

INTRODUCTION

The Poet's Craft

“**H**ARD IT IS TO STIR MY TONGUE.” These are the words of the Norse poet, Egill Skallagrímsson, expressing the difficulty in turning to verse at a time of deathly sorrow. Images of how the skill to compose poetry is gained almost always emphasise the hardship involved – “the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings”, as T. S. Eliot calls it in *East Coker* – hardship bound up with death, or some other sombre Otherworld. It is a world difficult of access, that has to be raided, forced to give up its treasures. Egill’s poem opens up onto a world of imagery that portrays the attaining of poetic skill, which is found in a plethora of forms not only in Norse myth, but also in other traditions. I hope, in this work, to highlight some of the complexity of imagery found when poets talk of poetry, and show how it varies between traditions. First, however, some comment should be made on what is meant by the two terms, “Otherworld” and “poetic inspiration”.

The use of the collective term “Otherworld” perhaps begs the question; as Sims-Williams rightly points out,¹ terminology in early sources indicates various different other worlds. The modern concept of one “Otherworld”, distinct from the mundane world we normally live in, is likely to derive from Christian world views. Nonetheless, provided that the term is understood to refer to any world distinct from that of mundane existence, without suggesting an ontologically polarised duality of “this world” and “the other world”, and without prejudice as to the extent of differences between such other worlds, then it seems reasonable to let the term stand. When it is important to highlight the multiplicity of otherworlds, appropriate distinctions will be drawn, but my main concern is to recognise and investigate the opposition between the world of the living human community and any Otherworld that is contrasted with it in particular cases as a source of poetic power.

* Sims-Williams writes in reference to Irish tradition, but in terms that are equally applicable to other traditions. He notes, for example, that Welsh tradition appeared to envisage one Otherworld, *Annwfn*, whereas in Ireland there was a multiplicity of otherworlds, each within its own mound scattered across the landscape.²

In his great work on the heritage of Indo-European poetics, *How to Kill a Dragon*, Calvert Watkins notes:³

In the poetic traditions of most or all of the early Indo-European languages we find texts, often in large numbers, which for one reason or another present, or seem to present, some sort of obstacle between the hearer – the “reader” – and the message. And it often seems that that “obstacle” is in some sense what that society considers art. [...] For the Indo-European world, the further back we go the greater the emphasis on purely verbal art, the art of the spoken word. For the spoken word is a force, a creative power that can have a physical effect on the external world, when it is “worked” or “crafted” by the poet.

Early poets may, then, have delighted in indulging in obscurity; dealing with the Otherworld can, surely, only have increased their appetite. Discussing a very different tradition, that of the Karelian lamenters, Stepanova and Frog explain the obscurity of the verses used in the rituals, so deep that to anyone not versed in the tradition and its language they were incomprehensible: it was believed that the dead could hear and understand the living, but only if this special linguistic register was used.⁴ The reasons for the obscurity of some of the poems dealing with the Otherworld considered in this book may not be made explicit, but it may well have been intended to heighten the quality of the contact with the Other by “othering” the expression too.

Murray makes some useful comments on “poetic inspiration”;⁵ the focus is on ancient Greek poetic inspiration, but many of the points are relevant to other traditions. It is, she emphasises, a misapprehension to view inspiration as identical with possession; it is also misplaced to regard inspiration and craft (*tekhnē*) as incompatible. The notion of the inspired poet as knowing nothing of what he is saying and being unable to explain whence his poetry springs is not primitive (in the case of Greece, it developed only in the fifth century BC, after the time of many extant earlier poets). Rather, “Although the initial inspiration appears to come to the poet as if from some source other than himself, the subsequent composition of the poem depends on conscious effort and hard work”.⁶ The Muses were symbols of a poet’s feeling of dependence on the external, the personification of his inspiration. They afforded *permanent* poetic ability (poetic genius), and provided *temporary* aid in composition (poetic inspiration). The distinction between these is important to bear in mind, but in practice the traditions about poetic inspiration often do not allow us to separate them: an initial aid in composition often appears to act as a proof of subsequent poetic ability, and we do not hear so much, within the mythological traditions considered here, of the subsequent occasions when the master poet calls on his Muses, or the equivalent, to help with particular compositions. Hence I tend to use the term “poetic inspiration” to include also “poetic genius”, without entering into

the fruitless task of sorting out how far our inadequate sources mean the one rather than the other in any particular instance.

