammed in a door, or, otherwise, the grace of God sent down to bridge the gap and help the seeker on to the Otherworld; here lies inspiration, here lies the consequence or the gift of the poet walking the borderlands of the Otherworld. The structure of the poem comes later, whether the skill is learned earlier or afterwards, but the inspiration, that which gives life to the structure, makes it come to life, work, *breathe*, is in this moment, when the Otherworld reaches out and touches the poet, and leaves them never the same. This is what the poet seeks.

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[185] Breatnach, 67.
[186] Henry, 125-6.

Wisdom and the Movement to the Otherworld

The result of this encounter with the Otherworld depends on the details of the particular story. For each it is a general ability of crafting poetry, and usually in some way there is knowledge or wisdom gained. The nature of this knowledge or wisdom is where the tales separate and comment individually. For Óðinn and the Norse poets, the knowledge is lore for the gods, and (or perhaps therefore) the poetic ability. Finn, on the other hand, is not frequently depicted composing and singing poetry, but instead using his gift for gaining knowledge, such as whose skull did they find, whose bodies lie here, or where did such and such a person go. Finn does obtain later the ability to cross over into the Otherworld of the síd, though this ability is not directly connected with the tale of him burning his finger on the salmon.

The Anglo-Saxon and the Welsh traditions, though, are somewhat different. For the Anglo-Saxons what is gained is knowledge of the way the world works, and more specifically the way that the Christian God *intends* humans to act in the world. This is different from the Norse and Irish traditions as this knowledge grants the one who understands it communion with God, and from there salvation. In this way, contemplation through the enjoyment of poetry serves not merely as a simple pastime, but as a way of understanding the truths of the world, and thus as a means of leaving it behind and joining

with God in Heaven after one's death. Knowledge in this sense is powerful for the one who understands it, as it helps one to complete the Christian goal of rejoining the self with God.

Welsh wisdom, too, is different from gained lore in that it gets to something deeper than facts and an understanding of the mechanism of the world. Such wisdom is perhaps beyond human capabilities, and thus Taliesin has transcended the ability of a normal human to understand the world around him. Being able to comprehend the answer to such questions as "why does the sea surge" and "what makes a greenfinch green" allows him to see the world for what it truly is, and in this way acts similarly to the Anglo-Saxon knowledge. Yet in Taliesin's case, there is no reason seemingly given for obtaining such wisdom; simply understanding is enough.

The notion of poetic inspiration, or any inspiration for that matter, coming from a higher existence is perhaps an idea prevalent throughout the world. Many cultures share in the belief that inspiration is not based solely in the material world, and the cultures discussed above are no exception. What joins these four together, in many ways, is in the method by which each culture describes this process. And it is this: through some sort of confinement, some constriction or some fettering, the poet is able to move towards an Otherworld and take something back with him. This 'something' is then worked into the knowledge gained through the act of living and observing the world, and composed as poetry.

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