

Old Norse Visions of the Afterlife

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The nature of life after death is only tentatively sketched out in the canonical writings of the Christian Church, yet it represents one of the most prominent literary subjects in medieval Europe. The so-called *Visiones* represent a genre that enjoyed a particularly broad dissemination between the fourth and thirteenth centuries. This study aims to assess the impact of this Latin tradition on Norse-Icelandic authors and processes of cultural appropriation evident in medieval vernacular adaptations of the genre. The first chapter outlines the historical and theological conditions surrounding the genre's dissemination in Western Scandinavia and identifies the primary corpus of vernacular adaptations of the genre to be analysed in this study. Chapter II considers the literary contexts in which *Visio*-conventions have been integrated, highlighting the distinctive generic and creative diversity exhibited in the primary corpus. Chapters III and IV are concerned with the literary motif of the journey to the otherworld and its importance in Old Norse literary traditions across the period of Christianisation. The former examines signs of continuity on a conceptual level between traditional native and Christian narratives about the otherworld, suggesting that the journey motif represented a sustained source of literary creativity in pre- and post-conversion societies. The latter examines this notion of continuity with reference to two significant literary symbols, the otherworld shoe and the otherworld bridge, and their pregnant resonances in Norse Icelandic records of myth, law, and religious ritual; it will here be shown how certain symbols found in vernacular accounts of the afterlife produce a rich set of connotations meaningful within their particular cultural setting. The final Chapter analyses the social mentality encoded in portrayals of the idealised hereafter, and it will be argued that portrayals of eschatological justice and the topography of heaven reflect attitudes characteristic of the societies from which these visions emerge. The thesis as a whole thereby calls attention to the broad and deep nature of the *Visio* genre's impact on Western Scandinavian literary culture, suggesting that this particular genre-oriented study may serve as a case study of the reception of Christian literary traditions in medieval Iceland and Norway more generally.

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Abbreviations

<i>Draumkvedet</i>	Michael Barnes ed., <i>Draumkvæde: An Edition and Study</i> (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1974).
<i>Esv</i>	Helle Jensen ed., <i>Eiríks saga víðförla</i> , Editiones Arnamagnaeanae (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel, 1983).
<i>Gísla saga</i>	<i>Gísla saga Súrssonar</i> , in Björn K. Þórólfson and Guðni Jónsson eds., <i>Vestfirðinga sögur</i> , Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943).
<i>Rannveigar leizla</i>	<i>Guðmundar sögur biskups: Guðmundar saga A</i> , ed. Stefán Karlsson, Editiones Arnamagnaeanae (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1983), chs. 58-60.
<i>Skald</i>	Citations from poems edited in volumes II and VII of the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages: <i>Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: from c. 1035 to c. 1300</i> , ed. Kari Ellen Gade, 2 vols., Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II (Turnhout, Brepols, 2009). <i>Poetry on Christian Subjects</i> , ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, 2 vols., Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages VII (Turnhout, Brepols, 2007).
<i>Skjald</i>	<i>Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning</i> , ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols. (Copenhagen, Gyldendal Nordisk forlag, 1912-1915).
<i>Sólarljóð</i>	Carolyne Larrington and Peter Robinson eds., <i>Skald VII:1</i> , pp. 287-357.
The <i>Poetic Edda</i>	All references to eddaic poetry edited by Ursula Dronke will be to her three-volume edition <i>The Poetic Edda</i> (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969-2011). Vol. I: Heroic poems: <i>Atlakviða</i> , <i>Atlamál</i> , <i>Atlamál in Grænlensko</i> , <i>Guðrúnarhvöt</i> , <i>Hamðismál</i> Vol. II: Mythological poems: <i>Völuspá</i> , <i>Baldrs Draumar</i> , <i>Rígsþula</i> , <i>Völundarkviða</i> , <i>Lokasenna</i> Vol. III: Mythological poems II: <i>Hávamál</i> , <i>Hymiskviða</i> , <i>Grímnismál</i> , <i>Grottasöngur</i> The remaining poems are cited from Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn eds., <i>Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern</i> , 2 vols. (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1962-1968).

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Figure 1: The Last Judgment from Østerlars Church, Bornholm, Denmark

I

Introduction

I. Outlines of the Medieval Hereafter

As the title of this thesis already intimates, this study is concerned with a tradition of writing in which literary aesthetics intersects with theology, popular belief, myth, as well as socio-political concerns. Although the Christian world view dominated large portions of Europe during the Middle Ages, there is likely to have been great variation in belief patterns between peoples and individuals, depending on education, cultural environment, local traditions, and personal conviction. These variables are not easy to gain access to through extant medieval sources. What we can draw on, however, are records of the ‘official belief’, the doctrines communicated by the church. From Scandinavia we are privileged to possess statements about life after death in written and visual forms. Before moving on to the primary texts of this study, it will be useful to consult these sources for the characteristics of the doctrinal hereafter there presented as the most salient and significant for our purposes.

Broadly speaking, theological projections of the life to come are firm about its universal consequence, but hesitant when it comes to the question of individual fates. One image which would have been found in most churches across Europe in the Christian Middle Ages was that of the Last Judgment, or Apocalypse. From the Scandinavian countries, medieval depictions of this event mainly survive in Sweden and Denmark.¹ Often situated on the portal above the church entrance or on the arch between nave and chancel, the motif served as a reminder to churchgoers of the threshold ultimately lying between mortality and the eternal hereafter. A particularly impressive fourteenth-century depiction, from Østerlars church on Bornholm (see Figure 1, p. 3),² paints the scene as follows: on the four outer corners angels stand, trumpet in hand, to signal,

¹ Compare L. Jacobsen et al., *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder*, 22 vols. (Copenhagen, Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1956-1978), s.v. ‘dommedag’. This encyclopaedia is hereafter referred to as *KLNM*. Remnants of a large Icelandic doomsday portrait from the twelfth century survive on a set of thirteen wooden boards; a reconstruction is found in Lilja Árnadóttir et al., *Kirkja ok kirkjuskruð* (Reykjavík, Prentsmiðjan Oddi, 1997), pp. 58-59.

² The painting is further discussed in U. Haastrup et al, *Danske Kalkmalerier*, 8 vols. (Copenhagen, Ejlers’ Forlag, 1985-1992), Vol. 4, pp. 192-193.

as in the Scriptural Revelation of John, that the Day of Judgment is approaching. Within a mandorla in the centre, Christ is shown enthroned with two swords, symbolic of the potency of moral judgment, extending from His head (cf. Revelation 19:5).³ On His right hand side we see two tiers thronged with naked human figures, their hands folded and their exalted status indicated by aureoles encircling their heads. From differing hairpieces and haircuts we glean that this is a mixed social group, consisting of men and women, royalty, and people of religious orders. All individuals on this side are turned towards Christ, whose revelation is one of the rewards prognosticated in the Scriptures (cf. Revelation 22:4). On Christ's left, the state of the souls not admitted among the blessed is portrayed. These individuals are turned away from their judge, facing instead a gigantic dragon or fish at the far right border in whose wide open gape a horned monster (the devil) hovers, staring at the onlooker with a gleeful grin. Lesser demons are busy herding flocks of the sad-faced sinners towards the hell-mouth with heavy black chains. Among the sinners one can distinguish tonsured monks and crowned aristocrats.

According to Scriptural traditions the last judgment was to be a universal event at which all humanity would rise from the dead, be tried before God, and – depending on moral merit – receive life everlasting or a second death in the fires of hell. The Revelation of John having ominously set the date for this event at a thousand years after Christ (20:2-5), certain medieval theologians deemed that the world would come to an end around 1000 AD.⁴ But detached from this reference in the centuries thereafter, the event was always more or less impending. The Last Judgment from Østerlars projects a clean moral division – two categories of people, and two alternative fates. From a didactic viewpoint, its message to the onlooker is simple: you are either good or evil; there is no grey area inbetween. However, as medieval audiences may well have

³ All references to the Old and New Testaments are in the first instance to *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, eds. Bonifatius Fischer et al. (Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994): henceforth *Vulgata*. English translations are from *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, eds. R. P. Carroll and S. Prickett (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2008): hereafter *KJV*.

⁴ The Anglo-Saxon homilist Wulfstan famously interprets the devastating enterprises of the Vikings in his day as proof that Judgment Day is close at hand; cf. his 'Sermo Lupi ad Angelos', ed. Dorothy Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957), no. XX.

been aware, this neatly structured illustration of Judgment Day ignores some major theological problems. Is it not the case that nobody save the saints can claim to have led entirely pure moral lives? And, seeing that judgment may yet be some time away, what will happen to the soul in the interim phase, between the soul's departure from the body and the resurrection?



Figure 1: The Last Judgment from Østerlars Church on Bornholm, Denmark. Reproduced with the kind permission of the photographer, Svend Aage Møller, and the Historical Society of Bornholm.

We can examine how these issues were addressed from the pulpit through two valuable collections of homilies, put together in Iceland and Norway in the latter half of the twelfth century.⁵ Known as the Norwegian and Icelandic homily books, the texts contained in them are to a large part translations and adaptations from Latin sources, homilies attributed to such authorities as Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Alcuin of York.⁶ Most likely, these sermons represented models or templates which could be consulted, altered, and abbreviated according to priests' needs and the demands of audiences.

The nature of the hereafter, or *epterlife þessa líff* ('this life's afterlife'),⁷ is an omnipresent theme in both collections. But also here it is the Last Judgment which is given most weight, not the soul's fate in the interim hereafter. Hell and heaven are described as final, not temporary locations. An excerpt from a 'Sermo necessaria' may serve as representative of the afterlife prospects typically painted:

himin-riki er fva got at engi *maðr* kan þat hyggia *eða* oðrum sægia. þar er lif æi-lift *ok* æi *ok* æi lios. þar er gaman *ok* gleði *ok* hverfconar pryði. *ok* dyrð *ok* fagnaðr enda-laus. þar værðr *maðr* ægi fiucr. *ok* engi of-gamal. þar er hvarke hungur ne þorste. þar er æigi fut ne sorg. þar ann hvær *maðr* oðrum iamt sem fiolfum sér. Þar sculu aller goðer menn guð fia æi *ok* æi *ok* með honum lifa *ok* hans ænglum fyrir utan enda. Sæler ero þærir menn er við slict sculu vera. en hinir ero veller er til hælvitif sculu rapa. þar sculu þærir vera með dioflum. þar er ei *ok* ei myrcr *ok* mæin *ok* fut *ok* sorg. hungur *ok* þorste. firna frost *ok* ofhiti *ok* hinar mefto piningar. *ok* allar endi-laufar. þærir menn aller er í þann illa stað coma. þa æigu þærir alldrigi væn mifcunnar siðan.⁸

⁵ Though I will not insist on the distinction in the following, I should note that, by the twelfth century, the two terms 'homily' and 'sermon' referred to different formats of expository writing; P. Roberts, 'The "Ars Praedicandi" and the Medieval Sermon', in *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Muessig (Leiden, Brill, 2002), p. 44, defines the difference thus: '*Homilia* or homily referred to the kind of preaching where a biblical passage, normally read during Mass, was explained phrase by phrase and was, therefore, a commentary on the gospel of the Mass. The term *sermo*, or sermon, came into use by the thirteenth century and was applied to the type of preaching where a short quotation, also taken from the liturgy of the day, was divided at length and developed according to the *ars praedicandi*.' Both types are found in the Norse homily books.

⁶ The two Norse collections have several pieces in common, which indicates that they derive from common sources; on the relationship between the two collections, see the recent discussion by O. E. Haugen and Å. Ommundsen, 'Nye blikk på homiliebooka', in *Vår eldste bok: skrift, miljø og bilebruk i den norske homiliebooka*, eds. O. E. Haugen and Å. Ommundsen (Oslo, Novus, 2010), pp. 9-34; on the function and audience of the Norwegian homily book, see K. M. Berg, 'Homiliebooka – for hvem og til hva?', pp. 35-76 in the same volume.

⁷ *The Icelandic Homily Book: Perg. 15 4to in the Royal Library, Stockholm*, ed. A. de Leeuw van Weenen (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1993), 23v, l. 29. This edition is in the following abbreviated *HómÍs*.

⁸ *Gamal norsk homiliebook: Codex AM 619 4to*, ed. G. Indrebø (Oslo, Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1931), pp. 88-89: 'Heaven is so exquisite that no man can understand or explain it to others. There is eternal life and perpetual light, there is joy and merriment and all kinds of ornamentation, and glory and beauty without end. There, a person does not fall ill or grow too old; there, neither hunger nor thirst, ailment nor grief is found; there, each person loves the other like himself; there, all good people shall see God for ever and ever and live with Him and His angels evermore. Blessed

This homiletic prospect differs in several respects from the kinds of depictions we will encounter in the visionary accounts. The natures of the respective spheres are captured in terms of simple oppositions – joy versus grief, light versus darkness, everlasting life versus physical agony and so on. These notions are enumerated in clauses anaphorically bound together by the existential ‘there is’ (‘þar er’). Resembling thus a catalogue of contrasting qualities rather than a portrait of concrete places, the format does not encourage reflections on the sensory sensations of hell and heaven to the degree the *Visiones* do. One could say that the homilies do not venture far into the otherworld landscape; they reproduce the stock imagery presented in learned Latin treatises such as Honorius’ *Elucidarius* – one of the earliest writings surviving in Old Norse translation (from c. 1150-1199).⁹

Despite the Apocalypse looming large in the homilies, their dominant outlook regarding the prospect of salvation is in fact predominantly optimistic, as Oddmund Hjelde has pointed out.¹⁰ Hjelde mentions this with special reference to the Norwegian compilation, but the observation may be extended to its Icelandic counterpart. We are told there that most human beings are inevitably tainted to some degree by un-Christian thought and conduct: ‘Hafa engir mex fva helgir veret i heimnom’, a sermon for All Saints Day states, ‘at eigi hafi necquat miþgort. þót fimir hafe bæþe fátt oc smátt’ (‘No person has been so holy on earth ... as not to have committed some misdeed, though some have done little both in quantity and degree’).¹¹ Weak by nature, all humanity relies on God’s grace, and this is readily granted to those who are genuine in their repentance: ‘aldrege verþa fynþer órar fva ftórar eþa fva margar. at eige vile guþ þegar fyr gefa þær ef af er látet at misgeora. oc fva yfer beótt sem mótt ef til’ (‘Our sins will

are those to whom this will befall. They are wretched, however, who are bound for hell. In that place they will be among the devils; and in that place there is perpetual darkness and agony, ailment and grief, hunger and thirst, horrendous frost and heat, and the severest torments everlasting. None of the people who go to that place may ever thereafter hope for mercy.’ This edition is in the following abbreviated *HómNo*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁹ *Elucidarius in Old Norse Translation*, eds. E. Scherabon Firchow and K. Grimstad (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1989). For an overview over the main European influences on Old Norse homiletic literature, see O. Hjelde, *Norsk preken i det 12. århundre: studier i Gammel norsk homilieboek* (Oslo, O. Hjelde, 1990), pp. 82-98.

¹⁰ Hjelde, *Norsk preken i det 12. århundre*, p. 475.

¹¹ *HómÍs*, ed. de Leeuw van Weenen, 71v, ll. 25-26.

never be so great or so many that God may not forgive them if retribution is made and appropriate restitution is made').¹² Hope in divine mercy is also reflected in later medieval portrayals of St. Michael balancing people's sins and virtues on a pair of scales; on one late fifteenth-century portrayal from Møn in Denmark the Virgin Mother is pictured on St. Michael's left, safely carrying the soul facing judgment in one arm while tipping the balance towards salvation with her right index finger.¹³ A similarly reassuring scene is envisaged in a Norwegian poem we will examine in more detail in later chapters, *Draumkvedet*, where St. Michael is said to actively weigh souls in the direction of heaven: 'vóg han alle syndesjælene/ hen til Jesum Krist' ('he weighed all sinning souls, over towards Jesus Christ').¹⁴

Despite its key role in contemporary Continental theological debates, the concept of purgatory is only vaguely alluded to in the Norse homilies. The Icelandic homily collection contains a small number of references to a state of spiritual purification through fire, the most concrete of which is the following passage:

Íva er *sem* hveriom comi dómadagr þegar er *han* andafc. fyr at véit hver þa þegar *sin* hluta. hvárt *han* skal helvitif *qualar* hafa þær ef *aldrege* skal þrióta. eða skal *han* hafa *hreinfonar* e. d *neçqueria* stund. oc þa mæ'ínlæte ef af *honom* breni enar smæri *fynþir*. þær er *han* hevir óbótar áþr *han* andifc. Afþui nefni ec he.ldr enar smæri til þes at *hréinfonar* e.ldr en megi af *brena* an enar stéorri. at þær éinar ma *hréinfonar* e.ldr en af taca. er hinar smæ-ri *fynþir* ero callaþar. en hinar eongar er hæfoþ *fynþir*.¹⁵

Only in the Icelandic homily book is a state envisaged in which the human soul undergoes some form of purification through expiatory fire (*hreinsunar eldr*). In this context it denotes a separate eschatological condition, whereas in other places of the collection the same terms are applied to

¹² Ibid., 21r, ll. 19-21.

¹³ Depicted in Haastrup et al., *Danske Kalkmalerier*, Vol. 6, p. 87. Numerous further variations of the motif of judgment by weighing in medieval Christianity and its roots in antiquity are analysed in L. Kretzenbacher, *Die Seelenwaage: Zur religiösen Idee vom Jenseitsgericht auf der Schicksalswaage in Hochreligion, Bildkunst und Volksglaube* (Klagenfurt, Verlag des Landesmuseums für Kärnten, 1958).

¹⁴ *Draumkvedet*, K1, 28.

¹⁵ *Hómíls*, ed. de Leeuw van Weenen, 71v, ll. 14-21: 'it is as if judgment day comes to each when he dies. For then, everyone will know her or his works, whether she or he shall suffer the hell-punishment which never ends, or purgatorial fire for a while. And the wrongdoings which will be purged from her or him are the lesser sins, those which she or he has not made restitution for by the time of death. I mention the lesser sins because these may be burnt away by purgatorial fire; the other are the cardinal sins.'

a sense of spiritual cleansing through illness and other forms of trials in this life.¹⁶

Though only officially recognized at the Council of Lyon in 1274, the concept of a purgatorial state had been long in the making.¹⁷ There is evidence that its importance also in Western Scandinavia grew strongly in the thirteenth century. In his recent study on the early Christian centuries in Norway and Iceland, Arnved Nedkvitne highlights the substantial increase in purchases of services for the dead over this period, a practice intimately connected with the idea that those alive can aid or accelerate the purification process of the deceased.¹⁸ In 1268, moreover, it became a legal duty for laypeople to seek confession at least on an annual basis. It was thought that through systematic contritional exercises the common sinner could hope to shorten the expiatory ordeal in the afterlife. In the fourteenth century one finds the earliest occurrence of a Norse term for *purgatorium* – ‘hreinsanarstaðr’ (‘place of purification’), which indicates that the condition attained firmer conceptual and spatial features over time.¹⁹

The idea that there was an interim stage after death, in which the human soul in some form awaited the Last Judgment, seems to have formed an increasingly central part of the church’s message. However, a survey of visualised apocalypses, sermon material, learned religious lore, and the literature we are concerned with in this thesis would in all probability bear out the fact that a single, universally accepted model of the world beyond never did emerge. The hereafter remained an elusive reality. This elusiveness is reflected in the contemporary diversity of religious practices bound up with the prospect of a future life. One of the main conclusions emerging from Nedkvitne’s study is that the expression of religiosity among the Norse lay

¹⁶ Compare *Ibid.*, 44r, l. 18.

¹⁷ Cf. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London, Scolar Press, 1984), pp. 284-286. Some of Le Goff’s assertions in this important study have been criticised – especially his preoccupation with linguistic developments as yardsticks for measuring the evolution of the concept of purgatory; contrast, for instance, A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. J. M. Bak and P. A. Hollingworth (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990), pp. 148-149. Notwithstanding, Le Goff’s remains a highly engaging study of the various traditions that came together to shape the Christian otherworld of the High Middle Ages.

¹⁸ A. Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society: 1000-1350* (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), pp. 93, 148ff. On the broader European theological trends relating to this topic, see J. Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th-18th Centuries*, trans. E. Nicholson (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1991), especially pp. 189-198.

¹⁹ *Páls saga postola II*, ed. C. R. Unger, in *Postola sögur: Legendariske fortællinger om Apostlernes liv, deres kamp for kristendommens udbredelse samt deres martyrdød* (Oslo, B. M. Bentzen, 1874), pp. 281-283.

population could and did take many forms. Certain rituals were obligatory – such as baptism and from the mid thirteenth century confession and Holy Communion. But many other modes of devotion were practiced which were to a much larger degree subject to personal motivation and taste. Nedkvitne asserts that ‘there was . . . wide scope for social groups to create their own social practices which gave meaning in their particular social situation.’ The Church, he suggests, encouraged rather than curtailed localised forms of religious expression. And the fact that devotion could take such different forms as pilgrimage, fasts, veneration of local saints, private prayer, alms, donations to churches and so on thus ‘made Norse religiosity socially diverse.’²⁰

The insight that people were able to find meaning in different aspects of Christian teaching and devotion, that religion was in essential ways democratic within the larger authoritative framework, provides an important intellectual-historical backdrop for our purposes. For one principal objective of the present study is to show that the subject of life after death in this corpus is characterised by a remarkable diversity of artistic, social, and religious expression. In this and the following four chapters I examine how Norse-Icelandic writers employed conventions of a prominent Latin tradition of eschatological vision literature in the vernacular. Before returning to the North, however, I will in the following briefly present the evolution of the type of literature we are concerned with as well as its core conventions.

II. Medieval Visionary Writing

When occasionally used in the public sphere in a transferred sense, ‘vision’ typically refers to a secular sense of ‘seeing’, a construct of the imagination, an ideal prospect. A semantic facet that has emerged over the course of the last century, and perhaps the most common use of the word in contemporary discourse, is that defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the ‘Ability to conceive what might be attempted or achieved, esp. in the realm of politics;

²⁰ Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, p. 308.

statesmanlike foresight'.²¹

Whereas this sense of *vision* revolves around prospective, even idealised realities, the Classical Latin 'uīsiō' and 'uīsus', from 'uidēre' ('to perceive with the eyes'), are in fact etymologically strongly interlinked with *truth* and *knowledge* (cf. Greek *oīda*).²² In addition to 'faculty of sight', the nouns above refer especially to a religious kind of perception transcending the realities of this world, whether in dream, a sudden lapse of consciousness, or an ecstatic experience. Such phenomena of sight are ubiquitous in medieval literature, above all in the diverse literatures concerned with devotional subjects, in Saints' Lives, miracle collections, sermon literature. Because several medieval literary traditions can be categorised as belonging to the general heading 'visionary literature', I should first define the type of literary vision with which this study is concerned.

In the period framed by the lives and works of Augustine (d. 430) and Chaucer (d. 1400), the conceptual framework of dream or vision was explored in numerous ways by theologians, philosophers, poets, and clerics desiring to probe the relationship between human experience and larger philosophical or religious models of existence. One tradition of visionary literature – often classified *Dream Vision*²³ – comprises some of the most widely studied pieces of medieval literature such as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the anonymous Middle English dream poem known as *Pearl*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and *The House of Fame*.²⁴

A second, less rhetorically intricate but intensely devotional medieval type of literary

²¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. 'vision', 2:b.

²² Cf. P. G. Glare et al., *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2012), s.vv. 'uīsiō', 'uīsus', 'uidēre'; W. W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1910), s.v. 'vision'.

²³ See for example K. Marti, 'Dream Vision', in *A Companion to Old and Middle English Literature*, eds. L. C. Lambdin and R. T. Lambdin (Westport, Conn., Greenwood, 2002), pp. 178-209.

²⁴ Recent editions of these poems are found respectively in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. M. Andrew and R. Waldron, 5th ed. (Exeter, Exeter UP, 2007); William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. E. T. Donaldson et al. (New York, Norton, 2006); Geoffrey Chaucer, *Dream Visions and Other Poems*, ed. K. L. Lynch (New York, Norton, 2007).

vision is that often referred to as ‘mystic visions’.²⁵ Often identified with female visionaries, texts of this category grow out of meditative settings in which the protagonist seeks to ascend in thought to a higher perception of the divine. Notable mystics include the Benedictine abbess Hildegard von Bingen (d. c. 1179), Catherine of Siena (d. c. 1380) in Italy, and the English mystics Julian of Norwich (c. 1416) and Margery Kempe (after 1438). A notable Scandinavian representative of this school of visionaries is St. Birgitta of Sweden (d. 1373), whose *Revelations* circulated widely in medieval Europe and who founded a religious order in her name.

But the branch of vision literature that enjoyed the widest circulation in medieval Europe consists of brief, factual-sounding prose testimonies about individuals who had allegedly visited hell and heaven and witnessed the pain and pleasures associated with these spheres. Scholars have attempted to reach definitions that distinguish this type of vision from those outlined above, but arriving at an exact definition has proven difficult. In his recent study of *Visiones* and their material dissemination in Norway and Iceland, Jonas Wellendorf sets up the following matrix:

- (1) Den visionære skal få indtryk af at blive hensat til den andre verden (2) hvor flere lokaliteter besøges. (3) Oplevelsen skal forvoldes af en overmenneskelig magt, (4) finde sted under trance og (5) være beskrivelig.²⁶

The one factor distinguishing this from Peter Dinzelbacher’s earlier attempt at a definition is point ‘2’, which excludes most of the visions described as mystic above. To distinguish it also from works such as Chaucer’s *Dream Visions*, we should add as a sixth criterion the eschatological focus. For in most fundamental terms, the format of these texts can be described as recorded journeys through the Christian eschatological universe.²⁷

²⁵ A useful introduction is E. A. Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1986).

²⁶ J. Wellendorf, *Kristelig visionslitteratur i norrøn tradition* (Oslo, Novus, 2009), p. 59: ‘(1) The visionary must have the impression of being transported to the other world (2) where several localities are visited. (3) The experience must be induced by a supernatural power, (4) occur in trance and (5) be describable.’ Cf. P. Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionslitteratur des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 1981), p. 29.

²⁷ I do not consider it fruitful to assess degrees of ‘genuineness’ in these testimonies, as Dinzelbacher does in categorising his material into ‘erlebte’, ‘literarische’, and ‘gefälschte’ visions; the fact that these accounts were written in clerical milieus and in every case underwent several stages of transmission complicates any argument about their value as records of ‘genuine experiences’, and it is problematic to simply assume that medieval audiences, lay or clerical, simply accepted them as such. In approaching these texts I prefer the more sensitive literary perspective articulated by C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York and Oxford, Oxford UP, 1987), p. 187, who regards them ‘as works of the religious imagination, whose function is to communicate meaning through symbolic forms rather than to copy external facts.’

To gain a better understanding of this literature's conventions, I will in the following describe three examples of the genre that were among the most influential and widely read in medieval Europe. As surviving textual witnesses demonstrate, all three accounts, the *Visio Pauli* from the fourth century, the *Visio Drycthelmi* from the eighth, and the *Visio Tundali* from the twelfth, found their way to medieval Western Scandinavia. In order to distinguish this literary tradition from the other types of visionary literature mentioned, Latin examples of this tradition will be referred to by the generic marker *Visio (Visiones)*, while the Old Norse term *leizla* will designate versions in Old Norse translation.

The Visio Pauli

One of the earliest indications that non-Scriptural revelations of the hereafter influenced people's beliefs about the hereafter is found in Augustine's writings. In his treatise on the fourth Gospel he refers in unfavourable terms to a text called *Apocalypse of St. Paul*, denouncing its content as both misleading and sacrilegious; he charges that it is a dishonest and fictitious work, created without respect of the canonical texts, and specifies that this fable is not acknowledged by the Church.²⁸ Augustine's criticism represents the earliest learned stance on this literary tradition, but the fact that it was echoed by later theologians such as abbot Ælfric of Eynsham (d. c. 1010) indicates a lasting disapproval among at least some within the theological intellectual elite.²⁹ It is the case, however, that the *Apocalypse of Paul* did not merely survive into the high Middle Ages, but grew into a literary tradition in its own right, surviving in over a hundred Latin redactions from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries, and in numerous European vernacular translations from the same period.³⁰ Collectively, all these offshoots are known as the *Visio Pauli*

The issue of genuineness is further discussed on pp. 85-94, 187-199 in the same volume, and by E. Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell before Dante* (New York, Italica Press, 1989), pp. xxi-xxvi.

²⁸ Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium tractatus*, ed. Radbodus Willems, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 36 (Turnhout, Brepols, 1954), 98:8.

²⁹ Cf. *Ælfric's Catholic homilies: The Second Series*, ed. M. Godden (London, Early English Text Society, 1979), p. 190.

³⁰ L. Jiroušková, *Die Visio Pauli: Wege und Wandlungen einer Orientalischen Apokryphe im lateinischen Mittelalter unter Einschluss der altschechischen und deutschsprachigen Textzeugen* (Leiden, Brill, 2006), pp. 27, 432.

tradition.

Part of the reason why Augustine and later commentators found this text problematic is that it lays claim to Scriptural authority. The account is put in the mouth of the apostle Paul and tied to a famous episode in his canonical letters. It is well known that St. Paul's conversion came about through a visionary experience (Acts 22:6-11); but it is the second vision, described in the second Epistle to the Corinthians, which became the point of departure of much speculation and literature about the Christian otherworld:

scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim sive in corpore nescio sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit raptum eiusmodi usque ad tertium caelum et scio huiusmodi hominem sive in corpore sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit quoniam raptus est in paradysum et audivit arcana verba quae non licet homini loqui³¹

This passage represents one of only very few impressions of the hereafter offered in the New Testament. The single most important, of course, is the Revelation of St. John, a text which due to its dense and often oblique symbolism has always posed considerable interpretative challenges. It is noteworthy that Paul, in the passage just quoted, distances himself in several ways from the story he tells. He modulates the narrative into the third person, and repeatedly underlines the indefinable nature of the visionary experience (*quae non licet homini loqui*).

This reluctance to say anything for certain about the beyond characterises how the subject is treated in the Bible on the whole. With reference to the topic of life after death in the New Testament, Murray J. Harris comments, 'The glimpses of the future afforded by the New Testament are designed not to satisfy our curiosity about the unknown but to stimulate holiness of life'.³² Yet this curiosity factor is important to bear in mind in observing the rise and enduring popularity of *Visiones* in the Middle Ages; collectively, the *Visiones* respond to a gap in the Scriptures concerning the soul's fate upon death, seeking to map out a void in the canonical

³¹ 2 Cor 12:2-4: 'I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for man to utter.'

³² M. J. Harris, 'The New Testament View of Life After Death', *Themelios* 11:2 (1986), p. 52. J. Clark-Soles introduces his study *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York, T & T Clark International, 2006), p. 1, with the categorical observation: 'There is no systematic theology in the NT regarding death and the afterlife'.

Scriptural sources and early commentaries.

In the *Visio Pauli*, the enigmatic reference to Paul's vision of the third heaven is fleshed out into a spectacular literary tour through hell and heaven. Here we find many of the ingredients which came to characterise the medieval genre. The main points of this otherworld journey are as follows:³³ in a case discovered within the foundations of the apostle's home several generations after his death, a fuller account of his visit to the third heaven is found. Paul recounts that he, when transported in spirit to the third heaven, was shown a righteous and a sinful person meeting their fate after death. Upon death they are faced with spiritualised manifestations of their good and evil earthly actions before both souls are taken to God, questioned, and commanded to hell or heaven based on evidence given by each soul's guardian angel. Paul is then led by an anonymous divine being through various echelons of heaven, including the Heavenly Jerusalem. The latter lies on the banks of the Acherusian Lake, and the motif of Paul sailing towards it in a golden boat is one of several in the account which betray the narrative's strong influences from Classical myth.³⁴ His journey subsequently proceeds in a north-westerly direction, to hell. Paul is overcome by sorrow as his guide leads him from one site to the next in an extensive gallery of punishments which culminates in a vision of the hell-pit. All torments are of a physical kind, and the majority of sinners have been guilty of sins relating to carnal lust or blasphemy. Despite the severity of sins committed, St. Paul seeks mercy for the sinners. On his and St. Michael's pleading, God grants all sinners in hell a break from their plights every Sunday. This is the background for the situation in the Old English *The Damned Soul* (also known as *Soul and Body I*) and related texts in which the soul revisits his former body from hell 'ymbe seofon niht' ('every seventh night') to complain about its earthly conduct.³⁵

St. Paul's apocryphal other world comprises a twofold moral division (heaven and hell);

³³ The following summary is based on J. K. Elliot's translation of the eighth-century Latin version in Paris MS 1631 in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1993), pp. 619-644.

³⁴ An informative (and beautifully illustrated) study of the evolution of the netherworld in Western literature is A. K. Turner's *The History of Hell* (New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993).

³⁵ *The Damned Soul*, ed. D. Moffat, *The Old English Soul and Body* (Woodbridge, D. S. Brewer, 1990), Vercelli, l. 10.

each of these branches contains internal gradations, appropriated to accommodate differing degrees of vice or virtue. From a theological perspective, the most important concept communicated in the *Visio* relates to judgement – here conceived as taking place in two phases. The first occurs immediately after the soul's departure from the body, whereas the Last Judgment is the second and final assessment. The first judgement takes place on a microcosmic level and concerns only the individual soul; the second is a macrocosmic trial of humankind as a whole.³⁶ This idea of a preliminary judgment gave rise to the theory that a person's condition at the point of death would not in fact freeze until the day of the Apocalypse. A person not guilty of capital sins could still hope to achieve a degree of purity by purgation which would ultimately qualify for entry into heaven at a later date. This theory of course developed in its fullest form in the twelfth century with the emergence of purgatory as a distinct eschatological space.

The version of Paul's *Visio* that appears to have travelled most widely in medieval Europe is considerably shorter than the earlier apocalypse. It concentrates exclusively on the portrayal of hell and its punishments. Despite this limited thematic scope, however, different versions show considerable variation. As Lenka Jiroušková notes, types of retribution were added and varied freely according to taste and local circumstances.³⁷ Notwithstanding Augustine's and Ælfric's admonitions, there is evidence that the *Visio* was shortened in order to integrate it into sermons and other homiletic contexts. Depending on emphasis, the account could serve either as a warning against the consequences of wrongdoing, or as a lesson on the sanctity of the Sunday Sabbath.³⁸

The Visio Drycthelmi

It has been argued that Dante knew and was influenced by the Pauline tour of the

³⁶ Cf. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, p. 121.

³⁷ Jiroušková, *Die Visio Pauli*, p. 16; all episodes found in the Latin hell-redactions are listed on pp. 165-170.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 374-396.

otherworld, particularly in his portrayal of the inferno.³⁹ But the general structure of Paul's vision – from heaven to hell – is not followed by Dante and is indeed uncommon also in the medieval *Visiones*. Their journeys proceed along the course the Florentine poet would also take – from hell (via purgatory) to paradise/ heaven. This structure is of substantial thematic significance in the *Comedy* as it interlinks physical, intellectual and spiritual notions of progression and ascent. Crucial to this journey paradigm is the concept that entry to heaven prerequisites spiritual cleanliness, a state only achieved by appropriate contrition and censure.

We first find this notion in a vision reported by Bede in the fifth book of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.⁴⁰ Drythelm, a layman not otherwise known to us as a historic person, falls ill and dies – only to recover a day later, to the great amazement of all persons attendant at his wake. While he was unconscious, he had this remarkable vision: he was approached where he lay by a young, luminous being and led from the bed in a northerly direction. Arriving at last at a deep valley, Drythelm notices two hilltops covered respectively in fire and frost; souls in human shape can be seen leaping back and forth between the two areas to relieve their pain. Drythelm immediately assumes this to be hell, but the guide denies this and descends with him along a tenebrous and lonesome path. Eventually they reach the pit of hell. At this point, the guide abandons the visionary, who is left watching Satan amidst a vortex of fire and pitch feasting on the most hapless souls. After a period in intense agony, Drychelm again perceives the light of his approaching guide. He guides him away and soon they arrive in much more pleasant environments. Two tiers of heaven are described; both are encircled by large walls, and the dominating impression within is of pastoral meadows, translucent brightness, sweet scents and music. The two sections of heaven differ from each other only in that the innermost excels the outer in refinement.

The vision concludes with a question-and-answer section in which Drythelm is asked

³⁹ As maintained especially by T. Silverstein, 'Dante and the *Visio Pauli*', *Modern Language Notes* 47 (1932), pp. 397-399.

⁴⁰ *Visio Drythelmi*, eds. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Beda Venerabilis: Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 488-499.

what he has seen and whether he has understood its significance – which he has not. Chief points in the guide’s commentary are that the otherworld consists of four strata. Both hell and heaven contain forecourts designating non-finite spiritual conditions, whereas the two extreme poles represent the eternally damned and blessed respectively. The souls first seen leaping from fire to frost had delayed seeking forgiveness for their misdoings until the moment of death; their punishment is of an interim kind, for they will be discharged from their ordeal once they are clean enough to merit entrance to heaven. In the framing narrative of the *Visio*, Bede tells how Drythelm reacted to the vision. He at once disposed of his material belongings and joined a monastery. His story, moreover, is said to have gained wide recognition; it was reportedly a particular favourite of King Aldfrith, who on several visits to the area interviewed Drythelm about his experience.

The *Visio*’s further transmission history outside the context of Bede’s work may serve to illustrate the typical routes travelled by such accounts. We find a full retelling of Drythelm’s *Visio*, next to other visions in Bede and Gregory the Great, in one of Ælfric’s Rogationtide homilies (probably written in the 990s).⁴¹ In view of the homilist’s apparent criticism of the *Visio Pauli* it is interesting to note that he does confirm the trustworthiness of this *ðegen*, even though he was a layman and ‘simple in mind’ (‘bylewite on andgyte’) (p. 199). In his peroration, Ælfric also offers an indication of just how fashionable *Visiones* were in his day, commenting, ‘We *rædað gehwær on bocum. þæt oft and gelome men wurdon of ðisun life gelædde. and eft to life arærde*’ (‘We read in books everywhere that people were often and frequently led out of this life and returned again to life’) (p. 203). The lesson he extracts from the *Visio* concerns the importance of aiding the dead through intercessory prayer and penitence.

About six decades after Ælfric’s writing the German scholar Otloh of Emmeram integrated Drythelm’s vision into a collection of twenty three visionary accounts, the *Liber*

⁴¹ Ælfric’s *Catholic homilies*, ed. Godden, pp. 199-205.

Visionum.⁴² In this work, the author, a monk chiefly based at Regensburg, includes visions from the writings of Bede and Boniface, accounts reported to him during his lifetime, and four taken from his own experience; in putting together this collection he intended, so the prologue informs us, to give edification to the faithful and warning to ill-doers about the judgment to come (p. 34). A third compendium in which the *Visio* found entry is Roger of Wendover's *Flores historiarum*, a historical chronicle of England spanning the arrival of the Saxons in the fifth century up to his own lifetime, concluding a few years before his death in 1237. The visionary report, entered under the year 699, is surrounded by (other) seminal occurrences in the history of Britain such as the deaths of St. Lambert and St. Benedict. Its heading, 'De mortuo resuscitato a pœnis purgatorii' ('About a deceased man who returned to life from the torments of purgatory'), seems to take familiarity with the theme for granted.⁴³ These three contexts alone, and there were numerous other copies or versions circulating in smaller formats, show a wide range of application. Such literature was considered historically important as well as useful in the context of moral education. *Visiones* were, moreover, recognised as a distinct narrative tradition, bound together in anthologies in which both the texts' thematic uniformity and their internal diversity come to light most fully.

The Visio Tundali

At the point in time when *Visiones* reached the peak of their circulation across Europe – during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries – portrayals of the otherworld also attained the highest degree of physical detail, if not realism. No other account illustrates this as well as the *Visio Tundali*,⁴⁴ a substantial account about an Irish knight's afterlife vision, written down at Regensburg soon after 1149, the year the event is alleged to have taken place. As regards

⁴² Otloh of Emmeram, *Liber visionum*, ed. P. G. Schmidt (Weimar, H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1989).

⁴³ Roger of Wendover, *Chronica, sive Flores historiarum*, ed. H. O. Coxe, 4 vols. (London, English Historical Society, 1841), Vol. I, p. 190.

⁴⁴ The Latin edition referenced in the following is found in A. Wagner ed., *Visio Tnugdali: lateinisch und altdeutsch* (Erlangen, A. Deichert, 1882); a useful introduction to this account is found in J-M. Picard and Y. de Pontfarcy, *The Vision of Tnugdali* (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1989). The visionary's name varies slightly from one MS to another (e.g. Tnugdalus or Tondal), and Tundal will in the following serve as common denominator.

topography, this account is closer to Dante's meticulously mapped out triune cosmos than to the rather empty landscapes in the *Visiones* of Paul and Drycthelm. Tundale's journey proceeds along dark valleys, over icy mountains, across foul-smelling rivers, into beastly bellies, through dazzling plains, and past splendid meadows. The quality of legend or adventure is more pronounced here than in foregoing accounts. At times the narrative draws attention to its own literary qualities, edging snapshots from Tundale's journey towards satire, parody and allegory. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the episode which depicts Tundale struggling through a slender and spiked bridge half-way through the hell-section (pp. 20-22). Explaining that this punishment is reserved for thieves, the guide presents Tundale with an ox to transport across the bridge – a replica of the specimen he once stole from his grandfather. Needless to say, the manoeuvre proves complicated, the cow being understandably reluctant to follow in Tundale's painful footsteps. The task turns even more absurd, however, when – having made it halfway across the narrow ledge – Tundale realises that another sinner, carrying a heavy load of grain, is approaching from the other side. Neither of the two is prepared to make way, and for a moment, the situation freezes with no resolution in sight. Only after a lengthy interval does the angel navigate the two souls past each other and lead Tundale onwards on the otherworld journey. This type of scene seems stylised, possibly designed to generate an emotional outlet within what is otherwise a grave didactic narrative. Though it may relieve, however, the comic also underscores the earnestness of the tale; as soon as one returns to Tundale on the bridge one notices, of course, that no such relief is available to the sinner in the hereafter. In this sense the comedy seems to turn on the audience.

Though Tundale's otherworld gives the impression of being much larger large, the essential eschatological structure is the same as in Drycthelm's account. Two antechambers of hell and heaven constitute temporary localities housing the majority of common sinners, all of whom may ultimately expect entry into heaven. The main difference in the twelfth-century *Visio* is that the otherworld is more crowded, and the visionary travels much farther, visiting a wide

range of distinct moral categories – over twenty, according to one critic.⁴⁵ The route travelled by the Irish visionary recalls Drycthelm's, but the former is exposed more fully to the penal machinery of the hereafter, as he and his guide systematically revisit the graver wrongdoings of his past. The further he advances the worse for wear is Tundale physically, but the freer does his spirit become from the burdens that obstruct his entrance to paradise.⁴⁶

A great number of vernacular versions of this *Visio* have been discovered, edited and studied over the past thirty years.⁴⁷ It exists in Middle English, Middle High German, Dutch, French, Italian, Catalan, Spanish, Portuguese, and Serbo-Croat in addition to Old Norse. Not only the wide geographical dissemination, but also its enduring popularity and demonstrable impact on ancillary art-forms sets this *Visio* apart from many others.⁴⁸ Impressive medieval manuscript illuminations of Tundale in the otherworld survive in the hand of the Burgundian painter Simon Marmion.⁴⁹ And to this day, the story circulates in various artistic formats, most recently represented in the form of a widely acclaimed a cappella setting of a late medieval Slavonic translation.⁵⁰ All this may serve to indicate that the subject of *Visiones* in general – and this *Visio* in particular – reach beyond the world-view of medieval audiences and, on account of their imaginative appeal, still find new audiences.⁵¹

⁴⁵ See also B. Pfeil, *Die 'Vision des Tnugdalus' Albers von Windberg Literatur- und Frömmigkeitsgeschichte im ausgehenden 12. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, Lang, 1999), p. 243.

⁴⁶ Few literary aesthetic analyses of the *Visio Tundali* have been conducted; but see in J. S. Emerson's interesting discussion of the author's figural juxtaposition of corporeality versus spirituality in 'Harmony, Hierarchy, and the Sense in the Vision of Tundal', in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. J. S. Emerson and H. Feiss (New York, Garland Publishing, 2000), pp. 3-47.

⁴⁷ Cf. most recently M. Cavagna ed., *La vision de Tondale: les versions françaises de Jean de Vignay, David Aubert, Regnaud le Queux* (Paris, Champion, 2008); E. E. Foster ed., *Three Purgatory Poems: The Gast of Gy, Sir Owain, The Vision of Tundale* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, Medieval Institute Publications, 2004); Pfeil, *Die 'Vision des Tnugdalus' Albers von Windberg*.

⁴⁸ A version of the text has been edited which was produced and circulated in Germany in the seventeenth century; cf. G. Bernardt and F. Rädle eds., *'Tundalus redivivus', 1622: eine Jenseitsvision aus dem dreissigjährigen Krieg nach der mittelalterlichen 'Visio Tnugdali': lateinisch und deutsch* (Amsterdam, APA-Holland UP, 1985).

⁴⁹ See T. Kren, R. S. Wieck, *The Visions of Tondal from the library of Margaret of York* (Malibu, Calif., J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990). Hieronymus Bosch (d. 1516) and painters in his circle made use of Tundale's account too; cf. J. Koldeweij et al., *Hieronymus Bosch: The Complete Paintings and Drawings* (Ghent and Amsterdam, NAi Publishers Rotterdam, 2001), pp. 224.

⁵⁰ Information on this project can be found on the website of the Dialogos Ensemble <<http://www.ensemble-dialogos.org>>; accessed 10.02.2012.

⁵¹ Beyond medieval vernacular translations, reflexes of the genre in English literature are found in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and again in nineteenth-century poems such as P. B. Shelley's 'Peter Bell the Third', and John H. Newman's 'The Dream of Gerontius' – the latter best known in Edward Elgar's setting. A fascinating discussion of

III. *Visiones* in Scandinavia

When and how *Visiones* reached the North is the subject of a recent and comprehensive study by the Danish scholar Jonas Wellendorf. In the central chapter of his published doctoral thesis *Kristelig visionslitteratur i norrön tradition* (hereafter *Visionslitteratur*), Wellendorf assesses extant medieval translations in Old Norse vernacular, focusing particularly on the scope of textual witnesses, their provenance, dating, and relationship to Latin versions. Six Latin *Visiones* survive in Old Norse translation. In addition to the three we have discussed, they include afterlife visions in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, the *Visio Fursei* and the *Visio Gunthelmi*.

Pope Gregory's theological treatise enjoyed immense popularity in the Middle Ages.⁵² The key points under discussion between the pope and his student in Book IV revolve around the intermediate hereafter and the nature of eschatological punishment and reward. To support his theories, the church father includes a considerable number of near-death visions, some of which introduced previously unknown motifs into the landscape of the other world. We will come back to these in chapters IV and V. The vision of St. Fursey is, like Drycthelm's report, recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. But Bede himself draws on an earlier, longer report, found in the *Vita Fursei*, a biography of the Irish-born saint, composed in connection with his translatio in c. 653.⁵³ Gunthelm's vision stems from the mid-twelfth century and is thus roughly contemporary with the *Visio Tundali*.⁵⁴ It was in all likelihood written in France, though the story is ascribed to a Cistercian monk in England. It will feature in our discussion of the visualised heaven in

visionary motifs in Norwegian poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be found in Leif Mæhle, *Diktar på leiting: Litterære studiar og artiklar* (Oslo, Novus, 2009), especially ch. 1.

⁵² Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, ed. A. de Vogüé, 3 vols. (Paris, Les éditions du cerf, 1978-1980), Book IV, ch. 38. As Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, p. 148, notes, the actual authorship of this work is a matter of contention in modern scholarship; as this question does not directly pertain to our discussion, I will, for clarity's sake, refer to the work as Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*.

⁵³ *Visio Fursei*, ed. M. P. Ciccacese, 'Le Visioni di S. Fursa', *Romano Barbarica* 8 (1984-85); the vision in question begins at ch. 5. On the historical background, see Ciccacese's introduction, pp. 231-235. Compare Bede's account, *Visio Fursei*, eds. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Beda Venerabilis: Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 268-74.

⁵⁴ *Visio Gunthelmi*, ed. G. Constable, in 'The Vision of Gunthelm and Other Visions Attributed to Peter the Venerable', *Revue Bénédictine* 66 (1956), pp. 92-114.

Chapter V. It will be useful, before advancing to a more concise definition of this thesis, to give a brief introduction to the historical timeline behind the transmission of the *Visiones* in Iceland and Norway and the relationship between the translations and the Latin originals. For this I draw largely on Wellendorf's recent findings and refer readers to his study for a fuller analysis of the subject including previous work in the field.

Apart from the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory, no *leizlur* (translated *Visiones*) pre-date the fourteenth century in their extant form. The *Viðrjóður* ('Conversations'), as the work has come to be called, appear to have impacted Norse literary culture like few other single works of Christian instruction,⁵⁵ and the variety of manuscripts (MSS) in which it, or parts of it exist, speaks to its popularity in the clerical milieus of Norway and Iceland. Six medieval textual witnesses, containing fragments of the treatise, survive, all older than c. 1400. The earliest of these, AM 677 4to, dates to c. 1200-1225, and belongs thus to the earliest generation of writing on vellum we have from Western Scandinavia. Scholars have generally considered this text a copy of an earlier translation, perhaps originating as early as the 1150s. It has been a matter of some debate whether this first copy was originally from Norway or Iceland. Like so much of the surviving body of Old Norse literature it was collected in Iceland by the native philologist Árne Magnússon (d. 1730), and is now preserved at the Arnarnagænan collection in Copenhagen, Denmark.⁵⁶

Furseus leizla, *Drythelms leizla*, and *Duggals leizla* all appear in their earliest forms in the same vellum, AM 657 a-b 4to. This MS can be dated on palaeographic grounds to c. 1350, but was written in different hands, probably over a number of years. As far as *Furseus leizla* and *Drythelms leizla* are concerned, this MS presents the only medieval copy,⁵⁷ and Wellendorf

⁵⁵ For assessment of the impact of this and other writings attributed to Gregory on Norse-Icelandic literature, see K. Wolf, 'Gregory's Influence on Old Norse-Icelandic Religious Literature', in *Rome and the North: The Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, eds. R. H. Bremmer et al. (Paris, Peeters, 2001), pp. 255-274; R. Boyer, 'The Influence of Pope Gregory's Dialogues on Old Icelandic Literature', in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, eds. P. Foote et al. (London, The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), pp. 1-27.

⁵⁶ I will in the following refer to C. R. Unger's edition of the *Viðrjóður* in *Heilagra manna sögur* (Oslo, B. M. Bentzen, 1877), Vol. I, pp. 179-255.

⁵⁷ *Drythelms leizla* exists also in a seventeenth century copy, printed by Einar G. Pétursson to supply the fragmentary older copy in his edition, 'Einn atburður og leiðsla um Ódáinsakur: leiðsla Drythelms eða CI áventýri í safni Gerings', *Gripla* 4 (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1984), pp. 138-165; unless otherwise

considers it likely that both were written in Iceland around 1300. More complex is the material history of *Duggals leizla*, which in this MS contains a prologue in verse stating, ‘Hakon konungr or latinu tok’ (‘King Hákon translated it from Latin’).⁵⁸ It has traditionally been held that the reference concerns Hákon IV Hákonarson (d. 1263), under whom a great deal of European literature was translated into Old Norse. But the attribution could also be to the later Hákon V Magnússon, whose period on the throne (1299-1319) better matches the dating of the MS. As a further argument for this later dating, Wellendorf points out that the type of verse used in the prologue (*Knittelvers*) only came into fashion after c. 1300, well known examples including the so-called Eufemia-verses commissioned by the eponymous wife of Hákon Magnússon. It is in any case noteworthy that *Duggals leizla* represents the earliest surviving prose translation of the *Visio Tundali* in any vernacular language, and four additional medieval textual witnesses bear witness to its strong appeal to Norse audiences.

Though the *Visio Pauli* represents one of the earliest *Visiones* of the genre, as we have seen, its textual history in the North is relatively short. A leaf of *Páls leizla* is found in AM 681 c 4to, a MS datable to c. 1400, which also contains a fragment of *Duggals leizla*. In addition to this a fuller albeit also fragmented version is found in an MS from c. 1500 (AM 624 4to).⁵⁹ Despite these rather late witnesses it has been argued that the *Visio* was known and translated already around the time of the homily books. A chief indication of this is a title in the Norwegian homily book which reads ‘Vifio sancti Pauli apostoli’ (‘Vision of the Apostle Paul’).⁶⁰ It is a misleading heading, however, as the text that follows is actually a translation of the Anglo-Norman Soul and Body dialogue *Un samedi par nuit*, a text with no connection to the *Visio Pauli* tradition. As Wellendorf rightly points out, the title, seeing that it is misapplied, does not prove that this *Visio* was known at this point. Thus the earliest fixed date we have to go by for dating *Páls leizla* is c.

noted, reference will be made to AM 657 a-b 4to.