It is, nonetheless, striking that what poets wanted from the Muses was often information. Herren notes the distinction between what Homer calls upon the Muses for in book 2 of the *Iliad*, namely the identities of the leaders of the Danaans, and the divine voice which Hesiod craves from the Muses to enable him to sing of the race of blessed gods.⁷ But, Herren notes, the distinction is one of emphasis: Homer deals with particular men of the past, so he needed assistance with memory or recall; Hesiod's verse is concerned with the gods. Commemoration applies only to mortals; sure knowledge of the gods is impossible, and hence a poet cannot be certain when the Muses are willing to utter truths – he can claim only to have received a beautiful voice.

As Chadwick notes, “The association of inspiration and knowledge of whatever kind acquired by supernatural means is ancient and widespread. Inspiration, in fact, relates to revealed knowledge.”⁸ This was reflected in Hesiod's making the Muses the daughters of Mnemosyne, “Memory”, which of course conserves information. Murray concludes that “the idea of poetic inspiration in early Greece [...] was particularly associated with knowledge, with memory and with performance; it did not involve ecstasy or possession, and it was balanced by a belief in the importance of craft.”⁹

To Hesiod's assertion that the Muses know how to utter truths among many falsehoods through the voice which they give the poet Watkins compares the message of Vāc, personified Voice, in the *R̥g Veda*, 10.125.4, “I say to you something worthy of trust”. The message is that those who merely see and hear do not properly comprehend; this is a theme that is apparent in Norse sources too, as the conclusion to *Hávamál* (st. 164) makes clear: “Heill sá er kann! Njóti sá er nam!” (“Blessed the one who knows how! Let the one who has grasped it make use of it!”; see p. 20). Watkins notes, “There can be little doubt that these Vedic and Greek examples reflect a common ideology of the theory and practice of poetics” which is a common inheritance from the proto-poetic language. These points are worth bearing in mind when dealing with other traditions too, particularly those sharing an Indo-European background.¹⁰

What actually constitutes poetry or “the poetic” is, of course, a huge topic. Some useful observations are made with reference to certain old Welsh and Anglo-Saxon poems by Higley.¹¹ The medieval notion differed from the general modern one, and it also differed between cultures, with the Welsh (in Higley's opinion) being particularly apt to avoid the merely explicatory, and to engage in juxtapositions of statements with no apparent link between them. Higley notes the ubiquitous medieval and Renaissance emphasis on *tekhne*, skill, and on the poet as an artificer, a craftsman whose tools are words.

Poetry tends to be defined according to its rhetoric and figures (metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and so forth).¹² In line with the points made by Murray and Chadwick, the catalogue-like demonstration of knowledge – of the world, of history, of whatever constitutes tradition – is crucial to the poet, yet seems tedious to modern readers. Knowledge is conceived primarily as “what I have seen”, so that a declaration that “I have seen” something lends authority to the speaker as someone wise. The implication of “I have seen” is, of course, “I can describe”: Higley notes Alcuin’s presentation of the powers of the mind (*mens*) in his *De ratione animae*, which is “of such mobility that it does not become inactive even when it is asleep, of such speed that at one moment of time it surveys the sky and, if it wishes, flies across the seas, traverses lands and cities, in short, by thinking, it, of itself, sets before its view all things it chooses, however far and wide they may be removed”.¹³ This is “imagination”, in the sense of an ability to assimilate information and form an image of something, rather than poetry (a distinction not sufficiently drawn by Higley). Yet it is the stuff of poetry, which presumably comes into existence when *tekhne* is applied. This is perhaps seen in another observation of Higley’s on some of the Old English gnomic verses (maxims):¹⁴ while these may consist of lists of mundane observations with often little apparent semantic or experiential connection, it is typical to begin each new maxim on the b verse, so that it is linked with the preceding example through alliteration: the poet thus shows his knowledge of how the world exists in its multifarious and ostensibly unconnected ways, and expresses the underlying order by applying *tekhne* – making poetry out of this knowledge (here, of alliteration).

Much might be written on the theory and definition of “inspiration” in medieval and other sources, but these few pointers may, I hope, suffice, as this is not a book that focuses primarily on theory, or on metrical technique. Explicit statements found in the sources tend, in any case, to seem mechanical; we might question whether the linguistic means existed to articulate what poetic skill really was in a more abstract sense. A clearer picture will emerge by examining some of the myths and texts that themselves deal with poetry, and teasing out the understandings of poetry that are implicit in them.