⁵⁸ *Duggals leiðsla*, ed. P. Cahill, Rit 25 (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1983), AM 681a, p. 2, l. 3; unless otherwise noted, my references are to this version in Cahill’s edition.

⁵⁹ Both fragments have been printed by M. Tveitane, *En norrøn versjon av Visio Pauli*, Årbok for Universitetet i Bergen. Humanistisk Serie 1965:3 (Bergen, Norwegian Universities Press, 1965). I will in the following refer to Wellendorf’s normalised edition of AM 624 4to in *Visionlitteratur*, Appendix A, pp. 411-415.

⁶⁰ *HómNo*, ed. Indrebø, p. 148.

1400.

Finally, there is *Gunelinus leizla*, which in material terms is the youngest, existing in two copies from the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries respectively. In both, the *leizla* is part of a collection of miracles devoted to the Virgin, known from C. R. Unger's edition as *Mariu saga*.⁶¹ The earliest codex, Holm perg. 1 4to, dates from c. 1450-1500, but the section containing the *leizla* has been deemed to be a copy from a text written around 1300. The second, eighteenth-century copy (comprising MSS AM 634 4to and AM 635 4to), moreover, is held to be a meticulously faithful transcription of a collection from the late fifteenth century. Though the two translations differ considerably in accuracy and rhetorical style, it appears that both go back to one and the same earlier translation. Wellendorf suggest that the different textual stages represent stylistic updates, reflecting altering fashions and audiences.

Having outlined the historical background of the six surviving *leizlur*, we should stress that the dates discussed are of course of limited value in assessing the broader issue of the genre's medieval dissemination in the North. Firstly, relating to its scope, we must assume that we today only possess and know of a small proportion of the total body of literature that actually circulated in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. From references in Old Norse sources, we know of at least one *Visio* which circulated in the North but which has not survived in Norse or Latin textual witnesses.⁶² Secondly, relating to time, it is necessarily true that, unless they were translated abroad, the *leizlur* stem from Latin versions, and these could well have been in circulation and influenced writers in Latin form. All we can show – for example concerning *Páls leizla* – is that a translation existed at the time of the surviving textual witnesses, even where these may well have been copies of earlier translations, or even independent versions of other extant translations. It is the date of the original Latin which determines how early the work could

⁶¹ Unless otherwise noted, references are made to the version in Holm perg. 1 4to, printed in *Mariu Saga: Legender om Jomfru Maria og hendes Jertegn*, ed. C. R. Unger, 2 vols. (Oslo, Brögger & Christie, 1871), pp. 534-541.

⁶² In *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols. (Akraness, Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-1945), Vol. 4, p. 286, reference is made to 'Leiðsla Karls keisara' under the entry for 890 AD, which must refer to the popular *Visio Caroli Crassi*, found in William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regvm Anglorum*, eds. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors et al., 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998-1999), Vol. I, pp. 162-168.

possibly have found its way to Norway and Iceland following these countries' constitutional conversion to Christendom in c. 1000 AD. For the *Visiones* of Tundal and Gunthelm this means a *terminus post quem* of c. 1150; the date of the other examples is not restricted.

Approaches to Translation

To what degree do the Norse translations of *Visiones* show signs of alteration and adaptation to localised context? More often than not scholars of medieval literature pursuing this question are, regardless of genre, faced with the complication that originals have been lost, and that any discrepancies between translations and extant Latin versions may therefore reflect some interim stage in the transmission process. As Wellendorf observes, our genre is no exception in this respect:

Visionlitteraturen er en af de tekstgrupper hvor det er særdeles vanskelig at studere forholdet mellem kildetekst og oversættelse, da genren nød en stor yndest middelalderen igennem. Så stor var denne popularitet at mange af teksterne ikke havde en stabil form, men var flydende i den forstand at de kunne findes i mange forskellige redaktioner.⁶³

For none of the five extant *leizlur* is the Latin source text or texts known, though we can in broader terms distinguish which redaction the source text branches from. It is clear, for example, that the translation of the *Visio Fursei* is not based on the Bede-redaction, but on a longer, less widely disseminated version close to that in the Saint's *Vita*.⁶⁴ It is with such broader affinities between *leizla* and *Visio* that Wellendorf is mainly concerned when discussing their relationship to each other. What we can observe in comparing translations with the closest known Latin version is that they, on the whole, do not diverge considerably in content. As a general rule, traces we may expect to find concerning the translators' attempts to accommodate foreign material – such as explanatory glosses, omissions, or comparisons – are largely absent. This could indicate that Latin versions were already in circulation and familiar.

⁶³ Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, p. 35: 'Vision literature is one of the groups of texts where studying the relationship between source text and translation is particularly difficult, as the genre enjoyed great popularity throughout the Middle Ages. Its popularity was so great that many of the texts did not retain a fixed form, but were fluid in the sense that they could exist in many different redactions.'

⁶⁴ Cf. Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 171-187.

One noteworthy exception to this general trend is the introduction to *Duggals leizla* we have already briefly touched on; here the patron of the translation project is introduced, its objective set forth, and the narrative's geographical setting outlined. The verse that introduces the patron also publicises the didactic aim of the text: Hákon, it says, 'or latinum tok ok liet norræna til skemtanar ok umbota monnum ok hugganar at þeir fagni er gott gera. en hiner hræðiz er misgera' ('translated it from Latin and had it brought into Norse for people's entertainment, moral improvement and contemplation, so that they derive joy from it who do good, and those who do ill grow afraid').⁶⁵ These remarks take the place of a preface usually contained in Latin versions in which the author praises his patroness, a certain abbess 'G.',⁶⁶ and outlines the *Visio*'s historical circumstances including how it came to be recorded. The fact that these pieces of information are omitted in the Norse version seems deliberate, and contributes, as Wellendorf notes, 'at universalisere og ahistorisere teksten' ('to universalise and de-historicise the text').⁶⁷ We can also consider the transferral of patrimony from the monastic abbess to the Norwegian royal as a strategy by which the translator seals the account with a local stamp of authority and significance.

A second distinct feature of the introduction to *Duggals leizla* is the concern to explain the geographical position of Tundale's native country, Ireland, in relation to the Scandinavian countries. While Latin versions of the text contain notes about the situation of Ireland in their introductions too, the Scandinavian translator adds two coordinates, namely that the island 'er ad ętt uesturs ok utsudurs at sigla af Noruegi ok Biorguinn' ('lies south-west by boat from Norway and Bergen'), and that 'nordr undan Irlande ligur Island ok er þrigia daga ha j mille' ('to the north of Ireland lies Iceland, with three days of ocean in between').⁶⁸ References both to Norway and Iceland indicate that the text was expected to reach audiences of both countries. Within the

⁶⁵ *Duggals leizla*, ed Cahill, AM 681 c 4to, p. 2, ll. 3-5.

⁶⁶ *Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, p. 1, l. 1.

⁶⁷ Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, p. 223. Compare also Cahill's analysis on the translation's relation to the Latin, *Duggals leizla*, pp. lviii-lxxxiii.

⁶⁸ *Duggals leizla*, ed Cahill, AM 681 c 4to, p. 3, ll. 7-8- p. 4, ll. 9-10

account of the vision itself, editorial interventions are more difficult to detect. With the expressed reservation that the *leizla*'s source text is unknown, Wellendorf discusses some passages, among them the scene on the bridge mentioned earlier, in which the rhetorical flourishes of Latin versions appear to have been toned down, rendering the tenor 'lidt mere lødig eller alvorlig' ('a little more sober or serious').⁶⁹

Having noted these exceptions, how should we assess the fact that the role of the translator in *Duggals leizla* and the rest of the *leizlur* is as subdued as it appears to be? At the very least it suggests that native audiences, at the time these translations were produced, did not require supporting structures to understand and accept the stories told. This may indicate that the genre itself was already familiar at the period from which the material witnesses stem. A second important factor may be that the genre's central idea, the journey to the world of the dead, most likely occupied an important place in native culture before *Visiones* entered this cultural landscape. A central concern in this thesis will be to assess reflexes of this native heritage on the extended transmission of *Visiones* in Norse-Icelandic literature.

IV. Approaching Old Norse Visions of the Afterlife

In the broadest terms, my objective in this study is to estimate the impact of the *Visio*-genre on literature produced in medieval Iceland and Norway. My primary focus is not on the intersection outlined above at which Latin examples of the genre were translated into Old Norse, but on the phase one phase further removed, in which Norse-Icelandic authors experimented with its conventions on their own premises. I will introduce the scope of my primary material in section I.v below, but would first like to offer some comments on my theoretical approach.

For a long time, scholarly discussions on prominent Scandinavian visionary texts such as *Sólarljóð*, *Draumkvedet*, and *Rannveigar leizla*, revolved by and large around source-criticism.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Cf. Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 224-226

⁷⁰ See e. g. Njörður P. Njarðvík, *Sólarljóð: útgáfa og umfjöllun* (Reykjavík, Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskola Íslands, 1991), pp. 87, 196; K. Liestøl, 'Draumkvæde: A Norwegian Visionary Poem from the Middle Ages', *Studia*

Based on similarities in theme and imagery, critics have been tempted to search for direct routes of influence between a Norse text and a given *Visio* (Latin or translated) in order to identify which texts the author may have drawn on. Given that this approach has dominated past criticism of this literature, Wellendorf too appends a sub-section on ‘Foreslåede forbindelser til den øvrige litteratur’ – that is ‘Proposed connections with other literature’ – to every *leizla*, in which he summarises past arguments and assesses their merit.

As Wellendorf also recognises in his conclusion, there are two chief problems with this source-centred approach; firstly, it is predicated on a narrow assessment of the genre’s influence on Old Norse literature, assuming at any time that native authors had certain visions in mind or on the desk of their scriptorium from which they abstracted certain elements. Secondly, and in a related vein, the search for parallels usually ignores one of the genre’s main characteristics, namely its strong generic self-awareness. Even a cursory inspection of different *Visiones* will show that features such as the journey through hell and heaven, the guide, the motif of the bridge, scenes of punishment and reward and so on are too integral to the tradition to trace back to any single text. An important conclusion of Wellendorf’s to carry forward into our discussion is therefore the following:

Det ser ikke umiddelbart ud som om enkelte visioner specifikt har øvet en direkte og iøjnefaldende stor indflydelse på det resterende korpus af norrøn litteratur. Dette skyldes alligevel ikke at visionslitteraturen og dens emne var ukendt, men snarere det modsatte; nemlig at det visionslitteraturen havde at forælle om, var så almengyldigt og de enkelte motiver som blev benyttet så udbredte at det ikke er muligt at spore den indflydelse der trods alt er at finde på enkelte tekster, tilbage til specifikke visioner. Visionslitteraturens tema, og det generelle indtryk den har givet, må i høj grad have været internaliseret af publikummet, og en skribent eller digter som kommer ind på temaet, har næppe haft behov for at konsultere en skreven kilde.⁷¹

This conclusion rightly discourages further attempts to trace literary influence in the narrower

Norvegica 3 (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1946), pp. 79-117; Cahill ed., *Duggals leizla*, pp. lvi-lvii.

⁷¹ Wellendorf, *Visionlitteratur*, p. 375: ‘It does not appear that any single vision has exercised a direct and notably substantial influence on the remaining Norse literary corpus. The reason for this, however, is not that vision literature and its topic was unknown, but rather the opposite; namely, that the content of vision literature was so much in the common domain and single motifs so conventional that it proves impossible to trace influences, which after all exist in some texts, back to specific visions. The theme of vision literature and the general impression it gave must to a considerable degree have been internalised among audiences, and an author or poet who has touched on the theme, has in all probability not had to consult a written source.’

sense. Instead, the acknowledgment of the *Visiones*' deep integration in medieval Norse-Icelandic culture means that one must adopt a more nuanced understanding of 'impact', as a phenomenon proceeding through a deeper engagement with its form and function.

My aim in this study is thus to arrive at a better understanding of how the genre was employed or adapted by Norse-Icelandic authors, a focus which must encompass *difference* as much as *sameness*. *Adapting* in this connection thus comprises imitation *and* variation – traits which reveal a creative process. My theoretical point of departure is the hypothesis that a cultural process of reinterpretation must have accompanied the genre's geographical journey to Western Scandinavia. Signs we will look for comprise firstly, localised variations of generic conventions, and secondly, structures and tendencies that associate them with each other as products of a common cultural environment.

The process I am describing is one that is as visible and important in different cultural scenarios today as it is with reference to medieval literature – be it in initiatives aimed at rendering Shakespearian drama 'accessible' to modern audiences or at imbuing a sporting event like the Olympic Games with a distinctly 'British' profile. But from a theoretical point of view, the discipline most advanced in describing such processes is Translation Studies. A key concept that has dominated this field of study over the past twenty years, and which encapsulates the tendency I am concerned with, is the so-called 'cultural turn'. This refers to the cultural adjustments entailed in translating a text from one language (and thus one culture) to another, whether classical, medieval or modern. The contributions of Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere have been particularly important in shaping this area of criticism.⁷² They have insisted that 'the demands of a culture' rather than linguistic accuracy represent the parameters by which 'faithfulness' in translation ought to be assessed. Regardless of historical period and geographical proximity, Bassnett and Lefevere have argued, transferring meaning between cultures is tightly bound up with processes of rewriting and adaptation. For a text or literature to

⁷² S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere, 'Introduction', in *Translation, History and Culture*, eds. S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere (London, Pinter, 1995), pp. 2-13.

achieve ‘functional equivalence’ between two cultures, translators may indeed see the need to make profound authorial alterations or interferences. As Bassnett puts it, ‘translation is about wanting to cross boundaries and enter into new territory, whilst the study of translation involves mapping the journeys texts undertake’.⁷³

My principal focus in this thesis is to examine the paths along which the *Visiones* travelled once they found their way into the Northern literary landscape and the *cultural turns* involved in this process. A second theoretical impulse concerned with such translation processes in medieval culture which informs my approach to Norse adaptations of the Latin genre is Mary Carruthers’ work on the role of *memoria* in medieval processes of cultural transmission.⁷⁴ While her seminal study on this topic is mainly concerned with the mnemonic faculty and its training in scholastic milieus, her overarching argument regarding the role of memory in the dissemination of medieval art is a cultural one. Both on personal and communal levels, she argues, meaning in literature, art and knowledge derives from experience. ‘A work is not truly read until one has made it *part of oneself*’, Carruthers observes; ‘the writing must be transferred into memory, from graphemes on parchment or papyrus or paper to images written in one’s brain by emotion and sense’ (p. 11; emphasis added). With reference to communities rather than the individual, memory comprises that shared experience or heritage which lies at the heart of what we may call cultural identity. The activation of *memoria* in the encounter with narrative is thus a decisive precondition for the latter to yield meaning; this activation Carruthers terms ‘textualizing’, and she describes it further thus:

In the process of textualizing, the original work acquires commentary and gloss; this activity is not regarded as something other than the text, but is the mark of textualization itself. *Textus* also means ‘texture,’ the layers of meaning that attach as a text is woven into and through the historical and institutional fabric of a society. Such “socializing” of literature is the work of *memoria*, and this is as true of a literate as of an oral society. Whether the words come through the sensory gateways of the eyes or the ears, they must be processed and transformed in memory – they are made our own.

⁷³ S. Bassnett, ‘Observations on Translation and Literature’, in *Translating Literature*, ed. S. Bassnett (Woodbridge, D. S. Brewer, 1997), p. 11.

⁷⁴ M. J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2008).

This subtle description, I think, gives us an important sense of the nature of the process we earlier identified as the *cultural turn*. Adopting Carruthers' terminology, we could advance the following thesis relating to our own topic: in the course of adapting the foreign *Visio*-conventions to native contexts, Norse writers – regardless of the consciousness of this process – sought to locate and augment their resonances in the deeper layers of their cultural fabric.

The structure of the thesis follows in broad outline the stages of the *Visio* from the context of the vision, along the journey along interim stations, guides, aids and obstacles, towards the final spheres of good and evil. In Chapter II we will see how the process of adaptation described above is already apparent on a generic level, as the literary contexts into which *Visio* conventions have been integrated comprise a cross-section of medieval Norse literature itself. Chapters III and IV will attempt to assess points of negotiation between foreign and indigenous literary traditions structured around the motif of the journey to the otherworld; we will see that the hereafter as a literary space represented an arena for cultural introspection and continuity. The final chapter will consider different ways in which the visualised otherworld reflects important social attitudes of the region under scrutiny; conceptions of moral right and wrongdoing as well as the iconography of heaven will here represent the main points of analysis. Each part of this study thus investigates a different facet of the overarching process of literary *adaptation* I have defined above. With special reference to the conventions of the *Visiones*, I hope this study will contribute to our understanding of the ways in which traditional and Latin portrayals of the hereafter intersected in the Norse-Icelandic literary corpus during the first centuries after the conversion.

V. Scope of Primary Material and Criteria for Selection

Before the principal Old Norse texts drawn on for this study are introduced, a few remarks on the criteria for selection must be made. As noted previously, *Visiones* have been the subject of numerous surveys, some of which have included references to Old Norse texts.⁷⁵ Analyses of convention and variation across such a large body of texts are useful in their own right, and have played a significant role in introducing a little studied branch of literature to medieval scholarship over the past decades. But their strength is also a shortcoming as the wide format allows no room for depth in examining single textual witnesses and their differing cultural contexts. The Old Norse material I am concerned with in this thesis is formally and thematically diverse, and I wish to do justice to the distinctive merits of the various poetic and prose texts I examine. Accordingly, the present study does *not* aspire to offer a survey of Old Norse literary representations of the afterlife, or even a full account of possible *Visio*-echoes in the corpus. I have instead selected six works which will form the primary pool for my discussion; they comprise *Völuspá*, *Sólarljóð*, *Rannveigar leizla*, *Draumkvedet*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, and *Eiríks saga víðförla*, and are given a fuller introduction below. Further primary sources, such as the vision of Óláfr Tryggvason in Oddr Snorrason's history of the King, and a previously neglected *leizla* found among Magnús Grímsson and Jón Árnason's *Íslensk æfintyri*, will be drawn into the discussion at different points, but as they play a more peripheral role in the thesis they will be introduced in the main body of the thesis.

To give a strict set of defining characteristics for my primary material proves even more difficult than for the Latin genre. Wellendorf was only able to include one originally Old Norse text, *Rannveigar leizla*, in his study of Norse Christian vision literature. But this text on its own is certainly not representative of the Norse reception of the genre. Broadly defined, the criteria

⁷⁵ Dinzelsbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, for instance, includes *Rannveigar leizla*, and *Draumkvedet* in his table of 'Erlebte Visionen' (pp. 17, 19), and *Völuspá* in the category of 'Literarische Visionen und Traumvisionen religiöser Thematik' with the note, 'Heidnisch (unter Christlichem Einfluß?)' (p. 25); in his section on 'Germanic Mythology' H. R. Patch, *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (New York, Octagon Books, 1970), mentions what he perceived to be pagan elements in *Eiríks saga víðförla* and *Sólarljóð* (pp. 71-73); *Draumkvedet* is mentioned among Latin *Visiones* in the Chapter 'The Literature of Visions' (pp. 121-123).

characterising all primary narratives can be listed as follows:

1. all texts have their origin in medieval Western Scandinavia;
2. they describe eye-witness accounts of one or more realms conceived of as a post-mortem destinations;
3. these destinations are identified with moral qualities, that is with good or evil, right- or wrongdoing.

Although the majority of texts drawn on in this thesis in addition share the framework of a vision or dream, some describe what appears to be a corporeal experience. This is indeed the case for various texts traditionally counted among the *Visiones* too (see ch. 2). The title of the present thesis thus incorporates a more fluid definition of vision, comprising narratives explicitly defined as visionary as well as certain accounts where the entrance into the otherworld is envisioned in physical terms.

The transmission history of the primary texts spans the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Many of these are notoriously difficult to supply with a date of origin, but a review of central aspects of their material history and recent scholarly discussions will alert us to the major stages of development lying behind their modern editions. The texts are introduced in chronological order according to earliest material witness.

Völuspá

Völuspá ('The Sibyl's Prophecy'), one of the most studied works of the Norse literary corpus, survives in three medieval contexts, differing among themselves in important ways. Snorri Sturluson offers the earliest proof that such a poem existed; a great portion of his mythography *Gylfaginning* is based on the authority of this poem.⁷⁶ Snorri probably wrote his *Edda* over an extended period of time up until his death in 1241.⁷⁷ It seems likely that he did not work solely from memory, but had at least one written version of the poem to hand. Yet Snorri's is not the poem's earliest material witness, given that his work is not preserved in any copy

⁷⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes, 2nd ed. (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005).

⁷⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, pp. xiv-xv.

predating the fourteenth century. We first find *Völuspá* in the so-called *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda* (R), a vellum manuscript dated to 1270-1280 on palaeographic evidence.⁷⁸ This MS contains the twenty nine poems (ten mythological, nineteen heroic) that make up the core of the ‘Eddaic’ corpus, and *Völuspá* appears as the first in this collection. As it comprises a history of the Norse mythological world from creation to doom and rebirth, this poem provides a form of index to the narratives that follow in the codex.

The R version of the poem is generally accepted as superior, but a second version is found in the diverse fourteenth-century compilation known as *Hauksbók* (H). *Völuspá* is one of the few pieces within this codex that appear to postdate the collector Haukr Erlendsson’s death (1334), albeit not by more than two or three decades. The H version appears less coherent structurally than R; the story of Baldr’s death, for example, which in R (sts. 28-33) represents the structurally central event of the poem and of the cosmic history it unveils, is absent in H, and thus a major factor behind the story of the gods’ demise is left unaccounted for. In other places, moreover, H adds details which scholars have dismissed as late Christian influences;⁷⁹ most conspicuous is a quatrain preceding what in R and H is the final stanza, announcing the coming of ‘hinn ríki ... sá er öllu ræðr’ (‘the supreme one ... who governs everything’). Ursula Dronke, whose edition and study of the poem is the most meticulous and thought-provoking, uses R as basis, adopting certain readings from H, but no stanzas that only occur in that MS.

Regarding the poem’s history before Snorri used it very little can be said with certainty. Many questions concerning the circumstances surrounding its origin remain open, among them the identity, religious background, and nationality of the author or authors.⁸⁰ A possible timeline behind the poem’s earliest evolution set out by Dronke includes the following stages:

1. *Völuspá* was orally composed \pm 1000, with as structure that is fundamentally that

⁷⁸ Cf. *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, eds. P. Pulsiano et al. (New York, Garland, 1993), s.n. ‘Codex Regius’.

⁷⁹ See Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, pp. 87, 152-153.

⁸⁰ In a recent analysis, C. Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: the Gods of the Norsemen* (London, Continuum, 2011), pp. 165-168, challenges the predominant theory of Icelandic origin, placing the poem’s genesis in late tenth-century Norway.

of the R text.

2. A written text, *RI, was made, in which this structure was maintained, ± 1200.⁸¹

Dronke's assumption that the poem originated at some point during the conversion era represents broad scholarly consensus.⁸² At the heart of most arguments about its date is the apparent conflation in its figural palette of Old Norse myth and Christian imagery. If integral to the 'original' *Völuspá*, the Christian didactic images, which we will investigate in more detail in chapters II and V, would indicate that the poet was through some channel exposed to Christian concepts of afterlife punishment and reward – perhaps through missionary preaching, or travel abroad.

Further uncertainty surrounds the poem's form. If an *Urtyp* of *Völuspá* ever existed, was it an oral or written composition? Dronke's suggestion that *Völuspá*'s roots lie in oral poetry would seem to undercut the theory that it ever possessed a prototypical form. Views on 'textual integrity' would of course have differed from that of modern editors in a primarily oral environment, and concepts such as improvisation and variation played a greater role in the transmission of verses. We must in any case be open to the possibility that *Völuspá* may have undergone multiple phases of change in which material was added, discarded, reinterpreted or restructured between stages 1 and 2 in Dronke's timeline, as indeed seems to have been the case in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Rannveigar leizla

Rannveigar leizla ('The Vision of Rannveig') does not exist as an independent narrative, but is only found in connection with the biography of Guðmundr Arason (d. 1237), an Icelandic bishop and locally revered saint. Though politically controversial, Guðmundr seems to have been

⁸¹ Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, p. 63.

⁸² Cf. J. McKinnell, 'Völuspá and the Feast of Easter', *Alvissmál* 12 (2008), pp. 3-9; R. North, 'Völuspá and the Book of Revelation', in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn, Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003*, eds. R. Simek and J. Meurer (Bonn, Universität Bonn, 2003), pp. 408-409; Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, pp. 93-98; Sigurður Nordal ed. *Völuspá*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík, Helgafell, 1952), p. 178.

popular with broad segments of the Icelandic society. It was on one of his many travels across the country that he came into contact with Rannveig, an individual otherwise unknown to us, said to have lived in the Eastern Fjords at the close of the twelfth century.

The four extant versions of *Guðmundar saga* all date to the fourteenth century, but they build on an earlier saga composed shortly after the bishop's death, of which parts survive as *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* in *Sturlunga saga*.⁸³ While the story of Rannveig does not occur in *Prestssaga*, it features in all four *Vitae*; as Stefán Karlsson also assumes, this renders it likely that it figured also in the earliest biography.⁸⁴ The four extant versions of the *leizla* do not differ in the main line of the plot,⁸⁵ which may be summarised as follows: Rannveig, a priest's concubine, desires to see Guðmundr in order to tell him about a recent traumatic experience. She reports that she fell unconscious one morning and was approached by a band of demons who hauled her off towards the pit of hell. Accusing her of adulterating the priesthood, they prepared to throw her into the pit when three Northern saints entered the scene and led her to safety. These three chide her for her vanity, but then reward her with a striking vision of the realm of the blessed, in which the future home of Guðmundr is shown to her. The bishop, we are then told, was greatly affected by this report.

The youngest version of the saga, written by Abbot Arngrímr Brandsson (d. c. 1362), displays a few alterations in its retelling of *Rannveigar leizla* that indicate the account's changing status over time. In the oldest version, commonly designated version A, the vision is told at the chronological moment it occurred; there its biographical importance is primary and it serves as one of multiple phenomena contributing to convince the protagonist of his suitability for the office.⁸⁶ Arngrímr, in contrast, places the *leizla* as preamble to the biography together with

⁸³ For a concise analysis of the relationship between the earliest sagas of *Guðmundr*, see Stefán Karlsson, 'Guðmundar sögur biskups: Authorial Viewpoints and Methods', in *Stafkrókar: Ritgerðir eftir Stefán Karlsson gefnar út í tilefni af sjötugsafmæli hans 2. Desember 1998*, ed. Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2000), pp. 153-171.

⁸⁴ *Guðmundar saga*, p. clii.

⁸⁵ I will in the following refer to the oldest saga version, published by Stefán Karlsson as *Guðmundar saga A*, penned between 1330-1350.

⁸⁶ See C. Larrington, 'Leizla Rannveigar: Gender and Politics in the Otherworld Vision', *Medium Ævum* 64 (1995),

selected other miracle stories.⁸⁷ Together, these form an independent collection of miracles which may well have circulated detached from the saga itself as Guðmundr's saintly status became firmly established.⁸⁸ This repositioning also suggests that Rannveig's vision came to be considered one of the strongest testimonies to his sainthood. It is worth noting, moreover, that Arngrímr adds certain details which make Rannveig's story appear more like other medieval *Visiones*; the demons, for example, joke that they will sing a dirge over her body when she is in the hell-pit, an echo of a similar pronouncement in *Duggals leizla*.⁸⁹ On the whole, Arngrímr displays a greater penchant for rhetorical ornamentation, which contributes to give his version a distinctly clerical colouring; this stands in contrast to the simplistic narrative style characterising the laywoman's account in version A.

Eiríks saga víðfjara

A large number of extant written copies of *Eiríks saga víðfjara* bear witness to this saga's enduring popularity from medieval to modern times. Its plot is linear and seemingly uncomplicated in theme. It tells the story of a prince, son of the first king of Þrandheimr, who one yule declares that he wishes to set out and find a place named *Ódáinsakur* ('Land of the Undead'). Travelling southwards, he befriends a Danish man by the same name and status as himself before proceeding to Constantinople. Over the course of several years at his court, the King teaches Eiríkr about theology, history and geography, which results in his conversion to the Christian faith. Eventually, the Norwegian prince reaffirms his commitment to the oath he took and journeys further eastwards. On the outermost fringes of the known world he arrives at a paradisaical realm guarded by a monster on a stone bridge. Undeterred, Eiríkr approaches the dragon and gains entry to the land beyond by jumping into its open maw. The landscape within is

p. 236.

⁸⁷ *Guðmundar saga D* is printed in *Biskupa sögur*, eds. Jón Sigurðsson and Gudbrand Vigfusson, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, Hið Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1858-1878), Vol II.

⁸⁸ Although he was never officially canonised, his bones were translated in 1315, he is referred to as 'sanctus' in sources from the fourteenth century onwards; cf. *KLNM*, s.n. 'Guðmundr góði Arason'.

⁸⁹ See Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 302-306.

pastoral and beautiful, and he continues his journey until he reaches a curious tower. Within, he finds a banquet decked in his honour, and that same night, as Eiríkr sleeps, his guardian angel appears in a dream, offering him the choice to remain in that land or return to the North. The dreamer, expressing his wish to bring Christianity to his people in the North, chooses the latter. Soon after he embarks on the home journey, and we are told he departed this world ten years later while at prayer in his home country.

We know nothing about this brief saga's author apart from what the work itself can tell us. He was evidently familiar with Christian encyclopaedic writing and interested in the conventions of various native and foreign genres. Ever since it was first edited in C. C. Rafn's *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* ('Legendary Sagas of the North'),⁹⁰ critics have struggled to identify the saga with any of the generic rubrics commonly applied to Old Norse prose. Recent commentators tend to describe it as a 'liminal' text – partly related to genres like legendary sagas, romance, and *Visiones*, but essentially unorthodox in structure and theme.⁹¹ When the saga was composed is uncertain, but the early fourteenth-century approximate proposed by Helle Jensen seems likely, based on the different trails of copies evident in the second half of that century.⁹²

Recent critics have been particularly interested in the saga's material history, and have observed that it survives in several medieval codices with distinct thematic profiles; especially interesting in this respect are AM 657 c, 4to (c. 1350-1400) and GKS 1005, folio, better known as *Flateyjarbók* (c. 1387-95). In the first, *Esv* is embedded in a group of religious works including *Mikjál's saga*, *Mariú saga egipzku*, and *Guðmundar saga*. As Elise Kleivane has recently argued,⁹³ this environment, if drawn into our reading, could help augment *Esv*'s devotional themes and in turn suggest one angle from which contemporary audiences

⁹⁰ *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum*, C. C. Rafn, 3 vols. (Copenhagen, Popp, 1829-1830).

⁹¹ S. A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1991), p. 31; cf. E. A. Rowe's discussion of the saga's genre in *The Development of Flateyjarbók* (Odense, UP of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 152-156.

⁹² H. Jensen ed., *Esv*, pp. xli-xlv.

⁹³ E. Kleivane, 'Sagaene om Oddr og Eiríkr', in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed*, eds. A. Ney et al., (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Forlag, 2009), pp. 27-48.

approached the narrative. In the second MS, *Flateyjarbók*, the themes at play in the texts surrounding *Esv* are chiefly historiographic. It is preceded by a genealogical poem describing the settlement of Norway (*Hversu Noregr byggðist*), and followed by the substantial sagas of Óláfr I and II and the story of Western Scandinavian conversion contained therein. As Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has shown on several occasions, this historiographic context accentuates those aspects of *Esv* concerned with the theme of conversion and ideologies of kingship.⁹⁴

The observation that these very different codicological environments bring out different thematic aspects of the saga is in itself useful; but the notion entailed in both Kleivane's and Rowe's arguments, that environments shape or construct the saga's meaning, does the author and saga injustice. It is, in my view, more plausible to assume that *Esv* found its way into diverse thematic contexts because of the multi-faceted readings already circulating with the text rather than considering them constructs of the manuscript environments. I will not primarily be concerned with MSS contexts in my discussion of the saga's otherworld projections, but will base my reading on the assumption that the themes accentuated in the various textual environments transcend the saga's codicological situations.

Gísla saga Súrssonar

The anonymously authored saga of Gísli Súrsson bridges several subcategories of Icelandic saga writing. It centres on the circle of one kin-group and the conflicts arising between them, and is set, like the majority of *Íslendingasögur* ('Sagas of Icelanders'), in the latter half of the tenth century. The man at the heart of this narrative, Gísli, is an unusually complex protagonist, his most compelling gift being his ability to express his thoughts and emotions in poetry. In the saga, his verses, like those of the contemporary court poets in the so-called *skáldasögur* ('Sagas of Skalds'), are quoted at the biographically appropriate places of the

⁹⁴ Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók: Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389*, ch. 4; E. A. Rowe, 'Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in Flateyjarbók', in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2-7 July 2000*, eds. G. Barnes and M. Clunies Ross (Sidney, University of Sidney, 2000), pp. 441-454.

narrative; thirty-seven verses are attributed to Gísli, and their recitation marks defining moments in the saga plot; among them we find the dream verses we will be concerned with. The greater portion of the saga concentrates on the lengthy period of Gísli's outlawry, delineating his perseverance amidst mounting pressure from his enemies. In view of this aspect of the plot, *Gísla saga* is also sometimes grouped in the sub-rubric *skógarmanna sögur* ('Sagas of the Outlawed'), together with, amongst others, *Grettis saga*.

The individuals at the heart of the narrative appear to have some foundation in reality, though references to them in Icelandic histories, e.g. *Landnámabók*, provide little more than genealogical information – much of which deviates from information given in the saga.⁹⁵ Legends probably circulated about Gísli over many generations before the saga as we now know it was written. Scholars are generally agreed that this happened in the thirteenth century,⁹⁶ although the earliest textual traces are of more recent date. From the fifteenth century two records survive, of which one is complete and used as the base text in the standard edition of Björn K. Þórólfson for Íslenzk fornrit.⁹⁷ A second full version, adding some material especially in the early parts of the saga, is only preserved in parchment from the eighteenth century; it appears to represent a copy from a fourteenth-century MS, the **Membrana regia deperdita*, which, as the name suggests, has since been lost.

A further set of questions surrounds Gísli's poetry. A number of discrepancies between poetry and prose in the saga have led Peter Foote and others to think that they are unlikely to have been part of one and the same creative process. In connection with the dreams that especially concern us the prose author, as we shall discuss in due course, imposes certain

⁹⁵ On the saga's historical setting see P. Foote, 'An Essay on the Saga of Gísli and its Icelandic Background', in *The Saga of Gísli*, trans. G. Johnston (London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1963), pp. 125-131.

⁹⁶ See Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 'Editing the Three Versions of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*', in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, eds. J. Quinn and E. Lethbridge (Odense, UP of Southern Denmark, 2010), p. 115; cf. Lethbridge, '*Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations', in the same volume; Foote, 'An Essay on the Saga of Gísli', pp. 123-130.

⁹⁷ The oldest MS, albeit fragmentary, is AM445 c I 4to, from the beginning of the fifteenth century. On the textual history of *Gísla saga*, see Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 'Editing the Three Versions of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*', pp. 105-122

interpretations not demanded by the verse and configures performance settings in artful ways. All this strengthens the impression that the prose has been, as it were, written ‘around’ pre-existing verse.⁹⁸ But how old may the poetry be? It is conceivable that verses from the purported historical context were preserved orally by generations of Icelanders together with stories about Gísli’s life. But commentators have been struck by the recognizably Christian tenor of several verses, especially, as we shall see, in those relating his afterlife dreams.⁹⁹ It is also noteworthy that no verse by Gísli has survived outside the saga context. A more likely scenario of origin is that one or several poets created these poetic sequences in later centuries based on legends surrounding the famed outlaw. To date, the most convincing suggestion is that advanced by Peter Foote and Gabriel Turville-Petre on the basis of rhetorical analyses; they see a relationship with skaldic poetry of the twelfth century,¹⁰⁰ the period in which traditional poetic conventions were first applied to Christian themes on a larger scale by poets such as Einarr Skúlason and Gamli kanóki.

Sólarljóð

Sólarljóð (‘The Song of the Sun’), an Icelandic poem in the eddaic metre *ljóðaháttur* (‘song metre’), only exists in parchment copies from the seventeenth century and later. As is the case for all texts in our primary corpus, author and date of composition are unknown. Early scholars held that *Sólarljóð* was either a conflation of different poems or corrupted in significant ways, and thus attempted to improve sense and structure by remodeling it.¹⁰¹ Following the

⁹⁸ On these features, see H. O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005), ch. 3.

⁹⁹ See e.g. G. Turville-Petre, ‘Gísli Súrsson and his Poetry’, in *Nine Norse Studies* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972), pp. 142 ff.; P. S. Langeslag, ‘The Dream Women of *Gísla Saga*’, *Scandinavian Studies* 81:1 (2009), pp. 51 ff.

¹⁰⁰ Foote, ‘An Essay on the Saga of Gísli’, pp. 112-119; cf. the comments by Turville-Petre, ‘Gísli Súrsson and his poetry’, pp. 148-153.

¹⁰¹ See F. York Powell and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1883), Vol. I, pp. 203-204; S. Bugge, ‘Mythologiske Oplysninger til Draumkvædi’, *Norsk Tidsskrift for Videnskap og Literatur* (1855), p. 102; H. Falk, ‘Sólarljóð’, *Videnskabselskabets skrifter* 2 (Oslo, J. Dybwad, 1914), pp. 2-4.

penetrating studies by Fredrik Paasche and Bjarne Fidjestøl in the 1940s and 70s,¹⁰² *Sólarljóð* is now generally considered a structurally coherent piece. However, displaying as it does a collage of literary conventions and religious imagery, it is still very much a matter of debate where its inner logic or structural unity lies.

Five short moral fables initiate the narrative; these illustrate the vices of murder (sts. 1-7), trust in fortune (8-9), lust (10-14), pride (15-18), and deceit (19-24). After seven counsels concerning integrity in faith and worldly affairs (25-32), the speaker turns the narrative focus to himself, describing a situation in the past where his carefree and life-affirming existence was suddenly muted by the prospect of death. In a series of seven stanzas at the poem's centre, each headed by the declaration 'Sól ek sá' ('I saw the sun') (39-45), the narrator retraces the moments of his death and rebirth into another existence. The ensuing section, showing clear affinities with the *Visio*-tradition, contains a series of impressions of torments and pleasures in the hereafter (53-75). In the last two stanzas of the poem, the speaker again addresses his interlocutor, revealing himself to be his father, and envisioning a future reunion and state of joy (81-82).

In similar fashion to *Esv*, *Sólarljóð* is embedded in textual environments whose themes and dynamics augment certain aspects of its theme and composition. Among the five MSS from the seventeenth century, three contain the poem's 82 stanzas in full,¹⁰³ while two are fragmentary.¹⁰⁴ In the seventeenth century, a legend circulated in Iceland ascribing the poem to Sæmundr fróði (d. c. 1133);¹⁰⁵ due to this alleged autobiographical nature of the poem, several collections of Eddaic poems – which on the whole were attributed to that Icelandic scholar – commence with this text (e.g. Holm papp 15 8vo; Lbs 1562 4to). Larrington and Robinson note that 32 of the copies containing the entire or parts of *Sólarljóð* also contain the quasi-Eddaic

¹⁰² See F. Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom: Studier i norrøn middelalder* (Oslo, Aschehoug, 1948); B. Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð: Tyding og tolkningsgrunnlag* (Bergen, Universitetsforlaget, 1979).

¹⁰³ AM 166b 8o; AM 738 4o; Holm papp 15 8o. Carolyne Larrington and Peter Robinson use AM 166b 8o as the base MS. This is the oldest copy and is dated paleographically to c. 1650.

¹⁰⁴ AM 167 b 8o lacks sts. 27-55 through a lacuna of two missing pages; AM 155 a V 8o contains sts. 1-5.

¹⁰⁵ *Þjóðsagnabókin: sýnisbók íslenskra þjóðsagnasafna*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 3 vols. (Reykjavík, Almenna bókafélagið, 1972-1973), Vol. II, p. 160: 'Sæmundr anaðist 1133, en með hverjum atburðum höfum vér eigi heyrtr. Þó segja men, að hann þrídagaður hafi úr líkrekkjunni risið ok þá kveðið þá drápu, er hand Ljóða-Eddu er vön að fylgja og kallast Sólarljóð.'

poem *Svipdagsmál*. This poem tells of a young man who gains advice from his deceased mother in connection with a quest for an otherworldly bride; thus the two share the motif of a late parent returning from death to offer guidance to the son. As critics have often pointed out, moreover, the sage-like verses of *Sólarljóð*'s first section produce strong associations with other prominent examples of Old Norse wisdom poetry.¹⁰⁶ With this in mind it is interesting to note that one MS adjoins it with *Hávamál* ('Sayings of the High One') – an extensive narrative in the Codex Regius in which Óðinn pronounces gnomic statements of wisdom (AM 166b 8o). A second prominent example of the Old Norse gnomic tradition is *Hugsvinnsmál* ('Sayings of the Wise-minded One'), found adjacent to the visionary poem in AM 155 a V 8o). This is a thirteenth century translation of the *Disticha Catonis* (2nd or 3rd cent. AD); this, like *Sólarljóð*, is written in *ljóðaháttur*, is addressed from father to son, and touches on many of the same themes of honesty, humility, and trust in divine providence. These contexts suggest that *Sólarljóð*'s story was, at least in the seventeenth century, seen as bridging mythic and Christian narratives on the themes of privileged wisdom and life after death.

Though we possess no means to prove when this poem was composed, some of these generic affinities speak in support of a medieval origin. Its devotional content and adaptation of *Visio*-conventions especially have led critics to assume a date before 1500. In the first comprehensive edition of Norse-Icelandic skaldic verse, Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, it was placed under the rubric 'digt fra det 12. årh.' ('poems of the twelfth century').¹⁰⁷ *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, the project currently reediting the entire corpus, allocates it to 'Poetry of the Thirteenth Century'. Fidjestøl tended to a later date,

¹⁰⁶ A relationship most recently examined by B. Schorn, 'Eddic Poetry for a New Era: Tradition and Innovation in *Sólarljóð* and *Hugsvinnsmál*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011), pp. 131-150; compare also A. Baumgartner, *Nordische Fahrten: Island und die Faröer* (Freiburg, Herder-sche Verlagshandlung, 1889), p. 240; Falk, 'Sólarljóð', pp. 1-12; Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 205; Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, pp. 34, 58; F. Amory, 'Norse-Christian Syncretism and Interpretation Christiana in *Sólarljóð*', *Gripla* 7 (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1990), p. 265; Njörður Njarðvík, *Sólarljóð*, p. 172; M. Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2005), p. 218; C. Larrington, 'Freyja and the Organ-Stool: Neo-Paganism in *Sólarljóð*', in *Germanisches Altertum und christliches Mittelalter*, eds. B. Broyanyi and T. Krömmelbein (Hamburg, Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2001), p. 180.

¹⁰⁷ *Sólarljóð*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald* B:I.

perhaps the fourteenth century or later.¹⁰⁸ It is of course not inconceivable that a poet in the seventeenth century could have employed a traditional metre and imitated the style and content of his medieval ancestors, but, together with previous critics, I regard this as unlikely. I hope that my comments of the poem may highlight rhetorical and theological aspects which would allow us to place it more firmly in the thirteenth-century setting proposed by the most recent editors.¹⁰⁹

Draumkvedet

The Norwegian ballad known as *Draumkvedet* ('The Dream Poem'), number B31 in the recorded *Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad* (TSB),¹¹⁰ is the product of a transmission history more convoluted perhaps than any other encountered in this section. Materially, it is by far the youngest, with written records only extending back to the 1840s. In common with many other Norwegian ballads, *Draumkvedet* was recorded in the southern region of Telemark and at a time when scholarly and popular interest in cultural reflexes from the country's medieval past was at its most intense.¹¹¹ Many of these ballads are clearly based on characters and legends from the Middle Ages. Olav Solberg, in a recent article on Scandinavian ballad traditions, emphasises the 'remarkably stable and long-lived' nature of the ballad genre from its inception in the late thirteenth century into the nineteenth century.¹¹² Thus, up to the nineteenth century, people sang about medieval Norwegian kings (e.g. TSB C11), the court of Charlemagne (TSB E29), saints (TSB B16), miracles (TSB B23) and political controversies (TSB C22). The same melodies were often used for different narratives, and none of the tunes associated with

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Larrington and Robinson eds., *Sólarljóð*, p. 288.

¹¹⁰ B. R. Jonsson et al., *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad* (Stockholm, Svensk visarkiv, 1978). Hereafter abbreviated TSB.

¹¹¹ Around this time, Ivar Aasen began his linguistic studies of Norwegian dialects which led to the establishment of a 'national vernacular' (*Landsmaal*) strongly oriented towards Old Norse in grammatical structure as a second official written form of Norwegian alongside Danish. P. A. Munch refuelled scholarly and popular interest in medieval Western Scandinavia up until the Kalmar union with his monumental eight-volume history entitled *Det norske Folks Historie*.

¹¹² O. Solberg, 'The Scandinavian Medieval Ballad – from Oral Tradition to Written Texts – and Back Again', in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. E. Mundal and J. Wellendorf (Copenhagen, Musum Tusculanum Press, 2008), p. 131

Draumkvedet appear to have been unique to this ballad. In terms of vocabulary and grammar, the ballad contains several archaic traits; it is reported that many of the ballad's words and expressions were not familiar to those who performed it to nineteenth-century collectors.¹¹³

An unusual characteristic of *Draumkvedet*'s transmission is that it was recorded in a large number of fragments but in only a few coherent ballad narratives. Further difficulties arise from the fact that material recognizable as *Draumkvedet* is in several instances interspersed with seemingly unrelated single stanzas or stanza groups.¹¹⁴ The lack of correspondence across versions, moreover, means that it is impossible to filter out a core sequence of stanzas or pronounce any opinion on what is or is not 'genuine' *Draumkvedet*-material. Fluidity and fragmentation is of course what we would expect in connection with oral literature, though critics have not always been prepared to accept this condition. At the turn of the twentieth century, the widely read scholar Moltke Moe attempted to solve the problem of the ballad's perceived imperfect state by creatively assembling a *medievalistic* prototype; the result, a 52-stanza conflation of numerous variants and creative additions, arranged to match medieval *Visiones*, is still the version introduced to the general public in anthologies, and some critics still employ it as basis for their commentary.¹¹⁵

The general scholarly trend, however, especially in the wake of Michael Barnes' work on the ballad in the 1970s, has moved towards a reappraisal of the original nineteenth century copies. To avoid too narrow or wide a focus for my discussion, I base my analysis on the 9 full versions and 29 individual stanzas (all in all 169 stanzas) printed by Michael Barnes in his 1974 edition *Draumkvæde: An edition and study*.¹¹⁶ In the following chapters, when reference is made to *Draumkvedet*, it is thus to this extended corpus of variants. Between them the stanzas in this corpus paint a sequence of scenes which may be summarised as follows: a young man by the

¹¹³ See Barnes ed., *Draumkvæde*, p. 102.

¹¹⁴ See Ibid., p. 73 and note 326

¹¹⁵ Cf. Mæhle, *Diktatarar på leiting*, p. 17. A recent anthology for non-specialists containing Moe's version is G. Steinsland, *Draumkvedet og tekster fra norrøn middelalder* (Oslo, De norske bokklubbene, 2004).

¹¹⁶ A fuller collection of 50 variants recorded between 1842 and 1914 can be accessed on the University of Oslo's digital ballad archive (accessed 01.10.2011): <<http://www.dokpro.no/ballader/lister/tsb-titler/variantar-b031.html>>.

name of Olav has been asleep for thirteen days, and tells about the dreams he had at the local church; in them he travelled through inhospitable landscapes which tore his body and cloak; as part of the journey he crossed a bridge guarded by several animals (a serpent, ox, hound); he saw numerous people enduring punishment for earthly offences; he came to understand how charity in this world would provide aid on the journey through the hereafter; he was guided by the Virgin Mary to a location where souls are judged by St. Michael, and there he saw Christ and the Devil charging against each other with their respective forces.

In view of the ballad's recent textual nature, theme and style represent the best indicators of the ballad's age. Questions of dating and authorship were long the chief subject of critical engagements with the poem, and suggestions have ranged anywhere between the turn of the fifth to the eighteenth centuries.¹¹⁷ As the disparate results show, this scholarly debate produced little but subjective estimates, and Barnes' sharp criticism of the greater part of it was not entirely unjustified. Perhaps the most interesting theory about the ballad's origin since then is that put forward by Peter Dinzlacher, who suggests that it, like most *Visiones*, may originally have been a prose account, from which a ballad tradition developed over time.¹¹⁸ In a recent article, moreover, Olav Solberg has given new support to the theory of *Draumkvedet*'s medieval origin by asserting that this and other prominent Norwegian ballads of medievalistic theme and content may well have existed in written forms at various stages of their transmission; he points out that one of the nineteenth-century performers of the ballad recalled that her father in her childhood owned recordings that were since lost.¹¹⁹ Barnes himself deems it likely that some form of *Draumkvedet* existed 'at least in the sixteenth century', an assumption based chiefly on distinctly Catholic imagery and conceptions in the ballad's description of the hereafter; this estimate corroborates with the greater part of scholarly opinion which traces its roots somewhere between

¹¹⁷ For overviews of *Draumkvedet* scholarship on this topic, see Barnes ed., *Draumkvæde*, Section 2, and his earlier article "'Draumkvæde' – How Old Is It?", *Scandinavica* 11 (1972), 85-105. Compare also O. Bø's overview entitled 'Det vi veit og det vi ikkje veit om Draumkvedet', in *Draumkvedet: Telemark Historie* 16, ed. Ø. Gulliksen (Bø, Telemark historielag, 1995), pp. 21-33.

¹¹⁸ See P. Dinzlacher, 'Zur Entstehung von *Draumkvæde*', *Skandinavistik* 10:2 (1980), pp. 89-96.

¹¹⁹ O. Solberg, "'Paa gammelt Maal og paa Pergament': Har det funnest ein skriftleg norsk balladetradisjon?", *Maal og minne* 2 (2011), p. 76.

c. 1250-1550,¹²⁰ a time-frame which to me seems broad enough to be plausible.

¹²⁰ Å. G. Blom, *Ballader og legender: Fra norsk middelalderdiktning* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1971), 270-271; B. R. Johnsson, 'Om Draumkvæde och dess datering', in *Smlen: Årsbok för vis- och folkmusikforskning 1994-1995* (1996), pp. 9-153; Bø, 'Det vi veit', pp. 21-33.

II Contexts of Vision

This Chapter will be concerned with the diverse literary settings in which *Visio* conventions can be identified within the broader literary corpus of medieval Norway and Iceland. The aspects of setting we will examine comprise features of genre and plot – the range of literary genres in which afterlife visions occur, and the stories of which they form part. The Norse contexts of vision constitute an important point of investigation in our study because they highlight one of the main distinctions between our primary texts and the Latin mother tradition. For whereas the Latin visionaries and their experiences adhere to conventional didactic frames of interpretation, our corpus of texts displays a great degree of originality and diversity both with reference to the protagonists and the types of narratives in which their afterlife visions are embedded.

We do not know for certain in what condition Latin *Visiones* reached Scandinavia. In all likelihood, accounts such as the *Visio Pauli*, the *Visio Tundali*, or the *Visio Gunthelmi* did not circulate in isolation, but within larger compendia comprising generically related texts and other forms of Christian didactic literature.¹ What seems clear, moreover, is that they found their way to the North in *Latin* redactions, and that each *Visio* took the form of a *self-contained narrative*; we know that even *Visiones* that were originally part of larger narrative settings, such as that of Furseus originally recounted within his *Vita*, or that of Drythelm in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, circulated most widely detached from these larger narratives.² Over time, Latin *Visiones* found their way into vernacular languages and new literary forms in other parts of Europe too. In English MSS from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, for example, verse translations can be found of the *Visio Pauli*, the *Visio Tundali*, *St. Patrick's Purgatory* and other texts. Yet, even if vernacularised and versified, these represent relatively pragmatic adaptations with few

¹ In his discussion of the Norse translations and their relationship with Latin redactions, Wellendorf identifies a probable source only in the case of *Gundelinus leizla*, which he asserts 'må enten have været fra en tekst af Vincent af Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* eller en nært beslægtet tekst'; see. *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 275, and 253-274.

² Exceptions to this are the visions contained in Gregory the Great's *Dialogi*, which are translated as part of the treatise in all the surviving medieval MSS; cf. Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 149-151.

significant signs of major creative additions or alterations.³ This background is important to bear in mind as we turn to the Norse corpus, for it renders the fact that *Visio* conventions may be traced across a wide range of genres in itself significant: we will consider reflexes of the Latin traditions across Norse works of hagiography and different subcategories of saga literature, in skaldic verse, eddaic poetry, and ballad literature, and in so doing arrive at a sample of the literary landscape of medieval Western Scandinavia. As it is without precedent in the Latin tradition, this manifest variety of contexts will prompt important questions relating to the distinctive conditions behind the Norse reception of the genre.

Different genres embody differing paradigms of narrative convention, and so the range of generic contexts entails changing dynamics between the topoi of *Visiones* and those governing the various generic settings into which they are integrated. This dynamic comes to the fore most forcefully in the narratives framing visionary experiences, in contexts of time, space, and social milieus. A number of the Norse-Icelandic visionaries we will encounter will prove unconventional compared with their counterparts in the *Visiones*. While it is true that the source tradition too is notable for its socially diverse range of visionaries,⁴ figures such as Rannveig of *Rannveigar leizla*, Olav of *Draumkvedet*, and the Völva of *Völuspá* are to a large part conditioned by the distinct generic spaces they inhabit, and so represent quite unique types of visionaries seen from the perspective of the Latin genre.

We will begin our discussion of generic and narrative contexts with *Rannveigar leizla*, the text which formally conforms most closely to the conventions of the Latin genre, but which features at its centre a persona imbued with singular credentials of authority. We will then turn to

³ On this body of texts, see R. Easting, *Visions of the Other World in Middle English* (Woodbridge, D. S. Brewer, 1997).

⁴ One of the most striking characteristics of the *Visiones* is the social diversity of their protagonists; this democratic quality is in all likelihood an important factor behind their wide circulation and enduring popularity in medieval Europe. The medieval visionaries whose names and accounts travelled to medieval Scandinavia include the Irish nobleman and saint Furseus and his compatriot, the soldier Tundale. Drycthelm is a Northumbrian *pater familias*, while his fellow Englishman Gundelinus is a novice of the Cistercian order. Charles III was emperor of the Carolingian Empire at the time of his alleged vision; the apostle Paul requires no further introduction.

one of the earliest Norse Kings' Sagas and examine to what purpose the *Visio* format is employed within Icelandic historiography. This leads us on to the genre of the Old Norse Family Saga and to Gísli Súrsson who brings a new, psychological dimension to the interplay between visionary and her or his prospects of the afterlife. Subsequently we will turn our attention to two visions in eddaic metre, *Völuspá* and *Sólarljóð*, in whose frameworks we observe Christian conventions negotiating with indigenous forms of prophecy and wisdom poetry. *Draumkvedet* will next present us with a *Visio* in ballad form, a fusion with significant implications with regard to the conception of the visionary and the story he has to tell. In *Eiríks saga víðförla*, the final text to be discussed in this chapter, we will find a *Visio* adapted to the structure of a quest of mythic proportions as the prehistoric prince Eiríkr vows to discover a legendary 'Land of the Undead'.

I. Hagiographic Visions

Rannveig's Testimony

Based on the chronology of the saga about Guðmundr Arason, Rannveig's vision appears to have taken place in 1197-8, six years before his investiture as bishop of Hólar. 'Sa at burðr', we read, 'uarþ enn um uettriN austr ifiördum. at þar fell kona idá(.) Hon het Rannueig' ('It occurred ... in the winter in the Eastern Fjords, that a woman fell unconscious. Her name was Rannveig').⁵ The biographer introduces this *atburðr* ('event') in a historically objective way, very much like the regularly interspersed chapters headed *Tiðende* ('news') – summaries of political and meteorological news that situate the bishop's life in his time.⁶ Like all the *jartegnir* ('miracles') in the saga, Rannveig's vision is presented as a historical occurrence. And the remarkable thing about Rannveig and her importance in the *Life* of Guðmundr is precisely this down-to-earth aspect of her persona and experience. For she is in no apparent way uniquely suited to become a mediator of divine realities and such a central influence in the life of Guðmundr.

⁵ *Rannveigar leizla*, ch. 58, ll. 1-2.

⁶ Cf. *Guðmundar saga*, ed. Stefán Karlsson, chs. 50 and 61.

Rannveig's most notable characteristic is that she is a priest's concubine at the time of her vision, and had been in relationships with other priests in the past: 'Hon fylgðe preste þeim er Auðun het. Hon hafðe fylgt öðrum preste aðr' ('She was attached to a priest called Auðun, and had been with another priest before') (ch. 58, ll. 2-4). It is this circumstance that brings about her afterlife vision; upon falling unconscious, the hagiographer quotes her as saying, a pack of demons come towards her and rush off with her through a rough, inhospitable landscape: 'hon. sagðe koma at ser fiandr með ogn mikille. ok gripo ihendr henne. ok leiddo hana hart ok öþyr' milega þar er voro hraun ok klungr' ('grabbed hold of her hand and led her roughly and recklessly to a region of wasteland and brambles') (ll. 24-26). Later in the vision, as the demons carry her towards the pit of hell, they charge her for having adulterated ('saugat') the clerical office, an offence which she must now repay by 'serving' ('þiona') them (ll. 39-41).

This context evokes that of Tundale in that it centres on a moral crisis as occasion for the visionary experience. As in Tundale's case, receiving a vision of the hereafter is not in the first instance a privilege, but a form of divine injunction. Although the offence Rannveig is accused of may seem severe considering the official stringency of the Catholic Church in this respect after the Gregorian Reform, there is evidence to suggest that it was likely less gravely looked upon by the spiritual elite of twelfth and thirteenth-century Iceland. An episode described later in the saga demonstrates that the issue of extramarital relationships in general created some friction, for Guðmundr is said to have helped a woman by the name of Þyriðr who had been excommunicated by Bishop Páll on the grounds of an extramarital liaison (Ch. 83, ll. 12-13). But as far as the more general opinion among clerics is concerned, reliable historical sources bear witness to a fairly liberal attitude. In an article devoted to the subject, Jenny Jochens has shown that the institutional imperative of clerical celibacy was, in medieval Iceland, more honoured in the breach than in the observance.⁷ Of the thirteen bishops in the two Icelandic sees between 1056-1237, seven were themselves married. In fact, Jochens notes that she has not identified a

⁷ J. M. Jochens, 'The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland', *Journal of Medieval History* 6:4 (1980), pp. 377-392.

single priest in the sagas who is said to have practiced sexual abstinence in this period. Finally, letters from the archdiocese of Niðarós in Norway to the Icelandic bishops written in the 1170s and 80s – the alleged period of Rannveig’s existence – curtly criticise the Icelandic clergy for marital and extramarital affairs, thus testifying to their common-place nature. Jochens claims that this was the status quo until at least the latter half of the thirteenth century (388).

Though the phenomenon may have been particularly widespread in Iceland, romantic relationships between priests and lay women represented something of a didactic stereotype also in other parts of Europe. On the ceiling of Vrå Church in northern Denmark, one of several moral vignettes illustrates a Bishop arm in arm with a woman as they approach the mouth of hell. Save for a mitre on the bishop’s head, neither of the two are clothed, and so the nature of their liaison is immediately apparent. Inside the hell-maw, moreover, one spots numerous other clerics of various ranks; a scroll of writing records their sorrow: ‘ve ve nobis quia in infernus sunt’ (‘pity, pity, because we are in hell’).⁸ All this serves to indicate that Rannveig’s situation cannot have been regarded as exceptional to medieval audiences of the saga; it may even be that the conventional nature of her relationship contributed to render her and her story plausible.

Nonetheless the Norse visionary represents a novelty against the backdrop of the Latin genre. For even though numerous medieval *Visiones* are – as Carolyne Larrington has shown – ascribed to female protagonists,⁹ they are typically noted for their purity of life and spiritual integrity, and so do not represent a tradition with which Rannveig can easily be associated. A point in case is Guibert of Nogent’s account of his mother’s visionary experiences, recorded in his early twelfth-century memoirs.¹⁰ Her vision is itself unusual compared to those of most male visionaries in that it revolves around the theme of family relations: on the outer fringes of hell she glimpses her late husband suffering purgation on account of a child he fathered outside of

⁸ Reproduced and discussed in Haastrup et al., *Danske Kalkmalerier*, Vol. 6, p. 71.

⁹ Larrington, ‘*Leizla Rannveigar*’, especially pp. 241-244.

¹⁰ Guibert de Nogent, *Histoire De Sa Vie*, ed. G. Bourgin (Paris, Librairie Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1907), pp. 70-74.

wedlock.¹¹ This child, in the vision pictured beside him, weeping violently, stirs her pity and she resolves upon awaking to enter into a convent and devote her life in prayer for her husband and the child's salvation. The important point to stress for our purposes is the fact that Guibert, to support his mother's credibility as visionary, extols her Christian qualities, characterising her as 'chaste' ('castus'), 'modest' ('modestus') and 'exceedingly devout' ('timoratissimam') (p. 5), a person whose seriousness ('gravitas') deflected all kinds of earthly vanity ('totus vanitatis') (p. 7). Like Rannveig, Guibert's mother is a lay woman at the time of her vision, but unlike the Icelandic visionary she is authoritative as a visionary because of her flawless character (in addition, of course, to her familial ties with the reporter of the vision.)

What, then, invests Rannveig with special credibility and authority as a visionary? Larrington rightly observes that Rannveig's role in the saga must respond to some specific need for her involvement, and she highlights the fact that women play an important role in the saga both as witnesses of miracles and recipients of Guðmundr's aid and compassion.¹² In fact, the saint's involvement with the lay community at large represents a particularly important theme in the saga.

In this respect, Rannveig is symptomatic of a larger trend in Icelandic hagiographies of the time, which consistently posit members of the laity, male or female, as witnesses to saintly miracles and saint-makers. Noteworthy examples of such lay testimonies can be found not only in *Guðmundar saga* but equally in the sagas of Sts. Jón (d. 1121) and Þorklákr (d. 1198),¹³ where the most weighty voices of religious testimony similarly belong to the laity. As Ármann Jakobsson has remarked, there is an evident tendency in hagiographic literature of the time to

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 70-71.

¹² Larrington, 'Leizla Rannveigar', p. 236; on this theme see also J. A. Skórzewska, 'Female assistance in holiness: A few episodes from the life of Guðmundr Arason', in *Transformasjoner i vikingtid og norrøn middelalder* (Oslo, Unipub, 2006), 197-218.

¹³ Compare, for example, *Guðmundar saga*, ed. Stefán Karlsson, chs. 31, 36, 81, 113; the dream of Þórdís in *Jóns saga hins helga*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson et al., *Biskupa sögur*, eds. Peter Foote et al., 5 vols., Íslensk fornrit 15-19 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 2003), Vol. I:2, pp. 268-269; and the healing of Jódís in *Þorláks saga byskups yngri* C, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, in Vol. II, pp. 261-262 of the same edition.

draw ‘marginal people’ of the Icelandic society into the centre of the religious narrative.¹⁴ A Norse Life of St. Cecilia contains a record of a near-death vision which serves as a further example of this tendency in contemporary hagiography.¹⁵

The saga about the early Italian martyr survives in MSS from around 1400 and later. The record of the saint’s life is translated from a Latin *Vita*, but in the course of the text’s transmission two local miracle stories were appended to the biography. The events they describe are set historically around the time the first church was dedicated to the saint at Húsafell in the southern quarter of the island. This happened during Klængur Þorsteinson’s time as bishop of Skálholt (1152-1176),¹⁶ and her feast day (November 22nd) was officially adopted on a national level a few years later, in 1179.¹⁷

The appended miracles illustrate the saint’s patronage of her fledgling community of devotees in Iceland, and both concern laypeople otherwise unknown to us. In the first of them we meet a certain Þorgils, who, having suffered a severe injury to his foot, is miraculously healed in a vision. This occurred a few nights before the feast of St. Cecilia while he stayed at Húsafell with his friend Brandr Þórarinsson, the founder of the settlement.¹⁸ Although her feast was as at this point ‘eigi lögheilagr’ (‘not sacred according to law’), Brandr’s mother, Guðrún Óspaksdóttir, venerates her and encourages the ailing visitor too to observe its advent by fasting (p. 295, l. 5). He complies with her wish and experiences a remarkable dream that same night:

honum þotti .ii. illiligir menn koma at ser, tok annarr i haar honum, enn annarr um fotinn sara, ok kiptu honum or reckiunni, ok var honum miok illt vit. Þeir drogu hann ut, ok var myrkt uti, baro þeir hann stundum, en drogu stundum, ok foru illa vit hann. En hann bad þa eigi kvelia sig sva miok. Þeir kvoduz honum þangat skylldu koma, sem miklu væri verra, ok saugdu hann sinn mann vera.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Friend of the Meek: Later Miracles of a 12th-century Icelandic Saint’, in *The Making of Christian Myths in the Periphery of Latin Christendom*, ed. Lars Boje Mortensen (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), p. 145; on this theme, see also Ásdís Egilsdóttir’s article, ‘The Beginnings of Icelandic Hagiography’, pp. 121-134 in the same volume.

¹⁵ *Cecilíu saga meyar*, ed. Unger, *Heilagra manna sögur*, Vol. I, pp. 294-96.

¹⁶ See M. Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400* (Brussels, Société des Bollandistes, 1994), pp. 88-89.

¹⁷ Mentioned in *Guðmundar saga*, ed. Stefán Karlsson, ch. 14.

¹⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), p. 227.

¹⁹ *Cecilíu saga*, ed. Unger, p. 295, ll. 18-24: ‘he thought he saw two evil-looking men approach him; one took hold of his hair, the other of the sore foot, and thus they dragged him off the bed. This caused him great pain. They pulled

At this point, Þorgils calls on God and numerous saints, but the demons add further injury, eventually even reaching into his breast for his heart. A great light then emerges and the visionary sees

kona ung ok frid, ok hafdi dregil um hófud, ok fell fagrt haar aa herdar henni. Hun tok um handlegg honum, þa stucku fiandr aa brótt, en hun tok hiarta hans or hendi annars þeira ok lagdi aprt i briost honum, ok fylgdi honum sidan til rekiu sinnar ok mællti vit hann: “Illa vartu staddr, Þorgils, sagdi hun, þer er þetta draumr, en þo er sva sem þu vakir; þu ert ordinn fyrir reidi guds af galeysi þinu, því vartu selldr diöflum, at þer var synt, hvers þu vart verdr ... En ek sa aumr aa þer, af því ath þu fastadir fyrir dagh minn ok hetz a mik til fulltings.”²⁰

Þorgils’ afterlife vision develops into a miracle of healing before he enters any recognisable spheres of the otherworld. When he awakes his body is restored. Unsurprisingly, this type of miracle constitutes by far the most common in Norse-Icelandic hagiography.²¹ In a very palpable way miracles of physical restoration visualise the spiritual restoration entailed in the described encounters with the divine. The devotional symbolism of Cecilía retrieving Þorgils’ heart augments this point.

As in Rannveig’s case, the format here – even if it does not develop into a full tour of hell and heaven – is that of an afterlife vision, a genre as we have noted characteristic for the social diversity of its protagonists. Within their hagiographic contexts, Þorgils and Rannveig play comparable roles. They endorse the protagonists of hagiographies in which they appear, and it appears that their Everywoman and Everyman qualities (none of them are linked to patronymics) are purposefully designed to give popular weight to their testimonies. Outside of their narrative setting they thus also convey something about contemporary Icelandic social attitudes. For by embracing a spiritually ‘flawed’ visionary like Rannveig, the hagiographers giving weight to her

him out, and it was dark. At times they carried him, at other they pulled him in a reckless manner. He pleaded that they should not cause so much pain, but they said he would be taken to a much worse place, and told him to behave like a man.’

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 295, l. 30-296, l. 1: ‘a woman, young and lovely. She wore a ribbon around her head, and beautiful hair fell down on her shoulders. She took hold of his wrist, and the demons ran off, but she took his heart from one of them and placed it back in his breast before accompanying him back to his bed. She said: “You were placed in a dire situation, Þorgils, you who dream this, though it is as if you were awake; you have caused God’s anger because of your heedlessness; and you were released to the devils so that you should see of what you were deserving ... But I took pity on you, because you fasted before my feast day and appealed to me for help”’.

²¹ Cf. Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, pp. 236-237.

testimony also demonstrate a conviction that divine favour extends to all strata of the social fabric, and that the virtue of the community at large eclipses that of its weaker links. And so, the characteristic that distinguishes Rannveig from the visionaries of the Latin source genre is at the same time one belonging to a Norse hagiographic tradition and mentality, where a marginal religious witness may attain the authority of an evangelist.

The next episode, also this part of larger biographical narrative, is ascribed to the Western Scandinavian proto-evangelist, Óláfr I Tryggvason. Within the earliest life of the monarch commonly attributed with introducing Christianity to this region, the episode in question is presented as the moment of religious awakening that sparked not only his own conversion, but the entire political enterprise that ensued.

The Conversion of Óláfr Tryggvason

Óláfr Tryggvason, who reigned between 995-1000, is the subject of a King's Saga written towards the close of the twelfth century by Oddr Snorrason, a Benedictine monk at Þingeyrar in Northern Iceland.²² Though originally composed in Latin, the saga comes down to us only in two fragmentary vernacular translations from around a century later. Precisely which motives may have occasioned this substantial biography of the king is still a matter of debate. Deeply coloured by hagiographic conventions, Oddr's saga bears strong witness to the important influence of Christian didactic writing on early Norse literary culture. This, together with the choice to compose the biography in Latin may, as some critics have suggested, have been bound up with an ambition to raise the King's religious profile internationally with the aim of effecting his canonisation.²³ In the early chapters of the saga which cover the period of the prince's exile in Russia, Oddr seeks to create a bridge between two aspects of Óláfr's character – the youthful,

²² Oddr Snorrason, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ed. Ólafur Halldórson, *Færeyinga saga, Óláfs saga Odds*, Íslenzk fornrit 25 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 2006).

²³ Cf. for example L. Lönnroth, 'The Baptist and the Saint: Odd Snorrason's View of the Two King Olavs', in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, eds. M. Dallapiazza et al. (Trieste, Parnaso, 2000), pp. 256-264; J. Zernack, 'Vorläufer und Vollender: Olaf Tryggvason und Olaf der Heilige im Geschichtsdenken des Oddr Snorrason Munkr', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 113 (1998), pp. 77-95.

heathen viking on the one hand, and the mature, religiously energetic missionary on the other. The seminal turning point in this development occurs in an afterlife vision which he reportedly experienced as a young man at the Russian court. In order to test its consequence in the narrative, we must consider more closely the biographical setting in which it is embedded.

As his learned biographer was likely aware, Óláfr's reputation was not entirely favourable among Continental commentators on Scandinavian conversion history. The eleventh-century German historian Adam of Bremen, referring to him by the epithet 'Craccaben', from the Old Norse for raven ('krákr') and bone ('beinn'), claims that Óláfr solicited magicians and trusted in the divination of birds.²⁴ As if implicitly responding to this kind of criticism, Oddr labours to position his subject in a new, typological light. In his prologue he draws a parallel between his subject and the messianic forerunner St. John the Baptist, arguing that Óláfr Tryggvason levelled the ground for his successor, St. Óláfr, and so laid the foundation for the Christian church in Western Scandinavia.²⁵

Already in his pagan childhood Óláfr is surrounded by tokens of saintliness. Oddr reports, for instance, that sorcerers ('spámenn') in Russia observed fetches ('hamingjur') attending the young prince, and that these exceeded in splendour anything of the kind they had witnessed before: 'aldri fyrr höfðu þeir sét né eins manns fylgjur bjartari né fegri' ('never before had they seen any person's fetches brighter or more beautiful than these') (p. 150). Reportedly, these spirits were so radiant that they lit up the entire eastern sky. As Paul Schach points out, Oddr here draws on a motif well known from Old Norse literature; often revealing themselves in dreams, *hamingjur* or *fylgjur* – guardian spirits in human or animal shape – tend to enter narratives in connection with formative moments in a person's life.²⁶ Indeed, this folkloric tradition explains why the local diviners are able to identify the phenomenon. Yet by giving them

²⁴ Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammurgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler (Hannover, Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917), Book II, ch. 40.

²⁵ Oddr, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ed. Ólafur Halldórson, pp. 125-126.

²⁶ P. Schach, 'Symbolic Dreams of Future Renown in Old Icelandic Literature', *Mosaic* 4:4 (1971), p. 54. On the *hamingjur*, see further p. 111 below and references there cited.

a distinct angelic colouring, Oddr signals to contemporary audiences that what the heathens actually sighted were spirits of a Christian nature.

Despite glimpses such as these which show that Óláfr early on possessed a special, if latent calling, we learn little about his personal encounter with Christianity – his *conversion narrative*. Signs of an intellectual or emotional crisis of the kind ascribed by Bede to the earliest English royal convert, Æthelberht of Kent (d. c. 616), are absent.²⁷ In the *Ecclesiastical History*, Æthelberht is presented as having had doubts both on a personal and political level, as he understood that adopting the new faith would affect not only him but an entire culture in a profound way. His decision eventually to adopt the Christian faith is thus in Bede’s account accompanied by a sense of sentimentality and hesitance which lends it credence as a record of such a momentous historical event. Oddr, in contrast, avoids (or fails) to construct a faith narrative for his subject. He chooses to depict Óláfr’s conversion not as an emotional and psychological process, but as an externally induced and governed development betokened by various quasi-miraculous signs and culminating in the following afterlife vision.²⁸ It takes place at an unspecified time at the court of Óláfr’s Russian foster family.

sá atburðr gerðisk at fyr Óláf bar mikla sýn: Honum sýndisk steinn einn mikill, ok þóttisk hann ganga upp eptir honum allt á ofanverðan ok þóttisk vera øfri skýjunum ok sá fagra staði ok bjarta menn er þar váru ok kenndi sætan ilm ok fagra blóma ok meiri dýrð enn hann kœmi hug á.²⁹

While surveying this pastoral setting, a ‘beautiful voice’ (‘rødd fagra’) addresses the visionary, commending him for having abstained from pagan worship, and urging him to travel to Greece to learn about the Christian faith:

“Far þú til Grikklands, ok mun þér þar kunnigt gert nafn Dróttins. Ok ef þú varðveitir hans boð muntu hafa eilíft líf, ok ef þú trúir sannliga munu margir eptir þér hverfa til rétttrar trúar, því at Guð hefir þik til kosit at snúa honum til handa mörpum þjóðum.”³⁰

²⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, eds. Colgrave and Mynors, chs. 25-26.

²⁸ Oddr, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ed. Ólafur Halldórson, pp. 162-164.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 162-163: ‘it came to pass that Óláfr experienced a great vision: He saw a great stone and thought he climbed up on it all the way to the top, beyond the clouds. And he saw beautiful places and bright people there and perceived a sweet scent and beautiful flowers and more glory than he could grasp.’

³⁰ Ibid., p. 163: “‘Travel to Greece, and there the name of God will become known to you. And if you abide by his command you will be awarded eternal life, and if you believe truly many will turn in consequence to the right faith, because God has chosen you to turn great multitudes to him.’”

As he descends down the hill, Óláfr catches a glimpse of a sphere of punishment and identifies many of his friends there. The sight of his foster parents – the Russian king and his wife – among those purged affects Óláfr so much that he awakes drenched in tears.

This is the earliest adaptation of *Visio* conventions in Norse-Icelandic prose, and it is interesting to note the great importance attached to it in the biographical context. In contrast to *Visiones* such as those of Paul or Drycthelm, descriptions of heaven and hell are secondary; the interview with God and the personal directive communicated in it takes centre stage, and as such the episode would have little value outside of the biographical setting in which it figures. Oddr's use of the *Visio* format to channel a divine directive for an evangelical mission recalls the role of such phenomena in a *Vita* of another apostle of the North, St. Anskar.³¹ Like Óláfr, the German archbishop was, according to his biographer Rimbart, called by God to his proselytising mission to Sweden and Denmark in a *Visio* in his youth. A brief excursion to this scene helps us to assess the timing and function of Oddr's visionary report in his saga.

In his biography, Rimbart, who succeeded Anskar as archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, explains that the latter was set on his missionary path by several dreams of the hereafter in his childhood and youth. One of these compares especially well with Óláfr's as it represents the moment that determined Anskar's missionary career. On the evening of Pentecost, a date pregnant with symbolism in view of his legacy, Sts. Peter and John appear to him and lead him away on a journey to the otherworld. They bring him first to hell, where he is cleansed for three days in purgatorial fire, and subsequently to heaven. There he perceives a vast congregation of saints oriented towards God, who is described simply as a marvellous brightness. In this vision, too, an invisible voice addresses the protagonist, and also here this voice articulates an assignment that would come to define the protagonist's life: “Vade, et martyrio coronatus ad me reverteris” (“Go, and return to me crowned with martyrdom”) (p. 23). Upon regaining

³¹ Rimbartus, *Vita Anskarii*, ed. G Waitz, *Scriptorem rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae historicis recusi* 55 (Hannover, Hahn, 1884), pp. 21-23.

consciousness, Anskar is both troubled and comforted – the vision having defined his life’s aspiration, but also its necessary conclusion.

The chief formal points of comparison between Óláfr’s and Anskar’s out-of-body experiences are the audiences with God, the prophecies communicated in them, and the great significance these experiences play within the respective biographical contexts. The thematic similarity between them strengthens the impression that Oddr might have drawn inspiration from this text in designing his account of Óláfr’s otherworld vision. From a biographical perspective, the *Visio* of Anskar functions to adumbrate and confront the perhaps single thorniest and most important issue of his *Vita*, the commonplace nature of his death. Throughout his biography, Rimbert attempts to counteract the apparent prejudice that the missionary, who died naturally of old age, did not fulfil the traditional expectation of martyrdom. As we see, the *Visio* addresses this issue directly, with Rimbert underpinning Anskar’s claim to martyrdom by placing its definition in the mouth of God. Where the surface narrative, the events of Anskar’s life as they happened, fails to square with hagiographic expectations, the afterlife episode allows Rimbert to move the debate to another level.

In the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, the career-defining afterlife vision functions in a similar way to counter prejudices about the protagonist’s character. It furnishes what we may call a Pauline moment of religious awakening which is absent from the surface narrative. Oddr locates in it the divine spark instigating Óláfr’s conversion and by extension the conversion narrative of Western Scandinavia. The fact that his *Visio* did not enter later canonical Norse-Icelandic histories such as *Fagrskinna* and Snorri’s *Heimskringla* could be taken as an indication that, in the eyes at least of these historians, it did not entirely convince.³² To us the report of Óláfr’s *Visio* is important as an early token of the influence of *Visiones* on Norse-Icelandic literary culture; its inclusion in this ambitious *Vita* of the Apostle of the North, moreover, points to the status Oddr

³² The dream is included, however, in slightly expanded form in the so-called longer saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, which is to a large part based on Oddr’s biography; cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, 3 vols., Editiones Anamagnæanae (Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1958-2000), Vol. I, p. 152.

and his contemporaries attached to such visionary accounts through their association with internationally renowned visionaries and the prestige of the Latin tradition.

II. Afterlife Dreams in a Family Saga

Certain formal features of Icelandic Family Sagas render dream reports within them especially significant. As Peter Foote observes, the form exhibits some of the ‘limitations’ of narratives written for theatrical performance; as saga authors characteristically do not describe their actors’ inner lives, ‘thoughts and emotions must be physically perceived, heard or seen in speech and action’.³³ This mode of storytelling is by narratologists referred to as *externally focalised* narrative, an authorial point of view centred on observable actions rather than on their origins in the psychology of the protagonists.³⁴ As in drama, thoughts and emotions are in the sagas thus described not by the narrator but by the protagonists themselves, most often in verse in the form of expositions or internal monologues. The skaldic dream-verses in *Gísla saga* interact in uncommonly complex ways with the prose narrative around them, and much of their significance derives from the intimate interplay with the dreamer’s evolving situation. Characteristics special to Gísli’s afterlife visions are that they channel impressions of the visionary’s mind as much as of external realities, and that they span across a large portion of the dreamer’s life, and so represent an important structural feature of the saga narrative.³⁵

Gísli’s seven dream reports during his outlawry can be divided into three thematic categories.³⁶ Two groups centre on the appearances of two dream women; the third foreshadows Gísli’s violent last fight. The first two groups are most relevant to our discussion as they entail impressions of moral and eschatological consequence.

In his recent article on Gísli’s afterlife dreams, Paul Langeslag convincingly shows that influences from Christian *Visiones* shine through on several levels in this saga’s afterlife

³³ Foote, ‘An Essay on the Saga of Gísli’, p. 105.

³⁴ H. O’Donoghue, *Saga Narrative*, pp. 140-141.

³⁵ On the nuanced dynamics between prose and verse in the saga, see O’Donoghue, *Saga Narrative*, ch. 3.

³⁶ Cf. Langeslag, ‘The Dream Women of *Gísla Saga*’, p. 49.

portrayals.³⁷ Most important in this regard is the opposition of good and evil embodied by the two dream women and augmented by the saga author.³⁸ Before he recounts the first of these dreams to Auðr, his wife, Gísli introduces the context thus: “‘Ek á draumkonur tvær ... ok er önnur vel við mik, en önnur segir mér þat nokkut jafnan, er mér þykkir verr en áðr, ok spár mér illt eina”’ (“I have two dream women ... and one is good to me, whereas the other persistently tells me things that seem worse than what went before, and predicts only misery”’) (p. 70). In the prose he labels the former ‘draumkona mín in betri’ (‘my better dream woman’) (p. 70), and the latter ‘konan sú in verri’ (‘the worse woman’) (p. 76). The former dream authority appears in two dreams that centre on images of halls and produce associations with comfort and intimacy (pp. 70, 94); the visions of the worse counterpart, in contrast, are bound up with images of blood and intense physical torment (pp. 75-77). As we will analyse in more detail in due course, the contrast in content between pleasant and agonizing dream women and the dreams they bring is present, but not explicit, in the poetic renderings of the dreams. In fact, the distinction between better and worse dream woman is only expressed in the prose, indicating that the moral juxtaposition governing these dream reports in the saga is a structural effect imparted by the prose author on the poetic narrative.³⁹ Lars Lönnroth has rightly observed that this effect helps us to see Gísli, his kin, and the saga plot at large as ‘parts of a universal conflict between good and evil.’⁴⁰

A quality that distinguishes the portrayal of Gísli from that of visionaries in the Latin tradition is the Norse author’s interest in the impact of the dreams on the protagonist’s subjectivity. In contrast to Rannveigr and Óláfr, both of who display commonplace physical reactions to their experiences (shivers and tears), Gísli’s prognostications of death first and foremost affect his mental state, and in his recitations he reveals their profound impact on his

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, p. 49-67.

³⁸ Cf. further Chapters 3 and 5 below.

³⁹ This discrepancy is noted by O’Donoghue, *Saga Narrative*, p. 162-3. The literary traditions behind these dream women will be further examined in Chapter 3.

⁴⁰ L. Lönnroth, ‘Dreams in the Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies* 74:4 (2002), pp. 462.

imagination. Dreaming in this way represents an important facet of Gísli's personality. The saga author emphasises his aptitude for nocturnal visions, describing him as 'draumamaðr mikill ok berdreymr' ('a dreamer of many and true dreams') (p. 70). The same term – *draumamaðr* – is employed with reference to the prolific Scriptural dreamer Joseph of Genesis in an Old Norse translation and commentary of the first books of the Old Testament.⁴¹ In Joseph's case the title reflects both to the importance of his own visions and the fact that he was a skilled interpreter of dreams. In the Old Testament, understanding dreams is intimately bound up with divine insight; the non-Jewish chieftains in Genesis and the Book of Daniel rely on the Scriptural prophets to disentangle the dream-prognoses they receive.⁴²

Norse-Icelandic literature too is extraordinarily rich in dream accounts,⁴³ and dreaming generally seems to represent a sign of health. Certain sources reflect the view that individuals who do not dream are somehow not considered entirely sound – a condition diagnosed as *draumstoli* ('dream-deprived').⁴⁴ It may seem ironic, with this in mind, that the overwhelming majority of dreams in Old Norse sagas and poetry, like Gísli's, do not in fact communicate good things, but generally prognosticate strife, misfortune, or death.⁴⁵ Although it can be a sign of health or sanity, in Gísli's case possessing a special aptitude for dreaming increasingly constitutes a psychological burden.

As his appointed time of death approaches, a date revealed to him in his first dream by

⁴¹ *Stjórn*, ed. C. R. Unger, *Stjórn: Gammelnorsk bibelhistorie fra verdens skabelse til det babyloniske fangenskab* (Oslo, Feilberg & Landmarks Forlag, 1862), p. 193.

⁴² On the functions of dream narratives in the Bible, see J-M. Husser, *Dreams and Dream Narratives in the Biblical World*, trans. J. M. Munro (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

⁴³ Useful studies of dreams in Norse-Icelandic literature are J. A. Cochrane, 'Bright Dreams and Bitter Experiences: Dreams in Six Sagas of Icelanders' (University College London, Unpublished Diss., 2004); Lönnroth, 'Dreams in the Sagas', pp. 455-464; G. Turville-Petre, 'Dreams in Icelandic Tradition', *Folklore*, 69:2 (1958), 93-111; Schach, 'Symbolic Dreams of Future Renown', pp. 51-73; and A. Faulkes, *Rauðúlfs þátr: A Study*, *Studia Islandica* 25 (Reykjavík, Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1966), pp. 12-29. Earlier, still useful surveys are G. D. Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1935), and W. Henzen, *Über die Träume in der altnordischen Sagalitteratur* (Leipzig, Verlag von Gustav Fock, 1890).

⁴⁴ Compare the idiomatic-sounding statement in *Morkinskinna*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2 vols., *Íslenzk fornrit* 23-24 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 2011), Vol I., p. 147: 'hann er draumstoli en þat hlýðir öngum manni, ok er ekki öðli til þess at menn dreymi ekki'.

⁴⁵ Good examples are the dreams of Kostbara and Glaumvör in *Atlamál in grænlensko*, sts. 16-25, and Gunnarr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* 12 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), pp. 155-156.

the better dream woman, Gísli's visions grow ever more distressing. The narrator reports that, as the autumn sets in and the nights lengthen, the protagonist experiences 'svefnfarar harðar' ('rough sleep-journeys') (p. 75). Only a few of these are actually described in the saga. Initially, Gísli seems defiant, indicating to Auðr that he is not unsettled by the prediction of his death: 'stendr eigi þat', he asserts in st. 20, 'mér fyr svefni' ('that does not stand ... in the way of my sleep') (st. 20). Yet the narrator repeatedly stresses that the outlaw sleeps unsoundly (cf. pp. 70, 102), and as time passes the dreams' effect on him becomes manifest as he grows afraid of darkness and of solitude: 'hann gerir svá myrkhæddan, at hann þorir hvergi einn saman at vera, ok þegar hann leggur sin augu saman, þá sýnisk honum in sama kona' ('he becomes so frightened of the dark, that he does not dare to be alone, and as soon as he closes his eyes, the same woman appears') (p. 104). Interestingly, fear of darkness is a characteristic that relates Gísli and the second notorious outlaw in Icelandic literature, Grettir, to whom Gísli's legacy is explicitly compared at an earlier point in the saga (p. 70).⁴⁶ Interestingly, it is the condition of darkness and concealment that exposes these heroes' psychological vulnerability most clearly.

The uneasiness of Gísli's sleep is one thematic thread in the steadily increasing tension of the narrative between the day he is outlawed and his death. Over the course of this period, as Eleanor Barraclough observes, he 'begins to drift further into the margins of the landscape, establishing more permanent hideouts in the interfaces between society and the wilderness.'⁴⁷ Ever since the death-prophecy, moreover, the passage of time is a constant tenor. The narrator uses the prognostication offered in the first vision as an independent temporal framework, first counting winters backwards to the dream (p. 79), then forward to the dead-line (p. 90), until at last they are all counted: 'nú eru ... liðnir draumavetr hans gørvallir' ('now are ... all his dream-years entirely spent') (p. 102). At the same time the number of Gísli's pursuers steadily

⁴⁶ Cf. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 7 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1936), p. 218: "Reynt skal þetta vera," segir Grettir, "en svá gerumk ek myrkfælinn, at þat má ek ekki til lífs vinna mér, at vera einn saman." Earlier, p. 121, we are told that the revenant Glámr cursed Grettir's sight.

⁴⁷ E. R. Barraclough, in 'Inside Outlawry in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 82:4 (2010), p. 384.

increases: Eyjólfur enlists six men to hunt him down (p. 70); then eight (p. 74); and lastly fourteen (p. 111).

Finally, cut off from any sense of lasting security the prospect of death seems to overpower the outlaw. His nightmarish dreams display the ‘sense of inner exhaustion’ on account of which he seems at last willingly to surrender to his fate.⁴⁸ The dreams ascribed to Gísli in the saga thus accompany him through a protracted and evolving context. Thereby a literary facet of afterlife vision emerges that only a saga structure would allow for. In subsequent chapters we will examine in further detail how the dream women and the visions they present respond to Gísli’s evolving situation. Here, the defining feature to emphasise is that the afterlife visions in this narrative represent a facet of the protagonist’s character and mind, and so bring a subjective dimension to the concept of afterlife vision that in this way had not been explored in the Latin genre.

III. Eddaic Visions

The Mythic Seeress

As we noted in the previous chapter, *Völuspá* likely originated in a time of great religious, political, and cultural change. Yet in theme and structure the tenor of this eddaic vision is not one of confrontation or sentimentality, but rather one of negotiation and harmony. On a scale not seen elsewhere in the larger Norse-Icelandic literary corpus, features of Christian eschatology are here integrated into the eschatological narratives of Old Norse mythology.

The famous opening stanzas of *Völuspá* situate the prophecy firmly within a seemingly ancient literary tradition of wisdom exchange in dialogue form:

Hlióðs bið ek allar
[helgar] kindir
meiri ok minni
mōgo Heimdal[1]ar.
Vildo at ek, Valfōðr,

⁴⁸ Foote, ‘An Essay on the Saga of Gísli’, p. 112.

vel fyr telia
 forn spiðll fira
 þau er fremst um man.⁴⁹

Even though her introductory address contains few details concerning the occasion and context behind the prophecy, the few allusions offered evoke a scenario familiar to us from other sources. She addresses Óðinn in particular among her audience, a feature which gestures towards a setting more fully delineated in *Baldrs draumar*, a poem not found in the Codex Regius but commonly counted among the eddaic corpus. Here we are told that the principal god sets out to consult a prophetess about the meaning of the disquieting dreams experienced by his son, Baldr. The region to which he gallops is the world of the dead Niflhel ('Mist-Hel'),⁵⁰ and it soon becomes clear that this vǫlva exists outside traditional categories of time and space. Concealed behind one of his many pseudonyms, 'Vegtamr' ('Way-tamed'), Óðinn calls her to life by performing 'valgaldr', 'death-reviving chants' (st. 4); her reaction indicates that this revival is not entirely welcome:

“Hvat er manna þat
 mér ókunnra,
 er mér hefir aukit
 erfit[t] sinni?
 var ek snivin snióvi
 ok slegin regni
 ok drifin döggo.
 Dauð var ek lengi.”⁵¹

Though Óðinn puts his vast wisdom on display in other contexts (e.g. *Grímnismál* and *Vafðríðnismál*), certain types of information appear to lie outside his grasp. For this he seeks out the vǫlur.⁵² From *Baldrs draumar* and *Vǫluspá* we gauge that the information he desires pertains principally to future events. In the former poem, moreover, it becomes clear that it comprises knowledge Óðinn is not supposed to possess. The aggressiveness with which he compels the

⁴⁹ *Vǫluspá*, st. 1: 'I ask for the attention of all, the holy lineages, greater and lesser, sons of Heimdallr. Do you wish me, father of the slain [Óðinn], to speak ably of old tales of men, those which figure earliest in my memory.'

⁵⁰ *Baldrs draumar*, st. 2.

⁵¹ Ibid. sts. 5: "Who is that man, unknown to me, who has caused me to rise troublesomely? I was snowed down with snow, beaten with rain, and driven through mist. Long was I dead."

⁵² See further J. Quinn's analysis of the vǫlur in eddaic poetry, 'Dialogue with a Vǫlva: *Hyndluljóð*, *Baldrs draumar* and *Vǫluspá*', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse mythology*, eds. P. Acker and C. Larrington (New York, Routledge, 2002), pp. 245-74.

sibyl to speak eventually reveals his identity, and this revelation of his true identity occasions her to break off their interview (sts. 12-14).

Glimpses of such an interrogative setting shine through also in *Völuspá*. The opening stanza reveals that Óðinn is again probing for information. At a significant turning point in the poem, where the seeress' recollection of the past turns into visions of futurities, she confronts her interlocutor, challenging “Hvers fregnið mik?/ Hví freistið mín?” (“Who questions me? Why do you try me?”) (st. 28). Throughout the second half of the poem, moreover, she appears to belittle his wisdom, repeatedly querying “Vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?” (“Is this already known to you, or what?”), and asserting her own prophetic aptitude – “fram sé ek lengra” (“I see even further ahead”).

The vǫlur possess an aptitude for vision that other figures in Old Norse myth lack. On the basis of *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar* it would seem that their ability to gaze beyond the temporal scope of human existence is intimately related to their liminality of existence. The ultimate statement in *Völuspá* evokes the kind of setting we see more extensively brushed out in *Baldurs draumar*. For the speaker returns to obscurity with the statement ‘Nú mun hón sökkvaz’ (‘Now she must submerge herself’), indicating a return back to the obscurity of the dead from which the sibyl in *Baldurs draumar* emerged. It seems clear from this that her existence in the world is not subject to the same time frame as that of humans or gods. Her age overarches the history she tells. In the poem’s second and third stanzas she conveys memories that reach beyond even the creation of the present earth; she recalls a time where there was neither ‘sandr né sær/ né svalar unnir./ Iqrð fannz æva/ né upphiminn’ (‘sand nor sea, nor smooth waves. There was no earth, nor sky above’) (sts. 2-3). Judy Quinn has distinguished the type of knowledge this being represents from that of wise giants such as Vafðrúðnir in cognitive terms; while the latter draws on a mnemonically stored pool of information, the vǫlva’s insight is ‘experiential’, that is to say it is activated in the process of recollection and vision.⁵³

⁵³ Ibid., p. 251.

An experiential or séance-like setting is further suggested by the many pronominal switches between the first and third persons running through her speech. The unsystematic modulations between ‘ek’ (‘I’, sts. 1, 2, 10, 28, 31 etc.) and ‘hón’ (‘she’, sts. 21, 27, 28, 29, 30), sometimes even occurring within a single stanza (44, 49, 58), complicate our attempts to track her perspective. Like voice and voice echoed, such shifts of attribution in references to memory (‘man ek’, st. 1; man hón’, st. 21), knowledge (‘veit ek’, st. 19; Veit hón’, st. 27), and vision (‘Ek sá’, st. 31; sá hón’, st. 37), provokes questions concerning whose vision it is and whence it originates. She is, paradoxically, at once the channel of a ‘strange plurality’ of voices and visions,⁵⁴ and the source of a unified narrative of the creation and disintegration of the cosmos. Our Völva’s knowledge is thus of a fundamentally different nature to that of visionaries of Christian tradition, Scriptural and medieval; for while the latter obtain their visionary impulse through various mediators from God, she draws on memory and her vision evolves in the act of seeing. Existing only in this act, one could argue that the quality the Völva embodies is first and foremost the idea of prophecy itself, and not a definable physical identity.

We observe, then, that the context evoked in *Völuspá* has strong roots in traditional Norse literature. Although some critics, foremost among them Ursula Dronke, have highlighted parallels with Classical oracles and medieval Christian descendants of the type,⁵⁵ there is, on closer inspection, little save the affinity in gender to link the two scenarios of vision. Where we do perceive that the Völva is coloured by Christian visionary perspectives is in her portrayal of the impending degeneration of the mythical cosmos and the apocalyptic imagery accompanying it. It seems to be a generally accepted notion that the worldview(s) of the pre-Christian North did not include a conception of moral judgment in the life to come. Literary sources suggest that

⁵⁴ U. Dronke, ‘*Völuspá* and Sibylline Traditions’, in *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands* (Aldershot, Variorum, 1996), ch. II, p. 16. We should note that some of these pronominal changes may have come about through the poem’s textual transmission; in Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning*, the Sibyl always speaks in the first person, but is sometimes introduced in the third.

⁵⁵ Cf. Dronke, ‘*Völuspá* and Sibylline Traditions’; cf. also K. Samplonius, ‘Sibylla borealis: Notes on the Structure of *Völuspá*’, in *Germanic Texts and Models: Medieval Reconstructions*, eds. K. E. Olsen et al., (Leuven, Peeters, 2001), pp. 185–229. Dronke bases her comparison on a medieval Latin sibylline poem printed in B. Bishoff, ‘Die Lateinischen Übersetzungen und Bearbeitungen aus den Oracula Sibyllina’, in *Mittelalterliche Studien: Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 1966-1981), Vol. I, pp. 164-168.

although notions of integrity and honour were important, it was the legacy among the living in these respects that presented the main concern in pre-Christian Northern societies.⁵⁶ Yet *Völuspá* offers images both of people suffering torment for social offences and others united in a state of bliss, and both scenes are tied to locations best described as eschatological. Consider stanza 38, in which the following moral evils and punishments are visualised:

Sá hón þar vaða
þunga straua
menn meinsvara
ok morðvarga
...
þar *saug* Níðhoggr
nái framgegna,
sleit vargr vera.⁵⁷

As we will discuss further in Chapter V, the types of offences described here in all likelihood represent ideas of social wrongs shared by Icelandic-Norwegian communities on both sides of the conversion. It is the idea of an eschatological *reprisal* for such wrongs that seems unprecedented in sources on Old Norse myth.

The poet, or later redactors, could have encountered imagery such as the above in sermon literature or medieval encyclopaedic treatises as well as in the *Visiones*; Honorius of Autun's *Elucidarius*, for example, which was translated into Old Norse around 1200, describes the third of nine torments in hell in the following terms: 'Þriðía kvöl', it dictates, 'erv hræðiliger o:mar og ð:ekar [o000] leger j fýn og j roððv' ('The third torment consists of frightful serpents and dragons terrifying in aspect and sound').⁵⁸ Yet Honorius and other clerical authors, as we observed in the previous Chapter, hesitate to explore these otherworldly places in more detail, let alone in sensory terms. For this they drew on *Visiones* such as those of Drythelm or St. Paul. *Páls leizla* offers portraits of punishment that are far livelier and formally more comparable with the

⁵⁶ An often quoted formulation of this mentality is *Hávamál*, st. 77: 'Deyr fé,/ deyia frændr,/ deyr siálfir it sama;/ ek veit einn,/ at aldri deyr:/ dómr um dauðan hvern.'

⁵⁷ *Völuspá*, st. 38: 'She saw wading there, in heavy streams, perjured men and murderous ... There Níðhoggr [striker of malice] sucked the deceased corpses; the wolf tore men'.

⁵⁸ *Elucidarius*, eds. Firchow and Grimstad, p. 123. A case for influences from Old English sermon literature is made by R. North, 'Völuspá and the Book of Revelation', in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn, Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003*, eds. R. Simek and J. Meurer (Bonn, Universität Bonn, 2003), pp. 403-412.

Völva's vision, as when the apostle and St. Michael pass by 'þann stað er vǫru konur ok karlar ok þoldu illar þíslir ... En suma rífu vargar ok hundar í sundr. En suma hjoggu ormar ok nauðrur' ('that place in which women and men suffered severe torments ... And some were torn asunder by wolves and hounds, and some bitten by serpents and oxen') (p. 414). *Völuspá*'s scenery in the stanza quoted above shows undeniable affinities with such passages, and recalls the descriptive mode of *Visiones* in that it goes beyond prophecy and enters through vision into the places described. In Chapter V we will examine in greater depth the thematic and figural relationship between this projection of eschatological retribution and the prospect of Gimlé with its band of worthy inhabitants.

For our purposes in this chapter the most important point to emphasise is the recognition that the Völva and the vision she presents are rooted in a distinctive native literary tradition. Gro Steinsland has suggested that the ambiguity and originality of expression characterising her narrative betrays her lack of understanding of the things she perceives.⁵⁹ Yet centred as the eddaic prophecy is on the Seeress' total perception of the past and future, it seems rather to be her superior insight which imbues her vision with such complexity and our own limited vision which generates ambiguity. Although her prophecy encompasses future ages, we may also emphasise, her vision is deeply rooted in the past. At the core of her vision, then, lies the encounter between traditional and new belief systems and the important role of memory in this transition. Like certain other personifications of wisdom in Old Norse myth, such as Mímir, the Völva in this eddaic prophecy embodies a distinctive ability to 'make sense of the future through recalling the past'; Margaret Clunies Ross identifies this 'creative' element as the defining feature of traditional Norse representations of memory.⁶⁰

In this way, *Völuspá* illustrates an approach to the cultural changes of its day that is at

⁵⁹ G. Steinsland, 'The Fantastic Future and the Norse Sibyl of *Völuspá*', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference*, eds. D. Ashurst et. al. (Durham and York, Durham University, 2006), p. 919.

⁶⁰ M. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols. (Odense, Odense UP, 1994-1998), Vol. I, p. 214.

once extroverted, in that it reaches out for Christian ideas about the life to come, and deeply introspective. The poem thus presents a powerful example of the form of artistic and cultural adaptation we are concerned with in this study, a process of adaptation proceeding and deriving meaning through a deep appreciation of the local past.

The Song of the Sun

In several post-medieval parchment MSS, *Völuspá* stands side by side with *Sólarljóð* at the beginning of sequences of eddaic poetry. This draws attention to a number of noteworthy affinities in form and theme between the two visionary poems. According to legend, *Sólarljóð* is itself a product of a miraculous occurrence; the song was allegedly recited by Sæmundr fróði as he momentarily arose from the dead three days after his death: ‘Þó segja men, að hann þrídagaður hafí úr líkrekki junni risið ok þá kveðið þá drápu’ (‘people said that he [Sæmundr] rose from his death bed three days after his death and recited the verse’).⁶¹ This legend provides a framework lacking in the poem itself; for as it stands, the narrative of *Sólarljóð* commences, like *Völuspá*’s, without a framing narrative outlining its occasion or purpose. In both poems, moreover, the resources of vision and wisdom reside with the dead rather than with the living.

One can distinguish between two contexts of vision in *Sólarljóð*. In the concluding stanzas of the poem, the speaker outlines an outer setting of transmission as he introduces his silent auditor; in the central section of the narrative, he describes the circumstances behind his death and subsequent otherworld journey (sts. 33-45). Even though the speaker remains anonymous, existing only as a construct of his speech in the poem, the narrative presented is intensely personal. At the heart of it lies the speaker’s encounter with mortality, an encounter evoked in vivid and penetrating images of anxiety, melancholy, hope, and consolation.

Death evidently came upon the protagonist in a sudden, unsettling fashion. For his appetite for life and its pleasures was still strong when the reality of its imminent end dawned

⁶¹ See citation in Chapter I, note 105.

upon him: ‘Lútr ek sat,’ he recalls, ‘lengi ek hölluðumz;/ mjök var ek þá lyst at lifa’ (‘Bowed down I sat, ... long I cowered; I so greatly desired to live then’) (st. 36). His attempts to fend death off, however, proved futile:

Heljar reip kómu harðliga
 sveigð at siðum mér;
 slíta ek vilda, en þau seig váru.
 Létt er lauss at fara.⁶²

The speaker’s premonitions of the hereafter intensify in the seven stanzas at the heart of the poem which apparently delineate his thoughts and impressions on the death-bed (sts. 39-45). Each of these stanzas is introduced by the defining image of the poem – the sun – through the statement ‘Sól ek sá’ (‘I saw the sun’). And in each stanza, the poet draws out different facets of this central image. At one moment it emerges as a symbol of Christ, the ‘sanna dagstjörnu’ (‘the true daystar’) (st. 39) of Scriptural tradition.⁶³ In a different stanza the sun is imbued with features of human anxiety: ‘Sól ek sá á sjónum skjálfandi/ hræzlufullr ok hnipinn’ (‘I saw the sun, trembling in my eyesight, grieving and full of anguish’) (st. 43); here the emblem appears to channel the speaker’s own perturbed emotions. A third glimpse of this central emblem mediates a vision of a more transcendent nature as the speaker through it perceives the figure of God Himself:

Sól ek sá; svá þótti mér,
 sem ek sæja á göfgan guð;
 henni ek laut hínzta sinni
 aldaheimi í.⁶⁴

Certain critics have, with reference to this stanza in particular, proposed that the sun represents a syncretic feature in *Sólarljóð*, one that reflects a Christian homilist’s reinterpretation of a pagan symbol of worship.⁶⁵ Yet the symbol of the sun is a very prominent one in twelfth and thirteenth-century exegesis and thus situates this poem firmly within a clerical trend of the time. We may

⁶² *Sólarljóð*, st. 37: ‘Cords of hell enclosed me forcefully; I wanted to tear them, but they were tough. Unfettered, it is easy to move about.’

⁶³ Cf. Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 181; cf. 2 Peter 1:19.

⁶⁴ ‘The sun I saw; it seemed to me as if I were seeing worshipful God; I bowed to her a last time in the old world of men.’

⁶⁵ See Amory, ‘Syncretism’, especially pp. 254-257.

compare the above stanza with a passage from *Mariu saga*, a *Vita* of the Virgin from the thirteenth century, in which the author draws an analogy between the sun and the soul's condition in the afterlife:

gleðr þann veg ok görir fagnað sólar nattúran allri veröldinni. Ok merkir siá veralldar fagnaðr þann fagnat, er öndin fagnar annars heims í himinríki ok gleðz iafnvel af annars gleði ok sælu sem síálfs síns.⁶⁶

One of the most impressive skaldic poems of the twelfth century, Gamli kanóki's *Harmsól* ('Sun of Sorrow'),⁶⁷ is, as the title betrays, in its entirety constructed around the same symbol. Here the sun serves on one level as an emblem of Christ, whose sorrow on the cross the narrative reenacts, and at another level as an emblem of the poem itself, which, as Katrina Atwood observes, 'as a public act of penance and a meditation on the grace of God, has acted as a "sun", dissipating the clouds of the poet's own *harmr*'.⁶⁸ This meditational aspect emerges forcefully in the seven central stanzas of *Sólarljóð*, and through its central structural position and transcendent attributes the sun here too governs the narrative as poetic figure and idea.

Yet in the seven sun stanzas, these glimpses of the sun are systematically juxtaposed with impressions of a more unsettling nature. The roaring of an infernal gate is heard in stanza 39 – 'Heljar grind ... heyrðak/ þjóta þungliga' ('I heard the gate of Hel ... howling heavily') – and three stanzas later the speaker perceives a flood of uncannily corporeal proportions 'Gilfar straumar grenjuðu annan veg/ blandir mjök við blóð' ('the rivers of Gylfi ground on the other side, densely blended with blood') (st. 42). In juxtaposing these better and worse impressions of the otherworld the poet casts the dying speaker as hovering between the prospects of heaven and hell, as if to adumbrate a conflict between good and evil over his soul in the afterlife.⁶⁹ The poet's use of synaesthetic concepts such as the sound of blood-drenched rivers calls attention, moreover, to the hallucinatory quality of these death-bed visions. The poem's inner context of

⁶⁶ *Mariu saga*, ed. Unger, Vol. I, p. 56: 'the sun delights and brings joy to the nature of the whole world. And that earthly joy signifies the joy which the soul experiences in the heavenly kingdom of the otherworld, where it delights in the wellbeing of others as much as in his own.'

⁶⁷ Gamli kanóki, *Harmsól*, ed. K. Atwood, *Skald* VII:2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, note to st. 64, p. 130.

⁶⁹ Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, ed. de Vogüé, Book IV, ch. 36.

vision is thus pregnant with emotion and delineated with an intensity of imagery that lends it a sense of psychological realism. It is the personal encounter with death that represents the primary interest of the poet in his creative adaptation of the format of the Latin genre.

As previously noted, an outer framework first emerges in the poem's four concluding stanzas. Presented as it is in the fuller MSS versions, *Sólarljóð* begins without any solid points of reference; there is no concern on the poet's part to establish the *where*, *who* or *why* of the account. Indeed, throughout the first half of the poem there is nothing to indicate that the poem is in fact a dream or vision. When the speaker does introduce his auditor in the concluding stanzas, it remains unclear precisely how they are related. He speaks of himself as 'faðir' ('father'), and addresses the other 'arfi', primarily meaning 'heir' or 'son'. Two stanzas later, the title and purpose of the poem are also defined:

Kvæði þetta, er þér kent hefi,
 skaltu fyr kvikum kveða,
Sólarljóð, er sýnaz munu
 minst at mörgu login.⁷⁰

If the setting outlined here is that of father speaking to his son, the poet aligns this vision with a long-standing literary tradition of wisdom exchange. As we noted in the Introduction, well known examples of Icelandic wisdom poetry such as *Hugsvinnsmál* employ the same framework;⁷¹ and this in turn echoes the narrative framework of prominent Old Testament books of learning.⁷² The same framework occurs, furthermore, in Classical examples of visionary literature, most notably in the *Dream of Scipio*,⁷³ an in the Middle Ages widely read and commented on otherworld vision, where the dreamer meets and gains insight both from his father and his grandfather in the otherworld.

But the relationship between speaker and interlocutor, as it is outlined in *Sólarljóð*, extends beyond the sphere of the family. Njörður Njarðvik has highlighted the terminology's

⁷⁰ *Sólarljóð*, st. 81: 'This poem, which I have taught you, you shall communicate to the living, the sun-song, which will seem least untrue to most people.'

⁷¹ *Hugsvinnsmál*, eds. T. Wills and S. Würth, *Skald* VII:1.

⁷² Cf. Book of Proverbs 1:8: 'Audi fili mi disciplinam patris tui'.

⁷³ Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *De re publica*, ed. K. Büchner, (Munich, Artemis & Winkler, 1993), Book 6.

application in liturgical settings, where father and son may refer to a priest and a member of his congregation.⁷⁴ Considering that the speaker in stanza 75 invokes the Holy Trinity, the Scriptural echo of God the Father and Christ the Son is also strong; these liturgical resonances strengthen the poem's claims to the status of revelation.⁷⁵

Even though *Sólarljóð*'s outer framework, then, is on the one hand an intensely private one, a son's dream of his late father, a broader public significance is more than implied. Because the two main actors remain anonymous throughout, they gain representative roles, embodying two cosmic perspectives of which one belongs to this world and the other to the divine. In thus enacting the role of the Everyman, the *arfí* posited as silent interlocutor underscores the universal applicability of the vision. This universal relevance is underscored further in the ultimate stanza of the poem, which projects a future day of reunion and joy and closes with a prayer for all dead souls:

Hér vit skiljumz ok hittask munum
 á feginsdegi fira;
 dróttinn minn gefi þeim dauðum ró,
 en hinum líkn, er lifa.⁷⁶

While the narrator has referred to himself and his interlocutor only as 'I' and 'you' up to this point, this closing stanza for the first time verbally links the two figures together through the prospect of a shared future 'day of joy'. This expectation extends to humankind at large when the speaker addresses God in the final two lines on behalf of all the dead with a citation from the *requiem aeternam*.⁷⁷ The complex dynamics between the narrator of the vision and his audience thus strengthen the impression that the poem's interpretative framework is meant to be flexible, designed to allow the embedded vision to move between potential personal and public relevance.

One could argue, then, that certain aspects of this opaqueness of context serve to

⁷⁴ Njörður, *Sólarljóð*, p. 102; cf. J. Fritzner et al., *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*, 4 vols. (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1883-1972), s.v. 'faðir'.

⁷⁵ Schorn, 'Eddic Poetry for a New Era', p. 139, highlights the simultaneously personal and universal appeals in this frame.

⁷⁶ *Sólarljóð*, st. 82: 'Here we part, and shall meet again on the future day of joy; my God, grant rest to the dead and relief to the living.'

⁷⁷ Cf. Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 162.

reinforce the poem's effect. In his sensitive analysis of *Sólarljóð*'s poetic merits, Fredrik Paasche remarked that its narrative possesses 'en viss ophøiet fjernhet' ('a certain elevated remoteness'),⁷⁸ a sense of distance, we could say, which imitates the spontaneity and unmediated quality of a dream or vision. As Brittany Schorn has recently observed, moreover, the deferral of context 'invites speculation on the nature of the narrative voice'.⁷⁹ Is this voice at home in eddaic or Christian didactic writing, or to a certain extent an incorporation of both?

The key characteristics worth emphasising in comparing this text with the generic antecedents in the Latin tradition are thus the opaqueness of the framework – including the anonymity of the speaker, listener, time, and occasion; the subjective lens through which the vision is recounted; and the eddaic metre governing its form. In a related fashion to *Völuspá*, this *Visio* in eddaic metre manages to mediate a condition of vision in addition to its product. These visionary experiences are not formalised, but enigmatic in form and content. They represent a more complex idea of vision than the formally plain and pedagogically uncomplicated accounts of the Latin source genre. The phenomenon is not merely received but subjectively experienced. All these features make our encounter with this text more challenging, perhaps, than with a plainly structured and fully glossed account such as *Rannveigar leizla*. Whereas the latter, following most generic antecedents in the Latin tradition, takes the *describability* of the spiritual world as its point of departure, *Sólarljóð* appears to presuppose an acceptance of the ineffable nature of its topic – that the reality it delineates lies in fact beyond the reach of verbal representation.

IV. A Ballad and a Quest

The Dream Ballad

The notion that sleep is somehow related in quality to the state of death, and that dreams

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 172.

⁷⁹ Schorn, 'Eddic Poetry for a New Era', p. 138.

may thus foreshadow aspects of the soul's post-mortem condition, is ancient.⁸⁰ The protagonist of *Draumkvedet* experiences a dream of unusual length and profundity, and the details about its date and prolonged duration constitute one of the few set pieces corroborated across the ballad, making it one of *Draumkvedet*'s defining characteristics. Maren Ramskeid's version presents the context of the dream as follows:

Han la sæg ne om Jolæftansqvællen
den stærken Svevnen fæk
han vakna inkje før om Trettandagjen
daa Folke i Kjyrkjun gjæk
Aa dæ va Olaf Aaknesonen som sove hæve so længje.⁸¹

The time frame surrounding this event highlight Olav's place within a tradition of Christian revelation. Commencing on Christmas Eve, the dream coincides with the liturgical moment of Christ's birth, and ends, significantly, on Epiphany. The latter is in the homilies referred to as 'retlega birtinga tið' – the 'time of true revelation',⁸² because, according to tradition, it was the date of Christ's baptism and of his first miracle at Cana in addition to the arrival of the three magi at His manger.⁸³

Despite all the noticeable imprints of Latin *Visiones* on the ballad, *Draumkvedet* is in important ways different. The ballad form impacts the points of emphasis in the narrative. Scandinavian ballad literature exhibits certain marked conventions of its own; in the words of the editors of TSB, this literature can be defined as

a genre of orally transmitted song that is defined by its form (sometimes couplets with one or two burdens, sometimes quatrains with one burden), by its narrative content, and by its objective style, the latter characterised not least by the frequent use of formulaic expressions and so-called "commonplaces".⁸⁴

In terms of content, one of the features of this afterlife vision that betray the conventions of

⁸⁰ It has been argued that the condition of dreaming itself gave rise to the concept of the soul's incorruptibility; see Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 12 vols. (London, MacMillan, 1915), Vol. V:2, pp. 260-261. Sleep and death are intimately linked in the language of the New Testament too; see Harris, 'The New Testament View of Life after Death', p. 48.

⁸¹ *Draumkvedet*, K1, 3: 'He lay down on the night of Christmas Eve, and fell into such a deep sleep, he did not awake before epiphany, when people were going to church. And that was Olaf Aakneson who had slept for so long.'

⁸² *HómNo*, ed. Indrebø, p. 65.

⁸³ As expounded *Ibid.*, pp. 62-65.

⁸⁴ Jonsson et al., *TSB*, p. 14.

ballad literature most strikingly is the characterisation of the dreamer. Olav is a much stronger presence in the narrative than his typical European counterparts. Whereas Gregory's visionaries, as well as Drythelm and Tundale, represent distinctly didactic types, whose personalities and physical features only matter in so far as they relate to the moral lessons of the narrative, Olav is himself a chief point of interest in the ballad, at once a romanticised hero and, as we shall see, something of an anti-establishment figure. His Christian name, not unlike the Thomases (O Yonderdale, Rymer) and Robins in English and Scottish ballads, represents a commonplace in Norwegian ballad literature, recurring in well-known narratives such as 'Olav Liljekrans' (TSB A 63) and 'Olav og Kari' (TSB D 367). The surname does not help to solidify his historical identity either, varying between 'Aakneson' (L4, 1; K1, 3), 'Åknesi' (M6, 1) and 'Aasteson' (V1a, 1; T8, 4) from one version to the next. Based on the latter form early critics proposed a connection with St. Óláfr, whose mother, as we know, was named Ásta.⁸⁵ Yet this surname is nowhere associated with the Norwegian saint, nor, for that matter, is this dream referred to elsewhere among his miracles.

The few details about Olav's character scattered across the various versions present him as a youthful, carefree, and perceptive man. Several stanzas highlight his young age, describing him as 'i Voxtern' ('in growth'),⁸⁶ and referring to him as a 'dreng' ('young man; lad').⁸⁷ The versions that describe the dreamer in these terms introduce a simile which gestures towards some further facets of his personality. He is described as 'Seljuronne' or 'Seljuteine' ('willow shoot; willow twig'),⁸⁸ an image which may imply character traits such as inexperience, innocence, sensitivity, flexibility of mind, and a great potential for growth and consequence.⁸⁹

The symbol of the 'teinn', we may note in this connection, is a prominent one in Norse-Icelandic literature. It recalls one of the best known dream episodes from the Kings' Sagas – that

⁸⁵ First suggested by J. Moe, 'Indberetning', *Norske Universitets- og Skole-Annaler* 2. R., V (1850), p. 279.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Draumkvedet*, K1, 1-2; cf. V1a, 2; S6, 2.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, V1a, 1; cf. M6, 1; L4, 1.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, K1, 1-2; V1a, 2; S6, 2.

⁸⁹ Compare G. Bø and M. Myhren, *Draumkvedet: diktverket og teksthistoria* (Oslo, Novus, 2002), p. 32.

experienced by Ragnhildr before the birth of her son Haraldr hárfagri. In her dream she finds herself holding a ‘þorn’ (‘thorn’) in her hand which subsequently grows into ‘teinn einn mikill’ (‘a great shoot’) and branches out over the entire country.⁹⁰ Referring as it does to Haraldr’s role in unifying Norway, the symbol of the *teinn* appropriately intertwines the spring and bloom of king and nation. A further striking employment of this symbol is found in the *Poetic Edda*, where Atli dreams of withering shoots before the tragic murder of his sons: ‘Hugða ec hér í túni teina fallna,’ he tells his wife, ‘þá er ek vildigac vaxna lata’ (‘I thought I saw budding shoots wither here in the courtyard ... which I had intended to let grow’).⁹¹ Heraldizing as it does the untimely death of his children, the imagery of premature natural decay foregrounds the *teinn*’s symbolic connotations with vulnerability and innocence. This recalls, in turn, the important image of the ‘mistilteinn’ (‘mistletoe’) in the story of Baldr’s death (*Völuspá*, st. 31); this plant, as Snorri recounts, was the one element of the universe Frigg did not include in her charm to protect the god, as she deemed it too tender.⁹² Loki, however, discovered this weakness and deceived the blind Höðr into killing Baldr with it. The poet of *Völuspá* highlights the paradox of the shoot’s tender, yet fatal nature by describing it as ‘miór ok miök fagr’ (‘slender and very beautiful’) as it stands in its pristine condition before the fatal event. In commenting on this image, Dronke points to the proverbial phrase ‘the thin twig will have great consequence’;⁹³ in connection with Olav this sense that something seemingly innocuous and inconspicuous may unexpectedly attain momentous significance lends the simile added potency.

Beside his tender age, we gauge that Olav belongs to a socially privileged milieu. The visionary himself claims to be a man of many talents, asserting ‘Egh kan noko af qvorjum Viso/dherfø tikjes æg fro’ (‘I know a bit of every song; therefore I am thought wise’) (V1a, 52). Other stanzas describe him as a ‘nyttan Drenjir’ (‘able young man’) (Va1, 1, M6, 1), and ‘Kaate

⁹⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941), Vol. I, p. 90

⁹¹ *Guðrúnarqviða önnor*, st. 40.

⁹² As related in Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, pp. 45-46.

⁹³ Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, pp. 52-53.

Drænrj’ (‘keen young man’) (L4, 1).⁹⁴ References to Olav’s apparel and equipment indicate that he is not only youthful and skilled, but also privileged in material terms. He fits his riding horse with unusually fine gear as he sets out to ride to church after waking from his dream: ‘Olav salar Gangareen seen,/ aa lægge paa gylden Greeme (‘Olav prepares his horse, and saddles it with golden halters’) (V1a, 13).⁹⁵ And on his expedition through the otherworld he wears a costly cloak which, as he stresses, suffered damage in the thorny landscape: ‘sonde va mi Skarlakens kaape/ aa Neglan a kvor min fing’ (‘my scarlet cloak was torn, as were the nails of each of my fingers’) (K1, 7).⁹⁶

With accessories such as these, the ballad-hero exudes an air of nobility, someone worthy of note on the basis of his social status alone. This is an aspect of the visionary’s characterisation that reflects ballad conventions particularly strongly. Gudleiv Bø emphasises this in his essay accompanying Myhren’s redaction, observing that Olav’s aristocratic features cast him in the role of ‘den tradisjonelle balladehelten’ (‘the traditional ballad hero’).⁹⁷ Nobility of station is in this genre implicitly a signal also of ‘en edel og helstøpt natur, en betydelig person, en person som det er grunn til å ta høytidelig’ (‘a noble and well-rounded character, someone significant, who commands respect’). This type of ballad hero, Bø goes on to say, is related to the traditional figure of the young prince in fairy tales, ‘der det sterkt stiliserte gir en slags umiddelbar appell til lytterens *sjel* – det føles uproblematisk å åpne seg reservasjonsløst til en slik idealfigur’ (‘where the strongly stylised element makes a naturally appeal to the audience’s *soul* – it does not feel problematic to place one’s unreserved trust in an idealised figure of this type’). In Olav we thus have a visionary character ‘som med sin kombinasjon av ungdommelig uskyld og edel heltenatur har sterk appell til lytteren’ (‘who, possessing the combined qualities of youthful innocence and noble heroism appeals strongly to the listener’).

Olav’s inherent qualities of respectability and trustworthiness come to the fore in the

⁹⁴ Cf. I. Aasen, *Ordbog over det norske folkesprog* (Oslo, C. C. Werner, 1850), s.v. ‘kaat’: ‘munter, lystig’.

⁹⁵ Cf. *Draumkvedet*, K1, 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, K1, 8; Va1, 28-29; M6, 9-10; L4, 6-7.

⁹⁷ Bø and Myhren, *Draumkvedet*, p. 32.

stanzas that describe his actions after the dream and the context of its transmission.⁹⁸ When he arrives at the church on Epiphany day, he finds the congregation assembled for mass:

Presten sto paa Predikstolen
aa lae ut Tekstinne sine.
Aa Olav sto i Kjyrkedynni
aa fortalde av Draumane sine.⁹⁹

While the priest addresses the congregation with his sermon or glosses, Olav stands or seats himself in the doorway of the church to recount his experience, thereby seemingly challenging the role of the cleric. As this episode, like the dream frame, is integral to multiple versions of the ballad, it constitutes one of *Draumkvedet*'s most characteristic narrative sequences.

Because it is such an evocative scene, numerous critics have attempted to read a political theme into the confrontation between Olav and the cleric. Georg Johannesen, for instance posits Olav as an agent of the counterreformation in the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Though it seems reductive to insist on a specific political frame of reference, this carefully choreographed scene certainly does position Olav and the cleric in a tense opposition. Seeing that Olav's revelation does take centre stage, the episode may well be interpreted on a more general level as an endorsement of the layperson's testimony over that of the officiating professional.¹⁰¹

In this connection it is worth noting that the stage Olav chooses for himself is itself rich in symbolism. Its significance in legal and homiletic literature underpins the protagonist's claim to authority. In Old Norse law codes, the doorway of the church was the most important arena of legal procedures.¹⁰² Oaths were sworn, trials held, and judgements conferred in this space, imbuing it with strong connotations of objectivity and any statement pronounced there with weightiness of consequence. One of the earliest Norse homilies, the *Kirkjudagsmál* ('Homily on

⁹⁸ *Draumkvedet*, K1, 4-6; V1a, 12-15; L4, 3-4; K9, 2-3; M6, 8, 72-73; L6, 2.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, K9, 3: 'The priest stood in the pulpit and delivered his texts; Olav stood in the doorway of the church, and recounted his dreams.' Cf. V1a, 12; K1, 6; L4, 6; L6, 2; M6, 8; L9, 3, L1, 2.

¹⁰⁰ As advocated by G. Johannesen, *Draumkvede 1993: Tre Essay om norsk folkediktning* (Oslo, Det Norske samlaget, 1993).

¹⁰¹ This point is convincingly argued by D. G. Myhren, 'Katedral eller stavkirke: Genredrøfting og tro i *Draumkvedet*', in *Draumkvedet*, ed. Gulliksen, p. 41.

¹⁰² Cf. *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, eds. R. Keyser et al., *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, 5 vols. (Oslo, C. Gröndal, 1846-1895), Vol. I, ch. 30.

the Dedication’), contained in both the Icelandic and Norwegian homily books, offers a detailed allegorical exposition of church building. It interprets the place in which Olav stands as symbolic of religious zeal and purity of faith.¹⁰³ The passageway before the church doors (‘Hurð fyrir durum’) is said to represent those ‘fkynfama menn þa er rœuftlega standa á mote villu-mœnnum’ (‘wise personages who with strong voice defend the church against non-believers’); the door itself is further interpreted as the Christian faith and gateway to its fellowship: ‘Dyrr kirkiunnar merkia trv retta þa er os læiðir inn til almennilegrar cristni’ (‘The Church door signifies the true faith which leads us into the fellowship of Christians’) (p. 96). This ecclesiastical symbolism, which evokes the Scriptural metaphor of Christ as doorway to the Christian faith,¹⁰⁴ adds significance to the stage at which Olav recites his dreams. For his testimony too represents a statement of ‘true faith’, even if, in this case, that statement comes from the mouth of a layman.

One of the most attractive features of *Draumkvedet*, then, and one that distinguishes it from the parent tradition, is its blending of two taxonomies of conventions. Defining features of the ballad form, such as the rhyming metre and burden, the strong episodic focus of the narrative, and the romanticised protagonist render the visionary account attractive and accessible as a story, adding a fresh dimension to the stern didacticism of the Latin *Visiones*. Every aspect of *Draumkvedet*’s framing narrative draws attention to the extraordinary and marvellous nature of the experience recounted.

Eiríkr the Far-Travelled

The otherworld journey delineated in *Eiríks saga* represents the only one in this chapter which does not unfold within the framework of vision. Eiríkr enters the Earthly Paradise through a bridge situated at the remotest eastern border of the known world; in describing a corporeal

¹⁰³ *HómNo*, ed. Indrebø, pp. 95-99. Three MSS of this homily survive, two of them complete and contained in the Norwegian and Icelandic homily books, both of which date to around 1200. The third, incomplete, text pre-dates these and may go back to the 1150s. See G. Turville-Petre, ‘The Old Norse Homily on the Dedication’, in *Nine Norse Studies* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972), pp. 79-93.

¹⁰⁴ John 10:9: ‘Ego sum ostium. Per me si quis introerit, salvabitur et ingredietur et egredietur, et pascua inveniet’.

expedition, *Esv* is thus akin to a sub-category of *Visiones* which centre on corporeal pilgrimages to the otherworld. Prominent examples of this type are the twelfth-century *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, which describes a knight's entrance into purgatory through an insular cavern on Lough Derg in Ireland,¹⁰⁵ and the earlier *Voyage of Brendan*, chronicling the eponymous Irish saint's sea journey to certain legendary islands of punishment and bliss.¹⁰⁶ Numerous medieval maps locate Paradise within the confines of this world in the East, indicating that such physical quests need not necessarily have seemed less credible conceptually than visionary routes to the hereafter.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, there are several aspects of *Esv* that align it with the mythic-heroic journey narratives in the *fornaldarsögur*,¹⁰⁸ Norse tales about prehistoric heroes of a predominantly fantastic nature. It is set in a distant Norwegian past, and its protagonist is a figure of legend rather than history. Yet mythic-heroic features come together with a strong didactic theme in this saga. Eiríkr's quest to the far ends of the known world is at the same time a story of religious awakening, a theme which gives the narrative an allegorical dimension. A particularly important facet of the saga, moreover, is the author's incorporation of references to a wide array of literary motifs and conventions. A closer inspection of the framing narrative of this quest reveals this intertextual quality clearly. The circumstances surrounding Eiríkr's mission are presented as follows:

ÞRANDR er nefndr konungr sa er fystr Red firir Þrandhæime hann atte son þann er Eirekr het. hann var vinsæll madr þegar a vnga alldi hann var Ramr at afli fræknn ok framr at öllu. dreingiligr j vexti. Þess er getit ætitt iola kuelld þa streingde Æirekr þess heit at fara vm allan heim at leita ef hann fynde stad þann er heidnir menn kalla V dains akr. en kristnir menn jord lifande manna edr Paradisum. Þesse heit stræinging verdr fræg vm

¹⁰⁵ *Tractatus De Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, ed. R. Easting, *St. Patrick's Purgatory: Two Versions of Owayne Miles and the Vision of William of Stranton; Together with the Long Text of the Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, Early English Text Society 298 (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1991).

¹⁰⁶ *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis, from Early Latin Manuscripts*, ed. C. Selmer (Notre Dame, Ind., 1959); an Old Norse fragment of this account exists as *Brandanus saga*, printed in Unger, *Heilagra manna sögur*, Vol. I, pp. 270-5.

¹⁰⁷ Compare the Hereford Mappa Mundi, where the terrestrial paradise is depicted as an island in the far East off the Indian coast; reproduced in N. R. Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2003), p. 192.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. R. Power, 'Icelandic Otherworld Journeys', *Folklore* 96:ii (1985), pp. 157-174.

allan Noreg.¹⁰⁹

Soon after this pledge Eiríkr sets out on his expedition accompanied by eleven men. As we see, the author tells us little about which realm his protagonist initially means to find,¹¹⁰ or indeed his motivation for making this curious pledge. The context for this quest lies, I would suggest, outside the saga.

Though pledges of mythic proportions are not a rare feature of Norse-Icelandic literature,¹¹¹ Eiríkr's type recalls one striking episode in Norse historiography in particular. It is described in its fullest form in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, the introduction to *Heimskringla*, in which the historian traces the genealogy of the Swedish kings back to the Norse gods.¹¹² The third ruler of Sweden, we there read, was called Sveigðir; he was the grandson of the god Yngvifreyr, and his most noteworthy characteristic, according to Snorri, was his interest in Óðinn, whom he wished more than anything to meet. Like Eiríkr, Sveigðir makes a bold pledge, and like the former it concerns a quest to locate a mythical otherworldly realm: 'Hann strengði þess heit at leita Goðheims ok Óðins ins gamla. Hann fór með tólfta mann víða um heiminn' ('He made a pledge to search for Godland and old Óðinn. He travelled with eleven men widely around the world').¹¹³

Sveigðir was unsuccessful on the first tour, which took him to Turkey and Russia and thence back again to Sweden. But he reaffirmed his commitment and travelled eastwards again a year later. At a settlement named Steinn ('Stone') it so happened that the king one night, after an evening of drink, encountered a dwarf. This creature promised him that he would meet Óðinn if he jumped into a large stone behind him. And so this strange sequence of events concluded:

¹⁰⁹ *Esv*, ll. 2-10: 'Þrandr is named as king who first ruled over Þrandheimr. He had a son called Eiríkr. He was a popular person, and already as a youth strongly built, serious, best at everything, and sturdy in growth. It is said that one Yule eve Eiríkr made a pledge to seek that place which heathen people call Ódáinsakr, and which Christians call The Land of the Living or Paradise. This pledge grew famous all around Norway.'

¹¹⁰ On Ódáinsakr, see Chapter III, pp. 97-110.

¹¹¹ Rowe, *The Development of Flatteyjarbók*, p. 154-155, mentions the famous *heitstrenging* of Haraldr hárfagri not to cut or comb his hair before achieving the unification of Norway; cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Vol. I, p. 97.

¹¹² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Vol. I.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

‘Sveigðir hljóp í steininn, en steinninn lauksk þegar aptr, ok kom Sveigðir aldri út’ (‘Sveigðir leapt into the stone, the stone closed, and Sveigðir was never seen again’) (p. 27).

Snorri’s main source for this story, as for the greater part of *Ynglinga saga*, is the late ninth- or early tenth-century genealogy *Ynglingatal* by Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, in which the King’s remarkable death is also detailed. The story is thus one with long traditions in Old Norse literature; considering its humorous appeal, this is hardly surprising.¹¹⁴

The motifs of the patriarchal kings’ son, the pledge to find a mythic otherworldly realm, the journey east, and the accompaniment of eleven men establish a relationship between these two quasi-historical narratives which seems too substantial to be unimportant. Given that Sveigðir’s story is likely to have been widely known, the parallels would have been conspicuous to the broader medieval readership. What this intertextual link gives *Esv* is a context in popular literary tradition and thus an anecdotal quality. The fact that Sveigðir’s *heitstrenging* ended as it did lends a satirical dimension to Eiríkr’s pledge, one which the author seems cleverly to exploit by then navigating the quest onto a different, spiritual route.

Although *Esv*’s intertextual relationship with Sveigðir’s story is particularly overt, the author employs several additional strategies to reinforce his protagonist’s quasi-historical aura. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe has pointed out that Þrándr, mentioned above as the protagonist’s father, is referred to in a second genealogical narrative about the settlement of Norway, entitled *Hversu Noregr byggðist* (‘How Norway was settled’). Here we are told that Þrándr was the first settler of the region of Þrándheimr; he was the son of Nórr, founder of Norway, who in turn was descended from the mythic patriarch Fornjótr (‘ancient giant’).¹¹⁵ This genealogical link consolidates Eiríkr’s role as a Norwegian royal prototype. His heroic status is further underscored in his name, particularly through the prestigious sobriquet *viðforli*. For this epithet

¹¹⁴ Þjóðólfr ór Hvini, *Ynglingatal*, ed. Finnur, *Skjald B:I*. Also Theodoricus monachus, *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, ed. G. Storm, in *Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ: Latinske Kildeskripter til Norges Historie i Middelalderen* (Oslo, A. W. Brøgger, 1880), pp. 97-98, mentions Sveigðir’s remarkable death, noting that ‘it must clearly be considered a fairy tale’ (‘quod certo fabulosum creditur’).

¹¹⁵ The genealogy is found close by *Esv* in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Vol. I, pp. 22-25; Rowe discusses this intertextual relationship in ‘Origin Legends and Foundation Myths in Flateyjarbók’, pp. 441-454.

associates this traveller with a rather illustrious group of Norse literary voyagers. Óðinn, for instance, is described as ‘mjök viðföruull’ (‘very far-travelled’) in *Ynglinga saga*, a characterisation which there entails the prestige of a conqueror and warrior.¹¹⁶ Two heroes of Classical origin, Hercules and Alexander the Great, also share the epithet in Old Icelandic encyclopaedic and historical literature;¹¹⁷ also the narratives connected with these larger-than-life figures centre on extraordinary heroism and martial prestige. Alexander was of course also associated with journeys to the otherworld in medieval legend, as the widely disseminated *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* bears witness to.¹¹⁸ Eiríkr’s conversion to Christianity and eventual return to Norway as a prototypical Scandinavian convert foregrounds his relationship with a number of renowned missionary far-travellers too. His nominal association with figures such as Yngvarr (of *Yngvars saga víðförla*) and Þorvaldr (of *Þorvalds þáttur ens víðförla*),¹¹⁹ who in the tenth and eleventh centuries developed into standard-bearers of the new faith on the peripheries of medieval Christendom, highlights the Christian theme of his expedition and the conversion narrative at its core.¹²⁰

Over the course of the saga, the Norwegian prince grows from being a prehistoric pagan hero into a prototype of the royal convert. When the pagan Eiríkr receives education in Constantinople and adopts the Christian faith, Eiríkr’s quest takes a new course; the mythical realm he set out to find comes to be redefined as the Christian Paradise; and the *heitstrenging* that initially came across, like Sveigðir’s, as eccentric, if not absurd, is at last reconceptualised as

¹¹⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Vol. I, p. 11.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Alexanders saga*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1925), p. 13; *Alfræði Íslenzk*, ed. Kr. Kålund, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 37 (Copenhagen, S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1908), I, p. 52, ll. 30-31.

¹¹⁸ A Norse translation of this work is printed in the appendix to *Alexanders saga*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania, Carl C. Werner & Comp., 1848).

¹¹⁹ *Yngvars saga víðförla*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðulanda*, 4 vols. (Reykjavík, Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), Vol. II; *Þáttur Þorvalds ens víðförla*, ed. B. Kahle, in *Kristnisaga*, ed. Bernhard Kahle, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek (Halle, M. Niemeyer, 1905). On the latter’s missionary efforts, see S. E. Duke, ‘Recreating History: Literary Descriptions of Iceland’s Conversion to Christianity, 1100-1300’ (Unpublished diss., Oxford, 2001), pp. 164-181; G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 51-53.

¹²⁰ It is worth noting that Eiríkr himself becomes a historiographical prop in another mythic-heroic saga *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, also likely to stem from the fourteenth century. Here the eponymous protagonist is introduced as the nephew of Eiríkr, ‘er fann Ódáinsakr’; cf. *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðulanda*, Vol. III, p. 147.

part of a providential plan. This happens in a dream which Eiríkr receives at the very end of his journey, within Paradise. His ‘varðhaldsengill’ (‘guardian angel’) appears to him and explains his part in the making of Eiríkr’s quest:

eg var nær staddr þa er þv streingder heit ad fara sudur i heiminn. og eg eggjadi þig a ad sigla [s]udr til Miklagards. ad gudz bodi og minni forsia tokstu þar skyrn ... enn drottin sette mig vard halldz eingil þinn og hefí eg hlíjft þier bæde á sio og a lannde og i hvorium háska ferdar þinnar vardveitta eg þig fra illum hlutum.¹²¹

In this speech the angel retraces the major stages of Eiríkr’s progression, revealing that it was ‘Guðs boð’ (‘God’s commandment’) rather than he himself that set the entire quest in motion. In this way, the author retrospectively unveils the fuller thematic implication of the contextual link between Sveigðir’s and Eiríkr’s pledges: God directs his subjects to the destinations they merit.

The themes of Eiríkr’s literary quest to the otherworld have been assessed differently by different commentators. Rowe draws attention to *Esv*’s significance as a ‘foundation myth’, a story of royal conversion whose protagonist serves as a kind of prototype for the two main protagonists of the Norse-Icelandic conversion narrative, Óláfr Tryggvason and St. Óláfr.¹²² Elise Kleivane, in contrast, proposes that the tale can be read in two principal ways: either as an educational tale about the importance of pursuing one’s personal ambitions, or as a kind of religious parable, about God’s supervision of humanity, and every person’s place within His grander scheme.¹²³ The saga’s key quality, the fact that it can encompass such varying thematic interpretations, resides in the quintessential motif of the quest to the otherworld at the core of its structure. This motif draws together multiple understandings of progression on historical, spiritual, intellectual, social as well geographical levels. The journey motif simulates the course of life. As we shall see in the subsequent chapter, it is one of the most important conceptual frameworks through which medieval Scandinavians on both sides of the conversion set the

¹²¹ *Esv*, ll. 254-263: ‘I was close by when you made the pledge to go southwards, and I urged you on to sail south to Constantinople. On account of God’s commandment and my perspicuity you took baptism there ... And God appointed me to be your guardian angel and I have helped you both on sea and on land and in all dangers of your journey I protected you from bad things.’

¹²² Cf. Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 153-62.

¹²³ Cf. Kleivane, ‘Sagaene om Oddr og Eiríkr’, p. 39.

transitoriness of earthly life in relation to larger frameworks of time and existence.

V. Conclusions

In the foregoing discussion of differing Norse contexts of afterlife vision, I have sought to highlight the diversity of literary contexts we are faced with when examining Norse adaptations of *Visio* conventions. Our view across this range of contexts has also been a survey across the Old Norse literary landscape, comprising works of hagiography and history, Family Saga, eddaic and skaldic metres, as well as ballad narrative. This diversity attests to the breadth and depth of the Latin genre's impact on Old Norse written culture. *Visiones* were not merely translated in the narrower sense of the word, but adapted with a great degree of flexibility, imaginative energy, and with a variety of literary motives.

A characteristic worth special emphasis is the high degree to which this process of adaption is conditioned by indigenous political, social, poetic, and aesthetic interests. In highly idiosyncratic ways, *Rannveigar leizla*, *Sólarljóð*, *Vǫluspá*, *Gísla saga*, *Draumkvedet* and *Esv* marry *Visio*-topoi with new literary forms, motifs, and narrative conventions. Collectively, the works considered above display a broad and enduring interest in the literary potential of the concept of the afterlife vision. From the perspective of the Latin source tradition, the originality governing Western Scandinavian adaptations of *Visio* conventions in terms of generic and narrative contexts can thus be highlighted as a distinguishing feature of the Northern branch of this literary tradition.

III

Death and the Journey I: Passing Away

All texts of our corpus take for granted the view that earthly life is only one stage of a longer transition whose destination lies somewhere beyond biological mortality. This thought, or variations thereof, unites all major religions and mythologies. Medieval Christianity, as we saw in the Introduction, did not have a systematic model of the hereafter. Particularly with regard to the soul's fate between its separation from the body and the Last Judgment, canonical authorities were unsystematic. The church's reluctance to expand on the issue shows clearly in the Old Norse homily books, which go no further than stating in the most general terms that the soul does not die with the body:

æond vǫr er sva skapæð at hon ma alldrigi døyia. ok hværfr hon þo heðan. ok þar kœmr hon er bæðe væit hon gott ok illt sem her hefir hon til gort. Ðat mot værðr er mœtafc sculu allra manna licamr ok fælor þæirra at fæmu þa er domadagr er.¹

The present chapter examines how the texts in our corpus map out this theologically sparsely defined interim hereafter. I want in particular to consider the points on this stage of the transition to the otherworld where Christian conventions converge with indigenous traditions. How far does the motif of the otherworld journey itself represent a continuity between foreign and native literary conceptions of the hereafter?

Although texts such as the *Visio Pauli*, the *Visio Drycthelmi*, and the *Visio Tundali* offer detailed and vivid portrayals of hell and heaven, they do not collectively present a unified model of life after death. Certain eschatological ideas relate all *visiones* – the concept of the soul's immortality, the notion of a moral assessment, the fundamental division into spheres of reward and punishment. Yet the fact that there are substantial inconsistencies on points such as the location of hell and heaven, the physical realities of these spheres, their eschatological hierarchies and so on shows that, within the greater theological model, there was considerable

¹*HómNo*, ed. Indrebø, p. 101: 'our soul is created in such a manner that it will never die, but nevertheless it goes away, and arrives where it knows both the good and evil it has done. There will come a council when all human bodies and their souls will come together on the day of judgement'

room for variation. The wealth of portrayals of the otherworld in the Latin genre itself bears witness to the literary potential of the concept of afterlife vision; as we noted in the previous chapter, it was a realm that could be accessed in Iceland as well as Ireland or Italy, by visionaries of lay, clerical, or noble estates. There was an appetite for new discoveries and for the spectacular. In this respect one could say that Dante, Chaucer, and the poet behind *Pearl*, though their dream poems are part of a separate branch of Western vision literature, draw on a creative resource that was first extensively explored in the *Visiones*.

One factor that may have influenced the reception of *Visiones* in the North from the very beginning is that this region already possessed what seems to have been a vibrant indigenous tradition of literary journeys and quests to the otherworld. In some of the primary texts of our corpus references to such indigenous narratives are explicit, as we shall see in the following. But in this and the next chapter, both of which centre on the motif of the otherworld journey, I am less concerned with overt references than with a less tangible conceptual continuity between traditional Norse-Icelandic and Christian approaches to this subject. The phenomenon I wish to highlight is that authors across the extended conversion era and well into the Christian Middle Ages valued the rich literary potential of the hereafter as a space for creativity, cultural introspection, and affirmation of regional identities.

I will start this Chapter by analysing semantic connections between the notions of death and the journey in the Norse vernacular; this will lead us to consider precedences for the motif of the afterlife journey in Norse literary traditions outside the *Visiones* and how these may have affected the reception of the Latin genre. I will then focus on three of our primary corpus where one can observe that literary concepts associated with native myth and folklore play a central role and analyse their function within the respective narrative contexts. In the second half of the chapter, our focus moves on to Norse incarnations of the otherworld guide in *Gísla saga* and *Rannveigar leizla* and to their specific attachment to native literary traditions.

I. A Traditional Passage

In all Germanic languages, a common semantic association exists between the notions of death and the journey.² It is still common in modern English to say that someone has ‘departed’ or ‘passed away’; these may be compared with expressions such as ‘dahinscheiden’ (‘to part hence’) in German, ‘gå bort’ (‘to go away’) in Norwegian, and ‘skilja við’ (‘to part with’) in Icelandic. As George Lakoff and Mark Turner note in their valuable study of conceptual metaphors, this idea of death as a journey is one with long traditions in Western literature. It is part of the larger idea of human existence as a journey by which we have come to define and express our experience.³ The expressions quoted above reflect a conceptual framework rather than any concrete religious belief; they are symptomatic of the reality that the departed lives on in memory, commemoration, conversation, and literature.

Comparable death-metaphors in Old Norse literature show that this notion of death as a journey was prominent in medieval Scandinavia too, and could apply in similar ways in heathen and Christian contexts. Cleasby and Vigfússon remark that the verb *deyja* – ‘to die’ – itself sometimes acquires a ‘curious sense of motion’,⁴ as for instance in *Landnámabók*’s observation that Selþórir and his heathen kin, when their time came, ‘dó í Þórisbjörg’ (‘died into Þórir’s hill’),⁵ or when Gísli Súrsson’s better dream woman shows him the comforts of her home and tells him ‘hingat skalt deyja’ (‘you will die to this place’).⁶ A further example is found in *Hrafnkels saga*, where the eponymous protagonist states that his ‘dying away’ would leave his sons devoid of prospects: ‘lítill mun vera uppreist þeira, ef ek dey frá’ (‘their prospects will be

² J. Grimm offers a survey of death-terminology in Germanic languages in *Deutsche Mythologie*, Reprint of the 4th ed., 3 vols. (Leipzig, Reclam, 1953), Vol. II, pp. 250-256.

³ Cf. G. Lakoff and M. Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1989), pp. 1-17.

⁴ R. Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfússon, and W. A. Craigie, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1957), s.v. ‘deyja’.

⁵ *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, Íslenzk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), p. 99. Compare *Eyrbyggja saga*, eds. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), p. 9.

⁶ *Gísla saga*, p. 96, st. 27.

scarce if I die away’).⁷ Here passing away is bound up with a sense of abandonment.

Both the verbs *fara* (‘to go; travel’) and analogously *ganga* (‘to go; walk’) figure frequently in journey-as-death paraphrases: ‘eino sinni’, declares Sigurðr in *Fáfnismál*, ‘scal alda hverr/ fara til heliar heðan’ (‘at some point in time each person shall travel hence to Hel’).⁸ Analogous constructions occur in Christian contexts in phrases such as ‘fara til guþs’ (‘travel to God’).⁹ In this context it is interesting to note that the traditional term for ‘burial’ – ‘hel-för’ (‘travel to Hel’) – which certainly implies a mythological concept of death, remains in use in Christian literature.¹⁰

In some instances of the *Poetic Edda*, narratives of mythic theme seem to be coloured by clerical rhetoric: Atli, of *Atlamál in grænlenzko*, reacts to the news of his children’s cruel murders with the statement, ‘Friðra vil ek dauða/ fara í liós annat’ (‘I wish in a fairer manner to travel through death into another light [world]’).¹¹ This echoes the Old Saxon *Héliand*’s paraphrase of dying as searching (‘sôkien’) for a ‘lioht ôðar’ (‘other light’).¹² One may further compare this phraseology with one statement in *Beowulf* in which the hero, recalling the tragic fate of his foster-father King Hrēðel, says that the latter ‘chose God’s light’ (‘Godes lēoht gečēas’) when one of his sons killed the other and thus rendered any alternative courses of action unsatisfactory. Beowulf comments approvingly that this reflected the honourable act of a man ‘of life’ – ‘of life’ or ‘of substance’, as Seamus Heaney renders the phrase.¹³

An itinerary of more extensive proportions is evoked in *Sigurðarqviða in scamma*. We are there told that Guðrún, intent on taking her own life, would not be dissuaded from commencing ‘the long walk’: ‘léta mann sic letia/ langrar gongu’ (‘[she] let no one keep her from

⁷ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, *Austfirðinga sögur*, Íslenzk fornrit 11 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), p. 121.

⁸ *Fáfnismál*, st. 10; cf. sts. 34, 39.

⁹ *Blasius saga*, ed. Unger, *Heilagra manna sögur*, Vol. I, p. 261, l. 8.

¹⁰ See Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. ‘helför’; cf. mod. Norw. ‘slå; fryse; sulte ihjel’.

¹¹ *Atlamál in grænlenzko*, st. 84.

¹² *Héliand*, ed. J. E. Cathey, *Héliand: Text and Commentary* (Morgantown, West Virginia University Press, 2002), ll. 578, 5698. Further parallels are mentioned by K. von See, ‘Der altenglische Widsith’, in *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung* (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1981), p. 284.

¹³ *Beowulf*, ed. Fr. Klaeber et al., 4th ed. (Toronto, Toronto UP, 2008), ll. 2469-2471; S. Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), l. 2471.

the long walk’).¹⁴ This phrase, too, echoes Christian figures of speech.¹⁵ A clearly euphemistic spin on this metaphor of the death-journey is put into the mouth of Brynhildr: in a conversation with an ogress on her own journey to Hel, she recalls that one of her childhood exploits was to facilitate the Gothic king Hjalmgunnar’s death thus: ‘lét ec gamlan á Goðþjóðo/ Hiálm-Gunnar næst heliar ganga’ (‘I let the old man of the people of the Goths, Helmet-Gunnar, then walk to Hel’).¹⁶

Based on this apparent linguistic continuity in mythological and Christian narratives it is tempting to cite Magnus Olsen’s observation that in the idea of the post-mortem ‘journey’ (‘vandring’) to the world of the dead ‘møttes nordisk hedendom med kristendommen’ (‘Northern paganism and Christendom met’).¹⁷ Yet the contexts in which the notion of the journey of death is explored most fully on either side of the conversion are self-consciously literary. Like Christianity, Old Norse myth has its ‘descent narratives’. Hel is the destination of two prominent quests, both of which are connected with Baldr, the figure whose fate according to *Völuspá* and Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*, determines the course of the larger, cosmic narrative. We have already had occasion to mention the first of these – Óðinn’s journey to the fringes of Hel to interrogate the *Völva* about the ominous dreams of his son, Baldr. This narrative, most commonly known as *Baldurs draumar*, survives in a fourteenth-century codex, AM 748 I 4to, but is believed to predate this material setting by at least a century. The second narrative, which is only contained in Snorri’s mythography, centres on Hermóðr and his quest to bring Baldr back to life following his murder.¹⁸ After riding nine days through deep and shadowy valleys, Hermóðr gains entrance to the realm of the dead, where he obtains Hel’s promise that Baldr will be revived on the condition that the entire creation sheds tears over him. Disguised as a tearless ‘gýgr’ (‘ogress’), Loki

¹⁴ *Sigurðarqviða in scamma*, st. 43; cf. st. 45.

¹⁵ Cf. Grimm, *Mythologie*, Vol. III, p. 250; K. von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, 7 vols. [of 9] (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1997- 2009 [work in progress]), Vol. 6, p. 416; the latter points amongst other parallels to the ‘longne weg/ to þam fæggran gefean’ which St. Guthlac anticipates for his soul in *Guthlac B*, ed. J. Roberts, *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979), ll. 1180-1.

¹⁶ *Helreið Brynhildar*, st. 8.

¹⁷ M. Olsen, ‘Gjøre bro for ens sjæl’, *Maal og Minne* (1936), p. 211.

¹⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, pp. 47-49.

prevents this from materialising.

There are several elements to the Baldr myth that suggest influence from or assimilation with Christian motifs.¹⁹ Especially striking is the narrative structure underlying this peace-loving god's death – the agency of the treacherous Loki and the event's centrality in the history of the Norse Cosmos. In *Völuspá*, Baldr is spoken of as 'blóðgom tívor' – 'the bloodstained sacrifice' (st. 31, Dronke's translation) –, an image which verbally and visually calls to mind the narrative of Christ's passion.²⁰ Snorri, moreover, recounts that, in seeking revenge against Loki, the gods chased him down and chained him to three stones, where he was to lie in fetters until the day of Ragnarök.²¹ The figure of Loki thus takes on features both of Judas in the messianic narrative and of the 'serpentem antiquum' ('old serpent') who John observes being shackled in a bottomless pit until Doomsday in the New Testament Apocalypse (20:2). Baldr, the most Christ-like of the gods introduced to us in the literary sources on Old Norse mythology,²² in a comparable way to the Scriptural figure falls victim to the malevolent agents of the cosmos, but in this fulfils the essential precondition for fresh life and a new universal order. According to *Völuspá* and Snorri's *Gylfaginning* Baldr's death is the cardinal eschatological event, similar in universal significance to Christ's sacrifice in Christian salvation history.

On the level of imagery, too, the descent narratives have been connected with Christian didactic writing in general and *Visiones* in particular. Christopher Abram convincingly demonstrates that certain elements of Hermóðr's journey in Snorri's account bear imprints of this genre. Especially striking is the topographical detail of the 'ðökkva dala ok djúpa' ('dark and deep valleys') (p. 47, l. 8) through which the demi-god rides for nine nights, a motif which

¹⁹ Cf. Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, pp. 94-98; J. Lindow, who has conducted a comprehensive study of the Baldr myth, suggests that messianic analogues were emphasised by mythographers such as Snorri in the interest of presenting Old Norse myth within a theological framework, but that the god's tradition in Norse mythology is in essence independent from Christian traditions; see his *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (Helsinki, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 1997), pp.174-178.

²⁰ As Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, p. 139 notes, *tívor* is a hapax legomenon in Old Norse; in Old English poetry the cognate *tifer* is used in religious verse with reference to Christ.

²¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 49.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 23, ll. 15-19: "Hann er beztr ok hann lofa allir. Hann er svá fagr álitum ok bjartr svá at lýsir af honum ... Hann er vitrastr Ásanna ok fegrst talaðr ok líksamastr".

immediately recalls the shadowy vale along which Drycthelm and his guide descend to hell.²³

Hel, moreover, is in Snorri's narrative explicitly said to lie in a northerly direction, a detail that reflects a geographical attribute of the inferno prominent in Christian literature, but which is absent from the eddaic source material on Hel.²⁴

Even though certain components of the Baldr myth – such as Hermóðr's descent – thus appear to be late constructs, it would be overstated to judge the entire myth a configuration of Christian narratives. After all, references to Baldr, his fate, and its seismic impact on the course of the divine history are found in numerous contexts in eddaic and skaldic poetry.²⁵ One may conjecture that certain features inherent to the myth at an earlier stage of development lent themselves to comparison and assimilation with the messianic narrative and over time took on some of its features; the paraphrase for Baldr in *Völuspá*, the motif of Loki in fetters, the imagery accompanying Hermóðr's journey to Hel would suggest such a process. Abram argues that the latter constitutes Snorri's own 'synthesis' of different literary traditions, eddaic and Christian, wrought in the interest of imposing coherence where this was lacking in his source material;²⁶ in the case of Hermóðr's literary descent, this seems plausible.

The fact that the vellums in which all written accounts of Old Norse myth survive derive from a firmly Christian cultural setting means that assessing their level of *authenticity* as records of pagan beliefs is in any case problematic. What one can assess, however, is the degree to which specific narrative patterns recur and stand in a thematic relationship with each other. Otherworld journeys indeed represent a central motif in the Norse poetic corpus. In an insightful article on the 'reseschema' ('travel scheme') of the *Poetic Edda*, Lönnroth describes the common journey paradigm relating *Baldrs draumar* and poems such as *Brymskviða* and *Skírnismál*.²⁷ In each of

²³ See C. Abram, 'Representations of the Pagan Afterlife in Medieval Scandinavian Literature' (Cambridge, Unpublished Diss., 2004), pp. 139-145.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-183.

²⁵ Cf. Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*, pp. 20-28; Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, Vol. I, pp. 270-271.

²⁶ Abram, 'Representations', p. 184.

²⁷ L. Lönnroth, 'Skírnismál och den fornisländska äktenskapsnormen', in *Opuscula Septentrionalia: Festskrift til Ole Widding*, eds. B. C. Jacobsen et al. (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1977), pp. 154-178.

these quests, the traveller's objective is to obtain or recover an object or condition yearned for by the gods, and in order to do so he must leave this world, a state of familiarity, stability and safety, and venture into the other, which is associated with hazard, chaos, death.²⁸ This taxonomy, which reappears in numerous later literary depictions of mythological quests,²⁹ also governs the structure of Hermóðr's descent. It is a paradigm, moreover, which differs in marked ways from the journey scheme of the *Visio*, whose end is not an object or condition located in the other world, but rather the traveller's internal transformation in the passage. The fact that such a tradition of journey narratives exists in native poetry helps to explain how a synthesis such as Snorri's, if indeed it constitutes a late construct, could nevertheless have seemed credible to medieval audiences.

In addition to this travel scheme, the Old Norse poetic corpus also includes certain early examples of narratives structured around the concept of the afterlife vision, narratives that appear to have developed independently from Latin visionary writing. Especially worth mentioning in this respect are the commemorative poems *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, composed in honour of Eiríkr blóðøx and Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri respectively, and believed to stem from the latter half of the tenth century.³⁰ The anonymous poet behind *Eiríksmál* describes how Óðinn in a dream perceived himself preparing his hall in expectation of the hero's arrival in Valhøll. He wakes the resident warriors and valkyries to prepare for the festivities. Eiríkr's entry to this hall is conceived of in heroic terms, as part of Óðinn's scheme to enlist the best and bravest of human warriors in his service in anticipation of Ragnarøk. Óðinn's court is already home to numerous illustrious personages; references are made to Baldr and to Bragi, the semi-divine principal poet, as well as to Sigmundr and Sinfljötli, two heroic figures whose role in the poem fittingly is to

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-156.

²⁹ For instance the well-known account of Þórr's expedition to Útgarðaloki in Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, pp. 39-44.

³⁰ *Eiríksmál*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I*; Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir, *Hákonarmál*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I*. It is generally believed that Eyvindr's poem is modelled on *Eiríksmál*; their formal relationship and respective representations of Valhøll are analysed in C. Abram, 'Representations', pp. 67-90. E. M Goeres, 'The King is Dead, Long Live the King: Commemoration in Skaldic Verse of the Viking Age' (Oxford, Unpublished Diss., 2010), pp. 93-125, compares the two poets' commemorative strategies.

receive the late chieftain to this community. On one level, this visionary poem commemorates Eiríkr as an individual; on the other, it presents a vision of the other world as a hall of fame where cultural idols and ideals are preserved, live on in prosperity, and oversee the state of humankind. In *Eiríksmál*, the hereafter is a kind of cultural sanctuary whose riches lie open to be explored in poetry. And it remains a source of literary inspiration for later Scandinavian authors long after the conversion. Consider, for instance, the rich array of travel narratives in Snorri's and Saxo Grammaticus' mythographies,³¹ in later quasi-*eddaic* verses such as the *Svipdagr*-poems and *Skíðaríma*,³² and in the large body of *fornaldarsögur*.³³

The narratives described above indicate, I think, that the conception of the otherworld journey was an important one in native literature before the *Visiones* began to circulate in Western Scandinavia, and that one can thus speak of an indigenous Norse tradition of such narratives. Although Olsen's above-quoted observation thus touches on an important sense of continuity between pagan and Christian cultures, the characteristic worth stressing is that this continuity, as far as we can estimate from the sources, is first and foremost literary rather than religious in nature. It is the common *literary* interest in the mortal's transition to another world which relates heathen and Christian portrayals of the hereafter most profoundly.

I would like, in the next section, to pursue this idea of the hereafter as a deeper cultural resource as manifested in three of our primary texts, *Eiríks saga*, *Sólarljóð*, and an Icelandic folk tale in Magnús Grímsson and Jón Árnason collection *Íslenzk æfintýri*. Each of these texts, while Christian in outlook, explores ways in which the motif of the Christian afterlife journey intersects with literary motifs rooted in Norse myth and folklore. My concern is to identify the traditions behind these motifs and examine how they are rendered meaningful within their fresh narrative contexts.

³¹ Cf. Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. A. Holder (Strassburg, K. J. Trübner, 1886), especially pp. 23-24, 31, 285-292.

³² Cf. *Svipdagsmál*, ed. G. Neckel, *Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 2 vols., 2nd revised ed. (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1936), Vol. I; *Skíðaríma*, ed. T. Homan (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1975).

³³ For a survey of the imaginative otherworld itineraries in the *fornaldarsögur*, see Power, 'Icelandic Otherworld Journeys', pp. 157-174.

Ódáinsakr

Eiríkr's expedition to the Christian otherworld, as we saw in the previous Chapter, commences with a pledge to seek a mysterious, seemingly mythic place by the name of *Ódáinsakr*. What is it the Norwegian prince means to find when he makes this vow, and why does he instinctively travel eastwards to find it? The place-name itself is a composite consisting of the negatively prefixed adjective 'dáinn' ('dead') and the noun 'akr' ('cultivated field; land'). This one could render 'field' or 'land of the Undead' in English. In the course of the saga, this name is equated with two further designations, 'Paradisum' ('Paradise') and 'iord lifande' ('The Land of the Living').³⁴ The latter term, applied to Paradise elsewhere in Old Norse literature too,³⁵ echoes the eschatological place or state alluded to in Psalm 114:9 in the statement 'Placebo Domino in regione vivorum' ('KJV Psalm 116:9: 'I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living').³⁶ This Psalm was integral to the medieval office of the dead.

The king of Miklagarðr draws the analogy between *Ódáinsakr* and Paradise in a straightforward manner, as if the two differed only nominally. But one must presume that the author employed the term conscious that audiences would associate it with a realm of myth or legend. That said, however, allusions to this place in the Old Norse literary corpus are few, and discrepant in their descriptions. Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* contains the reference commonly considered the oldest.³⁷ Here one reads that a certain 'Vndersakre' was the region to which Fiallerus retreated after he was driven to exile by the people of Scania.³⁸ The Danish scholar, however, has little to say about this region, noting only that it is 'unknown to our people' ('nostris ignotum populis'). There are no immediate linguistic reasons, moreover, for linking this place-name with the one found in *Esv*. Its first element appears to derive from the preposition 'und' ('below'), thus yielding the more general designation 'Underworld'. Within Saxo's

³⁴ *Esv*, ll. 130-131.

³⁵ *Messuskýringar: Liturgisk symbolikk frå den norsk-islandske kyrkja i millomalderen*, ed. O. Kolsrud (Oslo, J. Dybwad, 1952), p. 30, ll. 14-18: 'ef ver leitum eigi til fættar vid hann vm þat er ver misgíorum að ver megum þaa ok eigi komazt til þess oðalf er ofl er heitið. er lifande manna iorð heiter. þat er paraðis eda. fialft himenRiki'.

³⁶ J. D. Shafer, 'Saga-Accounts of Norse Far-Travellers' (Durham, Unpublished Diss., 2010), p. 114, note 56.

³⁷ Cf. R. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. A. Hall (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1993), s.n. 'Ódáinsakr'.

³⁸ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Holder, p. 105, ll. 28-30.

narrative context, ‘retreating to Undersakre’ thus appears to be merely another way of saying that Fiallerus ‘perished’.

Only in the *fornaldarsaga Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* – a tale unlikely to be much older than the saga under discussion – is a place mentioned which shares the name of Eiríkr’s destination. It is associated with Guðmundr, a legendary king described in numerous mythic-heroic sagas as ruler of Jötunheimr (‘The Giant-World’), situated somewhere in the north of modern-day Russia – or ‘Risaland’ (‘Giant-Land’) as it is sometimes called. *Hervarar saga* describes it in the following terms:

Guðmundr hét konungr í Jötunheimum; hann var blótmaðr mikill; bær hans hét á Grund, enn heraðit á Glasisvöllum; hann var vitr ok ríkr; hann ok menn hans lifðu marga mannsaldra, ok því trúa heiðnir menn, at í hans ríki sé Ódáinsakr, en hverr, er þar kemr, hverfr af sótt ok elli, ok má eigi deyja.³⁹

Despite this belief, however, according to *Hervarar saga* Guðmundr did meet his end eventually, and after that people began to sacrifice in his name and to venerate him as a god. The coupling of the place-names Glasisvellir and Ódáinsakr in the excerpt above leads us deeper into native complexes of mythic otherworlds. A compound of the nouns ‘gler’ (‘glass’) and ‘völlr’ (‘field’), these ‘Shining Plains’ are mentioned in a number of mythic-heroic sagas, always in connection with Guðmundr. Linguistically this concept evokes places described in heroic poetry and treatises on Old Norse myth. In *Helgaqviða Hjörvarðssonar*, st. 1, a realm called ‘Glasislundr’ (‘The Shiny Grove’) represents the home of King Hjörvarðr. Most commentators have in turn connected this place with the place Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* describes as a ‘lundr, sa er Glasir er kallaðr’ (‘grove, which is called Shiny’), and which is located in front of Valhöll.⁴⁰ This tree, or grove, owes its name to its golden foliage.

³⁹ *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. II, p. 309: ‘There was a king in Jötunheimr by the name of Guðmundr. He was a man of great sacrifices. His settlement was called Grund, and his country Glasisvellir (‘Shining Plains’). He was a wise and wealthy man. He and his men lived lives of several generations, and therefore heathen people thought that his country was Ódáinsakr, and that each person who reaches it escapes illness and age, and will not die.’

⁴⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. A. Faulkes, 2 vols. (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), Vol. I, p. 41, l. 22-23. Cf. von See et al., *Kommentar*, Vol. 4, pp. 421-422.

Glasisvellir's only permanent characteristic across the various sagas is its chieftain Guðmundr. According to the *þáttur* ('story') of Þorsteinn Bæjarmagn ('Mansion-Might') the people dwelling there are distinctive for their great size; the account of Helgi Þórisson, in contrast, highlights the beauty of its female inhabitants.⁴¹ That *Hervarar saga* should associate Glasisvellir with Ódáinsakr illustrates that both place names were, at least in the fourteenth century, concepts that authors could configure in flexible ways according to differing narrative requirements. Hence also the apparent geographical discrepancy between the Lands of the Undead in *Hervarar saga* and *Esv* was in all likelihood irrelevant to contemporary audiences, who most likely recognised in them formulae of legend rather than primarily geographical realities.

Even so, the fundamental idea of an earthly region free of mortality may well have existed in literature and folk belief in the pre-Christian North, just as in other mythologies. Classical myth, we recall, has its Elysium and Celtic folklore is rich in accounts of remote islands sheltered from age and illness.⁴² Rudolf Simek, moreover, points out that exotic peoples and places not bound by the common rules of age and mortality 'are mentioned in all Latin encyclopaedias of the Middle Ages'.⁴³ The notion of immortality was a prominent facet of the medieval imagination. A further precedent for the idea of an eastern region with the characteristics of Ódáinsakr in Old Norse myth is found in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*. In the previous Chapter we drew attention to Sveigðir's endeavour to find *Goðheimr* and its chief inhabitant, Óðinn, a story for which the Icelandic mythographer drew on the authority of the early genealogical poem *Ynglingatal*. A few chapters earlier in the same treatise Snorri informs us how this concept of *Goðheimr* came about and to what it refers. According to his euhemeristic account of the evolution of Norse mythology, the gods settled Scandinavia from Asia, the Æsir's

⁴¹ See *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. IV, chs. 4 ff., and *Helga þáttur Þórissonar* in the same volume.

⁴² An analogue to Ódáinsakr is the land named as *Tír na mBec* – 'Land of the Living Ones' – in Celtic folklore; see further H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester, Manchester UP, 1988), pp. 181-187.

⁴³ Cf. R. Simek, 'Elusive Elysia', in *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hemann Pálsson*, eds. R. Simek et al. (Vienna, Hermann Böhlau, 1986), p. 259.

place of origin, and here, on the basis of a creative etymological link, synonymous with Ásgarðr. Snorri tells us that, before he died, Óðinn announced that he would return to the east after his death and there live on in perpetuity in the ‘Land of Gods’:

er hann [Óðinn] var at kominn dauða, lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eignaði sér alla vápndauða menn. Sagði hann sik mundu fara í Goðheim ok fagna þar vinum sínum. Nú hugðu Svíar, at hann væri kominn í inn forna Ásgarð ok myndi þar lifa at eilífu. Hófsk þá at nýju átrúnaðr við Óðin ok áheit.⁴⁴

Ynglinga saga’s version of events suggests that the world in people’s conceptions divided into two halves, the *Manheimr* (‘World of Men’) in the North, and *Goðheimr* (‘World of Gods’) in the remote east. The same Ásgarðr, which in the mythological scheme is the permanent abode of the *Æsir*, is here introduced as both their original earthly and final eschatological home. As von See points out, the euhemeristic Ásgarðr, like the mythical one, possesses otherworldly features; in the context of *Ynglinga saga* it too attains the likeness of a ‘[himmlisches] Gefilde ... dessen Bewohner ewiges Leben haben’ (‘heavenly dominion ... whose inhabitants enjoy eternal life’).⁴⁵ It is this earthly otherworld Sveigðir is intent on finding, and it is because of its identification with Asia that he travels eastwards to find it.

In view of the apparent close links between *Esv* and the story of Sveigðir, it may well be that the author of the former based his concept of Ódáinsakr on the Goðheimr mentioned by Snorri. It is certainly notable that Eiríkr too instinctively sets out in the same direction to find his Land of the Undead. A possible etymological link that may bring the two together was suggested by Jacob Grimm, who proposed, though not with reference to the two narratives in question, that the place which came to be known as Ódáinsakr might have had its roots in an earlier place-name such as **Óðinsakr* (‘Land of Óðinn’); this, Grimm suggests, was once a term for Valhøll, Óðinn’s traditional home in the other world.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Vol. I, p. 22: ‘when he [Óðinn] was close to death, he had himself marked with a spear point and dedicated to himself all men who die in battle. He said he would go to the Land of Gods and there welcome his friends. Now the Swedes believed he had returned to the ancient Ásgarðr and would live on in eternity. In the wake of this, sacrifices and worship of Óðinn again flourished.

⁴⁵ K. von See, *Mythos und Theologie im skandinavischen Hochmittelalter* (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1988), p. 46.

⁴⁶ Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, Vol. II, p. 687.

We may infer, then, that the place referred to in *Esv* produced a number of associations with contemporary audiences, associations bridging regions described in Old Norse myth, mythic-heroic narratives, and Christian sources. The point worth stressing in this context is that the idea of a state of immortality was one that overarched these different kinds of lore, and that it, as *Esv* demonstrates, engaged authors on both sides of the conversion.

Á norna stóli

Sólarljóð differs from *Visiones* generally in that it does not represent a near-death experience as such, but purports to recount the post-mortem journey of a soul who has already passed away. The poem attains a rare sense of realism through its vivid impressions of the dying individual's physical and mental condition; at the same time, however, it is an account that candidly draws attention to the indescribable nature of its own subject. Over the course of stanzas 43-52 the speaker traces the separation of his soul from the body, describes the physical symptoms prefiguring his death, and outlines the route his soul took immediately upon death. The journey described is complex both rhetorically and in its thematic implications.

The seven elegiac sun-stanzas (39-45) at the centre of the poem delineate how the speaker's senses grow increasingly feeble; his eye-sight turns dim, and his heart is ailing:

Sól ek sá á sjónum skjálfandi
 hræzlufullr ok hnipinn,
 þvít hjarta mitt var harðla mjök
 runnit sundr í sega.⁴⁷

In Icelandic poetry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, this sentiment of anxiety is prominent and finds frequent expression. It is memorably expressed, for example, in the fourteenth-century Marian elegy *Lilja* ('the Lily'), where imagery similar to the above recurs: 'Tvá hræðumz ek', the narrator there reveals: 'dóm ok dauða ... hrygðin slítr af hjartarótum/ harðan styrk í sútamyrkri' ('I fear two things: judgement and death ... sadness tears

⁴⁷ *Sólarljóð*, st. 43: 'I saw the sun quivering in my eyes, frightened and sad, for my heart was torn apart forcefully.'

the strength from the heart-roots in the dusk of sorrow’) (sts. 76-77).⁴⁸

The *Sólarljóð*-speaker’s premonitions of the hereafter are accompanied by images of the corporeal symptoms of fading life; ‘tunga mín var til trés metin’, he relates, ‘ok kólnat at fyrir utan’ (‘my tongue became like wood ... and I was cool outwardly’) (st. 44).⁴⁹ More enigmatic is the description of the moment of his death, which he recalls as a drawing together of alpine waters: ‘fjalla vötn lukðuz fyrir mér saman,/ en ek hvarf kaldr frá kvölum’ (‘the mountain waters closed before me, and I turned away cold from the torments’) (st. 45). This is followed by a striking delineation of the soul’s release from the earthly shell, envisioned as a ‘rebirth’ into a new existence. This is a stage of the journey which this poet canvasses in far more detail than any of the *Visiones*:

Vánarstjarna fló – þá var ek fæddr –
 burt frá brjosti mér.
 hátt hon fló; hvergi hon settiz,
 svát hon mætti hvíld hafa.⁵⁰

The speaker’s soul, one gathers, does not immediately find access to the other world; for a while it hovers, unable to find rest. The pronounced sense of movement – ‘hátt hon fló’ (‘high it flew’ [emphasis added]) – stresses the liberating nature of this new existence and stands in clear contrast to the images of physical constraint evoked in the concluding scenes of the speaker’s earthly life. At the same time, however, two last glimpses of the deceased body show that the separation is not complete: ‘Öllum lengri var sú in eina nótt,’ he recalls in stanza 47, ‘er ég lá stíðr á stráum’ (‘Longer than all others was the night ... in which I lay stiff on the straw’).⁵¹ His focus then moves to the image of his grave, the ‘sandi orpin sæng’ (‘sand-cast bed’) awaiting his

⁴⁸ Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, *Lilja*, ed. M. Chase, *Skald VII:1*, sts. 76-77; This and further poetic uses of the heart in Old Norse poetry are discussed by K. von See, ‘Das Herz in der Skaldendichtung’, in *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung*, pp. 73-83.

⁴⁹ Compare the physical symptoms described in *Duggals leizla*, ed. Cahill, p. 11, ll. 3-6: ‘fell líkamr hans til iardar nidur sem alldri hefði ond i uerit þui (næst)fellu oll sonn dauda mork □ hann har hans fell en enni roknadi Augu hans um sneruzt enn nasaraufar hans byrgduzt uarar bliknudu haka ofan seig og allir líkamslider hans kolnudo’.

⁵⁰ *Sólarljóð*, st. 46: ‘A star of hope flew – I was then born – away from my breast. High it flew; settling nowhere to find rest.’

⁵¹ Illustrations in Medieval Books of Hours show the deceased placed on beds of sand in connection with the last washing of the body, a rite alluded to also in *Sólarljóð*, st. 50; compare Roger S. Wieck, ‘The Death Desired: Books of Hours and the Medieval Funeral’, in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, eds. E. E. DuBruck and B. I. Gusick (New York, Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 436-438, and Fig. 7.

physical remains (st. 49). Appended to this image is the gloss ‘þat merkir þat,/ es mælti goð,/ at maðr es moldu samr’ (‘this shows, as God said, that man is the same as dust’), a verbal echo of the liturgical office of the dead.⁵²

When we regain sight of the traveller on his way through the other world, we see that he is held up in several unexpected places. He relates that he dwelt nine days ‘Á norna stóli’ (‘on the chair of the norms’) (st. 51), and thence proceeded ‘á hest’ (‘on horseback’) towards ‘kvölheima’ (‘worlds of torments’) (st. 53). In-between these sequences the poet paints a striking image of the speaker clearly in a state of disorientation as he searches for a route into the other world:

Utan og innan þóttumz ek alla fara
sigrheima sjau;
upp ok niðr leitaða ek æðra vegar,
hvar mér væri greiðastar götur.⁵³

The speaker’s solitary search and uncertainty contrasts with the experience of visionaries in the Latin genre, who are typically introduced to their guides at this stage. The thematic implication of this episode in *Sólarljóð* is not immediately apparent, but the poet’s manifold uses of the figure of the journey throughout the poem furnish one thematic framework.

Sólarljóð is rich in journey imagery, and in many places this imagery represents spiritual or moral conditions. This is symptomatic on the one hand of the strong conceptual link between life, death and the notion of journeying we discussed earlier in the chapter, but on the other significant enough to constitute a distinct thematic thread throughout the poem. When the speaker describes his physical death, for instance, he employs the image of movement away from this world: ‘ek hvarf kaldr frá kvölum’ (‘I turned away cold from the torments’) (st. 45), and in stanza 15 he warns that those persons who pursue symptoms of pride distance themselves from God: ‘þeir hverfa, er honum [ofmetnað] fylgja,/ flestir guði frá’ (‘most of those who follow it [pride] turn away from God’). In stanza 27, he stresses the importance of ‘finding’ God –

⁵² Compare *Stjórn*, ed. Unger, p. 40 (1 Gen. 3:19): ‘þu ert molld ok i molldina mant þu aprt huerfa’.

⁵³ *Sólarljóð*, st. 52: ‘It seemed to me I searched through the seven homes of victory outwards and inwards; I searched up and down for better ways where the most convenient roads for me would be.’

‘mjök fyrir verður manna hverr,/ er sér finnrat föður’ (‘each person comes to nothing, who does not find the Father for himself’); and a few stanzas later the speaker, now bound by the fetters of death, laments that it is simple to travel as long as one is free: ‘Létt er lauss at fara’ (‘Unfettered, it is easy to move about’) (st. 37). In this kind of phraseology, the poem’s overarching ‘vandringsmotiv’ (‘journey motif’), as Fidjestøl called it, is supported by thematically consistent rhetorical structures.⁵⁴ This is a theme, moreover, which attracted contemporary poets especially, most notably perhaps the skalds behind *Leiðarvísan* (‘The Way-Guide’) and *Líknarbraut* (‘The Way of Salvation’),⁵⁵ who establish intricate figural connections between the ideas of Christ’s life and passion, pilgrimage, prayer, poetry, and faith.

The image of the disoriented traveller in *Sólarljóð*’s stanza 52, moreover, ties in with a number of episodes in the poem in which the poet explores the negative implications of the life-as-journey concept, the consequences of going astray or making the wrong turns. In the very first stanza group of the poem (sts. 1-7), we hear of a traveller who, weary and lost for direction, is taken in by a kindly local. He provides for him and invites him to stay for the night, but comes to pay a heavy price: the stray guest murders his sleeping host. The figural theme of physical and moral disorientation is developed further in exemplum 5 (sts. 19-24), which centres on the image of a road as a locus of deceit and murder. A certain Sörli falls victim to the persons guilty of killing his brother. While on the road together, they plot to murder Sörli, who had naively accepted their offer of material compensation. The road on which the murderers hide his body is described as a ‘leynigata’ (‘road of concealment’), harbouring both the innocent victim and with him the offence of his assailants (st. 24).

Among the punishment scenes delineated in the afterlife section of the poem, two centre on journeys of an undesirable and painful sort. In stanza 59 men whose faces are ‘reddened from women’s blood’ (‘rýgjar blóði roðin’) travel on ‘glæddur götur’ (‘glowing paths’) (cf. st. 31); yet others, who in this life had been seduced by earthy attractions are described walking down

⁵⁴ Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 34 traces this thematic principle in *Sólarljóð*’s formal composition.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Leiðarvísan*, ed. K. Attwood, *Skald* VII:1, sts. 38, 41; *Líknarbraut*, ed. G. S. Tate, *Skald* VII:1, sts. 31-37.

misleading avenues: ‘þeir váru villir vega’ (‘they were going astray’) (st. 62).⁵⁶ Their emotional reaction to this censure is ‘grief’ (‘ófagnaðr’). These scenes of punishment visualise the proverbial ‘paths of wickedness’ in the topography of the other world.⁵⁷

Though it has proven difficult to trace unity in the poem’s formal structure, the poet’s sustained interest in the journey as moral image, I would suggest, functions as a major unifying element on a figural level. And so the speaker’s search for an adequate route in the other world must be understood as part of this extended conceit revolving around journeys misdirected or misconducted and their spiritual implication. We know from his own words that the narrator, like the sinners astray in the hereafter, was susceptible to worldly pleasures in this life; in stanza 35 he complains, ‘dvalarheim hefr dróttinn skapat/ munafullan mjök’ (‘God has created a world full of delights’) (cf. st. 36). With this pattern of spiritual journey images in mind, the poet’s vision of the speaker lost for ways in stanza 52 implies a sense of disorientation on a spiritual level.

In the context of such subtle Christian theological imagery, the poet’s reference to a mythical ‘seat of the norms’ may seem puzzling and out of place. Yet this is not the only allusion to mythological concepts in *Sólarljóð*. For instance, the poet pictures ‘heiðnar stjörnur’ (‘heathen stars’) (st. 60) hovering above the heads of certain inhabitants of hell as apparent signs of their earthly immorality. Elsewhere he refers to Frigg, ‘Óðins kván’ (‘Óðinn’s wife’) (st. 77), who is said to induce temptation among men – a kind of Nordic counterpart to the lascivious Venus.⁵⁸ Whereas these demonising images correspond to fairly common strategies of Christian exegesis, however, calling to mind for instance the references to the mythological *miðgarðsormr* (‘world serpents’) and the *jǫtnar* (‘giants’) in the inferno of the Old Norse Harrowing of Hell,⁵⁹ the ‘seat of the norms’ is less clearly part of a didactic scheme. It seems to denote a morally neutral

⁵⁶ This phrase echoes Óðinn’s description of his youth in *Hávamál*, st. 47: ‘Ungr var ek forðom,/ fór ek einn saman./ Þá varð ek villr vega.’

⁵⁷ Cf. Proverbs 4:14: ‘Ne delecteris in semitis impiorum nec tibi placeat malorum via’.

⁵⁸ The two heathen goddesses are identified with each other in the vernacular translation of Bracara’s sermon *De falsis diis*, ‘Vm þat huaðan otru hofst’, contained in *Hauksbók*, eds. Eiríkr Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1892-96), p. 159, l. 14. Though Óðinn’s wife would traditionally be Frigg, Larrington, ‘Freyja and the Organ-Stool’, p. 191, points out that the reference could also be to Freyja, who is associated with Óðinn and licentiousness in Christian writings too.

⁵⁹ *Niðrstigningar saga*, ed. Unger, *Heilagra manna sögur*, Vol. II, pp. 2-3.

concept to be interpreted in the light of the details provided.

In Old Norse myth, the norms are first and foremost associated with human fate. We know from the *Poetic Edda* that the three principal norms held powers over human life and death and that they could shape a person's fortunes. Is the speaker's involvement with them thus, as Fredrik Paasche suggested, a reference to the death-bed 'hvor den dødes skjebne blev avgjort' ('where the fate of the deceased was decided')?⁶⁰ Or is it rather the image of the seat that is important – perhaps an allusion to Hliðskjálf,⁶¹ the 'hásæti' ('high seat') on which Óðinn sat and peered through the worlds, and thus indicative of a heightened sense of vision or knowledge?

According to *Völuspá* the norms' dwelling place is at 'Urðar brunni' – the 'well of fate' (st. 19). This well lies by the world ash Yggdrasill, where Óðinn too is said to own a high seat (*Hávamál*, st. 111). In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri identifies this well with divine potency more generally, explaining that this is the location where the gods come to judge: 'Þar eigu guðin dómstað sinn' ('that is where the gods have their seat of judgment').⁶² The conversion-era skald Eilífr Guðrúnarson, whom Snorri quotes repeatedly in *Skaldskaparmál*, is attributed with a half-stanza that draws an interesting connection between this former seat of cosmic rule in native myth and the seat of the new judge, the Christian 'King of Rome':

Setbergs – kveða sitja
suðr at Urðar brunni –
svá hefir ramr konungr remðan
Róms banda sik lǫndum.⁶³

By associating the well of Urðr with the new Christian centre of divine power in this way, the skald interprets the conversion as a transfer of rule over human fate from the former authorities (whether the norms, Óðinn, or the entire pantheon of gods) to Christ. In an illuminating discussion of this verse, Vésteinn Ólason connects the notion of the *setberg* at the well of Urðr

⁶⁰ Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 183.

⁶¹ See Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 13, and the prose introductions of *Grímnismál* and *Skírnismál*; cf. Dronke's note, p. 331.

⁶² Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 17, ll. 30-31.

⁶³ Snorri Sturluson, *Skaldskaparmál*, ed. Faulkes, Vol. I, p. 76, st. 268: 'people say that he [Christ] sits south at Urðr's well on the cliff; so has the strong king of Rome taken over lands where the heathen gods are worshipped'; varying interpretations are possible, depending on the reading of the first word of line 1; compare von See 'Christliche Skaldendichtung', in *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung*, pp. 394-395.

with Óðinn's seat as described in *Hávamál*, and argues that it is the Christian significance of the baptismal water as an extension of the water of life springing from the metaphorical rock Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4) which leads the poet to construct this analogy.⁶⁴ But a more direct parallel to the images of the mythological seat and well is found in the Scriptural description of the well of life springing up at God's throne adjacent to the tree of life (Revelation 22:1-2). Analogously to the mythological well, this locus symbolises divine power of judgement over human lives and the centre of the divine realm. The new ruler over humanity has taken the seat of the old; and at least on a rhetorical level, the seat of the norms assumes Christian significance as the point of divine authority over earthly existence.⁶⁵

If it is the Christian seat of judgement we are invited to recall in *Sólarljóð*'s stanza 51, the speaker's nine days on the seat of the norms could signify an intermediate judgement in the hereafter where the soul would learn of its good and evil worldly deeds.⁶⁶ Although it would thus seem first and foremost to represent a rhetorical flourish, one that does not carry any actual syncretic significance, the image is nevertheless rooted in traditional native literary traditions. As Fidjestøl observed, this and other mythical allusions in the poem – even if Christian in implication – ‘fører tanken i retning av heidne førestillingar’ (‘direct our thought towards pagan ideas’).⁶⁷ In order to realise the concept's potential Christian meaning one must thus pursue its mythic connotations. And in this way the speaker's interlude on the norms' seat urges audiences to reflect on the deeper literary and cultural structures underlying the journey he engages on – the continuity residing in the concepts of human fate, death the journey bound up with it.

The Vengeful Fetch

In the collection of folktales published by Magnús Grímsson and Jón Árnason in 1852 as

⁶⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Setbergs kveða sitja’, in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. M. Dallapiazza (Trieste, Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), p. 485-487.

⁶⁵ Abram situates this stanza within the larger framework of contemporary religious and poetic transition in *Myths of the Pagan North*, ch. 4.

⁶⁶ Cf. the passage from *HómNo*, p. 101 cited in the introduction to this chapter.

⁶⁷ Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 42-43. See further Larrington, ‘Freyja and the Organ-Stool’, especially pp. 184-196, who highlights the nuanced functions of pagan imagery on the formal level of the poem.

Íslenzk æfintýri ('Icelandic Tales'), one story presents an interesting, though previously neglected, adaptation of the *Visio* form.⁶⁸ It is special in that it is a very late example of a prose account of this type, and because it revolves around a very precise and sensitive theological theme. Its protagonist is a parson who has failed to fulfil one of his most essential pastoral duties, to perform the ritual of baptism. One day an anonymous man approaches him in church and leads him away, showing him first the beauties of heaven, and then the terrors of hell, among which he will find his future home unless he makes restitution for his misconduct. When he returns to his parish he finds that seven years have passed, and estranged as he now is from his community, he retires to a monastic institution.

One should not ignore the fact that the textual history behind this legend is short; yet the theme it is concerned with, in addition to the generic relationship with the *Visiones*, means that the core narrative has some claims to greater age. Konrad Maurer, to my knowledge the only scholar who has commented on its date, rightly draws attention to its distinctive Catholic imprints – the protagonist's retirement to a monastic institution being perhaps the most obvious.⁶⁹ The accusation levelled against the parson is precise, and reflects a prominent issue in medieval theology and Icelandic law: 'Einu sinni var prestur', we read, 'Hann var ágjarn og ranglátur. Svo bar til, að hann var beðinn að skíra barn fyrir fátækan mann. Prestur nennti því ekki, og dó svo barnið óskírt' ('Once upon a time there was a parson ... He was greedy and intolerant. One time it came about that he was called to baptise a poor man's child. The parson, however, did not care to trouble himself, and so the child died unbaptised').⁷⁰

The Icelandic law code known as *Grágás* ('The Grey Goose'), a compendium which represents the legal principles of the better part of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, opens with a chapter devoted in its entirety to the issue of baptism; it outlines what was to be done if the child was gravely ill or no water was at hand, or indeed what was to happen if a parson refused

⁶⁸ *Íslenzk æfintýri*, eds. Magnús Grímsson and Jón Árnason (Reykjavík, E. Þórðarson, 1852), pp. 132-136.

⁶⁹ K. Maurer ed., *Isländische Volkssagen: Vorwiegend nach mündlicher Überlieferung* (Leipzig, Verlag der J. C. Hinrichs'schen Buchhandlung, 1860), p. 198.

⁷⁰ *Íslenzk æfintýri*, eds. Magnús Grímsson and Jón Árnason, p. 132.

to conduct the ceremony without good reason.⁷¹ From a legal perspective, the parson's offence would have warranted lesser outlawry – meaning de facto expulsion from Iceland for a minimum of three years (p. 4). Audiences may have seen this legal principle translated into the story of the parson exiled for seven years in the otherworld.

The parson's neglect entailed even more severe consequences for the child and its family. Christening represented the conceptual gateway into the Christian fellowship and thus also into the Icelandic community. For, according to contemporary religious doctrine, baptism represented the key to the prospect of salvation. Individuals sharing the fate of the infant in this story were, from a doctrinal perspective, destined for an alien status in the hereafter. The so-called *limbus infantorum* constituted an infamous obscure state, properly part of neither heaven, hell, nor purgatory.⁷² Because the unbaptised soul did not become part of the Christian model of salvation in theological terms, it could not be honoured with the normal commemorative structures on earth either. This dilemma is apparent in *Grágás*, which assigns children in this category a burial place on the fringes of the churchyard – ‘við kirkiu garð út. þar er mætisk vigð mold oc ö vigð’ (‘at the outer edge of the graveyard, where hallowed meets unhallowed ground’).⁷³ It also specifies that no requiem was to be sung for them. It is difficult to imagine that children suffering exclusion even on the level of ritual were ever conceptually integrated into the Icelandic community.

This makes the role played by the victim of the story within the vision the more striking. It is visualised in the figure of a bird which settles on the parson's head as he and the guide set out:

Þeir gengu nú út úr kikjugarðinum, og koma á völlu eina. Þá kemur fugl fjúgandi, og sezt á höfuð prestinum, og kroppar fast. Prestur ætlar að losa fuglinn úr hári sjer, en gat ekki.

⁷¹ Cf. *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852), Vol. I, ch. 1.

⁷² See further I. A. McFarland et al., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2011), s.n. ‘Limbo’. The doctrine was reviewed and officially abolished in 2007 by a commission presided over by the current Pope Benedict XVI on the grounds that its conception of salvation was too limited; the entire review is found in *Comissio Theologica Internationalis, The hope of salvation for infants who die without being baptised* (London, Catholic Truth Society, 2007).

⁷³ *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Vol. I, p. 7.

Hann biður aðkomumanninn að hjálpa sjer. En hann sagðist ei mega það, að svo stöddu.⁷⁴

The bird thus remains in place throughout the journey, until they return to the church. Only at this point does the guide release the bird from the parson's head and reveal its identity: “‘þú skalt vita,’ he says, ‘að það er hefnadarandi barns þess, er þú synjaðir skírnar’” (“‘you ought to know ... that this is the avenging spirit of the child whom you refused baptism’”) (pp. 135-136).

As the term *hefnadarand* (‘spirit of revenge’) does not seem to denote a distinct concept or category of being in Christian or secular sources, it is the image of the bird which is most expressive of the child's condition. As an animate double of the deceased child, the bird recalls the literary motif of the *fylgja* (‘fetch’) and *hamingja* (‘guardian spirit’) so often encountered in Old Norse verse and prose.⁷⁵ A fetch represents a person's spiritual double or alter ego; sometimes it takes the form of a human being, but it is more often visualised as an animal of some kind. In *Atlamáal in Grœnlenzko*, for instance, Kostbera, the wife of Högni, sees an eagle in her dream which, flying through the hall, leaves all people present drenched in blood: ‘dreifði hann oss öll blóði’ (‘he sprinkled us all with blood’). She takes this as a warning of impending danger: “‘Hugða ek af heitom,/ at væri hamr Atla’” (“‘I thought, from its threatening nature that it was Atli's spirit’”) (st. 18). In view of Atli's later treacherous and brutal killing of Högni and Gunnar, the visual identification with a bird of prey is thematically apt. This association is underlined by the etymological connection of Atli's name with the adjective *atall* – meaning ‘hungry for conflict; hostile’.⁷⁶ Gísli too learns about the imminent danger facing him before the last fight through a dream in which fowl play the central part: ‘dreymir hann, at fuglar kæmi í húsit ... þeir eru meiri en rjúpkerar ok létu illiliga ok höfðu válkazk í roðru ok blóði’ (‘he dreams that birds enter into the house ... they are greater than male ptarmigans, appeared threatening and

⁷⁴ *Íslenzk æfintyri*, eds. Magnús Grímsson and Jón Árnason, pp. 132-133: ‘They left the church yard and came to a plain; then a bird came, and settled on the priest's head pecking intently. The priest attempts to free the bird from his hair, but it could not be done. He entreats his companion to help, but he said he could not assist at this time.’

⁷⁵ Cf. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1975), pp. 227-230; J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd revised ed., 2 vols. (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1957), §§ 162-164.

⁷⁶ Cf. J. de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden, Brill, 1961), s.n. ‘Atli’; s.v. ‘atall’.

had wallowed about in blood’).⁷⁷ In this dream it seems to be the birds’ characteristic appearance – their fierce-looking beaks and eyes – that render them suitable as illustrations of Gísli’s antagonists.

As these two examples exemplify, sightings of this kind are especially common in connection with an individual’s death. The literary motif of the *fylgja* and *hamingja* is not fixed in its implication. Sometimes the fetch displays the physical characteristics of the person it represents; at other times it represents a person’s attitude or condition. The main characteristic of the bird in our story is its intimate relationship with the priest. It comes into the narrative as they leave the churchyard, and leaves as they return. This sequence reflects, as we have seen, the peripheral confinement of the child’s body in the sacral landscape. Clinging thus to the priest in the other world, the bird illustrates his essential part in the child’s fate; as such it also visualises the moral offence whose consequences return to haunt the parson. Perhaps it is significant, moreover, that the species and appearance of the bird remain unspecified. Coming from and returning into obscurity, the bird seems aptly to reflect the doctrinal and social position of the unchristened child in medieval Iceland.

II. Guides in the Old Norse Otherworld

The Old Norse generic term for the *Visiones* – *leizlur* (n. sg. *leizla*) – captures a defining element of the genre. Derived from the verb *leiða* (‘to lead; accompany’), the primary sense of the noun is ‘guidance’, though its semantic range extends to include the meaning ‘funeral’, or the last escort of the dead to the grave.⁷⁸ In the sense of ‘guidance in vision’, the term occurs in four distinct medieval codices; an entry in the chronicle *Konungsnáttal*, from the first quarter of the fourteenth century, is the earliest: under the year 1149 it reads ‘Leiðzla Dvbgals á Írlandi’ (‘the

⁷⁷ *Gísla saga*, p. 110.

⁷⁸ Cf. Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. ‘leizla’; Cleasby-Vigfusson, *Dictionary*, s.vv. ‘leiðsla’; ‘út-leiðsla’; ‘leiða’. Wellendorf, *Visionenliteratur*, 47, note 3, was applied with reference to both Christian and heathen burial rituals.

vision of Duggal from Ireland’).⁷⁹ Rannveig’s vision, meanwhile, is the only native visionary account to be associated with this title in a medieval codex.⁸⁰

Although they are a defining feature of the Latin genre, guides play significant roles only in two of our main texts. Where they do, however, in *Gísla saga* and *Rannveigar leizla*, they represent strong focal points. Both sets of guides in these texts are in their own way untypical incarnations of the *Visio* motif; Gísli’s dream women bring together features of mythical and Christian otherworld spirits. The three male guides in *Rannveigar leizla* distinguish themselves in demonstrating strong ties to the cultural setting of the visions in which they figure. The main point of interest in the second half of this Chapter is which native authority figures these guides represent and how the authors allude to various literary traditions associated with them. We will see that the identities breathed into life by the respective authors, because they produce strong resonances in the Old Norse literary corpus, present prime examples of the literary tendency we distinguished at the outset of this Chapter. Not unlike *Eiríksmál*’s vision of Valhøll, inhabited as it is by illustrious poets, heroes, and divinities of native tradition, the eschatological visions of *Gísla saga* and *Rannveigar leizla* present cultural spectacles in which familiar icons of the Norse cultural heritage star as guest actors; this gives the hereafter the quality of a cultural stage. A brief description of the role of the otherworld guide in the Latin tradition will allow us to discern the local colourings of our Norse incarnations more clearly.

In Christian tradition the prototypical otherworld guide is St. Michael.⁸¹ Though he is only a relatively minor figure in the canonical works of the Old and New Testaments, it is the intercessory role attributed to him in the prophecies of Daniel and John which seems to have provided the basis for his later popularity in the role of otherworld guide. He acts in this part

⁷⁹ *Konungsannáll*, ed. G. Storm, *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. G. Storm (Oslo, Norsk historisk kildeskriftfond, 1888), p. 114.

⁸⁰ See Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 49-50.

⁸¹ On St. Michael and the early literary traditions which gave rise to his prominence in the Middle Ages, see R. Johnson, *Saint Michael the Archangel in Medieval English Legend* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2005), ch. 1.

already in the apocryphal *Testament of Abraham*,⁸² a visionary text most likely penned in the first century AD, where he leads the aged patriarch on a journey through earth and the heavens to alleviate his anxiety of dying. In the *Visio Pauli* tradition, the archangel reappears in the role, there demonstrating his special role as ambassador of the deceased in bringing about the weekly Sabbath of sinful souls in torment. This intercessory aspect of his legacy comes on display in the judgement scenes of *Draumkvedet* too, where, as we mentioned earlier, he generously weighs souls towards Christ at the Last Judgment.⁸³

In medieval *Visiones*, the part of the psychopomp is performed by a large variety of male actors, and in some cases their relationships with their protégés are more intimate. In the case of Gundelinus, for instance, it is St. Benedict, the spiritual father of the novice's monastic order (the Cistercians), who appears in the role. He leads Gundelinus to the otherworld by the route of a ladder, an allegorical image of his rule's spiritual code.⁸⁴ In the early thirteenth-century *Visio* of Thurkill, a farmer from Essex, the thematic key is the religious centre of Santiago de Compostela. Evidently the English farmer had at some point made a pilgrimage there, for his guide, St. Julian the Hospitaller, reveals in the vision that they are returning to this shrine. St. Julian is himself intimately connected with this site as the patron saint of pilgrims.⁸⁵ In other cases, the connection between guide and visionary is more personal: the anonymous guide in *Duggals leizla*, for instance, surprises the visionary by calling him by name and revealing that he is his guardian angel.⁸⁶ Rare, however, is the scenario outlined in the ultimate stanzas of *Sólarljóð*, where a deceased family member figures in the role of the guide to the hereafter; to my knowledge, this only occurs in a late twelfth-century *Visio* recorded by Peter of Cornwall in which his grandfather, Ailsi, is reported to have been taken to hell and heaven by his own late

⁸² *Testament of Abraham*, ed. D. C. Allison (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

⁸³ Cf. *Páls leizla*; *Draumkvedet*, K1, 27-28; L4, 14-15; K5, 20-21; T5, 4.

⁸⁴ On this allegorical motif, see Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 250-252.

⁸⁵ *Visio Thurkilli*, ed. P. G. Schmidt, *Die Vision des Bauern Thurkill: Visio Thurkilli* (Weinheim, Acta Humaniora, 1987), p. 22.

⁸⁶ *Duggals leizla*, pp. 19-21; *Esv*, ll. 248-261.

father.⁸⁷

The relationship between guide and visionary typically simulates that of a master and his student and thereby revolves around the *dialogic* structure of much medieval literature of instruction (in the Norse corpus for instance the *Elucidarius*, *Konungs skuggsiá* or the *Prose Edda*).⁸⁸ The protagonist is here often portrayed as naïve, timid and slightly obtuse. The guide, on the other hand, embodies qualities of security and forbearance in addition to wisdom; his primary responsibility – for they were always male – is to elucidate the implication of what is seen but not understood. In these respects, the visionaries and guides in the *Visiones* are related to their more psychologically complex counterparts in thirteenth and fourteenth-century *Dream Visions*.

As *Visiones* occasionally acknowledge, the guided journey to the otherworld is not a product of Judaeo-Christian literature alone, but one intimately related to Greek and Roman literary traditions. The eighth-century author of the Latin *Vita* of St. Guthlac, Felix, recounts an episode in which the saint is abducted to the pit of hell to be tried for his spiritual strength, and in describing this place, he alludes to several concepts of the underworld of classical myth. He likens the pit to Erebus – the personification of primeval darkness or chaos –, and to the two rivers Styx and Acheron – border rivers across which the dead are often seen ferried by Cheron.⁸⁹ What is more, when Guthlac's guide, St. Bartholomew, finally emerges to aid the English hermit, we read that he arrives with all the 'ethereal splendour of the dwellings of the Olympus' ('aethereis sedibus radiantis Olimpi') (p. 106) – the latter, of course, being the magnificent dominion of the Greek divinities. Bede in the report of Drythelm's *Visio*, moreover, makes specific allusion to Aeneas' guided descent, recounting that the protagonist's journey proceeded

⁸⁷ *Visio Ailsi*, ed. R. Sharpe and P. Hull, 'Peter of Cornwall and Launceston', *Cornish Studies* 13 (1985), pp. 5-53. An important Classical example of a family member in the role as guide is found in the dream of Scipio; cf. Chapter I, note 73.

⁸⁸ The fundamental structure of the dialogue exploited in these medieval genres is of course one with deep roots in Western literature; see M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson (Minnesota, U of Minnesota P, 1984), especially pp. 120-136.

⁸⁹ Felix, *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1956), p. 106.

‘sola sub noctas per umbras’ (‘through the shadows in the lone night’),⁹⁰ a verbal echo which Bede’s learned audiences would certainly have recognised. A further noteworthy play on mythological imagery occurs in the *Visio* of Charles the Fat, which we know found its way to medieval Scandinavia too; when the anonymous guide arrives, he fastens a glowing thread around the visionary’s thumb.⁹¹ The scene immediately recalls Ariadne’s famous life-line given to Theseus at the labyrinth of Crete. This radiant thread ensures that Charles is not lost in the course of the journey ‘through the labyrinths of infernal torments’ (‘in laberinteas infernorum penas’),⁹² and safeguards Charles against the advances of the infernal monsters. Classical and Christian features of the otherworld journey, we may lastly note, converge on the most impressive scale in Dante’s *Commedia*; there it is Virgil, described by the Florentine as ‘lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore’ (‘my teacher and my author’), who serves as guide and wisdom personified.⁹³ Even if it is more often than not a silent facet of the *Visiones*, all these examples may serve to illustrate the fact that authors and redactors of such accounts across medieval Europe were aware of the rich narrative traditions bound up with the sphere they explored, and appreciated the potential residing in the concept of the otherworld journey for bringing such traditions together.

Certain otherworld journey narratives from medieval Scandinavia show an analogous interest in intersections between Christian and mythological incarnations of the guiding authority. Saxo, for instance, describes how an aged, one-eyed figure – a barely camouflaged Óðinn – took King Hading to his home and revealed events soon to come to pass.⁹⁴ In the fourteenth-century burlesque dream poem about Skíði, Þórr takes on the role, guiding the dreamer all the way from Iceland to Valhöll – here too apparently located in the eastern

⁹⁰ Bede, *Visio Drycthelmi*, eds. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 490 and note 2.

⁹¹ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, eds. Mynors et al, Vol. I, pp. 162-168; cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoseon*, ed. and trans. H. Breitenbach, *Metamorphoseon: Epos in 15 Büchern* (Zürich, Artemis Verlag, 1958), Book VIII, ll. 151-182.

⁹² *Visio Caroli Crassi*, ed. Mynors, p. 164.

⁹³ Dante Alighieri, *Divina commedia*, ed. and trans. J. D. Sinclair (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1961), *Inferno*, i, l. 85.

⁹⁴ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Holder, pp. 23-24; Abram, ‘Representations’, ch. 6, analyses the influence of Christian afterlife visions on a second expedition to the otherworld ascribed to Hadingus, p. 31 in the same volume.

hemisphere.⁹⁵ As we turn to our two primary texts, the facet I want to pay particularly close attention to is this intertextual nature in the guiding authorities portrayed – their merging of Christian conventions and specific Norse-Icelandic cultural traditions.

Gísli's Dream Women

Even though the *draumkonur* of *Gísla saga* articulate and represent principles of Christian morality in their respective dreams, their characteristics of appearance and behaviour derive from native lore. In them several literary traditions come together. ‘They are’, Lars Lönnroth notes, ‘at once pagan valkyries and Christian guardian angels, symbols of both life and death’.⁹⁶ The visions associated with their agency, furthermore, entail reflexes of eddaic, skaldic, and learned Christian conceptions of a particular class of mythic beings. How these various traditions intersect in the saga will be the topic of this section.

Compared to their Latin counterparts, the most striking characteristics of Gísli's dream authorities are their gender and the contrasting kinds of visions they represent. The better dream woman is the first to make her appearance in the saga. She is introduced in a dream which forecasts Gísli's death through the symbolic image of seven flames or fires: ‘váru sjau eldarnir, sumir váru mjök brunnir, en sumir sem bjartastir’ (‘there were seven fires; some were burning out, others were at their brightest’).⁹⁷ Though we know Gísli to be well versed in dream symbolism, in this instance it is the dream woman who interprets: ‘kom inn draumkona min in betri,’ the dreamer tells Auðr, ‘ok sagði, at þat merkði aldr minn, hvat ek ætta aptir ólifat’ (‘the better dream woman came in ... and said that that signifies the years remaining of my life’). To this prognostication she appends a number of ethical counsels in which she urges him, amongst other things, to abandon heathen practices and be charitable towards the poor: ‘hon réð mér þat, meðan ek lifða, at láta leiðask forna sið ok nema enga galdra né forneskju ok vera vel við daufan

⁹⁵ *Skiðaríma*, ed. Homan.

⁹⁶ Lönnroth, ‘Dreams in the Sagas’, p. 461.

⁹⁷ *Gísla saga*, p. 70.

ok haltan ok fátœka ok fáraða’ (‘she advised that, for the remainder of my life, I should relinquish the old belief and abstain from practices and rituals, and that I should care for the deaf, the lame, the poor and the helpless’) (p. 70).⁹⁸ In *Visiones*, the guiding authorities often impress moral guidelines of similar type onto their protégés before sending them back to their earthly bodies, and it may well be this motif in the Latin tradition that inspired the dream woman’s dicta.⁹⁹

In the second dream in which Gísli meets the better dream woman she invites the dreamer to come with her on a longer journey: ‘Hon sýndisk honum ríða grám hesti ok býðr honum beð sér at fara til síns innis, ok þat þekkisk hann’ (‘She appeared to him mounted on a grey horse and asks him to ride to her home with her; to this he consents’) (p. 94). As grey horses symbolise death elsewhere in Icelandic folklore, Gísli’s inclination to embark on the journey with the dream woman may indicate the dreamer’s willingness to die.¹⁰⁰

Once they arrive at her hall, the dream guide leads him inside by the hand and there tells him that their relationship will continue in this place when he dies. Directing him towards a ‘sæing blauta’ (‘soft bed’) (p. 95, st. 26), she announces: ““skaltu hingat fara, þá er þú andask, ... ok njóta hér fjár ok farsælu”” (“you will journey to this place when you die, ... and here enjoy riches and happiness”) (p. 94). In the verse she explicitly includes herself in this prospect, saying that he will be allowed to ‘govern [her]’ (‘mér ráða’) (st. 27). In the verse, moreover, Gísli refers to the woman as ‘brúðr’ (‘bride’) (st. 25), a term whose primary sense is ‘bride’ or ‘lover’, and thus underlines her romantic appeal; in Christian poetry, we should note, the semantic range of the term extends to ‘saint’, ‘Virgin’, and the ‘Christian church’ as bride of Christ.¹⁰¹ In this way the term in Gísli’s verse captures the apparent dissonance between the messages of Christian

⁹⁸ This passage has been specifically linked to 4 Ezra 2:21; cf. F. Paasche, ‘Estras aabenbaring og Pseudo-Cyprianus i norrøn litteratur’, in *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson 29. Maj 1928* (Copenhagen, Levin & Munksgaard, 1928), p. 201.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Visio Drycthelmi*, eds. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 494: ‘si actus tuos curiosius discutere, et mores sermonesque tuos in rectitudine ac simplicitate seruare studueris, accipies et ipse post mortem locum mansionis inter haec quae cernis agmina lactabunda spirituum beatorum’.

¹⁰⁰ Compare Lönnroth, ‘Dreams in the Sagas’, p. 460.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1931), s.v. ‘brúðr’; cf. Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. ‘brúðr’.

morality and erotic love which this better dream woman produces.

The worse dream woman is, in contrast to this well-meaning *brúðr*, both aggressive and jealous. Her dream appearances are bound up with images of physical torment: ‘kona kom til mín’, he once confides in Auðr, ‘ok batt á hǫfuð mér dreyrga húfu ok þó áðr hǫfuð mitt í blóði ok jós á mik allan, svá at ek varð alblóðugr’ (‘the woman came to me ... and bound my head with a gory hood, drenched my head in blood, and sprinkled blood all over me so that I was entirely soaked in it’) (p. 103). In an earlier dream she begrudgingly asserts that she will undo all that the better counterpart has promised him (p. 102). Unlike her better counterpart, this dream authority never journeys with Gísli to a definable dream location. She represents a spiritual condition rather than a place of torment. As Langeslag remarks, the visions she produces frame her as ‘malevolent agent’, one who imbues her dreamer with psychological agony and nightmarish premonitions of the hereafter.¹⁰²

While guides to the hereafter in the Latin tradition are never female, Norse literature contains a diverse population of female spirits, including the *norns* referred to in *Sólarljóð*, *disir* and *valkyries*. All these mediate between humanity and the divine in some respects, and their formal distinctions are not always clear.¹⁰³ In his recent study on female death spirits in Western traditions, Matthias Egeler discusses the two dream women in *Gísla saga* as reflexes of the figure of the valkyrie in particular.¹⁰⁴ The worse of the two, as he points out, is actually referred to by a valkyrie name – ‘geymi-Göndul’ – the first element of which means as much as ‘guardian’ or ‘protector’ (st. 31); seeing that the worse dream woman in fact offers pain and discomfort rather than protection, the attribute in the kenning seems at odds with her actual nature.¹⁰⁵ The term *valkyrja* is a composite of the components *valr*, meaning ‘the dead; the

¹⁰² Langeslag, ‘Dream Women’, p. 53.

¹⁰³ In her recent study *The Norns in Old-Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh, Dunedin, 2011), Karen Bek-Pedersen examines the references to female supernatural spirits in Old Norse literature and distinctions between them in some detail.

¹⁰⁴ M. Egeler’s recent discussion of these beings in *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen: Gedanken zur religionsgeschichtlichen Anbindung Nordwesteuropas an den mediterranen Raum* (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2011), especially pp. 95-107.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95; cf. *Lexicon Poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, s.v. ‘geyma’ and s.n. ‘geyma-Göndul’.

fallen’, and *kjosa*, ‘to choose’. Cleasby-Vigfússon note that they in addition to this can function as ‘guardian angels’ as well as ‘tutors of the heroes’.¹⁰⁶

On what basis they choose their favourites is not always clear in poetic sources. One of the earliest poems in which valkyries play a central role is *Hákonarmál*, the tenth-century panegyric by Eyvindr skáldaspillir.¹⁰⁷ The poem embeds an account of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri’s final battle and death into a mythological narrative spun around the Óðinnic death-myth. According to this, persons who fell in battle would dwell with Óðinn in Valhøll after death, and live in splendour until the final cosmic confrontation at Ragnarøk. In st. 1 of Eyvindr’s poem, Óðinn dispatches the two valkyries Gøndul, the prototype referred to in the kenning of *Gísla saga*, and Skoꝓgul to travel out and choose (‘kjósa’) a new member from among the rulers of the Yngling line. They set out – like Gísl’s better dream woman – on horseback, and arrive, as if themselves symptomatic of conflict, at the moment when Hákon’s fatal battle – the battle of Storð – is about to commence. They oversee rather than take active part in the outcome of this conflict.¹⁰⁸ Eyvindr describes the hero’s dawning awareness of the spirits’ presence as he fights and is wounded; it is this phenomenon of vision that marks Hákon’s death in the poem.

As personified symptoms of death, Gísl’s dream women evince a close relationship with Eyvindr’s depiction of the valkyries. All of Gísl’s dreams of them are thematically linked to his pending demise. In *Hákonarmál*, we note, the valkyries’ choice is not explicitly tied to an erotic motivation, yet on the basis of their activities elsewhere in the poetic corpus such a motive may plausibly be inferred. The two poems about Helgi Hundingsbani in the Codex Regius furnish a prominent example of the erotic valkyrie type. The female spirit in this narrative, Sigrún, is a

¹⁰⁶ Cleasby-Vigfússon, *Dictionary*, s.n. ‘Val-kyrja’; compare Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, pp. 48-56.

¹⁰⁷ Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir, *Hákonarmál*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I*, 13. It is generally held that Eyvindr based his poem on *Eiríksmál*. His nickname skáldaspillir, meaning the ‘poet-spoiler’, or perhaps in a transferred sense ‘plagiarist’, suggests that Eyvindr had a reputation in that direction in his day. On this, see references cited in note 30 above.

¹⁰⁸ Several poems in eddaic metre, including *Hákonarmál* and *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*, portray journeys between this world and the next on horseback. As Falk, *Sólarljóð*, pp. 29-30, notes, the speaker of that poem also draws on this mythic motif when he recalls having approached the otherworld on horseback (st. 51), a feature not encountered in the *Visiones*.

half-human, half-divine figure who falls in love with the eponymous hero after having witnessed his extraordinary martial talent.¹⁰⁹ The manner in which she surrenders herself to him at this moment recalls the words of Gísli's better dream woman when she unveils the prospect of their union in the hereafter:

Oc þér, buðlungr, samir bæði vel
 rauðir baugar oc in ríka mær;
 heill scaltu, buðlungr, bæði nióta
 Högnu dóttur oc Hringstaða,
 sigrs oc landa; þá er sócn lokit.¹¹⁰

This encounter between valkyrie and human proves fatal too, in this case because Sigrún's brother, who is opposed to the match, effects Helgi's premature death. As we hear in the stanza above, Sigrún, like Gísli's bride, promises him herself as well as material wealth. And as becomes clear in the second poem, their romantic relationship also transcends Helgi's mortality. We there hear that the slain Helgi returns from Valhöll to his 'haugr' ('burial mound').¹¹¹ For one night, he is united with his loyal 'bride' ('brúðr'), in a bed ('sæing') especially prepared by her.¹¹²

The portrayal of Gísli and the better dream woman, we see, contains several strikingly close verbal and figural reflexes of the heroic liaison in the Helgi poems; yet the conceptual association of heroic death with erotic love is integral to native literary traditions.¹¹³ An early reflex of the motif occurs in *Ynglingatal* (ninth century) where Hel, goddess of death, is said to have chosen ('kjósa') King Dyggvi 'at gamni' ('for pleasure') and 'leikr' ('play').¹¹⁴ Not unlike the death-as-journey paraphrase, Hel's erotic desire for Dyggvi's body represents a rhetorical

¹⁰⁹ Helgi too is counted among Yngvi's descendants; cf. *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, st. 55.

¹¹⁰ *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, st. 56: 'And you, lord, have proved worthy of gold-red rings and the precious maid; you, lord, shall alone enjoy the daughter of Högni, as well as ennobled dominions, victory and lands, now that the battle has concluded.'

¹¹¹ *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana önnor*, sts. 42 ff.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, st. 46, and subsequent prose.

¹¹³ In addition to Egeler's discussion of the valkyries, this theme is discussed in J. Quinn, 'The gendering of death in eddic cosmology', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions*, eds. A. Andrén et al. (Lund, Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 54-57; G. Steinsland, *Eros og død i norrøne myter* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1997), especially pp. 103-109.

¹¹⁴ Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni, *Ynglingatal*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I*, st. 7. As Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, p. 98, draws attention to, the noun 'gaman', principally meaning 'play' has strong sexual connotations in Old Norse; compare Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. 'gaman', especially rubric 2.

conceit. It recalls a dream Saxo ascribes to Baldr in his treatise, in which the god envisages Proserpina arriving to embrace him three days before his death.¹¹⁵ Perhaps the most extensive use of the love-death conceit is found in the poem *Krákumál* ('The Speech of the Crow'),¹¹⁶ an anonymous skaldic poem datable to the twelfth century and contained in the saga of Ragnarr Loðbrók ('hairy-breeches').¹¹⁷ The eponymous legendary king presents this monologue as he awaits his death by execution in a snake-pit. Throughout the 29-stanza poem, the greater part of which recounts martial enterprises, Ragnarr juxtaposes descriptions of battle with images of erotic love. The battle at Hjaðninga-vág, he notes, 'vasat sem bjarta brúði/ í bing hjá sér leggja' ('was not like placing a bright bride in one's bed') (st. 13), while in Northumbria, fighting was not 'sem unga ekkju/ í ǫndvegi kyssa' ('like kissing a young woman in the high seat') (st. 14). At Víkaskeið combat 'vasat ... sem vín konur bæri' ('was not comparable to women serving wine') (st. 18), and the ordeal in Álasund 'vasat sem varmar laugar/ vinkers Njörun bæri' ('could not be compared to women handing out warm towels') (st. 20). In the concluding six stanzas Ragnarr turns attention to his present condition, resignedly noting that the norms' judgment is beyond human influence (st. 24), while expressing comfort at the prospect of a hereafter with Óðinn in Valhöll (st. 25). Ultimately, he apprehends the *dísir* ('spirits') sent by Óðinn advancing to invite him to their home. The spirits are again female, and their attentions now seem to be welcomed by the poet. For with them in mind he reveals that he departs cheerfully ('læjandi') (st. 29).

On the one hand, the sustained contrast between battling and romantic intimacy entails a statement of the relative honour or manliness involved in the two spheres: real men fight; lesser men choose domestic pleasure. Yet, within the poem, this conceit develops towards and anticipates the vision of the *dísir*'s arrival to collect Ragnarr in the ultimate stanza, a vision which itself likens death to a romantic encounter. In this way the elaborate conceit in *Krákumál*

¹¹⁵ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Holder, p. 77. Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, p. 104, points out that the Roman goddess of war is identified as 'wælcyrrie' in Anglo-Saxon sources.

¹¹⁶ *Krákumál*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I*.

¹¹⁷ *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. M. Olsen, *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (Copenhagen, S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1906-1908).

revolves around the same literary motif as the narratives referred to earlier. With this tradition in mind the *draumkona inn betri* in *Gísla saga* and her overtures towards the dreamer become more meaningful, allowing us to interpret them as a further variation of the prominent literary love-death conceit. Because of its resonances in Old Norse poetry, especially in heroic contexts, this aspect of the better dream woman augments the heroic frame also of Gísli's persona in the saga.

It is noteworthy, as O'Donoghue observes, that this afterlife romance occurs in apparent suspense of external focalisation: in the stanzas in question Gísli is 'speaking a soliloquy, addressing not an audience within the narrative, but us, as audience of the text'.¹¹⁸ Is the prose author uncomfortable with the apparent romantic tension between the dream woman and Gísli's loyal partner by marriage, Auðr? Perhaps; but on another level the dream channels the dreamer's longing for security and peace, a sense of comfort lost in his present condition. Several of Auðr's traits – her affection, her wish to offer protection, and fidelity – are shared by the better dream woman. She too offers Gísli support and consolation in the face of persecution and visions of violence. In this sense the qualities displayed by the better dream woman augment the timeless and heroic frame also of Auðr's character. The two better women in Gísli's life are thus not contenders for his affections, but reflections of each other's virtues, their identities neither entirely conflating nor clearly distinguishable from each other.¹¹⁹

The second dream authority of the saga, whose visions are much cruder in nature, evidences affinities with a second conception of the valkyrie in Norse literature. These traditions appear to be coloured by a Christian didactic viewpoint. In narratives such as *Darraðarljóð* and *Víga-Glúms saga*,¹²⁰ valkyries are, as Hilda Ellis Davidson notes, synonymous with 'blood and carnage ... rejoic[ing] in slaughter and the conflicts of men'.¹²¹ Even in a distinctly hagiographic context such as *Guðmundar saga* – the saga that contains Rannveig's vision – valkyries play an

¹¹⁸ O'Donoghue, *Saga Narrative*, p. 164-165.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176, points to later passages in the saga where the figures of Auðr and the better dream woman seem to merge.

¹²⁰ *Darraðarljóð*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I; Víga-Glúms saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eyfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 9 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), pp. 71-72.

¹²¹ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York, Greenwood Publishers, 1968), p. 69.

important role. They enter the dream of certain protagonists to forebode violence and bloodshed:

um uetrin eptir bardagan iViðe n(ese) voro dreyndir draumar margir. Þat dreynde man einn iSkagafirði at han þottiz koma i hus eitt mikit. Þar sato inne konur .ij. Þær voro bloðgar ok rero afram. Honum þotte rigna bloðe i gluggarna.¹²²

What do these mythic spirits signify within a narrative devoted to a saint and the proud Christian tradition of Iceland? As Nedkvitne remarks, these dream-valkyries first and foremost fulfil a literary function in the saga: they foreshadow the forthcoming conflicts at Hólar and Örlygsstaðir, and represent at the same time conflict itself as something essentially un-Christian and, as it were, barbaric in nature.¹²³ As far as the figure of the valkyrie is concerned, it is in such Christian contexts reduced to notions of brutality, death, and human misery. The figure has been coupled with evil agency of a distinctly Christian nature. This is the literary setting out of which Gísli's worse dream woman grows.

We can observe, then, that Gísli's dream women, though both are coloured by Christian influence, also reflect different treatments of the figure of the valkyries of Old Norse literature. As part of the elaborate eddaic subtext of the saga,¹²⁴ the dream women contribute to the narrative's self-reflexive code of conduct against which the persons and actions described should be assessed and judged. The fact that the saga author categorises the dream women into a binary schema of better and worse augments a moral duality already inherent in the poetic visions. Distinct signs of Christian influence, we have seen, are the better dream woman's role as interpreter and her proclamation of moral principles of conduct in the first dream; to this we may add her function as a guide more generally, for, as Egeler stresses, the Norse otherworld spirits never actually perform this function elsewhere in mythological narratives:

Sie bestimmen im Auftrag Odins wer stirbt; sie bestimmen wer siegt; sie verkünden dem toten König sein Jenseitsschicksal und seine Berufung nach Walhall. Aber sie geleiten die

¹²² *Guðmundar saga*, ed. Stefán Karlsson, ch. 138, ll. 1-5: 'in the winter after the fight at Víðines many dreams were dreamt. One man of Skagafjord dreamt that he thought himself approach a great house, inside of which two women sat who were covered in blood and rocked back and forth. He thought blood was raining through the windows.'

¹²³ Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, p. 262.

¹²⁴ On the saga's heroic subtexts, see O'Donoghue, *Saga Narrative*, ch. 3, Turville-Petre, 'Gísli Súrsson and His Poetry', pp. 122-130, and M. Olsen, 'Gísla saga og heldediktningen', in *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson 29. Maj 1928*, eds. J. Brøndum-Nielson et al. (Copenhagen, Levin & Munksgaard 1928), pp. 6-14.

Toten nicht auf ihren Weg ins Jenseits.¹²⁵

In traditional narratives, the role of the valkyries is thus essentially different from that of the Christian otherworld guide. The centrality of the verb *leiða* in verse and prose accounts of the second dream by the better dream woman (pp. 94 and 95, st. 26) further strengthens the impression that the *Visiones* or *leizlur* have constituted an important influence on the conception of these figures.

One soon recognises, of course, that the two *draumkonur* are not products of merely two literary traditions and conventions but of several layers of creative imagination which renders it impossible to chart their ‘genetic’ composition. Born out of a complex literary interplay, they invite their audiences to examine and engage with various layers of medieval Scandinavian traditions of writing. The universal character of the afterlife allows for such diverse traditions of narrative to converge.

The Three Northern Saints of Rannveigar leizla

When Rannveig finds herself at the edge of the pit of hell, and the demons make ready to cast her in, she calls on three regional saints for aid. They lead her to safety and reprimand her for her moral flaws, but it soon becomes clear that their agenda extends beyond protecting Rannveig; their role in the vision is to establish the status of the saga’s subject, Guðmundr Arason, within the history of Western Scandinavian Christianity.

Rannveig’s vision begins somewhat differently from those of most counterparts in the Latin genre. As she falls unconscious a band of demons arrive and carry her towards hell. She appears already to be sentenced to punishment, and no guide is in sight. The *leizla* reaches a climactic turning point at the moment the demons prepare to hurl her into the fiery pit, at which point a great flood of light inundates the scene and her guides finally arrive:

¹²⁵ Egeler, *Walküren, Bodbs, Sirenen*, p. 47: ‘On Óðinn’s summons they decide who dies; who earns victory; they inform the dead King of his fate in the hereafter and his appointment to Valhøll. But they do not accompany the dead on their road to the hereafter’.

íþui bile kemr yfir hana lios mikit ok ser hon at menn fylgia liosino gøfugligir. ok þo með ogn nockure. Þesse syn varð hon fegin mioc. ok styrctiz sua þegar at 'hon þorðe` spyrea huerir þar uære. EN þeir sөгðo at þar uar Ol(afr) konungr ok Magnus j(arl) ok hinn heilage H(alluarðr). Þeir taka til hennar. ok taka hana or hondum fiandum ok leiddu hana ibrot.¹²⁶

The saints here referred to – Óláfr (d. 1030), Hallvarðr (d. 1043) and Magnús (d. 1115) – represent three of the earliest and thus most important spiritual authorities in the North. They were evidently held in high regard in Guðmundr's day, for the narrator observes that Rannveig's appeal to them reflects their overall popularity at the time: 'hon kallaðe a hinn heil(agra) Ol(af) konungr ok Magnus j(arl) inn helga. ok Halluarð. þuiat menn heto þa mioc a þa her a landi' ('She called on the holy Óláfr, Magnús, and Hallvarðr because people called on them much in this country then') (ll. 48-51). After escorting her away from the infernal sphere, they first admonish her about her vanity which occasioned the traumatic experience, and subsequently introduce her to a vision of heaven. This sphere consists mainly of a cityscape: it is inhabited exclusively by Icelandic virtuous souls, and in the middle one fine building stands out as the prospective home of bishop Guðmundr.

Rarely are the ties between guides, visionaries, and their cultural environment so intimate and important in *Visiones* as in Rannveig's vision. Local political or religious authorities may sometimes feature in the landscape of the other world; the aforementioned Thurkill, for instance, glimpses the English martyr St. Osyth among the more internationally recognised authorities Catherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch in a golden cathedral of virgins and female martyrs.¹²⁷ But her role remains a minor one as she does not affect the narrative of the vision. A *Visio* in which the guides do evince a close cultural bond with the visionary is that of Furseus, in which the young saint interviews and benefits from the advice of Beoanus and Meldanus, two bishops with ties to his childhood home. In addition to the geographical connection between

¹²⁶ *Rannveigar leizla*, ch. 58, ll. 52-58: 'at that moment a great light came over her and the light was accompanied by glorious, though not entirely unimposing persons. At this sight she was greatly relieved and strengthened to such a degree that she dared ask who they were. And they said they were Óláfr the king, Magnús the earl and Saint Hallvarðr. They approached her, released her from the hands of the devils, and accompanied her away.'

¹²⁷ *Visio Thurkilli*, ed. Schmidt, p. 80 and note 21.

guides and visionary, there is a personal one, for these Irish saints were entombed at Péronne in northern France, where Furseus' remains were also moved in connection with his *translatio*.¹²⁸ Beoanus and Meldanus give counsel on questions concerning religious discipline and critique the moral shortcomings of contemporary ecclesiastical leaders. In the *Visio* they thus channel a social commentary on current states of affairs as well as embodying the theological impulses that shaped Furseus' religious thinking.

Rannveig's guiding authorities are of course *local* only in so far as Norway, Iceland and the Orkneys shared a common cultural heritage and similar history. The fact that they, together with Guðmundr, stand for three branches of this same cultural area is an interesting feature, for it foregrounds a sense of collectiveness in terms of religious affairs and history which, on a political level was brittle in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By virtue of his formative part in the conversion of Norway and Iceland, St. Óláfr represents the patriarch of the Northern religious community. Niðarós, where his relics are enshrined, became the northernmost archbishopric in 1152-53, and as such exercised ecclesiastical authority over the clergy in Iceland. To obtain his official investiture, for instance, Guðmundr had to make the journey to Trondheim and St. Óláfr's shrine in 1203.

Because of his historical importance, Óláfr remained a key authority in matters of religion and politics long after his death. One of the few details provided about St. Hallvarðr's kin in his *Vita*, for instance, is that his and Óláfr's mothers were related by blood.¹²⁹ In hagiographies as in Kings' Sagas the saint continues to make pronouncements after his death – often through dreams and visions where he evaluates the merits of various secular and religious leaders. A prestigious political work such as the saga about King Sverrir illustrates that the 'Óláfr-vision' grew into a literary convention in its own right.¹³⁰ *Guðmundar saga*, too,

¹²⁸ *Visio Fursei*, ed. Ciccacese, pp. 291-300; See Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, p. 163, note 1.

¹²⁹ *Acta Sancta Halvardi*, ed. Gustav Storm, *Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ: Latinske Kildeskrifter til Norges Historie i Middelalderen* (Oslo, A. W. Brøgger, 1880), p. 155.

¹³⁰ See *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Íslensk fornrit 30 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 2007), pp. 8-9, and A. Busygin's analysis in, 'Sverrir and St. Óláfr: Symbology of Power in a Saga Dream', in *Scandinavia and*

evidences that St. Óláfr's endorsement is a matter of special hagiographic importance. Before Guðmundr accepts the bishopric at Hólar the saint reappears in another visionary context, again in order to reveal his endorsement. On this occasion it is Guðmundr's uncle, Þorvarðr, who channels the message. In a dream he embarked on a journey to Trondheim, visited St. Óláfr's hall, and received his embrace and promise of future bliss. This was immediately interpreted by Þorvarðr as the saint's unequivocal endorsement of his nephew.¹³¹ Óláfr's guiding role in Rannveig's vision thus reflects his lasting importance as the central pillar of the Norse-Icelandic Church.

Of the three personages who come to Rannveig's aid, Hallvarðr, the patron saint of Oslo, is the most 'obscure' in the sense that very few indications survive of his popular veneration in medieval Iceland.¹³² Indeed, textual witnesses to the saint's life from the Middle Ages are limited to four partly fragmentary breviary lessons;¹³³ Icelandic annals date his death to 1043.¹³⁴ The fullest account of his life is a brief *Vita* from in the *Acta Sanctorum* (published in 1680), based on a now lost medieval MS from Utrecht.¹³⁵ Though sparing, however, the information we do have about the context of his martyrdom may help to account more fully for his significance in *Rannveigar leizla*, for several of its thematic aspects resonate in the visionary narrative.

According to the *Vita*, the young merchant – probably at this point in his early twenties – was making ready to cross the Drammensfjord (to the south of Oslo) when an unnamed, pregnant woman appeared on the shore and pleaded for leave to accompany him on the boat. As they set out, three men rushed towards them and took up pursuit in a second vessel. While pursued, she told him that these persons had wrongly accused her of theft and threatened to kill her. Hallvarðr then confronted the pursuers, demanding that the woman should be granted the

Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn, Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003, eds. R. Simek and J. Meurer (Bonn, Universität Bonn, 2003), pp. 67-71.

¹³¹ *Guðmundar saga*, ed. Stefán Karlsson, ch. 99, ll. 36-42.

¹³² Larrington, 'Leizla Rannveigar', p. 239; cf. *KLNM*, s.n. 'Hallvard'.

¹³³ For a recent discussion of these texts and their inter-relationship, see Å. Ommundsen, 'A Text in Flux: St. Hallvard's Legend and its Redactions', in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, eds. S. Ranković et al. (Turnhout, Brepols, 2010), pp. 264-290.

¹³⁴ Cf. *Konungsannáll*, ed. Storm, *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*, p. 108.

¹³⁵ *Acta Sancta Halvardi*, ed. Storm, pp. 155-158.

opportunity to defend herself against their charges and prove her innocence in a legal process. The men, however, reacted angrily to this, calling for her execution. One of the three at this point took up a bow and arrow and shot Hallvarðr, before proceeding to murder the woman too.

According to the legend, the former was buried at sea with a mill-stone tied to his neck, yet his body re-emerged with the stone floating beside him. Based on this miracle he was declared a saint. It was his advocacy on behalf of the woman which thus came to define St. Hallvarðr's legacy. Medieval versions of the seal of Oslo depict him with an arrow in the one hand, a mill-stone in the other, and with the woman of the legend resting at his feet.¹³⁶

Considering the nature of Hallvarðr's legend and his status as protector of the disenfranchised – especially of women – his appearance in Rannveig's vision seems especially apt. His role here, being first and foremost to assist the visionary in her precarious situation, calls to mind the chief characteristic of his legend. This thematic correspondence may well be part of the reason why it is in precisely this Icelandic context that the Norwegian saint does make such an important appearance, especially if we accept the statement about his contemporary popularity in Iceland as true.

The more strictly political motive behind the saints' integration in the *leizla* shines through in the comments put in their mouths concerning the merits of Guðmundr and the general holiness of Iceland. As a trio of Northern saints, the guides themselves showcase the solidity of the religious traditions of the North. In their conversation with Rannveig, moreover, they verbally consolidate Iceland's place in this tradition, praising its unparalleled proportion of virtuous individuals: 'eigi ero a øðrom löndum at iafn miclum maN fiolða. fleire heil(agir) menn enn aIslandi' ('in no other country is there among its people such a high number of holy persons as in Iceland') (ll. 81-82).¹³⁷ The two former bishops Jón and Þorlákr the younger are held up as

¹³⁶ Cf. L. M. Grønbold, 'Oslos byvåpen: St. Hallvard bytter rekvisitter', *Tobias* 4 (2000), pp. 3-5.

¹³⁷ Patriotic perspectives on native religious traditions are not uncommon in hagiographic writing; compare for example Ælfric's expressed pride in his portrait of St. Edmund, *Passio Sancti Eadmundi Regis et Martyris*, ed. G. I. Needham, *Lives of Three English Saints* (Exeter, Exeter UP, 1976 [1966]), ll. 218-220: 'Synd eac fela oðre on Angelcynne halgan þe fela wundra wyrcað – swa swa hit wide is cuð – þam Ælmihtigan to lofe, þe hi on gelyfdon.'

the most powerful tokens of this, but implicitly also Rannveig, with her privileged patronage and vision of these realities, forms an important part of this argument. Accordingly, the guides' statements harmonise with the greater message of a saga which in its entirety casts Iceland as a vibrant religious community, rich in manifestations of that country's divine favour.

We may finally point out that *Rannveigar leizla* is not the only narrative in which this trinity of Scandinavian saints are singled out as standard bearers of the Christian faith. In the early fourteenth-century saga about St. Magnús, the biographer highlights the impact of this same trio, lauding them as *forögumenn* ('forerunners; guides') within their newly-converted communities and representing them as spiritual pillars for the entire North:

Ok allt eins, þó at svá sé, virðist guð at sýna oss sína mildi, einkanliga í því, er hann hefir oss látit koma til kynningar síns blessaða nafns, þar með gefit oss styrka stólpa, ina helgustu forögumenn heilagrar kristni, af hverra heilagleik öll Norðrhálfan skínn ok ljómar nær ok fjarri. Þessi eru: inn heilagi Óláfr konungr ok inn háleiti Hallvarðr, frændi hans, er prýða Nóreg með sínum helgum dómum; inn mæti Magnús Eyjajarl, er birtir Orkneyjar með sínum heilagleik.¹³⁸

These hagiographic reflections on the saints' cultural value reinforce the part they play as guides of Rannveig in the *leizla*. As Carl Phelpstead underlines in commenting on the quoted passage, the three were acknowledged to be 'evidence of God's mercy towards people on the periphery'; they 'symbolise divine blessing of the people as a whole: in them the holy has entered the history even of peoples at the ends of the earth'.¹³⁹ The personages revived in the Icelandic afterlife vision are effective in their literary context because they held a comparable status in the religious and historical vision of their time and culture. Collectively, their status as pioneering religious personages in the North imbues the vision with a strong local colour and sense of cultural prestige. This shows that, even in clearly Christian terms, the medium of afterlife vision

¹³⁸ *Magnúss saga lengri*, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, Íslensk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), p. 335: 'And nevertheless, God showed us his grace above all in this, that he has sent to us witnesses of his blessed name and thereby gave strong support, the most holy forerunners of holy Christianity from whose holiness the entire North shines and echoes near and far. These are: the holy King Óláfr and the exalted Hallvarðr, his kin, who adorn Norway by their holiness; the noble earl Magnús, who casts rays over the Orkneys through his saintliness.'

¹³⁹ C. Phelpstead, 'Pilgrims, Missionaries and Martyrs: The Holy in Bede, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Knýtlinga saga*', in *The Making of Christian Myths in the Periphery of Latin Christendom*, ed. L. Boje Mortensen (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), pp. 77-78.

represents an arena where regional identities were shaped, nurtured and consolidated. More than names, the three guides in *Rannveigar leizla* gesture towards well-known *Vitae*, their cultural significance at the time, and narrative traditions surrounding them. The *leizla* thus serves as an important historical document of the mentalities governing the time and place of its origin.

III. Conclusions

We opened this chapter by observing that the prospect of the afterlife from a theological point of view was not fixed with many definite parameters. We have, furthermore, discussed literary evidence which suggests that a narrative tradition centring on the motif of the otherworld journey already existed in Western Scandinavia before the influx of Christian didactic literature commenced, and that this tradition remained an important creative influence for many centuries after the conversion. I have sought to highlight features in our primary corpus that reflect a continuity between such native and Christian traditions, a sense of continuity, however, not first and foremost rooted in religious beliefs, but in language and creative interest in the concept of the afterlife journey.

The evidence adduced in this Chapter casts some fresh light on conclusions of the former, where we saw that conventions of the *Visiones* merge into a remarkably wide variety of formal and narrative contexts in the Norse literary corpus. The apparent fact that Norse narrative traditions were rich in accounts of journeys to the worlds beyond may well account for the extraordinary ease and originality with which Norse authors made use of *Visio* conventions. The universal quality of the concept of the afterlife journey allows for narratives of different periods and religious outlooks to come together. It represents a space where cultural interaction and introspection can take place. While signifying transitoriness on an individual level, death entails a strong sense of permanence on a cultural level. The literary hereafter becomes a store of cultural identity. This seems to be a particularly important notion in the Western Scandinavian literary landscape where the interaction between traditional and Christian, vernacular and Latin

forms of literature was vibrant throughout the medieval period. In the following chapter my objective will be to examine reflexes of this cultural continuity in certain striking symbols employed and explored in the topography of the Norse hereafter.

IV Death and the Journey II: Aids and Obstacles

The previous chapters have indicated that the interim hereafter (as physical, temporal, and spiritual state) was only fragmentarily described in the canonical writings of the Christian Church, and that the consequent theological vacuum provided a fertile ground for literary explorations of the otherworld, first and foremost among them the genre of *Visiones*. When this Latin tradition arrived in Western Scandinavia, we noted in Chapter III, it became part of a literary culture in which the motifs of the journey to and vision of the hereafter were already prominent subjects of poetic narrative. Noteworthy examples of this are the poem *Baldrs draumar*, the poems sharing a similar journey scheme in the *Poetic Edda*, and the visions of Valhøll contained in the tenth-century panegyrics *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*. In the foregoing Chapter my aim was to demonstrate that these Latin and indigenous traditions merge in their common interest in the hereafter as arena of literary and cultural exploration, and that this creative element is one of the defining features of Norse adaptations of *Visio* conventions. To illustrate this sense of continuity I highlighted different ways in which the authors behind our primary corpus of texts explicitly refer to concepts of myth in Christian contexts or employ the framework of the afterlife vision to call to life native cultural icons and narrative traditions surrounding them.

In this chapter I would like to pursue this notion of the hereafter as a boundary-crossing cultural arena further, though the reflexes to be considered here are of a more subtle kind. I will examine two symbols which, although they are imbued with moral significance within their narrative contexts, have received critical attention for their resonances in various accounts of mythological places and customs. The symbols in question are the shoe and the bridge, and their primary literary environments *Draumkvedet* and *Eiríks saga*. Building on previous scholarly discussions, I wish to establish more clearly how the Christian incarnations of these symbols tie in with other uses of same symbols in Old Norse culture, and whether they may be considered

phenomena with particular regional significance – similar to the image of the willow shoot employed to describe Olav Åsteson in *Draumkvedet*. It is my aim to assess in how far these symbols themselves encapsulate a process of localisation (conscious or instinctive), and so may serve as tokens of the cultural translation process this study is concerned with.

I. The Otherworld Shoe

Textiles play an essential part in most religious, cultural, and social rites. The aesthetic, status-indicating, protective, and camouflaging qualities of garments also make them one of our most effective and versatile social and cultural symbols. In 1998 researchers based at the University of Southampton established a project with the aim of studying one particular ritualistic use of garments encountered in a great variety of different cultural settings around the world.¹ Broadly defined as ‘deliberate garment concealment’, the phenomenon they have been concerned with involves items of clothing placed within the foundations, walls and roofs of private and public buildings. Finds in Britain range from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. The most convincing explanation as to the motivations behind this practice on a global level is that it serves an apotropaic function – designed to ‘ward off evil’.² Of course, the local implications in different parts of Great Britain or Australia, in the sixteenth or the nineteenth centuries may vary considerably.

Recorded instances of the phenomenon are particularly numerous in England, where items discovered date back to the Middle Ages. The great majority of finds in England involve foot-wear. When June Swann took stock of findings in 1996, in excess of 1500 caches containing hidden shoes had been recorded.³ They comprise shoes of children as well as adults, and were found hidden in private homes, hospitals, museums, as well as Oxford colleges. Though numbers peak between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, a find from the choir stalls of Winchester

¹ See the project’s web site at <<http://www.concealedgarments.org>>; accessed 12.03.2012.

² See D. Eastop, ‘Outside In: Making Sense of the Deliberate Concealment of Garments Within Buildings’, *Textile* 4:3 (2006), pp. 238-255.

³ See J. Swann, ‘Shoes Concealed in Buildings’, *Costume* 30 (1996), pp. 56-69.

Cathedral shows that the practice dates back to the Middle Ages. But ‘why the shoe?’, one may query with Swann; she conjectures that its strong personal association with the owner constitutes one important reason: ‘It is the only garment we wear’, she notes, ‘which retains the shape, the personality, the essence of the wearer.’ Swann also notes that in many cultures shoes have been and still are tied up with symbolism and superstitions. ‘They are symbols of authority, as in the Old Testament; they are linked with fertility; we still tie them on the back of wedding cars; and they are generally associated with good luck (witness all the holiday souvenirs in the shape of shoes). But most of all they stand in for the person’ (p. 56). Located as the shoe-finds are within significant physical thresholds of various buildings – especially in ‘voids, and at points of entry or access (doors, windows and chimneys)’ – the corpus of finds reflects a conceptual association of the house with the body and their mutual need of protection.⁴ Given the personal link between shoe and wearer and its association with journeying the concealed footwear may well also have served commemorative functions. It retains so to speak the traces of a person’s presence in the fabric of the home.

I am not aware of any similar finds from medieval Norway and Iceland, but a variety of literary records show that the shoe there too represented an important religious and social symbol. *Draumkvedet*’s reference to the shoe as aid in the otherworld is our point of departure. Olav, the ballad’s youthful protagonist, experiences considerable hardship on his journey through the otherworld. In V1a, 30, he expresses this in the following terms:

No hæv æg vori upmæ Skye,
aa neat paa Havsens Gronne
den som fulnar meene Fotspore
Han lærer kje af blie Mon/ne.⁵

The phrase ‘to follow in someone’s footsteps’ represents a familiar figure of speech, in modern Norwegian as in English applicable to any sphere of life where a (younger) person is expected to match a senior’s achievements. Yet as part of the ballad’s overarching journey structure the

⁴ Cf. Eastop, ‘Outside In’, pp. 248-249.

⁵ *Draumkvedet*, V1a, 30: ‘Now, I have been up at the skies, and down at the bottom of the sea; the person who fills my footsteps shall not laugh cheerfully.’ Cf. M1, 1; V8, 1

image is certainly also meaningful on a literal level. We recall that Olav elsewhere draws attention to the injuries he suffered on his hands and feet during the passage through the inhospitable landscape of the otherworld.⁶ In the corpus at large, Olav's dream comes across as a physically demanding ordeal, a feat of strength and endurance. This must, I think, be understood in symbolic terms: his journey comprises at once a physical and spiritual trial, a process of purgation or moral cleansing. Within the ballad corpus, the images of the footstep and shoe combine to accentuate the moral dimension of this spiritual journey conceit.

Olav's passage through the otherworld is for the most part unguided. There is no authority present to explain the significance of what he sees. Nevertheless, the ballad's protagonist draws a set of lessons from his experience; detached from any definable eschatological sphere, and occurring at different points in the narrative across the corpus, this set of moral dicta forms the didactic core of the afterlife vision. One subset of these concerns various forms of sins and their punishment in the otherworld; the second subgroup presents positive advice, highlighting the benefits of good works. Each of these positive dicta revolves around the rewards of charity, and each is associated with different stages of the otherworld journey. The key pedagogical lesson of the ballad is that specific good deeds in this life yield proportional benefits for the soul on its pilgrimage to God after death. The following stanza articulates this lesson most concisely:

Sæl æ den i denne Heimen
den Fatike gjæve Sko
han tar inkje bærføte gange
i Qvase Tynermo.⁷

Scattered throughout the ballad one finds further illustrations of charitable acts. The greater part of these conceives of this virtue in material terms, highlighting the value of gifting clothing and food.⁸ Not all of these other stanzas display correlations between the type of good deed and its

⁶ Cf. L4, 6-7; K1, 7-8.

⁷ *Draumkvedet*, L4, 19: 'He is blessed in this world who gives shoes to the poor: he will not have to walk barefoot, over stinging thorn-fields.' Cf. V1a, 59; K1, 12.

⁸ Compare *Draumkvedet*, sts. K1, 12-16; L6, 4-6; L4, 17-19, 24; V1a, 56-59; M6, 34-35, 60.

reward as precise as the above. While giving ‘Klæi’ (‘clothes’) appropriately affords protection against chills in the otherworld,⁹ the return for gifts of ‘Rug’ (‘rye’) or ‘Kaan’ (‘corn’), for instance, seems more arbitrary: the former prevents dizziness when crossing the otherworld bridge – ‘han tar inkje somloug gange/ paa hoge Gjeddar Bru’ (‘he will not walk dizzily, on the high Gjeddar bridge’) (K1, 13); the latter safeguards against the horns of a menacing bull – ‘han tar inkje ræddas paa Gjeddarbroi/ fe kvasse Stute Hon’ (‘he will not have to fear the sharp horns of the bull on the Gjeddar bridge’) (K1, 14). These stanzas convey a more general principle of ‘you reap as you sow’.

The logic behind these notions of proportional return accords with the model underlying most medieval portrayals of the afterlife. It is especially vividly and systematically applied in popular theological treatises like the *Elucidarius* and in the *Visio*-tradition.¹⁰ retribution in the hereafter is linked conceptually to the type of deed. The notion that offences should be requited according to their nature is also a distinctive feature of medieval secular law codes,¹¹ and finds on the Scriptural legal principle of proportional retribution (*lex talionis*), most pointedly articulated in the phrase ‘oculum pro oculo dentem pro dente’ (‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’) (Exodus 21:24). Although *Draumkvedet*’s conception of eschatological justice is not clearly defined, I think one must distinguish between two levels. In Chapter V we will look in more detail at Olav’s portrayal of sins and their punishment. The offenders described in those stanza sequences have already been sentenced, and their ordeals appear to be perpetual. The lessons on charity, in contrast, are intimately related to the journey through the hereafter. One’s record of good deeds determines the level of complications one faces on the post-mortem journey; yet, as Olav’s own experience demonstrates, these are temporary complications from which one emerges purified. Although not explicitly identified as such, the journey thus appears to represent a state of purgation.

⁹ *Draumvedet*, L4, 17: ‘han tar inkje i Annom Heimen/ Qvorkjen bibre hel siæve.’

¹⁰ Compare *Elucidarius*, eds. Firchow and Grimstad, especially pp. 123-4.

¹¹ See further Chapter V.i below.

Of all the ballad's moral illustrations, the motif of the shoe stands out as the most symbolically striking. Its link to the overarching theme of the otherworld journey is particularly strong, and it plays a central role within the dreamer's own experience. According to some versions Olav receives new shoes from the 'Gudmoer' ('Mother of God') (L4, 21) after suffering through one stage of his expedition.¹² In others he finds the opportunity to mend his old broken pair himself.¹³ It is implied that this gift and the opportunity to mend his footwear results from the fact that Olav has at this point made himself deserving of this aid. It illustrates an important turning point on his journey on a spiritual level.

As several scholars have pointed out, comparable instances of the shoe-motif are found in a small number of Christian texts from adjacent geographical regions.¹⁴ One is the North Yorkshire funeral chant known as the 'Lyke Wake Dirge', which was first recorded by John Aubrey in the seventeenth century, but appears, like the Norwegian ballad, to have a longer oral tradition behind it.¹⁵ The dirge envisages an afterlife journey through a topography that reflects the ballad's place of origin, its path leading across a 'Thorny Moor' ('Whinny-Muir') and a 'Brig o' Dread'. As in *Draumkvedet*, the nature of this journey depends on the traveller's record of charitableness, a lesson here too exemplified by the gift of shoes: 'If ever thou gav'st hosen and shoon,' we hear, 'Sit thee down and put them on'. 'If hosen and shoon thou ne'er gav'st nane ... The whinnes sall prick thee to the bare bane'.

Very similar is the version of this motif in a twelfth-century *Visio* from Northern Germany. During a spell of illness in December 1189, Godeschalcus, a peasant from present-day

¹² Semantically, 'Gudmoer' could equally refer to 'godmother', though within the narrative setting the referent is more likely the Virgin Mary overseeing the fate of the souls in conjunction with the other two main authorities of the poem, Christ and St. Michael (L4, 14); cf. Barnes ed., *Draumkvæde*, pp. 207-208.

¹³ Cf. *Draumkvedet*, V1a, 38; M6, 40.

¹⁴ Compare P. Dinzelsbacher, "'verba hec tam mistica ex ore tam ydiote glebonis": Selbstaussagen des Volkes über seinen Glauben – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Offenbarungslitteratur und der Vision Gottschalks', in *Volksreligion im hohen und späten Mittelalter*, eds. P. Dinzelsbacher and D. R. Bauer (Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 1990), pp. 57-99; and Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 104-110.

¹⁵ *Visio Godeschalci A*, ed. E. Assman, *Godeschalcus und Visio Godeschalci: mit deutscher Übersetzung*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins 74 (Neumünster, Wachholtz, 1979); 'Lyke Wake Dirge', ed. F. Sidgwick, *Popular Ballads of Olden Time: Ballads of Mystery and Miracle and Fyttes of Mirth*, 2nd series (London, A. H. Bullen, 1904), pp. 88-91. One indication of the Dirge's greater age is the antiquarian (Old English) plural *-(e)n* ending retained in the terms 'hosen' and 'shoon'.

Holstein, is led out of body by an anonymous guide. The first topographical feature they come across is a lime tree bearing a remarkable yield:

Primum autem insolite quantitatis et amenitatis arborem tiliam in via offenderunt, altitudine quidem sua precelsam usualem aliquam tiliam non supergredientem, sed in latitudine nimis diffusam; que foliis latis ut platanus vestiebatur, robur ad octo cubitus maiores spissum habens. Per singulos quoque et per totos contigue ramos suos calciamentis onusta erat combinatis, quemadmodum in virgis longiusculis coriarios opera sua ferre videmus; quantam quis multitudinem toti mundo esse non arbitraretur.¹⁶

This tree of shoes is peculiar to Godeschalcus' vision and offers an interesting visualisation of the concept of otherworldly reward. In his detailed study of this *Visio* Peter Dinzelbacher points to the significance of the 'Gerichtslinde' as a locus for legal trials and judgement in early thirteenth century Germany. This allusion would underline the notion of moral evaluation represented by this visionary tree.¹⁷ It may, however, equally well be a clerical play on the prominent metaphor of the 'fruits of faith' in the rhetoric of the New Testament.¹⁸ In any case, it is clear that the German peasant does not grasp any of these allusions, for he turns to the guide for clarification:

Cumque Godeschalcus numerositatem calciamentorum miratus, quid sibi vellent, curiosius perscrutaretur, angelus affabilis manu extenta vicinum ei periculum ostendens: 'Nonne', inquit, 'vides, quid immineat? Quicumque digni inventi fuerint de calciamentis istis accipere, periculum istud horrendum illesi et securi transire poterunt'.¹⁹

Ahead of Godeschalcus, there lies a 'field overgrown with thorns and thistles' ('terra spinas et tribulos germinans'). The guide explains that the yield on the tree, though primarily reserved for those who in this life gifted the same to others, also benefit candidates who, by demonstrating 'good will and charitable compassion' ('bona voluntas et pia compassio') (p. 56), have proven

¹⁶ *Visio Godeschalci*, ed. Assman, p. 54, ll. 20-27: 'First they encountered on the way an uncommonly large and beautiful lime tree, and although it did not extend the size of an ordinary lime tree, its branches were densely intertwined at its side. It was covered in broad leaves like a platane tree and its trunk was about eight long ells wide. On each of its branches it was covered in pairs of shoes, in the manner in which we see shoemakers carry their products on extended sticks, though no one could ever have imagined the existence of such a great number on earth.'

¹⁷ Dinzelbacher, 'verba hec tam mystica', p. 86.

¹⁸ Compare Matthew 12:32-33; Mark 4:20; Luke 6:43-44; 8:8; 18:15; John 4:36.

¹⁹ *Visio Godeschalci*, ed. Assman, p. 56: 'And when Godeschalcus, wondering at the number of shoes, inquired about their meaning, the affable angel, pointing to the nearby danger, said: "Look", he said, "do you not see what lies ahead? All who are judged worthy to receive these shoes will be able to cross that terrible obstacle safely and unscathed.'"

themselves worthy despite a lack of material means. Evidently, Gottschalk belongs in neither category, and is consequently subjected to the torments of the thorn field bare-footed until, about half way through, the angels seem to be satisfied with his progress, and offer him a pair too.

One cannot fail to notice that the three afterlife portrayals from Norway, England and Germany are very closely related in their use of this motif. The fact, moreover, that the *Visio Godeschalci* is the only Latin *Visio* to contain it strengthens the impression that it represents a Northern European feature with roots in this extended cultural area. There are a number of further reflexes of this Christian motif in Scandinavia that would support this theory.

The only further analogues in adaptations of the *Visio* tradition are, like *Draumkvedet*, young in their textual history. Wellendorf draws attention to a fairy tale from Setesdalen, a region adjacent to the Western side of *Draumkvedet*'s home district, which contains a version of the shoe-motif combined with that of the thorny otherworld bridge.²⁰ It was recorded in the second half of the nineteenth century by the collector Johannes Skar, and by him entitled *Paradis-soga* ('Tale of Paradise').²¹ The tale describes how Aasmund, the youngest of three brothers, embarks on an expedition to Paradise. He hopes there to find his two deceased elder brothers. An old man whom he meets on the road kindly offers directions, indicating that Aasmund would eventually come to a crossroads, and advising that he should, once there, proceed along the narrower rather than the broader path. Aasmund follows these instructions and travels a long distance before he finally arrives at the bridge. Described as 'Hekle-bru', it is beset with thorns, and the narrator tells us that, as he crossed it, Aasmund felt the sting of its spikes penetrate to his heart: 'han kjende det inkje i Skosolane; men han kjende det pikka i Hjarta' ('he felt it not in his shoe-soles, but felt it sting in his heart') (p. 121).

The combination of the thorny path and shoe in this episode recalls the incarnations of the motif we traced in *Draumkvedet*, the 'Lyke Wake Dirge', and the *Visio Godeschalci* above.

²⁰ Cf. Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, p. 117.

²¹ J. Skar, *Gamalt or Sætesdal*, 8 vols. (Oslo, Olaf Norlis Forlag, 1915), Vol. VII, pp. 117-123. The tale is a version of ATU 471.

An interesting point of variation in Aasmund's tale is the detail that the thorns pricked his heart rather than his feet. The physical equation between sin and punishment so typical of *Visiones* has here been 'updated', it seems, to accord with the later theological emphasis on the internal source of moral (and immoral) conduct. For the shoes deflect the purgatorial stings from the foot directly to the seat of Aasmundr's moral conscience.

In the medieval Scandinavian corpus the motif finds reflexes in certain works of religious instruction. Icelandic manuals of penitence reveal that walking shoe-less was considered an efficient exercise of contrition. The *Skriptaboð* ascribed to Bishop Árni Þorláksson (d. 1298) recommends that certain offenders ought, for a period of time, dispense with such articles of comfort as shoes and linen clothes; they should 'gangi berfættur ok komi ei til kirkiu. hafui eigi reidskiota. eigi linklædi beri eigi vopn' ('walk bare-footed and stay away from church, should not ride, nor wear linen, nor carry weapons').²² An Icelandic version of a ballad about Mary Magdalene quotes Christ as prescribing the same exercise of penance to the female protagonist.²³

However, the most interesting instance of the motif in the wider Christian corpus is found in a Norse translation of a homily for Easter Sunday ('In die sancto pasce sermo ad populum').²⁴ The Norse text is a conflation of two Gregorian homilies in honour of this day. As Hjelde points out, significant portions of Gregory's originals have been left out – especially passages that may have been less engaging for Scandinavian lay audiences.²⁵ But the Norse homilist has also added material, in most cases details that render Gregory's expositions more precise, and his illustrations more vivid. A point in case is the translation of a passage that describes the Jewish feast of Easter as described in the Pentateuch and interprets its Christian significance. The key passage for our purposes is Exodus 12:11, in which the attire to be worn when consuming the

²² *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, ed. Hinu Íslenzka Bókmentafélagi, 16 vols. (Copenhagen, Möller, 1857-1972), Vol. II, p. 38.

²³ 'Kvæði af syndugri konu', ed. Jón Helgason, *Íslensk fornkvæði*, 8 vols. (Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1962-1981), Vol. VI, p. 211-213. An overview over the ballad's Scandinavian tradition is given by Ann-Mari Häggman in 'Visan om Maria Magdalena: En nordisk legendvisa i finlandssvensk tradition', *Fróðskaparrit* 42 (1994), pp. 107-108. Vésteinn Ólason, *The Traditional Ballads of Iceland* (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1982), p. 372, points out that the shoe-stanza distinguishes the Western Scandinavian from continental versions of the ballad.

²⁴ *HómNo*, ed. Indrebø, pp. 81-86.

²⁵ Hjelde, *Norsk preken i det 12. århundre*, p. 247.

Easter lamb is detailed: ‘Sic autem comedetis illum renes vestros accingetis et calceamenta habebitis in pedibus, tenentes baculos in manibu, et comedetis festinanter’ (‘And thus shall ye eat it; with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand’).

As to the general line of interpretation, the Norse homilist follows Gregory’s glosses on this passage closely; concerning the meaning of the shoes he, like Gregory, explains that ‘Sqvar ero fkin dœuðra kyqvenda. Sqvar merkia dôme liðinna fæðra. en fôtr merkia gœngu góðra verca’ (‘shoes are products of the skin of dead animals; they signify the teachings of the patriarchs and our feet the steps of good works’).²⁶ But in order to emphasise the implication of this statement the Norwegian cleric extends the picture, painting an allegorical scene in which the steps of good works are set in relation to the image of a thorny wilderness as symbol of deceit: ‘Ða hæfum mér fqvá á fotum. ef vér biorgum os í vercum með dómum liðinna fæðra við fræiftni fianda ok vándra manna fva fem fcvár lifa fótum við þyrni ok við ormum’ (‘We wear shoes on our feet if we protect ourselves in our conduct with the laws of the patriarchs against the temptations of the devil and evil men, just as shoes protect our feet against the injuries of thorns and serpents’).²⁷

The allegorical scene produced to enrich Gregory’s exposition matches that of the visionary texts we discussed above. Its visual effectiveness rests on the simple constellation of the shoe and the thorny pathway. The former illustrates the protective shell afforded by practising Christian morality; the latter the omnipresent nature of earthly temptations. The journey signifies faith; inhibitions are symptomatic of immorality. Introduced in such a straightforward manner, the homily suggests that contemporary audiences, lay as well as clerical, would have found the allegory uncomplicated. And it seems likely, therefore, that audiences of *Draumvedet* too would have been sensitive to the allegorical implication of the motif in the ballad, even if the conceit is there drawn out on a larger scale.

Thus far, we have observed that the didactic motif of the shoe was particularly popular in Northern Europe, with variations of it figuring in various literary contexts over a long period of

²⁶ *HómNo*, ed. Indrebø, p. 86, ll. 23-25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86, ll. 25-28. Cf. Hjelde, *Norsk preken i det 12. århundre*, p. 261.

time. It is difficult to establish where the idea originated; as we shall see, it has been connected with a specific pre-Christian burial custom described in one medieval family saga. I would suggest that it does not derive from any one conception or belief, but that it is a reflex of a broader semiotic pattern in Norse-Icelandic literature and culture. To illustrate this point I will in the following section draw attention to some additional secular and mythological literary examples in which the shoe plays an important role as a symbol of different kinds of metaphorical journeys.

The Shoe in Myth and Ritual

Several secular rituals described in medieval Scandinavian sources centre on the object of the shoe and imprint of the footstep. They are employed as formal instruments in legal procedures, and as a token of arrangements engaged upon between two or more parties. Especially interesting – because of its elaborate format – is the ritual of adoption described in early Norwegian legal codes. The procedure is delineated in the laws of the *Gulapíng* and *Frostapíng*, compendia which survive in MSS from the thirteenth century but whose legislative traditions go back at least to the time of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri (d. c. 960).²⁸ As depicted in these texts, adoption was conceived of as a journey into the new kinship group. The ritual is called *ættleiðing* ('leading into kinship') and later *arfleiðing* ('leading into inheritance'),²⁹ and its central token, consonant with the overarching journey motif, was a piece of homemade footwear.

It was the prospective father's duty, in preparation for the ceremony, to produce this item – '[at] gera fco' ('to make a shoe'). Its leather, we read, was to derive from a newly slain, three-year old ox, more specifically the knee joint of its right hind leg. At the feast held for the occasion, the initiator was first to place the item next to a barrel of specially brewed ale, and then to put it on. In doing so he should, according to the *Gulapíng* version, declaim the following

²⁸ Cf. *KLNM*, s.nn. 'Gulatingsloven'; 'Frostatingsloven'.

²⁹ *Den ældre Frosthathings-Lov*, ed. Keyser et al., *NGL* I, IX, ch. 1; cf. *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, ch. 58 in the same volume.

words: ‘ec leiði þenna mann til fiar þess er ec gef hanom. oc til giallz oc til giavar, oc til felf og til fætes. oc til bota oc til bauga. oc til allz rettar fva fem moðer hans væri munði keypt’ (‘I lead this man to those possessions which I confer on him, to debt and gift, to place and seat, to redress and wergild, and to all entitlements just as if his mother had been lawfully brought into marriage with the marriage gift’).³⁰ In the next step of the procedure, the father was to invite the candidate to wear the shoe: ‘fcal faðer láta ættleiðing stíga í’ (‘the father shall let the adoptee step in’); and after this each of the initiator’s siblings or alternative inheritors was to do likewise. Finally, these were to lead (‘leiða’) the new family member to the parents’ presence (‘á reca scaut oc rygja’). At this point the candidate became a fully assimilated member of the family and claimant of inheritance on the same line as her or his new siblings.

After the ritual, the provisions specify, the shoe used in the ceremony should serve as proof of the contract engaged upon by all parties involved.³¹ This legal procedure is interesting in the context of our discussion because it, too, draws on some of the same basic symbolic connotations of the object we discussed in connection with the Christian motif and the ritual of shoe-concealment at the outset of this section. There is a strong connection between the object, the individual who wears it, and her or his status; its protective quality comes to illustrate a transferred sense of security – that of the family as the core social institution; and its effectiveness as a symbol derives from a larger conceptual association between life and the notion of the journey. The father, in fashioning the shoe, creates a fresh material basis for his adopted son’s new status. All parties involved, in stepping into the shoe, impress, as it were, their personal stamp of consent on the item. In this way, the shoe symbolises the familial support behind the adoptee and his future journeys. The item comes to represent the adoptee’s principal protective network, and the new basis of his social identity.

The origins of this legal procedure lie in the dark. Konrad Maurer asserts that it is ‘anscheinend uralten Rechtens’ (‘apparently derived from ancient laws’), but offers no

³⁰ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, ed. Keyser, ch. 58.

³¹ *Den ældre Frosthathings-Lov*, ed. Keyser, IX, ch. 1.

suggestions as to why.³² Steinsland observes that the ritual is most likely pre-Christian in origin because canonical law did not acknowledge children conceived outside wedlock as fully eligible inheritors.³³ Christian views on family structures are more strongly reflected in later versions of the procedure, according to which the adopted child was no longer equally ranked with the lawful offspring, but relegated to a secondary status of inheritance,³⁴ and the ritual itself, though retaining its name, became religious in nature.³⁵ That the procedure as described in the *Gulaping* and *Frostaping* law codes may in fact reflect older practices is thus first and foremost indicated by the non-involvement of the church, the centrality of the ale-feast, and the elaborate nature of the procedure. Details that seem curious today were most likely more meaningful at the time these legal codes were put in writing.

Though differing in form, as a rite of social initiation, *ættleiðing* shares several characteristics with descriptions of early rites of blood-brotherhood, or *fóstbræðralag*.³⁶ In such ceremonies the footstep plays a central role as stamp of personal integrity and of a contractual alliance entailing life-long obligations. One version of this rite, found in *Gisla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*,³⁷ describes the parties involved cutting out a strip of earth, called *jarðarmen*, and raising it on a spear. With both ends fastened to the ground, this strip of turf forms an arch under which the candidates in the next stage step together. At this point, the candidates let their blood flow together on a specific point in the soil. A second, more simplistic version of the ritual is described by Saxo in connection with Hading and Lysir's blood-brotherhood; he delineates the procedure as follows: 'Siquidem icturi fedus ueteres uestigia sua mutui sanguinis aspersione perfundere consueuerant, amiciciarum pignus alterni cruoris commercio firmaturi' ('it was so

³² K. Maurer, *Vorlesungen über altnordische Rechtsgeschichte*, 5 vols. (Leipzig, A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1907-1910), Vol. III, p. 170.

³³ G. Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi* (Larvik, Solum Forlag, 1991), p. 81.

³⁴ Cf. *KLNM*, s.v. 'Ættleiing'.

³⁵ The personages involved were to proceed to church and make the declaration of adoption on the authority of the Gospel; see Maurer, *Vorlesungen über altnordische Rechtsgeschichte*, Vol. III, pp. 169-180.

³⁶ A connection between the rituals is suggested by A. M. Wergeland, *Ættleiðing: ein Rechtsgeschäft mittels dessen in Norwegen vordem unächt geborene Kinder in das Geschlecht eingeführt werden konnten* (München, F. Straub, 1890), pp. 7 ff.

³⁷ *Gisla saga*, p. 22; *Fóstbræðra saga*, ed. Björn K Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *Vestfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), p. 125.

done by our forefathers when they were to make a pledge that they would sprinkle their blood on the footprints and let it merge in order to reinforce the commitment of their relationship’).³⁸ This depiction can be compared with a statement by Brynhildr in *Brot af Sigurðarqviðo* in which she derides Gunnar for having betrayed his foster-brother, Sigurðr:

Mantattu, Gunnar til gorva þat,
er þit blóði í spor báðir rendot.³⁹

Both versions of the *fóstbræðralag* connect the symbolic features of the blood-confluence and the footstep. A notion especially highlighted in the last quotation is that the pact engaged upon in this fashion was considered ethically binding. Gunnar’s already cowardly deception is made all the more perverse by his breaking the bond of loyalty tied in the ritual. In this context, the footprint attains a contract-like significance, sealed in nature and memory through the blood-stamp within it.

As we turn to sources on Old Norse myth we will find that the shoe symbol attains significance in a number of eschatological contexts. However, the authenticity of each of these as records of actual beliefs has been doubted. In attempting to trace the Northern European predominance of the didactic shoe-motif in *Draumkvedet*, the ‘Lyke Wake Dirge’, and the *Visio Godeschalci*, several critics, among them Magnus Olsen and more recently Dinzeltacher and Wellendorf, have debated whether the motif may have its origin in a pre-Christian interment ritual described in *Gísla saga*.⁴⁰ At Vésteinn’s burial,⁴¹ Þorgrímur nef, a farmer keen to preserve traditional customs, wishes to tie ‘Hel-shoes’ to the feet of the deceased. This part of the burial rite, he states, helps people tread the road to Valhøll: “‘Þat er tízka,” segir hann, “at binda monnum helskó, þá er þeir skulu ganga á til Valhallar”’ (“‘It is a custom”, he says, “to tie Hel-shoes to people on which they shall walk to Valhøll”’) (p. 45).

³⁸ Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Holder, p. 23.

³⁹ *Brot af Sigurðarqviðo*, st. 17: ‘You seem not to remember, Gunnar, how both of you mingled blood together in a footstep.’ Brynhildr’s words are echoed in *Lokasenna*, st. 9, where it is Loki who reprimands Óðinn: ‘Mantu þat, Óðinn,/ er vit í árdaga/ blendom blóði saman?’

⁴⁰ See Olsen, ‘Gjøre bro for ens sjæl’, p. 212; Dinzeltacher, ‘verba hec tam mystica’, pp. 79-82; Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 107-110

⁴¹ *Gísla saga*, pp. 45-46.

One should of course not ignore the fact that the practice described in *Gísla saga* is not supported by any further references in the entire Old Norse literary corpus. The saga author, moreover, writing at least two centuries after the conversion, necessarily had a Christian outlook on the times and culture he described, and could well have designed such a heathen-sounding custom for the purpose of his narrative. It does not help, for that matter, that Þorgrímr, the person overseeing this rite, is characterised as a man ‘fullr af gørnigum ok fjølkynngi’ (‘full of sorcery and witchcraft’) – precisely the sort of eccentricities denounced by Gíslí’s better dream woman.⁴²

That being said, it appears equally unlikely that this particular motif in *Gísla saga* should derive from Christian literature. It plays on a conception of the post-mortem journey well known from early Norse literary sources. The notion that the roads to the hereafters of Old Norse myth can be lengthy and challenging shines through, as we discussed in the previous Chapter, in numerous narratives. Óðinn’s descent to Hel in *Baldurs draumar* is bound up with danger, as the bloody hound he encounters illustrates (sts. 2-3), and we recall the vølva’s complaints in the same poem about the wearisome nature of her journey back to life from the obscurity of the dead. Helgi Hundingsbani, moreover, indicates to his lover that the route to back to Valhøll leads both over bridges and along ‘roðnar brautir’ (‘reddened paths’).⁴³ Like the verb form ‘rióða’, this adjective typically carries the sense ‘bloody’, ‘bleeding’, or ‘reddened with blood’, a detail which thus indicates the journey’s potentially troublesome nature.⁴⁴ On this basis, the idea that Vésteinn could benefit from protective aids in the hereafter does not seem implausible in itself as a record of a pre-Christian custom.

In this connection the fact that the symbol also appears in prominent places in the *Prose Edda* may serve to strengthen the case for its broader cultural importance. According to Snorri, two gods possessed shoes imbued with exceptional attributes. One of them is the troublemaker Loki. In the account of Sif’s abduction in *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri tells us that Loki owned ‘skúa

⁴² *Gísla saga*, p. 37.

⁴³ *Helgaqvíða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*, st. 49.

⁴⁴ Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. ‘roðinn’; cf. B.e La Farge and J. Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda: Based on Hans Kuhn’s Kurzes Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1992), s.v. ‘rióða’.

er hann rann á lopt ok lög' ('shoes with which he could travel through air and sea').⁴⁵ In the story in question, these enable him to escape from Brokkr, the dwarf with whom he had wagered his head. Snorri does not reference a poetic source for this detail, and though we know from other sources that Loki is capable of shape-shifting and travel by extraordinary means,⁴⁶ this particular attribute is only mentioned here. Anna B. Rooth, in her study of this complex figure in Old Norse myth, conjectures that whereas Loki's capacity to sail oceans and skies may be genuine, 'helpful mythographers' have derived this particular motif from classical traditions and the winged shoes of Mercury.⁴⁷

The more consequential piece of divine footwear, however, belongs to Víðarr. Snorri recounts that Óðinn, upon his defeat by the wolf Fenrir at Ragnarøk, will be avenged by Víðarr, his son. This sequence of events is consonant with that described in *Völuspá* (sts. 51-52). But where the poem describes Víðarr killing the monster with a spear, *Gylfaginning* states that the god treads on Fenrir's lower jaw and tears its jaws apart. A weapon of unusual dimensions aids him in the duel:

Á þeim fœti hefir hann þann skó er allan aldr hefir verit til samnat: þat eru bjórar þeir er menn sníða ór skóm sínum fyrir tám eða hæl. Því skal þeim bjórum braut kasta sá maðr er at því vill hyggja at koma Ásunum at liði.⁴⁸

This version of the cosmic battle intimates that the god's strong *shoe* is his decisive advantage. It is also his defining attribute. For like Þórr's hammer or Íðunn's apples, Víðarr's shoe is characteristic enough, says Snorri, to use as basis in kennings for the god: 'Hann má kalla hinn þogla Ás, eiganda jár⟨n⟩ skós' ('He shall be called the silent god, [and] owner of the iron shoe').⁴⁹ The fact, moreover, that Snorri refers to the Víðarr-myth as the origin of a custom apparently still current in his day, gives the motif a significant further social dimension. It underlines the notion that the god is facing the beast not only on his and his father's behalf, but

⁴⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Faulkes, Vol. I, p. 43, ll. 2-3; also mentioned on p. 46, l. 3.

⁴⁶ He takes to the air with Freyia's 'fiaðrhamr' in *Drymsqviða*, st. 5.

⁴⁷ A. B. Rooth, *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology* (Lund, Gleerups Förlag, 1961), p.45.

⁴⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 50, l. 37- p. 51, l. 3: 'On that foot he wears the shoe which has been assembled through all time: it is made out of the strips of leather which people cut off their shoes in the front or at the heel. Thus the person who wishes to be of help to the gods should throw away those leather patches.'

⁴⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Faulkes, p. 19, ll. 23-24.

on behalf of humankind, who in this respect represent the source of his strength. By virtue of the shoe's social fabric the step into the wolf's jaws accrues the force of all humanity.

Together with the rite described in *Gísla saga*, Loki's and Víðarr's attributes in Snorri's *Edda* demonstrate that the shoe also represented a popular symbol in narrative traditions surrounding the mythic otherworld, even if their authenticity as traces of actual pre-Christian beliefs cannot be established. Víðarr's shoe and the attached belief have been deemed late literary developments too,⁵⁰ yet Snorri's details concerning various aspects of this myth suggest that, at least as a literary phenomenon, the myth was widely known. These mythological variations tie in with our discussion of the Christian shoe-motif because they mediate between this world and the next. The Hel-shoe and Víðarr's weapon present metonymic images of the extended journey of human existence, and the notion that actions in this world condition the nature of the otherworld journey.

The symbol we have analysed within different narrative contexts in this section, then, shows that the didactic motif in *Draumkvedet* produces particularly strong associations in its particular cultural setting. Within the different contexts we have discussed, the same object carries differing symbolic connotations. These are not necessarily related to each other in any direct and traceable manner, but support each other collectively as facets of what one might call one and the same popular semiotic pattern in Old Norse literature. Against this background I consider it more likely that the homiletic motif has its roots in a traditional interest in this symbol manifest across the literary corpus, than in a particular application of it, such as the Hel-shoe in *Gísla saga*.

⁵⁰ See de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Vol. II, p. 227, and Vol. I, p. 285. Contrast J. S. Martin, *Ragnarök: An Investigation into the Old Norse Concepts of the Fate of the Gods* (Assen, Van Gorcum, 1972), p. 83, who believes the myth 'has all the air of a belief that had sunk into folk-lore and was probably old when Snorri repeated it.'

II. The Otherworld Bridge

The anonymous Icelandic devotional poem *Liknarbraut* ('the way of salvation'), from the close of the thirteenth century, likens Christ's cross to a range of symbols bound up with the metaphor of life as a journey or pilgrimage.⁵¹ They include a 'lykill' ('key') (st. 31), a 'skeið' ('ship') (st. 33), a 'stigi' ('ladder') (st. 34), and a 'brú' ('bridge') (st. 35). The latter symbol is especially interesting considered against the backdrop of Icelandic poetics. The skald supports its metaphorical association with the cross by stating that the bridge aids virtuous persons on their way to heaven and obstructs the passage of the sinful. In a transferred sense, the bridge is thus envisaged as Everywoman and Everyman's route to the hereafter. As George S. Tate shows in his commentary, this employment of the symbol betrays the poet's profound familiarity with continental traditions of Christian exegesis and with *Visiones*, many of which, as we shall see, integrate bridges with the same essential attributes into the topography of the otherworld.⁵² At the same time, however, the image produces particularly strong resonances in records of Old Norse poetry, myth, and religious rituals. How do these native and foreign traditions relate to each other, and where do they intersect? These are the questions I wish to pursue in the second part of this chapter. Special reference will be made to the bridge episodes of *Eiríks saga víðfórla* and *Draumkvedet*.

Few symbols are as evocative of transitions from one stage of existence to another as the bridge – allowing as it does progression where external voids obstruct. Numerous religious traditions envisage bridges as connecting elements between this life and the next, or as a stage on this journey.⁵³ In *Visiones* – the literary tradition through which this concept enters the Christian otherworld – the bridge typically entails a dual function: it evaluates and purges the person crossing. As far as we can see, the motif originated in the last quarter of the sixth century with

⁵¹ *Liknarbraut*, ed. Tate, *Skald* VII:1.

⁵² See Tate's commentary to *Liknarbraut*, sts. 31-35, pp. 261-27

⁵³ The most comprehensive study of medieval conceptions of the otherworld bridge is P. Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenseitsbrücke im Mittelalter*, Dissertationen der Universität Wien (Vienna, 1973). On its role across different mythologies, see J. Hastings et al. eds, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, 13 vols. (London, T & T Clark, 1908-1927), s.v. 'Bridge'.

the visionary accounts contained in Gregory of Tour's *Historia Francorum* and the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.⁵⁴ In the more influential, latter text we read about an anonymous soldier who obtained a vision of a city of the blessed in the otherworld. This village is described as having at its border a foul-smelling and foggy river, across which a single bridge arches. Its function is defined as follows in the Old Norse translation: 'a brunni gørþisc su manna raun at vandr menn fello i óena, es yvir vildo ganga, en þeir es svnpalausir voro, runno yfir bruna øruggir til ens fagra staþar' ('on the bridge the following trial took place: evil men who attempted to cross fell into the river, while those free from sin ran across unscathed to the beautiful places').⁵⁵ An illustration of this mechanism is attached to the Latin treatise which has been lost in the Norse translation. The soldier observes a man who, as he crosses, slips off the bridge; a fierce struggle immediately ensues between agents of good and evil, each contesting over his soul to secure the right over its destiny.⁵⁶ Though the outcome of the struggle remains untold, the vignette illustrates the main function of the bridge well. As an instrument of intermediate judgement in the hereafter, its purpose is analogous to St. Michael's scales at the Last Judgement.⁵⁷

Over the course of the following centuries the bridge became an integral component of the otherworld landscape and attained more complex attributes. The most vivid descriptions may be found in the Hiberno-English visions of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries where such structures are visualised as coated with thorns and spikes and imbued with punitive as well as evaluative functions.⁵⁸ A striking example is the bridge figuring in the satirical scene of the *Visio Tundali* we drew attention to in the Introduction. In the Norse translation, it is described as follows:

þa sa þau stodv vatn med <sua> huossum *uindi og odum stormi at bylgiur gengu sua hat

⁵⁴ For early Christian versions of this motif, see F. Graf, 'The Bridge and the Ladder: Narrow Passages in Late Antique Visions', in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, eds. R. S. Bousthan and A. Y. Reed (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 19-33.

⁵⁵ *Viðróður*, ed. Unger, p. 250, ll. 26-28

⁵⁶ Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, ed. de Vogüé, Book IV, ch. 36.

⁵⁷ A detailed description of St. Michael and the scales is found in the *Visio Thurkilli*, ed. Schmidt, pp. 34-40; compare *Draumkvedet*, K1, 27-28; K5, 20-21.

⁵⁸ On this, see P. Dinzelbacher and H. Kleinschmidt, 'Seelenbrücke und Brückenbau im mittelalterlichen England', *Numen* 31:2 (1984), pp. 242-287.

at ei mati sia himenenn fyrir þui en j þessu uatni uar *undarlíga mikill fiolldi dyra ogurlígra er goptu og rautudu og kostudu epter mæti at suelgia syndugar salr En um breidd uazsins uar bru miog long og uar lofa breid En leingd bruarinar uar half róst og uar þessi bru bædi leingri og miori enn hin er uer gatum fyr Nu uar sia en miofa bru er yfer la uatnit oll sett stalgoddum sua at eingi fotur mannz mati yfer komaz En oll þau enu ogurlígu dyr er þar uoro j uatninu þa samnaduz alla uega at brunne at taka þar mat sinn allar þær salr er ei mattu um komaz bruna⁵⁹

To his great exasperation, the Irish protagonist is not spared this trial and his anxiety surges when he observes a soul crossing the bridge in great agony, carrying a heavy load of wheat on its back. Duggal is told that this burden corresponds to goods the soul gained unlawfully in this life and that – in accordance with the same principle – he must herd across the ox he once allegedly stole from his grandfather. What follows is familiar.⁶⁰

Both Gregory's bridge and the more intricate derivative in *Duggals leizla* bear out the moral principle attached to the figure in the abovementioned poem *Liknarbraut*; we encountered a version of the same logic in *Paradis-soga* and its Heklabru. Indeed, both the 'Lyke Wake Dirge' and the *Visio Godeschalci* refer to similar structures too.⁶¹ Versions of the motif in *Draumkedet* and *Esv* attest further to the fact that the Christian motif travelled widely; in each of these narratives, moreover, we can observe that the concept has merged with what seem to be separate bridge traditions in Germanic literature.

As far as its appearance is concerned, *Draumkvedet*'s bridge mirrors that described above in *Duggals leizla* closely. Some stanzas describe it as beset with hooks and spikes;⁶² others as guarded by a trio of monsters,⁶³ yet others as steep and dizzyingly high.⁶⁴ Like Duggal, moreover, Olav indicates that he was inconvenienced by this structure. In L4, 13 he recalls: 'eg

⁵⁹ *Duggals leizla*, ed. Cahill, p. 39, l. 7-p. 40, l. 8: 'then they saw a lake with such sharp wind and fierce storm that waves grew large enough to block their view of heaven. And in this water were numerous kinds of terrifying animals which gaped and made noises and attempted as best as they could to devour the sinful souls. And across this water was a very long bridge as wide as a hand; the length of the bridge was half a røst and this bridge was both longer and narrower than the one we encountered before. Now this narrow bridge which spanned over the water was beset with steel spikes all about so that no person could cross on her or his feet. And all the terrifying animals in the water huddled around the bridge to make their meal of all the souls who would not manage to get to the other side'.

⁶⁰ Cf. p. 18 above.

⁶¹ See Dinzelbacher and Kleinschmidt, 'Seelenbrücke und Brückenbau', pp. 268-269.

⁶² *Draumkvedet*, L4, 12; K9, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, L4, 13; L6, 3; K1, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, L4, 12; L6, 7; V1a, 25; M1, 2; M6, 15; K9, 5-6.

slap ikje af Jedarbroi/ fe domane dei kom vraange' ('I was not allowed off the Jedar bridge, because of the harsh judgements that came my way') (cf. T3, 4). Elsewhere he merely recounts that he crossed the bridge – 'Gjængje Hev eg Jedarbroi/ ho Tose under Skyi hange' ('I have walked the Jedar bridge; it seemed to be suspended beneath the clouds'), confirming that it constituted an important stage of the journey (L4, 16; K1, 11).

For all its likenesses with the *Visio*-motif, however, this bridge differs in one important respect: it bears a name, or several names. We find it referred to as *Jedarbro* (L4, 13, 16), *Gjallarbrui* (V8, 2), *Gjalarbrol* (V9, 7), but most commonly a form of *Gjeddarbro*,⁶⁵ names not identifiable with any known medieval Christian tradition. Scholars have traditionally connected all of these names with the concept of the 'Gjallar brú', a bridge which Snorri posits as an integral part of the realm of Hel.⁶⁶ In his depiction of Hermoðr's expedition to this realm, Snorri describes this structure as standing at the threshold between the worlds of the living and the dead. After riding for nine nights through the deep and shadowy valleys, Hermoðr, we read, 'kom til árinna Gjallar ok reið á Gjallar brúna' ('came to the river Gjöll and rode across the Gjallar bridge').⁶⁷ This bridge possesses two salient features: firstly, it emits a strong sound when people make their way across; its female guard says that it reverberates no less under Hermoðr's weight than under that of five hundred travellers (l. 13). Secondly, it is built from a very fine material – 'Hon er þokð lýsigulli' ('it is covered in bright gold') (l. 9) – whereby it reflects the ornate splendour generally associated with the otherworld in Snorri's mythography.

The name 'Gjallar brú', and formations appearing to be derived therefrom (such as 'Gjæddarebrú' and 'Gielle-broe'), occur in numerous contexts in later Scandinavian ballad literature and folklore.⁶⁸ However, given that Snorri's is the earliest surviving reference to such a bridge, its place in the pre-Christian mythological landscape has been debated. In their recent

⁶⁵ For variations of the name, see Barnes ed., *Draumkvæde*, pp. 214-215.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

⁶⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 47, ll. 8-9.

⁶⁸ On these later uses, see B. Jonsson, 'Om Draumkvædet och dess datering', *Sumlen: Årsbok för vis- och folkmusikforskning* (1994-1995), pp. 9-153. Myhren, in Bø and Myhren, *Draumkvedet*, p. 82, notes that *Draumkvedet*'s main spellings 'Gjeddarbru' or 'Jeddarbru' are characteristic of a progressive ll>dd transition in the dialect of Western Telemark.

theses, Abram and Wellendorf surmise that *Draumkvedet*'s and Snorri's bridges are related, and that, on the basis of the bridge's afterlife in Scandinavian folklore, the prototypical motif that unites them must have been more widespread in medieval literature than the relatively few surviving references would suggest.⁶⁹ The name occurs only once elsewhere in sources materially datable to the Middle Ages, namely in Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*,⁷⁰ likely composed on the occasion of king Hákon's death in 1263. There the phrase 'gá á Gjallarbrú' ('to cross the Gjallar bridge') appears, not unlike paraphrases we have encountered earlier such as 'to meet Óðinn' or 'receive Hel's embrace', to function as a metaphor for death.⁷¹

Though the two critics agree that the names of the bridges of ballad and myth are connected, they envisage differing scenarios behind their association. Wellendorf, based particularly on a visually comparable edifice in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*,⁷² considers it likely that Snorri's 'Gjallar brú' indeed originates in native traditions independent of Christian influence.⁷³ Abram, in contrast, thinks it more probable that it was the prominence of the Christian motif that inspired Snorri to integrate the 'Gjallar brú' into the Hermodr-narrative. He suggests that *Draumkvedet*'s 'Gjeddabro', as well as other variants in Scandinavian ballad literature, could have derived etymologically from a Norse coinage such as **gjalda brú* – 'bridge of repayment', arguing on this basis that Snorri configured this graphically and linguistically to match his scheme of the mythological underworld.⁷⁴

In my opinion there are several important aspects to Snorri's bridge – and in extension to *Draumkvedet*'s – that reflect deeper roots in native tradition. Firstly, the 'Gjallar brú' of *Gylfaginning* lacks any association with trial or retribution. Secondly, it possesses ornamental qualities never seen in the *Visiones*; this feature of the Gjallar bridge is in fact alluded to in one

⁶⁹ Abram, 'Representations', pp. 152-169; Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, p. 112.

⁷⁰ Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða*, ed. K. E. Gade, *Skald* II:2, st. 24.

⁷¹ Cf. Abram, 'Representations', pp. 152.

⁷² In Saxo's account of Thorkillus and Gorm's expedition to the realm of Geirroðr, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Holder, p. 288, l. 2, a bridge of gold ('aureo ponte') is described which marks the border between the land of the living and the otherworld and may only be crossed by the dead.

⁷³ Wellendorf, *Visionslitteratur*, pp. 114-119.

⁷⁴ Abram, 'Representations', p. 169.

of the *Draumkvedet*-stanzas, where we hear that the bridge is ‘inlaid’ with gold: ‘gulli er etter Straumo lagt’ (‘gold lies in streams along it’) (T3, 3).⁷⁵ Gold is also the defining visual feature of the bridge described in Saxo. Thirdly, the function of bridges in Norse cosmology is well attested in poetic sources, which renders such an elaborate process of adaptation from Christian sources less clearly motivated. This raises questions as to Snorri’s hypothetical reasons for lifting the ‘Gjallar brú’ from Christian sources only to de-Christianise it in the next stage. The most famous bridge mentioned in the eddaic poems is ‘Bilrøst’ – Snorri’s ‘Bifrøst’ – which leads to the home of the Æsir and protects their realm against the jötnar.⁷⁶ Snorri equates this bridge with the rainbow.⁷⁷ Reference is made to further bridges in *Helgaqviða hundingsbana qnnor*. As Helgi prepares to return to Valhøll after his rendezvous with Sigrún, he states, ‘scal ec fyr vestan vindhiálms brúar./ áðr Salgofnir sigrþjóð vekir’ (‘I must [ride] west of the bridges of the sky, before Salgofnir [the cock of the hall] wakes the victory-bands’).⁷⁸ On account of *Bilrøst*’s prominence elsewhere, commentators have generally suspected that this must also be what Helgi makes reference to;⁷⁹ however, the latter’s use of the plural *brúar*, seems discrepant with this attribution. The poem may well refer to a set of bridges between this world and the next whose existence happens not to be seconded in any other surviving literary source. In any case, we observe that the idea of the otherworldly bridge (named or not) plays an important role in Snorri’s extant sources, and that a Christian prototype would not have been necessary, as far as one can speak of need and motivation with reference to literary productivity, for the concept of a bridge leading to the realm of Hel.

A further characteristic that firmly associates the ‘Gjallar brú’ of *Gylfaginning* with the mythical otherworld is the inherent attribute of sound conveyed in its name. The adjective *gjallr*

⁷⁵ I interpret ‘etter’ as the preposition ‘along’, also commonly found in modern Norwegian in the compound ‘langsetter’; cf. Aasen, *Ordbog over det norske folkesprog*, s.v. ‘ette’. Compare Abram, ‘Representations’, p. 166, who, in view of the fact that the detail only appears in one variant, cautions against regarding it as a definite echo of the *Gjallarbrú* motif.

⁷⁶ This bridge is mentioned twice in the *Poetic Edda*: cf. *Grímnismál*, st. 44; *Fáfnismál*, st. 15.

⁷⁷ Snorri Sturluson: *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, pp. 15-20, 25, 34, 50.

⁷⁸ *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana qnnor*, st. 49.

⁷⁹ Cf. von See et al., *Kommentar*, Vol. 4, pp. 798-799.

(‘ringing; resounding’), as well as the verb form *gjalla* (‘to ring; resound’), semantically ties together a larger complex of components relating to the mythological cosmos. Several of these pertain to spatial and temporal boundaries. Apart from the Gjallar bridge and the river Gjöll, the attribute is perhaps most intimately associated with Hermoðr’s ‘Gjallarhorn’ (‘resounding horn’), the instrument whose sound will signal the commencement of Ragnarøk according to *Völuspá*.⁸⁰ What is more, Jan de Vries draws attention to the shared element of sound in the names of the three primordial giants Bergelmir (‘the roaring bear’), Þrúðgelmir (‘the strongly roaring’), and Aurgelmir (‘the roaring clay’) introduced in *Vafþrúðnismál*.⁸¹ He points out that these names in turn echo those of the mythical otherworld rivers Vaðgelmir (‘the roaring ford’) and Hvergelmir (‘the roaring spring’): in Vaðgelmir, according to *Reginismál*, a form of afterlife punishment of wrongdoers takes place, and so its function, if not its name, may well be inspired by Christian didactic literature.⁸² Hvergelmir is described in *Grimnismál* as the otherworldly source of all rivers – including Gjöll.⁸³ What appears to connect all these mythic names is the Indo-European root **ghel* (‘to scream; yell’) encoded in them.⁸⁴ This is the same root which also underlies *gjalla*, and thus also the core linguistic component of the river Gjöll and its bridge. A final echo of this root we have come across earlier in this study is the noun *galdr*, the kind of chant, we recall, used by Óðinn to call to life the *vǫlva* in *Baldrs draumar* (st. 4).⁸⁵

A possible key to this prominence of sound in the otherworld of Old Norse myth may be the giant Ymir, whose body is in some sources said to have furnished the raw material out of which the cosmos was created.⁸⁶ The name Ymir is intimately related to sound, or rather noise;

⁸⁰ *Völuspá*, st. 45.

⁸¹ *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 29. Cf. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Vol. II, p. 370. R. D. Fulk, ‘An Eddic Analogue to the Scyld Scefing Story’, *The Review of English Studies* 40 (1989), p. 317, argues for variant, agrarian, etymologies for Bergelmir and Aurgelmir, connecting the names with Old Norse terms for barley and corn.

⁸² von See, *Kommentar*, Vol. 5, pp. 288-289.

⁸³ *Grimnismál*, st. 26.

⁸⁴ J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols. (Bern and Munich, Francke Verlag, 1959-1969), s.v. ‘*ghel’.

⁸⁵ Compare the quasi-eddaic *Grógaldr*, part of *Svipdagismál*, which relates the wisdom verses of a young man’s deceased mother.

⁸⁶ E.g. *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 21

consider the verb ‘ymja’ (‘to scream’) and noun ‘ymr’ (‘scream’).⁸⁷ In the *Prose Edda*, Snorri identifies Ymir with the proto-giant Aurgelmir of the same poem, and this may well be on the basis of their shared association with sound.⁸⁸ A compelling case regarding the many reverberations of sound or noise in the terminology of Old Norse cosmic features has recently been made by Henning Kure.⁸⁹ He argues that Ymir’s quality of sound may, together with his physical components, have constituted one of the raw elements from which the cosmos took shape. *Völuspá*’s opening stanzas tell us that the process of conferring names to all components of the universe was a central aspect of the gods’ early efforts to mould and cultivate the elements. And this codification of language could plausibly, and analogously to the physical craftsmanship the *æsir* display in forging metal into tools, be interpreted as a process of crafting in this case of the primordial substance of sound.

It is relevant, finally, to take note of the fact that numerous additional motifs connected with this border region marked by Gjöll developed in later quasi-eddaic poetry. *Fiqlsvinnzmál* mentions a gate named Þryngiöll (‘the loudly shrieking’) positioned outside the hall of Menglǫð, which is itself a conflation of heathen and Christian netherworlds.⁹⁰ A later fragment of Snorri’s *Edda* refers to a gate in the mythological netherworld named ‘Gjallandi grind’ (‘the resounding gate’), a concept recalling the strongly resounding gate perceived and described by the *Sólarljóð*-speaker (st. 39).⁹¹ All these names of giants, rivers, instruments, chants, gates and bridges in this way, at least on a linguistic level, attest to a close association between key structures of the mythological cosmos and sound. The ‘Gjallar brú’ in *Draumkvedet* hence

⁸⁷ See H. Kure, ‘In the Beginning was the Scream: Conceptual thought in the Old Norse myth of creation’, in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn, Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003*, eds. R. Simek and J. Meurer (Bonn, Universität Bonn, 2003), p. 311; contrast de Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.n. ‘Ymir’, who, in accordance with the trend in comparative religious scholarship of his day to interpret the figure as akin to the Sanskrit god Yama and Avedic Yima, links the name to the Indo-European root **iemo*, ‘twin’.

⁸⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, p. 10, ll. 15-16.

⁸⁹ Kure, ‘In the Beginning was the Scream’, pp. 311-319.

⁹⁰ *Fiqlsvinnzmál*, ed. G. Neckel, *Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 3. durchgesehene Auflage (Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1936), Vol. I, sts. 9-10. Cf. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, s.n. ‘Þryngiöll’.

⁹¹ Cf. Falk, *Sólarljóð*, pp. 26-27.

echoes not only Snorri's Hel-bridge, but an entire matrix of mythological otherworld concepts evidently recognised and developed in later literary traditions. Even though the bridge described in the saga is clearly modelled on the type of structure described in the *Dialogi* and the *Visio Tundali*, its distinctive features, first and foremost its name, show that it is a product of several differing literary traditions. Whether or not the motif was at one point in the Middle Ages or later introduced into the ballad as a conscious 'mythologism' can hardly be established, and neither can the precise source of the 'Gjallar brú' in Norse literature. Even so, the discussion above shows just how deeply the Christian bridge has been embedded in native literary culture. The bridge motif encountered in *Draumkvedet* is not simply a variant of a *Visio*-topos, but a unique concept bringing together several strands of Latin and native narrative traditions.

The Steinbogi of Eiríks saga

The author of *Eiríks saga* establishes a different set of native associations in his adaptation of the *Visio* motif. Here it figures as one stage in a quest of heroic dimensions, and the author stylises the bridge to function as a locus of a traditional confrontation between the hero and his monstrous nemesis; this yields a scene pregnant with resonances with Germanic literature. The bridge in question first comes into view as Eiríkr and his companions reach the border of India and there finally locate the threshold to the Terrestrial Paradise:

er þeir hófdu længe geingit þykkua skogha ok undarliga hafa. þá koma þeir um sidir fram or morkinne þá tok at lysa ok liost at gera ok litu firir ser æ mikla a henni uar stæinboge. öðru megin ærinnar sá þeir land fagrt ... þat skilr Æir(ekr) at æ su mun skilia þesse lönd at fra sögnn Grikkia konungs þat kom honum j hug at æ su munde falla ór Paradiso ok heita Phison. En er þeir droguzst at steinboganum þa sa þeir at dreki ogurligr lá ahonum ok gapti munninum ok þotti þeim hann gifrliga lata.⁹²

The choice of the travellers in the face of this challenge is simple. They must either confront the

⁹² *ESV*, ll. 181-193: 'when they had travelled for a long time through dark and marvellously high woods they finally came out of the darkness where it got lighter and brighter, and they saw before them a great river over which stood a stone bridge. On the other side of the river they saw a beautiful country ... Based on what the Greek King taught him, Eiríkr discerns that the river which borders this land must come from Paradise and be the one that bears the name Phison. And when they approached the stone bridge they saw that a terrifying dragon lay on it, its jaws agape; they thought it a horrifying sight.'

dragon or abandon the quest. Eiríkr's Danish namesake and foster-brother chooses the latter alternative; predictably, the protagonist of the saga chooses differently. Together with one of his men he charges against the monster and, by leaping into its maw, gains entrance to the beautiful country beyond: 'þeir rada til ok hlaupa j munn drekanum ... þa þotti þeir sem þeir uæde i Ræyk' ('they prepare and run into the mouth of the dragon ... then they thought themselves wading in smoke').⁹³

It will be useful to distinguish between two sequences in this episode – firstly, the carefully choreographed encounter of hero and the dragon on the *steinbogi*, and secondly the hero's curious strategy in confronting the beast. In conceiving each of these sequences, I would suggest, the author alludes to a distinct set of literary conventions, and I will in the following examine them in turn.

The moral function of the otherworld bridge is not explicit in the saga. Yet its monstrous guard and especially its geographical setting between the Dantesque dark forest and the paradisaical garden imply a moral subtext. Sporting no spikes or thorns, the bridge recalls the visually sober incarnation of the motif we encountered in the *Dialogues*, where the bridge similarly crosses the boundary river encircling the heavenly sphere. Like the latter, its position evokes the Scriptural 'narrow way' to heaven – a figural association stressed by St. Gregory in his treatise.⁹⁴

It is equally clear, however, that our author is concerned to link the culminating stage of the quest with a heroic sense of test of character, the encounter between the hero and the monster. In fact, the motif of the dragon-guarded stone bridge is something of a commonplace in contemporary legendary sagas. The Norse saga about the classical hero Hector, for instance, describes a confrontation with a dragon – in this case Argus metamorphosed – guarding a treasure of gold on a *steinbogi*. This monster, manifestly incorporating features of gold-guarding dragons

⁹³ *Esv*, ll. 205-217.

⁹⁴ In his commentary following the anonymous soldier's vision, Gregory the Great's *Dialogi*, ed. de Vogüé, Book IV, ch. 38, links the bridge to this passage in Matthew 7:14.

in Germanic tradition, has placed itself on the only bridge facilitating access between the palace and the life-sustaining forests on the other river bank. It falls to Hector to remove it: ‘tok Ector uopn sijn og gengr fram ath steinnbogunum ... tok hann nu badum hondum spiotit og renndi fram suo hart ath orminum sem fugl flygi’ (‘Hector took his weapon and advanced to the stone bridge ... he took the spear into both of his hands and ran as fast towards the monster as a bird flies’).⁹⁵ Scenes similarly choreographed around dragons on stone bridges can be found in *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* and *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns*, each of which appear to stem from around the same time as *Esv* or later.⁹⁶

This popular motif in late Norse legendary sagas is, as the Norse tale of Hector reflects, modeled on a rich tradition of heroic dragon fights in Germanic poetry. As the object of a climactic encounter between hero and nemesis, Eiríkr’s dragon recalls, among others, the famous protector of the hoard in the Sigurðr cycle. Apart from presiding over a much-coveted treasure, this dragon-incarnation provides the young hero a chance to prove ‘hugr’ (‘courage’), ‘hendr’ (‘hands’), and ‘hiqrr’ (‘sword’).⁹⁷ To Sigurðr, as to other Germanic literary heroes, the monster represents a kind of rite of passage, giving birth to his heroic self and thus to his narrative.

One closer analogue to the *steinbogi*-and-monster motif in later Scandinavian legendary sagas, however, is the well-known dragon fight in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. The hero of this narrative faces and defeats three monsters during his lifetime, the last of which also defeats him. The point that evokes contact between this third climactic encounter and the later Scandinavian motif is both figural and linguistic. For the most distinctive topographical feature of this dragon’s habitation is also a *stânboga*, though we observe that the term refers to a slightly different kind of structure:

Ĝeseah ðā be wealle sē ðe worna fela
gumcystum gōd gūða gedīgde,

⁹⁵ *Ectors saga*, ed. A. Loth, *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5 vols. (Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1962-1965), Vol. I, p. 161, ll. 4-14.

⁹⁶ Cf. Jensen ed., *Esv*, pp. XXVI-XVIII, and R. Simek, ‘Die Quellen der Eiríks saga víðförla’, *Skandinavistik* 14:2 (1984), pp. 111-112.

⁹⁷ *Fáfnismál*, st. 6.

hildelemma, þonne hnitān fēðan,
 st[o]ndan stānbogan, strēam ūt þonan
 brecaŋ of beorge; wæs þære burnan wælm
 heaðofȳrum hāt.⁹⁸

In the Old English poem, the term *stānboga* appears to refer to an arch in the dragon's lair,⁹⁹ though it has been suggested that it may constitute a kenning for the dragon itself – 'the stone-archer'.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the constellation of a pre-historic noble hero meeting his *draca* (as it is called in l. 2549) by a *stānboga* overarching a *strēam* makes for an interesting parallel on both verbal and figural levels between this episode and the later Icelandic legendary sagas, especially *Esv.* Interpreted symbolically in the Anglo-Saxon and Norse literary contexts the association between the monstrous antagonist and the image of the stone arch in both texts yields a highly stylised liminal space that intensifies the action taking place around it. The dragon on or beneath the bridge is what stands between the protagonist and his destiny.

All three menacing creatures in *Beowulf*, of course, stand not only between hero, hoard, and fame, but more fundamentally between the *status quo* and universal destruction, chaos and death. An entire civilisation depends on Beowulf's quest to confront them. These circumstances recall in particular the Ragnarøk-portrayals in the *Poetic Edda*; for Þórr's defeat of the World Serpent in a comparable way hinges on just such an act of heroic self-sacrifice.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, of course, the entire Norse pantheon must give way to allow for a regeneration to take place. The two monsters the hero faces earlier in the poem attain a strong moral colouring through their expressed kinship with the Scriptural figure Cain who, according to medieval tradition, was the

⁹⁸ *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber et al., ll. 2542-2547: 'He saw there by the wall – he, most full of/ manly virtue, survivor of fights,/ and battle clashes when troops crush together – / a stone arch standing; a current from there/ broke out of the cave; there was a stream flooding/ of hot deadly fire'.

⁹⁹ The Norse term too can refer more generally to a natural or man-made stone arch; cf. Frizner, *Ordbog*, s.v. 'steinbogi'.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. H. Henel, 'Stānboga im Beowulf', *Anglia* 55 (1931), pp. 273-281. A hundred and fifty or so lines later in *Beowulf* the term is again used when the narrator describes Beowulf glancing at the stone arches raised on pillars and spanning the inside of the burrow (ll. 2717-2719). C. Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 24-51, suggests a possible source to this dragon and cave setting in the tale of Cadmus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁰¹ R. North, *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 202-205, sees in Þórr's last stance against the Miðgarðsormr as recounted in *Völuspá*, st. 53 the closest analogue to *Beowulf*'s third dragon fight and considers the motif a 'major borrowing' from Norse myth.

progenitor of all incarnations of the monstrous on earth.¹⁰² Though the dragon may not technically be counted among these creatures, here too Christian and heroic traditions have merged. The dragon of heathen traditions has acquired distinct colours of Christian morality.

This brings us to the second sequence of *Esv*'s bridge-episode: the manner and meaning of Eiríkr's confrontation with the monster. In past chapters I have repeatedly pointed to the numerous pregnant inter-textual links between this quest and that associated with Sveigðir in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* – the protagonists' semi-divine origins, their noble status, their pledge to find a mythic realm, the otherworldly nature of this realm, and the journey eastwards with a crew of eleven men. I have intimated that the element of the absurd emphasised in Snorri's story – as in his main source, *Ynglingatal* – was consciously exploited by the author of *Esv* to posit Eiríkr as an antitype; medieval audiences familiar with the former story may well have recognised in Eiríkr a counterpart to Sveigðir and the legend surrounding him. The comic crowning point in Sveigðir's life-story (and the one *Ynglingatal* focuses on) is the manner in which his all-consuming wish to meet his idol Óðinn is eventually fulfilled. As we noted in Chapter II, the explorer was lured by a dwarf into leaping into a great rock ('steinn') in an eastern town by the same name; after this he was never seen again.¹⁰³

Because Sveigðir's leaping into the stone is such a striking motif, one could argue that Eiríkr's leaping into the dragon's mouth (both texts use the phrase 'hljópa í') constitutes one further conscious subversion of the former narrative by the author of *Esv*. Sveigðir gains entry to the halls of Óðinn (if only in a transferred sense); Eiríkr to the Christian Earthly Paradise. Their pledges are thus fulfilled in figurally and linguistically comparable fashions. The *Esv* author, moreover, observes that the Danish Eiríkr believed his friend had been swallowed, and that he – like Sveigðir – would never be seen again (ll. 206-210).

This intertextual echo would underline the already striking symbolic connotation of the

¹⁰² *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber et al., ll. 101-113. On the tradition linking monstrous creatures to Cain, see A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1995), ch. III.

¹⁰³ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Vol. I, p. 27.

scene. There can be no doubt that the dragon threatening Eiríkr on the border of Paradise, in addition to presenting a trial of mettle, is also a test of the recent convert's moral preparedness for entry into the Christian Paradise. This is the point underlined by the Danish Eiríkr's decision to call off the quest at this juncture. Not unlike Beowulf's dragon, Eiríkr's is a symbol which bridges traditional heroic and Christian motifs. Given that *Esv* is on a fundamental level a story of a Norwegian pagan's conversion to Christianity, this convergence seems especially meaningful.

Intersections between pagan myths and Christian narratives are manifestly explored in other media too, and Sigurðr fighting the dragon was evidently a favourite motif in this respect. Wood carvings on Norwegian stave churches from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (e. g. the Hylestad portals) depict scenes from the *Völsung* cycle. Though it has been a matter of debate how these eddaic motifs relate to the ecclesiastical space they adorn, artists and audiences must have considered them meaningful within their Christian frame of reference.¹⁰⁴ One interpretative approach (among several) may well have been typological, meaning that audiences were challenged to reinterpret persons and episodes from the old Germanic tales in a Christian light. In the same way that medieval commentators trained in allegorical exegesis interpreted Samson in the Old Testament or Hercules in Classical tradition as prefigurations of Christ, so Sigurðr challenging the dragon on the Church door would have invited church-goers to discern this episode's Christian resonances. These could include 'historic' scenes such as Christ's challenging of Satan in the Harrowing and St. Michael's encounter with the same in the Apocalypse, allegorical motifs such as Christianity in confrontation with paganism, or more abstract moral principles – such as each believer's struggle against temptation. Conversion-era rune-stones juxtaposing Christ's harrowing with Víðarr in Fenrir's gape, reflect a similar interest in trans-

¹⁰⁴ Similar juxtapositions of heroic and Christian motifs can be found on rune stones across Scandinavia; on Sigurðr in Christian iconography, see G. Nordanskog, *Föreställd hedendom: tidigmedeltida skandinaviska kyrkportar i forskning och historia* (Lund, Nordic Academic Press, 2006), especially chs. 16-18.

mythological narrative patterns.¹⁰⁵

It seems to me that the author of *Esv*, who was evidently well acquainted with the major literary traditions of his day, makes a point of allowing various foreign and indigenous narrative patterns to interact within the main fable of the saga – the pioneering encounter of a Scandinavian royal with Christianity. The various inter-narrative resonances discernible in the saga afford it multiple potential dimensions of intertextual references. What the *Esv* author achieves in the climactic scene at the bridge, then, is a rather complex discourse with conventions in native and foreign traditions of writing. The scene's central components – Eiríkr, the *steinbogi*, and the dragon – yield associations with a distinct category of mythic heroic and epic literature. At the same time, the bridge's location at the border of the Christian Paradise will at once have alerted audiences versed in exegetical traditions to the Christian topos of the otherworld bridge. Unlike other narratives in our corpus, the process of adaptation exemplified in *Esv* could thus be said to be conscious and scholarly (rather than instinctive or implicit). The account thus invites comparison and contrast with the sources and analogues to which it makes such studied allusions.

Bridge-Symbolism and Commemoration

I would like to conclude this section by looking at traces of a custom in medieval Scandinavia which indicates that the idea of the otherworld bridge itself may have united certain aspects of pagan and Christian beliefs. In his late tenth-century genealogy *Háleygjatal*, the skald Eyvindr skáldaspillir introduces a bridge-simile which gestures to a deeper connection between bridges and commemoration in his day.¹⁰⁶ *Háleygjatal*, like its apparent model *Ynglingatal*, is essentially a catalogue of a Norwegian chieftain's ancestry, in this case Eyvindr's patron Hákon

¹⁰⁵ On these rune stones, see T. A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1999), pp. 148-150.

¹⁰⁶ Eyvindr Finsson skáldaspillir, *Háleygjatal*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjald B:I*, pp. 50-62. For a recent discussion of *Háleygjatal* and its context, see R. Poole, 'Myth and Ritual in the *Háleygjatal*', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. J. Quinn et al. (Turnhout, Brepols, 2007), pp. 153-176.

Sigurðarson. The simile is introduced in the poem's last stanza, and offered as symbol both of the unbroken line of Hákon's *ætt* ('kin'), and the poem itself – the medium through which this line has been reconstructed:

Jólna sumbl
enn vér gótum,
stillis lof,
sem steinabrá.¹⁰⁷

Certain facets of the simile render it particularly meaningful within the setting. Figurally the image of the *steinabrá* plays on an Old Norse term for kindred or ancestry, the common compound 'ættbogi' (also spelled 'áttbogi'), which likens the family to a 'arch of kinship'.¹⁰⁸ It is this term which Eyvindr, as it were, casts in stone in this concluding word of the final stanza. Over the course of the poem, moreover, Eyvindr reconstructs an 'arch' of kinship spanning from the celebrated subject, Hákon jarl, to Óðinn, his line's divine founder. The strength of the arch derives from this foundation in the divine race, and from each generation's subsequent substantiation of the family's vitality. Like each block of stone in the physical counterpart, one could say, each of the chieftains enumerated in the poetic stanzas rests on the legacy of the ancestors and supports the next in line. The simile is effective because it underscores the notion that kinship is a continuum that transcends the temporal constraints of any one of its members. In extension, this image of the arch of ancestry, supporting and supported by the poetic verses, signifies tradition, history, and cultural identity.

In his recent discussion of *Háleygjatal*'s ritualistic resonances, Russell Poole points to the simile's possible allusions to contemporary practices revolving around the construction of bridges in aid and commemoration of the departed.¹⁰⁹ Though it is well known that such a custom flourished in the centuries following the conversion, scholars have only recently discovered evidence that could tie the phenomenon to longer-standing traditions in the North. In

¹⁰⁷ Eyvindr, *Háleygjatal*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, st. 16: 'A poem we have again composed, praise for the earl, strong like a stone bridge.'

¹⁰⁸ Compare s.vv. 'ættbogi', and 'áttbogi' in Fritzner, *Ordbog*, and *Lexicon Poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson.

¹⁰⁹ Poole, 'Myth and Ritual in the *Háleygjatal*', p. 176.

Iceland as well as on the Scandinavian mainland, bridge-building was in the Christian era considered a devotional act. Well over a hundred surviving runic inscriptions from Denmark, Sweden and Norway attest to the practice of erecting bridges for the benefit of deceased family members.¹¹⁰ A good example is the rune stone formerly located on the farmstead Nordre Dynne, in the municipality of Ringerike in Norway.¹¹¹ Alongside illustrations of the nativity and surrounding scriptural events, this slender stone contains two sentences commemorating a woman by the name Ástríðr. They indicate that a bridge was made in her memory: ‘Gunnvør gerði brú, Þryðriks dóttir, eptir Ástríði, dóttur sína. Sú var mær hönurst á Haðalandi’ (‘Gunnvør, daughter of Þryðrik, raised this bridge for Ástríðr, her daughter. She was the most skilful maiden of Hadeland’).¹¹² The inscribed stone, which probably dates to the first half of the eleventh century, when Christendom was still a young cultural influence, originally stood on a pagan burial ground. Its placement indicates that, at the time it was erected, pagan and Christian memorials to the dead could still be set in relation to each other and designed to interact.

Certain critics have interpreted the Christian practice of bridge-building as a phenomenon growing out of the important role of bridges in the otherworld of the *Visiones*.¹¹³ People may have believed that constructing a bridge for oneself or one’s kin might facilitate their journey through the otherworld in the same way that *Draumkvedet* envisages relief on this journey in return for other charitable gifts in this life. As a spiritually beneficial act, bridge-building is also mentioned in theological sources from other parts of Europe, not least in England, as Peter Dinzelsbacher and Harald Kleinschmidt note.¹¹⁴ Yet the practice appears to have been

¹¹⁰ See B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in early Medieval Scandinavia* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 186-187, for tables over the total corpus of bridge references on viking-age rune stones in Scandinavia. The greater portion of these contain brief statements expressing that a bridge was built ‘in memory’ of a person, usually a member of the nuclear family; cf. Å. Johansson, ‘A Road for the Viking’s Soul’, in *The Materiality of Death: Bodies, Burials, Beliefs*, eds. F. Fahlander and T. Oestigaard, BAR International Series 1768 (Oxford, Archaeopress, 2008), pp. 147-148.

¹¹¹ Illustrated in T. Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, trans. B. van der Hoek (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2005), p. 107.

¹¹² Quoted from Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, p. 105.

¹¹³ Olsen, ‘Gjøre bro for ens sjæl’, pp. 210-12; contrast Wellendorf, ‘Over mytologiske floder’, *Maal og Minne* (2006:1), pp. 24-26.

¹¹⁴ See Dinzelsbacher and Kleinschmidt, ‘Seelenbrücke und Brückenbau’, pp. 242, 257-264.

considerably more widespread in the North than in Britain and elsewhere on the Continent,¹¹⁵ and widespread already at an early date. Birgit Sawyer points out that two thirds of the 81 runestones referring to bridge-building found in the Swedish district of Uppland alone predate the year 1070.¹¹⁶

Most likely, a major factor behind the popularity of this custom in Scandinavia is purely practical. Medieval Icelandic law exempts material support towards the building of bridges from tax, clearly pointing to the infrastructural value of these structures across inaccessible Northern landscapes.¹¹⁷ Yet, as noted, archaeologists have recently discovered a further possible factor that may help to shed light on this distinctive Scandinavian tradition. Alongside numerous pre-Christian burial sites in Sweden and Denmark researchers have found remains of bridge constructions that seem, like their Christian counterparts, to have transcended purely practical functions. Thus far finds have predominated in Uppland, Sweden,¹¹⁸ and the Danish island of Skjælland.¹¹⁹ It is a well-known phenomenon that grave-fields from ancient Scandinavia often figure close by roads or natural thresholds in the landscape, such as rivers or the sea shore.¹²⁰ It is thus tempting to interpret the bridges adjacent to graves too as linked to the dead and their passage to the hereafter. An especially interesting detail emerging from the excavation in Broby is that the bridge found here – leading again to a burial site – bears traces of ornamentation: the edges are marked by two rows of decorative stones placed in even intervals of 1.6 metres, a feature characteristic also of a second such construction in close-by Täby.¹²¹ This aesthetic element indicates that the bridges in question held a significance beyond the obvious practical

¹¹⁵ Wellendorf, 'Over mytologiske floder', p. 21.

¹¹⁶ Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones*, p. 135.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Vol I, p. 205: 'Þat fe þarf eigi til tiundar at telia er aðr er til guðs þacka laget. hvárz þat er til kirkna laget eða til brúa eða til sælo scipa'. Semantically the Norse term 'brú' can also refer to a ford or passageway through marshland; cf. Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. 'brú'.

¹¹⁸ See C. Grön, 'A Road to the Other Side', in *The Materiality of Death: Bodies, Burials, Beliefs*, eds. F. Fahlander and T. Oestigaard, BAR International Series 1768 (Oxford, Archeopress, 2008), pp. 151-154.

¹¹⁹ See J. Lund, 'Thresholds and crossings in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* I (2005), pp. 112-113, 118-119, and the studies there cited.

¹²⁰ Note, for example, that the Old Norse noun 'leiði' ('grave') and verb 'götva' ('to bury') are derived respectively from 'leið' ('way') and 'gata' ('road'), thus bearing witness to their close connection with main routes of travel. Cf. *Lexicon Poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, s.vv. 'leiði'; 'götva'.

¹²¹ Datable to c. 700-1050, according to Grön, 'A Road to the Other Side', p. 151.

function of facilitating thoroughfare, that they served a *memorial* as much as *infrastructural* function. We are reminded here of the ornate quality of the ‘Gjallar brú’ and related bridges in medieval literary sources.

In their respective archaeological analyses, Camilla Grön, Åke Johansson, and Julie Lund, moreover, all foreground the potential sacral importance of these constructions.¹²² They intimate that they may well reflect a belief that the dead had to face a journey from their graves to a realm of death, a journey in which the bridge itself or rituals connected to it could provide assistance. Lund goes as far as asserting that, ‘If the rune-stones from the Christian period were raised to ease the journey from the living to the dead, the meaning of the bridge in early Christianity equals the meaning of the bridge in the pagan period: it is a road to the land of the dead and thereby a divider and a connection between the living and the dead – a threshold and a passage’.¹²³

Though the implication of the journey to the hereafter certainly changed with the spread of Christian teaching about moral judgement and retribution, the Christian practice of raising such edifices may have appeared especially meaningful in Scandinavia because it tied in with a pre-existing form of commemoration and so preserved a long-standing native tradition. As such, the Norse otherworld bridge as manifest in literature and archaeology consolidates the notion of the cultural continuity residing in the idea of the journey of mortality whose literary facets we have traced in these two journey chapters.

III. Conclusions

The two symbols discussed in this Chapter are relevant to our study because they play prominent roles across Christian didactic, legal, mythic, and ritualistic contexts in medieval Scandinavia, and thus betoken the deeper cultural dimension of the Norse literary hereafter. They

¹²² Ibid., pp. 153-154; Å. Johansson, ‘A Road for the Viking’s Soul’, in *The Materiality of Death: Bodies, Burials, Beliefs*, eds. F. Fahlander and T. Oestigaard, BAR International Series 1768 (Oxford, Archeopress, 2008), pp. 147-150; Lund, ‘Thresholds and Passages’, pp. 127, 129-130.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 121.

are in themselves potent emblems of the multifaceted cultural setting they grow out of. In the two Journey-Chapters at the heart of this study I have concentrated on signs that the governing structure of the *Visio*-narratives – the expedition to the otherworld – in a specifically forceful way facilitated a processes of cultural negotiation and introspection in the Norse-Icelandic cultural landscape. We have examined concrete instances in which Christian conventions have been set in relation to concepts deeply rooted in native narrative traditions, several of which have indicated the lasting importance of the journey motif as conceptual image of human existence with its various stages, rites of passage, and crossroads. There is a manifest continuity between heathen and Christian ways of portraying human mortality, a permanence which shows most clearly in the sustained literary engagement with the concept. Sources on pre-Christian as well as Christian conceptions of the hereafter in medieval Scandinavia demonstrate much internal inconsistency – perhaps better interpreted as variety – as to its nature. The one key idea that governs the language and literary representation of life after death in this extended corpus is that of the extended journey marking the transition from this world to the next. This major common denominator, we have seen, allowed theologically disparate models of thought to negotiate and find common ground in contemporary literature.

In the final Chapter of this study I will turn from journeys to destinations and from the argument of continuity to one of values. A major component of the Latin tradition is the depiction of eschatological punishments and rewards and the locations in which this mechanism of retribution takes place. By example of the types of virtue and vice singled out in the texts of our corpus and their visualisation of the perfected space in the hereafter I will argue that the Norse projections of the otherworld showcase ideals and attitudes particularly pertinent within their social setting and that they accordingly allow us to distinguish them from the Latin tradition also with respect to attitudes and ideals.

V Envisaging the Ideal

In each of the preceding chapters we have seen evidence of the fact that, although homilies and *Visiones* do evince some fundamental eschatological structures, the medieval hereafter never developed into one fixed model. Over the centuries, as ever new visionary expeditions were undertaken, fresh discoveries were made and so the sphere was continually in the process of being mapped out. Though the Latin genre is marked by, and often critically belittled for its strong awareness of convention, it is also important to emphasise that the portrayals of the otherworld contained within them do not add up to one unified topography of the otherworld. It may seem paradoxical, for instance, when Heito of Basel refers to the authority Gregory the Great in his introduction to the ninth-century *Visio Wettini*,¹ but then proceeds to offer a prospect of the otherworld which is more detailed, structurally complex, and quite different topographically from those described in the *Dialogues*. With regard to the location of the otherworld, its structure, and topography, there was considerable room for variation; conformity with convention was not the only standard *Visiones* were judged by.

That being said, variation surprisingly rarely takes the form of *localisation*, of noticeable regional landscapes and attitudes. Only in *Visiones* of a political nature – among which *Rannveigar leizla* may be counted – do personages of special relevance to the region sometimes play prominent roles. The general absence of local colour in *Visiones* is due in part to the relative social and cultural homogeneity of medieval Christian Europe, but more specifically to that of the monastic milieus from which the vast majority of the surviving records stems.

One prominent exception to this overall tendency is the *Visio* of Gottschalk and its portrayal of heaven.² The idealised space is here not described in terms of Eden or the Heavenly Jerusalem, but envisioned as a vast, not particularly glamorous-looking urban space, with houses

¹ Cf. *Visio Wettini*, ed. E. Dümmler et al., *Monumenta Germanica Historica: Poetae Latini aevi Carolini*, 4 vols. (Berlin, Weidemann, 1884-1923), Vol. 2, p. 269.

² *Visio Godeschalci*, ed. Assman, chs. 50-52.

organised in a geometrical grid-system and aligned with long benches. Untypically, the social organisation in this township is here family-centred. When the German farmer observes a certain individual who arrives in the city without knowing where to go, it is not an anonymous guide who approaches to show him the way, but his late wife. She directs him towards a bench where a place is reserved for him next to herself.

In his comments on this scene, Dinzelbacher points to reflexes of the account's socio-cultural setting; he identifies features of the city with Neumünster in Holstein, and draws specific attention to the fact that the family-centred focus reflects the social status of the visionary.³ As a peasant, the network of greatest social significance for Gottschalk would clearly have been his kin. Given that kinship bonds naturally played a secondary role in medieval monastic communities, it is not surprising that the *Visiones* typically show little interest in the topic; souls are typically grouped according to moral merit alone, and social affinities left out of the equation. These features of Gottschalk's report seem to reflect the farmer's particular *Sitz im Leben* in more concrete ways than most *Visiones*.

In order to discern deeper cultural trends from one depiction of the hereafter to another one must widen the geographical scope of reference. Jane Baun, for example, has recently drawn attention to a number of points of contrast between portrayals of heaven in Byzantine and Western European afterlife visions.⁴ On the basis of two examples, the Eastern *Apocalypse of Anastasia* and the Irish *Vision of Adomnán* (both from between the ninth and eleventh centuries), Baun foregrounds topographical and conceptual features in the depictions of the idealised space which reflect the differing socio-political contexts from which these visionary texts originate.⁵ In the former, heaven is conceived of as an imperial palace, whereas the latter centres on the intimate setting of a minor chieftain's hall. Whereas the Byzantine vision depicts heaven as a

³ Dinzelbacher, 'verba hec tam mystica', pp. 96 ff.

⁴ J. Baun, 'Last Things', in *Cambridge History of Christianity: Early Medieval Christianities c. 600-c. 1100*, eds. T. F. X. Noble et al. (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2008), pp. 606-624. A translation of Anastasia's vision can be found in J. Baun, *Tales from another Byzantium: celestial journey and local community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 401-414.

⁵ Baun, 'Last Things', pp. 618-619.

large, alienating environment in which God is a remote concept, the Irish example delineates a ‘household’, a radiant city in which God as King stands in a ‘face-to-face relationship’ with His people. His chieftain-like characteristics are highlighted by features such as the description of the halo, hovering above his head – ‘like unto a wrought helmet, or a regal diadem’.⁶ In Anastasia’s vision, God is stern and displeased with his subjects. He must be moved to reconciliation by angels and saints who plead on humanity’s behalf in a heavenly court of law. Whereas the angels in the Irish heaven stand in awe around the royal throne, make music and contribute to the celebratory mood, their Byzantine counterparts are busy collecting up-to-date information from the various corners of the earth, registering and erasing data of human conduct in what Baun in her translation terms the ‘heavenly record office’.⁷ The Byzantine delineation of heaven reflects an imperial administration and mindset, whereas the Irish reflects a more intimate local structure of authority in which the monarch is firmly within the field of vision.

Convincing as Baun’s observations are, her socio-political angle on depictions of the otherworld depictions could outline new, rewarding avenues of investigation even with regard to the more homogeneous European *Visio* tradition. It represents an especially relevant line of approach when examining portraits of the hereafter in medieval Western Scandinavia, a region which in historical, cultural, social, political respects was distinct from mainland Europe. As we have had occasion to observe, the region possessed a rich store of non-Christian cultural traditions with roots in the recent past. And though Christian learning became the dominating cultural influence in the centuries after the conversion, and its literatures contributed to shape fresh native forms of writing, these new influences merged with rather than supplanted traditional conceptual frameworks, language and artistic ideals.⁸

In examining Old Norse visual and ethical conceptions of the idealised otherworld, my

⁶*The Vision of Adamnán*, trans. C. S. Boswell, in *An Irish Precursor of Dante: A Study on the Vision of Heaven and Hell Ascribed to the Eighth-Century Irish Saint Adamnán* (London, D. Nutt, 1908), ch. 8.

⁷ Baun, *Tales from another Byzantium*, p. 409.

⁸ The profoundest study of these lasting structures in Norse-Icelandic society is Clunies Ross’ study *Prolonged Echoes*.

key concern will be to assess how these components reflect medieval Scandinavian social mentalities, and in how far they can thus be said to represent *localised* visions of the hereafter. Such standards are most clearly discernible in the Norse portrayals of moral right and wrongdoing and prospects of heaven – or ‘the perfected space’. These features will be examined in turn in the following.

I. Right and Wrong in the Old Norse Hereafter

Broadly speaking, it is true to say that all of the vices and virtues illustrated in the Scandinavian corpus – especially significant texts here are *Völuspá*, *Sólarljóð* and *Draumkvedet* – correspond to well-known Christian codes of ethics, principles such as those expounded in the Decalogue and the Sermon of the Mount. When *Sólarljóð* describes the punishment of souls guilty of *öfund* (‘envy’) (st. 62), for example, medieval audiences would have immediately recognised this vice as one of the Seven Cardinal Sins presented in homilies and church paintings as one of the most dangerous distractions from the path to God and the prospect of salvation. It follows that depictions of punishment and reward in afterlife visions are above all didactic in function, representing standard lessons of Christian morality and urging their emulation.

However universal such abstract moral lessons may be, we may nevertheless assume that the types of offences and models of virtue singled out in the Norse sources give some picture of what the authors and the individuals who transmitted the poems (in written or oral form) considered important in their time and social context. The manifestations of right and wrong illustrated must have been relevant to contemporary audiences. This encourages one to examine the most concrete exemplifications for their particular cultural resonances: how do illustrations of vice and virtue tie in with values articulated elsewhere in the cultural documents of the region? This is an aspect not addressed by critics in the past, and deserves closer attention here.⁹

⁹ An exception is Gro Svenneby, who in her thesis, ‘Helvetes kvaler og himmelsk salighet: en studie av

I shall begin this discussion with the scenes of retribution in *Völuspá* and from there move on to some of the most striking visualisations of punishment and reward in the Norwegian and Icelandic dream poems.

According to the outlook of *Völuspá*, the state of the cosmos is inexorably linked to the health of kinship relations. Stanza 38 contains that striking Christian didactic image – already referred to in Chapter II – which describes offenders of various types exposed to wild beasts and other forces of nature. The perpetrators in question are identified as

menn meinsvara
ok morðvarga
ok þannz annars glepr
eyrarúno.¹⁰

The poet here highlights three forms of misconduct that correspond to prominent moral codes in Judaeo-Christian traditions; bearing false witness, murder, and covetousness figure in that order also in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13-17). Some stanzas later, the Prophetess adds to the catalogue of vices when, as symptom of the impending doom, she predicts that

Bræðr muno beriaz
ok at þonom verða[z],
muno systrungar
sifiom spilla.¹¹

In view of the imminent collapse of the world order it is interesting to note that the types of offences highlighted in both of these stanzas centre on human interrelations, especially among members of kin. They are crimes symptomatic of the fragmentation of the community, and this in turn is symptomatic of the growing confusion on natural and divine levels delineated in the second half of *Völuspá*.

David Clark has analysed this theme of kinship feuds as it resonates through some of the

forestillinger omkring helvete og himmelriket i Norge i perioden ca 1100-1300' (Oslo, Unpublished MA Thesis, 1999), points to some common standards regarding in particular the institution of marriage in Norse portrayals of the hereafter, including *Visio* translations, and medieval Norwegian legal codes.

¹⁰ *Völuspá*, st. 38: 'perjured men, and murderous, and those who deceive the wives of other men.'

¹¹ *Ibid.*, st. 44: 'Brothers will fight each other, and be each others' killers cousins will spoil kinship.'

most prominent episodes in the Codex Regius poems of the *Poetic Edda*.¹² He shows that, when feud among members of kin takes centre stage in the narratives of the *heroic* poems, its consequence and the manner in which it is visualised gestures towards analogous motifs in the *mythological* poems, chief among them *Völuspá*. Clark draws attention in particular to *Hamðismál*, which describes the end of the Völsung clan and concludes the poetic sequence of the Codex. The central component in the narrative of Hamðir and Sǫrli's fall is that the brothers misinterpret their half-brother Erpr's enigmatic offer to assist them in their enterprise to bring down Iǫrmunrekkr, killing him for a perceived offence. Only once they arrive there and find themselves on the brink of defeat do they recognise that Erpr would have been the one person able to bring their campaign to a positive conclusion. The fact that this narrative of the doom of the Völsungs concludes the eddaic cycle, and thus stands in a significant material relationship with *Völuspá*, augments the noticeable thematic connection between the two poems. *Hamðismál* takes up *Völuspá*'s motif of a dynastic collapse – that of the gods at Ragnarǫk – within a heroic narrative. The Völsung line also disintegrates because of ruptures at its social core.

Ursula Dronke rightly remarks that stanzas 38 and 44 of *Völuspá* 'stand out' in the poem in that they deal with the fates of humans rather than the divine.¹³ Yet I think Clark's observation that portraits of human conduct and fate in a microcosmic way reflect conditions in the divine world of the eddaic poems reinforces the thematic purpose of these scenes. They illustrate the universal reverberations of the Baldr drama, the event that triggers the cosmic collapse. In the events surrounding Baldr's death, the central turning point of the poem, the codes and ideals of kinship are subjected to grave pressure. The person who commits the killing itself, the blind Hǫðr, is Baldr's brother; both gods are sons of Óðinn. Hǫðr, in turn, is deceived into committing the deed by Loki, who we know, from an allusion elsewhere in the *Poetic Edda*, to be Óðinn's

¹² D. Clark, 'Kin-Slaying in the *Poetic Edda*: The End of the World?', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007), pp. 21-41.

¹³ Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, p. 142.

blood-brother.¹⁴ In order to avenge Baldr the head of the pantheon produces a new son, Váli (named in *Baldrs draumar*, st 11), who at the age of one night proceeds to kill the technically guilty, but in reality blameless Høðr (31-34).

The key moment in the history of the cosmos is thus fraught with social complications, especially as relates to co-fraternal feud, a topic highlighted on a human level in stanza 44. The importance of this social theme in the build-up to Ragnarøk reflects the central importance of core social structures as pillars of civic stability. Cosmic order is founded on social stability, at the heart of which lie healthy consanguine relations. This notion is further underpinned in *Völuspá*'s vision of the post-apocalyptic world, where the theme of kinship becomes the main focus once more. We hear that Baldr and Høðr – the victim and his killer – will share a dwelling in the new world: 'Búa þeir Høðr ok Baldr', stanza 59 reveals, 'Hropz sigtóptir' ('Høðr and Baldr live ... at the court of victory'). In view of the two brothers' roles in the Ragnarøk narrative, it is natural to interpret this as a prospect of harmony and reconciliation. While the disintegration of the former order was accompanied by the fragmentation of the most fundamental social structures, the regenerated order is bound up with restoration also on a social level. *Völuspá* thus projects a world view in which social and cosmic states are interlinked variables, and this interdependence shines through on divine, human, and natural levels of existence.

One should stress that, although *Völuspá*'s scenes of moral retribution are certainly consonant with medieval Christian views on morality, the issues highlighted here seem to overarch the religious transition in the North. Core social structures cannot have been less important immediately after the conversion than they were before, and so attitudes relating to this sphere of life were not immediately and significantly altered by Christian teaching as far as the general population was concerned. Considering how important the family was as the primary social network and marker of social identity in the Viking and Christian Middle Ages, it is not

¹⁴ Cf. *Lokasenna*, st. 9.

surprising that *Draumkvedet* and *Sólarljóð* likewise demonstrate a strong concern with kinship relations. What is more, several of their illustrations of social vices and virtues evoke specific standards of conduct defined in the medieval Norwegian and Icelandic laws, pointing to these standards' normative status in their respective social settings.

The issue of inappropriate relationships among cousins also highlighted in stanza 38 of *Völuspá* is taken up in a number of stanzas in *Draumkvedet*. The illustration of this vice stands out from all others in the ballad in that the offenders are dehumanised, envisaged as hostile serpents:

Der saag æg dei Ormane tvei
dei hoggje kvorare i Kjæfte
aa dæ va Syskjenboni i denni Heimen
dei mone kvorar ægte.¹⁵

In terms of its imagery, the punishment is reminiscent of Níðhoggr sucking the corpses in *Völuspá* (st. 38); it associates the social offence in question with a sense of wilderness, aligning manifestations of chaos in society and the natural world. In both mythological and Christian literary traditions, of course, the image of the serpent represents destructive agencies.¹⁶

Liaisons between cousins would certainly have been in discord with the strict regulations on matrimony defined in medieval Norwegian law codes. Marriage is there banned between blood-relatives within the seventh cognate degree.¹⁷ Yet it does not follow, as Karl-Ivar Hildeman claimed, that the stanza must necessarily reflect a Catholic setting.¹⁸ For although later, post-medieval laws in use in Norway relax this rule somewhat, legal provisions as late as those of Christian V, formally adopted in Norway in 1687, still condemn marriages between

¹⁵ *Draumkvedet*, K1, 10: 'There I saw two serpents that bit each other in the jaws; they were cousins in this world that desired to marry each other'; cf. V1a, 53. L4, 10 and S6, 8, associate the same punishment with siblings who had cursed or disowned each other.

¹⁶ In the Norse corpus this is best exemplified by the Miðgarðsormr, antagonist of Þórr in *Völuspá*, st. 53, and *Hymiskviða*, sts. 17-26; in her commentary on the latter poem, Dronke, pp. 89-101, argues that the concept of the hostile Miðgarðsormr is likely to have been a late literary phenomenon, coloured by contact with Christianity in the tenth century.

¹⁷ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL* I, ch. 24.

¹⁸ K-I. Hildeman, *Medeltid på vers: litteraturhistoriska studier* (Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958), pp. 228-229.

relatives of the second and third degree of kin.¹⁹ Hence the offence described in *Draumkvedet* (and *Vǫluspá*) remained legally valid and recognisable as such to audiences even after the religious reform in 1530.

A second group of particularly interesting punishment scenes in *Draumkvedet* centres on parent-child relationships. Most striking is the recurring punishment episode describing children being carried in the arms of a certain class of sinners in hell. Though their crime is not exactly defined, the implication of the imagery seems unambiguous:

Kiæm eg mæg at manne dei
de blei mæg daa Fyste ve
Lite baan i Fanie bar
Giek i Jori alt unde Kne.²⁰

The children's integral role in this episode, their apparent weight in the sinners' hands, as well as the stanza's wording suggest that the offence concerns what in other Norse literary sources is referred to as 'bera ut barn' and 'barna-útburð' – literally 'carrying out children' or infanticide.²¹ This terminology is verbally echoed in line 3 of the quoted stanza ('bar' is the past tense of 'bera'), thus reinforcing the meaning of the striking imagery. The children's weightiness reflects the moral gravity of the crime. The fact that this offence is thus alluded to rather than clearly defined, moreover, may signal further social implications. It suggests that even naming this particularly heartless deed was perceived as socially and morally problematic, a kind of social taboo.

One recent commentator suggests that *Draumkvedet*, rather than criticising a contemporary phenomenon, in this stanza refers to the heathen practice of infanticide.²² Icelandic histories do indicate that infanticide was practised before the conversion. *Íslendingabók*

¹⁹ *Kong Christian den Femtes Norske Lov: 15de april 1687, med Kongeloven 1665* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1982), p. 255. On the history of this legal point from medieval to post-Reformation, see A. I. Riisøy, *Sexuality, Law and Legal Practice and the Reformation of Norway* (Leiden, Brill, 2009), pp. 43-45.

²⁰ *Draumkvedet*, L4, 8: 'I passed by those persons, and only then realised – they were carrying a little child in their arms, and stood up to their knees in the soil.' Cf. K1, 21; K3, 5 offers a variation on the theme, featuring a person who is purged for having refused to acknowledge his or her child.

²¹ Compare *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL I*, ch. 22; *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, Íslenzk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), p. 17.

²² Bø and Myhren, *Draumkvedet*, p. 38.

famously relates that this was one of the old customs initially retained after Christianity had been officially adopted.²³ It is worth noting, however, that the early Norwegian Christian laws, too, condone certain forms of infanticide. Articles on baptism and parental responsibilities in the *Gulathing* and *Frostathing* codes state that, if a child was born with physical disabilities, its parents could take it to the local church, have it baptised, and leave it to perish on the church premises.²⁴ This incurred a fine to the church in compensation, but no further legal consequences. The reformed law code of Magnús Hákonarson from the latter thirteenth century emends the above by somewhat equivocally stating that any child that enters this world ‘oc manz hafuð er a’ (‘and it possesses a human head’) must be brought up ‘þo at nockor orkymli se a’ (‘even if it displays some blemishes’).²⁵ Even if these criteria are more stringent, the fact that infanticide is not categorically rejected even here indicates that some room remained for personal judgment.

Else Mundal, who has collected and analysed portrayals of infanticide across the Old Norse corpus, suggests that these Christian legal exceptions to the general prohibition of infanticide reflect contemporary beliefs or superstitions linking corporal with spiritual disfigurement.²⁶ Such a background would perhaps shed some light on the Church’s approval, or even active involvement in the procedure. It is in any case worth noting that, even though it became a strictly regulated practice, forms of child-exposure remained lawful in the thirteenth century and beyond. In reality it may of course have been a much more common problem than the laws reflect, especially considering the religious stigma and social and economic pressures bound up with fostering children out of wedlock. In seventeenth-century legal provisions, infanticide is defined as a capital offence,²⁷ which points to the longevity of the problem described in the ballad. Whether *Draumkvedet*’s critique thus relates to legally licensed or covert

²³ *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 17.

²⁴ *Den ældre Gulathing-Lov*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL* I, ch. 21. References to infanticide in the Old Norse corpus have been examined by E. Mundal, ‘Barneutbering’, *Norskrift* 56 (1987), pp. 1-78.

²⁵ *Nyere Christenret, udgivet af Kong Magnus Haakonsson*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL* II, p. 293.

²⁶ Cf. Mundal, ‘Barneutbering’, pp. 25-26.

²⁷ Cf. Riisøy, *Sexuality, Law and Legal Practice*, pp. 138-139 and references there cited.

forms of the practice, performers of the song and audiences in the thirteenth century and later may thus have been well able to relate the sin depicted to their own social environment. Its association with paganism seems less pronounced.

Not all visions of human fate in the life to come, one may emphasise, centre on sin and sorrow. A stanza on parent-child relations in *Sólarljóð* depicts them from a positive angle, describing the reward awaiting those who provide for the older generations.

Menn sá ek þá, er móður höfðu
látit mat í munn;
hvílu þeira váru á himingeislum
hafðar hagliga.²⁸

The promoted virtue ties into the overall ‘honour your parents’ theme articulated in several places in Scripture.²⁹ The same general theme is highlighted in *Draumkvedet* too, where children alleged to have accursed their parents are identified among the infernal populace:

Kjæm eg mæg at bonno dei
di Stoge so Høgt paa Gløe
Herre gud søndige Saaline
dei ha bana bort Faer Aa Moer.³⁰

Even though stanza 72 of *Sólarljóð* harmonises with the Scriptural principle echoed here, however, its striking visualisation raises questions about the implication of its detail: which cultural factors may lie behind the Icelandic poet’s choice to single out those who provide for their mothers as meriting the highest rewards in heaven?

A possible key may be found in legal provisions dealing with the duty of maintenance within the nuclear family. For the priority illustrated in the *Sólarljóð*-stanza conforms closely to the hierarchy of dependency defined in the *Ómagabálkur* (‘Dependency Section’) of *Grágás*, the basic formula of which is the following:

Sva er mælt at sina omaga ahver maðr fram at föra alande her. Moðor sina amaðr fyrst fram at föra. EN ef hann orcar betr þa scal hann föra fram föðor sín. Nu má han betr. þa

²⁸ *Sólarljóð*, st. 72: ‘I then saw persons who had put food into their mother's mouth; their places of rest were comfortably arranged on heavenly rays.’

²⁹ Larrington and Robinson eds., *Sólarljóð*, point to Exodus 20:12 in their note to st. 72.

³⁰ *Draumkvedet*, L4, 11: ‘I came to those children, they stepped so high on glowing ground; God almighty, these sinful souls, had accursed their father and mother.’

*scal hann born sin fram föra. Nv ma hann betr þa scal hann systkin sin föra fram.*³¹

The mother, we see, heads the pyramid of responsibility, while father and children follow in second and third place. *Sólarljóð* singles out those individuals who have honoured the first priority of care. That this privileging of mothers was not merely a theoretical principle is further borne out in contemporary saga literature, a particularly good example being the often anthologised story of *Auðunar þáttur vestfirska* ('The Story of Auðunn from the Western Fjords').³² Auðunn's particular concern, we read here, before departing Iceland on his ambitious financial and religious expedition is to supply his mother with enough provision for the duration of his travels: 'Hann Auðunn lagði mestan hluta fjár þess, er var, fyr móður sína, áðr hann stigi á skip, ok var kveðit þriggja vetra björg' ('Auðunn put aside most of the provisions he had for his mother before he embarked, and this was said to amount to three years of sustenance') (p. 361). Auðunn turns out to be highly successful in his venture, and he attains levels of wealth and prestige abroad that he could never have amassed at home. Even so, three years later, when Auðunn is affluent and well placed at the Danish court, he displays his high degree of integrity by honouring his obligation towards his mother. He declines the offer of further hospitality from the Danish king, stating as his reason that his mother's provisions are about to abate – "því at nú er lokit björg þeiri, er ek lagða til, áðr ek færa af Íslandi" ("for now the provisions I stocked before I left Iceland have ended") (p. 366). Auðunn's sense of duty in this respect indicates that the virtue highlighted also in *Sólarljóð* represented somewhat of an ideal of social responsibility in medieval Iceland.

It may at first sight seem inconsistent that a responsibility presented as absolutely fundamental in the laws can in other contexts figure as representation of social ethics *par*

³¹ *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Vol. II, p. 3: 'It has been established that every person is responsible for supporting his dependants in this country. He ought first to provide for his mother. If he can do better, he shall provide for his father. And if he can do even better, he shall provide for his children. If he can do better still, he shall provide for his siblings.' On this legal principle, see further Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1990), pp. 142-155.

³² *Auðunar þáttur vestfirska*, eds. Björn K. Þórólfson and Guðni Jónsson, *Vestfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1943). W. I. Miller has recently examined the social and legal context of this story in the book-length study *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Leiden, Brill, 2008).

excellence. But the adjoining comments in the Dependency Section indicate that even this basic responsibility proved problematic for some to meet. It outlines the various steps to be taken if means did not suffice even to provide for the first in line. In the worst case this forced the provider into debt slavery in the service of a solvent member of kin, a measure which would certainly have strained not only his freedom, but his standing in society, and ultimately his sense of honour. This context may help shed light on the striking compensation the souls in question enjoy in *Sólarljóð*'s idealised sphere: awarded rest on beds of sun-beams, they personify lives of physical exertion, self-sacrifice, perhaps a duty honoured in spite of unfavourable conditions.

Religious Discipline

In Chapter III we introduced the story about the neglectful parson found among the *Íslenzk æfintýri*, and discussed the weighty theological and legal consequences associated with his failure to christen a new-born child that later died.³³ We recall that the condition of the child is visualised in the shape of a bird clinging to the cleric's head from the moment he leaves the churchyard on his seven-year *leizla* to the otherworld to his return. This anonymous creature, we noted, reflects the infant's alienated theological and social status by way of the traditional Icelandic literary motif of the *fylgja*; the story itself serves as an exemplum about the fundamental significance of the first sacrament in medieval societies.

As this tale reflects, observing Christian rites of passage – from cradle to grave – became an increasingly important component of the social ideal during the first four centuries following the conversion. Nedkvitne notes that, over the course of this period, the dimensions of social identity in Iceland and Norway gradually expanded from local to state levels. Whereas the 'local Thing community, the local chieftain and family lineage' predominated in communal awareness before the conversion, the state and church increasingly recognised and explored the potential of

³³ Cf. pp. 107-111 above.

religious rites ‘to create new social identities’ in the building of the Christian polity.³⁴ At the same time as rules of proper Christian conduct became increasingly stringent, it became an increasingly more important social obligation to conform to them. The following examples of conformity and disconformity and their respective consequences illustrate this point.

Sólarljóð’s first example of heavenly reward focuses on individuals who did heed the expectations formulated in God’s laws,³⁵ and several of the poem’s episodes of retribution offer concrete exemplifications of desirable and unacceptable religious conduct. One of these concerns people who have failed to observe the feast days of the Church:

Menn sá ek þá, er minst vildu
 halda helga daga;
hendr þeira váru á heitum steinum
 neglðar nauðliga.³⁶

In a comparable way to the children in *Draumkvedet*’s depiction of infanticide, the nature of this punishment may help us identify the crime in question. Paasche points to the poet’s focus on their hands, suggesting that that the sinners in question had performed labour on days officially set aside for religious worship.³⁷ According to *Kristinna laga þáttur* (‘The Christian Law Section’) of *Grágás*, labour was restricted on weekends from Saturday afternoon to Sunday night, on important saints’ days, as well as on the days falling within the major liturgical feasts of Easter and Christmas.³⁸ As a general rule, neither work nor travel should be undertaken at these times; yet one may note that the laws are relatively lenient when it comes to exceptions to these provisions: in any scenario where live-stock, produce, or habitation was at risk, for instance, securing one’s property and attending to animals took the foremost priority.

The strictest censures in the section dealing with Christian rituals in *Grágás* relate not to

³⁴ Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, p. 114.

³⁵ *Sólarljóð*, st. 69. This stanza can be read in more ways than one; I follow Fidjestøl in preferring ‘mark’ (‘attention; respect’) – found in two MSS – to ‘margt’ (‘much’) in the second half-line, rendering the sense ‘er mark höfðu/ gefit at guðs lögum’, rather than ‘er margt höfðu/ gefit at guðs lögum’ – the reading preferred by Larrington and Robinson. Charity is explicitly rewarded in st. 70.

³⁶ *Sólarljóð*, st. 65: ‘People I saw who least of all would observe the holy days; their hands were brutally nailed onto red-hot stones.’

³⁷ Compare Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 192.

³⁸ *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Vol. I, chs. 8-17.

manual labour, which generally warrants fines only,³⁹ but to non-observance of set periods of fasting. Except in life-threatening circumstances, the failure to observe the chief fast-days (Lent, the Ember days, all Fridays and Saturday before Whitsun) could incur lesser outlawry.⁴⁰ It is interesting, with this in mind, to observe that *Sólarljóð* highlights the virtue of fasting in the reward section with a particular emphasis. In fact, the speaker describes it as the most praiseworthy of all virtues:

Menn sá ek þá er mjök höfðu
 hungri farit hörund;
englar guðs lutu öllum þeim;
 þat er *it* æzta unað.⁴¹

Even God's angels bow before these ascetics in reverence. Perhaps this emphasis on the virtue of fasting and the stringency of the laws in this respect indicate that fasting represented one of the forms of Christian ritual that tested the discipline of average Icelandic citizens especially.

In connection with religious codes of conduct, the scenes in *Sólarljóð* and *Draumkvedet* that bear witness to their cultural context most markedly are those that spotlight heretical conduct. Runes play a particularly prominent role in both poems as symbols of this. One stanza in the *Draumkvedet*-corpus delineates a group of sinners guilty of having used (or abused) this indigenous Norse script; their condition in hell is envisaged in the following terms:

Daa kom æg meg te Maanno dei
Dei vrei sine Hænder i Blo
Gud naae dei fattike Saaline
Som her kun' for Ronine raa.⁴²

It is not entirely clear from the wording of this stanza what particular form of misconduct the souls are guilty of. The claim that the souls possessed the ability to 'command', or more broadly 'employ' runes hints at some ritualistic usage, but does not necessarily entail a statement about the nature of the script itself. Runes remained in use in everyday contexts well into Christian

³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, ch. 10.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, ch. 16.

⁴¹ *Sólarljóð*, st. 71: 'Then I saw persons who had often tested their body with fasting; God's angels bowed to all of them; that is the highest joy.'

⁴² *Draumkvedet*, L3, 5: 'Then I came to those persons, they writhed their hands in blood; God have mercy on those wretched souls, who in this life were in command of runes.'

times, as the fascinating finds at the Bergen harbour bear ample witness to.⁴³ Yet the script is already in the eddaic poems associated with certain forms of hidden wisdom,⁴⁴ even in some contexts with malicious agency: in *Grímnismál*, the term *feiknstafir* ('staves of horror') is introduced as a symbol of hostile forces. Here Óðinn claims that Baldr's realm, Breiðablik, is that which in the whole cosmos is least marred by their influence: 'á því landi ... ek liggja veit/fæsta feiknstafi' ('in that dominion I know the least horror-staves are to be found').⁴⁵ Dronke translates this striking compound as 'omens of ill', calling to mind the dubious circumstances surrounding Baldr's death.

The same, rare term is picked up by the *Sólarljóð* poet in connection with a class of sinners associated with a further type of sacrilege:

Marga menn sá ek moldar gengna,
þá er eigi máttu þjónustu ná;
heiðnar stjörnur stóðu yfir höfði þeim
fáðar feiknstöfum.⁴⁶

The two first lines of this stanza are not altogether precise, and thus open to varying interpretations. As a liturgical term, *þjónusta* may either refer to the 'officium' ('mass') in general, or to the 'corpus domini' ('Eucharist') in particular.⁴⁷ Larrington and Robinson, translating *þjónusta* as 'sacrament', suggest that the individuals in question died before they could receive the last rites.⁴⁸ Paasche, in contrast, thought that the offence depicted was of a more socially controversial nature, suggesting that the souls were in fact 'skilt fra þjónusta', a legal status amounting to 'excommunication'.⁴⁹ I think this latter sense overall corresponds best with the imagery associated with the sinners and the severe eschatological consequence ascribed to them.⁵⁰

⁴³ On uses of runic script in the Christian North, see Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes*, especially ch. 8.

⁴⁴ According to *Hávamál*, st. 138-139, Óðinn hung nine nights on a tree to gain the knowledge of runes.

⁴⁵ *Grímnismál*, st. 12.

⁴⁶ *Sólarljóð*, st. 60: 'I saw many persons walking through the mud who were not permitted to attend services; heathen stars hovered above their heads painted with staves of horror.'

⁴⁷ Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. 'þjónósta'.

⁴⁸ Cf. Larrington and Robinson's notes to st. 60, pp. 338-339.

⁴⁹ Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, pp. 191-192.

⁵⁰ Excommunicates are also among the four categories of individuals not entitled to burial in Icelandic churchyards;

A medieval bishop could of course have had numerous reasons for excommunicating members of his congregation, but in the context of this stanza the symbols strongly suggest that their felony is connected to heathen practices. The image of the *heiðnar stjörnur* is perhaps particularly indicative of this; for given their association with geographical orientation, the stars' 'heathen' nature strongly implies a sense of spiritual disorientation. But also the integration of *Grímnismál*'s 'omens of evil' into this strange constellation supports the impression that the souls' failure to attend the Christian service has its background in something more serious than mere neglect – rather a form of religious malpractice.

As regards the potential implications of the runes as symbols in *Draumkvedet* and *Sólarljóð*, a passage in the Norwegian laws furnishes a further useful point of reference. A supplement to the Christian law section of the Gulaping lists runes among various forms of un-Christian practices warranting the strictest punishment of full outlawry; it is stated that, 'ef maðr eða kono fær með spáðomi. runum. galðrum. gerningum eða hinðuitu fem ðæmis firir villu þa er sa utlegr' ('if a man or woman practices sorcery, runes, chant, witchcraft or superstition which is judged heretical, she or he is an outlaw').⁵¹ It is clear from this statement and the episodes in the afterlife visions that, though runes were still widely used in the Christian Middle Ages, certain applications of the script were apparently viewed with great suspicion as tools of witchcraft, and it must be to expressions of such dark arts that the stanzas above make reference.

Theft and Public Ridicule

Several of the episodes of otherworld retribution we have seen thus far have demonstrated close correspondences with medieval legal writing. The souls enjoying a place of honour in heaven because they had provided for their mother on earth, the cousins punished for their desire to marry, and the individuals manipulating runes exemplify quite specific, legally defined responsibilities and perpetrations. By way of concluding this section I would like to draw

cf. *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Vol. I, p. 12.

⁵¹ *Supplement til Ældre Gulathingslov*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL IV*, p. 18, note 2.

attention to a punishment episode in *Draumkvedet* that in particularly complex fashion relates to medieval legal articles concerned with the same offence. The crime, evoked in numerous stanzas of the corpus, relates to a particular form of theft; in L4, 9, the visionary describes the following scene:

Kjæm eg meg at mann dei
ha Hændan utav blo
Herregud søndige saaline
hae Flutte deild i Skog.⁵²

Theft of the kind highlighted here – manipulation of property markers – corresponds closely to a sub-class especially defined also in the ‘Þiófa bolkr’ (‘Thievery Section’) of medieval Norwegian laws. The *Gulaping* version describes it in the following terms:

tecr maðr marc[s]teina upp ef standa. oc setr niðr i qðrom stað. oc fðrer a lut hins er mote hanom a. þa er hann þiofr at.⁵³

Grágás, we may note, defines this form of property theft separately too, which indicates that it presented a common concern in both countries.⁵⁴ In the *Draumkvedet* stanza cited above, the sinners are visualised with blood on their hands. This could be an allusion to the covert, or perhaps the physically toilsome nature of this particular act, though we should note that blood is a fairly common token of sin both in *Draumkvedet* and *Sólarljóð*. Other portrayals of the same crime in the ballad corpus detail forms of censure more carefully tailored to the offence.

Especially striking are the following two stanzas from L6, where the thieves are visualised bearing pieces of fiery turf in their hands:

Som eg kom meg te manni der
då blei eg fyste grý,
han bar på glóands jórtorvunne
å gjekk mæ ei kápe av blý.

Så æ de i denne heimen
de snakkar jór av andre,
so må dei i den anen heimen

⁵² *Draumkvedet*, L4, 9: ‘I come to those people whose hands are covered in blood; God almighty, these sinful souls have moved boundary markers in the woods.’ Variations on this theme are found in L6, 8-11; K5, 11.

⁵³ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL* I, ch. 264: ‘if a person takes the marking stones up from where they stand and puts them down elsewhere on the property of the owner, she or he is a thief.’

⁵⁴ In *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Vol. I, pp. 82-83, the penalty prescribed is lesser outlawry.

lie so stór en vande.⁵⁵

Here, the correspondence between crime and punishment so often explored in medieval *Visiones* is particularly close. The object of the wrongdoing in this world reappears as the mode of punishment in the other, a notion we found presented in very similar terms in the bridge episode of the *Visio Tundali*. The sinner whom Tundale encountered on the bridge had made himself guilty of stealing grain in this life, and was therefore seen carrying a bundle of the same as part of his purgation. As we recall, the visionary himself was by the same token required to herd an ox across.

One particular conceptual association governing several of the punishment scenes we have discussed in this section is that between *sin* and *weight* (cf. the punishment of infanticide). In the two stanzas quoted above this link is emphasised not only through the pieces of turf, but in the distinctive image of the leaden cloaks weighing down the sinners in the landscape. Lead is a popular Christian symbol of censure, especially in connection with the vice of greed, of which theft is of course a reflex. A similar fate is shared, for instance, by the souls who in *Sólarljóð* are said to have envied the material possessions of others: ‘flokkum þeir fóru til Fégjarns borgar/ ok höfðu byrðar af blýi’ (‘in flocks they travelled to the fortress of greed, and carried burdens of lead’) (st. 63).

As Larrington and Robinson observe in their comments to this stanza, lead often represents the negative counterpart to gold in *Visiones*.⁵⁶ It is therefore worth noting that the seductive glow of precious metals is repeatedly evoked in the first half of *Sólarljóð*. In exemplum 4, Ráðný and Véboði are said to have become too attracted to the pleasure of gold (st. 18); and in the subsequent exemplum the same metal betokens the deceit of Sörli’s murderers (st.

⁵⁵ *Draumkvedet*, L6, 8-9: ‘When I came to the people there, I first grew aware that the man carried red-hot turf, and walked around with a coat of lead./ This is what happens to those who in this world snatch other person’s ground; they will have to endure such suffering in the other world.’

⁵⁶ See Larrington and Robinson eds, *Sólarljóð*, note to stanza 63; cf Matthew 6:19-21. The gold-lead contrast occurs also in Norse figures of speech; in *Thomas saga erkibyskups hin yngri*, ed. C. R. Unger, *Thomas saga erkibyskups: Fortæling om Thomas Becket erkebiskop af Canterbury, to bearb. samt fragmenter af en tredie* (Oslo, Benzen, 1869), p. 349, ll. 14-19, divine and secular rulers are juxtaposed in the following terms: ‘skilr þeira konunga rett sua mikit sem gull ok bly, þat er huartueggia maalmr ok æigi iafn, annar er biartr, fagr ok skirr, annar suartr, dauckr ok uskirr.’

21). A few stanzas thereafter the speaker evokes the lesson illustrated in these episodes once more, stating in idiomatic fashion that ‘ljósir aurar verða at löngum trega’ (‘bright silver brings about grief in the long term’) (st. 34).⁵⁷ The poet behind *Sólarljóð* is clearly particularly interested in the symbolism of this metallurgic imagery. But the same principle lies behind the image of leaden cloaks worn by the thieves in the Norwegian ballad. The sense of concealment associated with the garment augments its thematic connection with the covert crime in question.

But even more complex is the potential implication of the turf in the thieves’ hands. For according to the Norwegian laws, individuals accused of theft below a certain value were not automatically outlawed, but subjected to a kind of public ordeal in which turf, or patches of turf, formed the defining element.⁵⁸ Unlike most other legal procedures in the medieval Norwegian laws, this is one in which social humiliation represents a central element. A running course was to be prepared, and audiences were invited to throw both turf and gravel at the suspect: ‘scal hanom skapa gotu. oc kasta a hann griote. æða tove’ (‘a gauntlet shall be prepared for him, and he shall be struck with gravel or turf’).⁵⁹ If the accused had previously admitted guilt, this ordeal was considered satisfaction enough. However, if she or he denied the charge, the stakes were higher, and the gauntlet took on the added function of a trial. In this case the suspect was required to run a distance of nine standard-length bows, while again being pelted with the abovementioned projectiles. If the accused prevailed without falling over, she or he was acquitted; yet if not, the person fell as an outlaw:

En ef hann kveðr nei við syni með lyritar eiði. en sa eiðr fellr hanom til gotu. En hanom scal gotu skapa þeðan sem hann verðr sannr at. En su gata scal væra niu boga lengð. fulltiða mannz. En þa scal þyrva hann með griote oc með torve. oc fellr hann útlagr ef hann fellr. En ef hann kemse þeðan. þa have hann sva gort.⁶⁰

The significant point in the context of the ‘turf stanza’ in *Draumkvedet* is that this form of public

⁵⁷ Larrington and Robinson eds., *Sólarljóð*, p. 319, point to the similarly worded caution, ‘ilt er auði at trúa’, in *Hugsvinnsmál*, ed. T. Wills and S. Würth, *Skald* VII:2, st. 34.

⁵⁸ For the value-threshold, set at an ‘örtug’, see Cleasby-Vigfusson, *Dictionary*, s.v.

⁵⁹ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, eds. Keyser et al., ch. 253.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: ‘And if he denies it, he shall declare it with an official oath, and then run the gauntlet. For him a course shall be prepared from the place of exposure. And this course shall span the length of nine bows, as carried by a fully grown man. He shall be pelted with gravel and turf, and if he falls, he falls as an outlaw. If he makes it through, he has done his due.’

ordeal gave rise to a specific legal concept – that of the ‘torfs-maðr’ – literally ‘turf-man’. This term is interchangeable with ‘thief’ in thirteenth-century legal writings,⁶¹ and may well have remained in use as common designation of thieves even after the procedure was disestablished. Because they are such a central image in *Draumkvedet*’s thievery stanzas, the pieces of turf in this episode, in addition to simply representing the object of the crime, call to mind both the legal definition of this class of criminals and the complex secular mechanism of dealing with them in medieval law. In this case secular penal procedures appear to have shaped the way sin is defined and censure visualised in the other world. Awareness of this legal backdrop adds weight to the consequence of the poetic imagery.

Based on our analysis of right- and wrongdoing in the otherworlds of *Völuspá*, *Sólarljóð*, and *Draumkvedet* we can identify two distinct tendencies. We note, firstly, that the ideal of the community resonates in one way or another through all examples, from the *Völuspá* poet’s condemnation of grave antisocial offences – of murderers, adulterers, and kin-slayers – to the public ordeal evoked here in *Draumkvedet*. Moral offences are associated with social alienation and natural wilderness – with serpents, thorns, red-hot stones, fiery turf, gravel, heathen stars, and roads that lead astray. The health of the community’s core structures constitutes the primary concern, an ideal exemplified in the most cogent terms by the poet of *Sólarljóð* in honouring the souls ‘who put food into their mother’s mouth’.

Secondly, one observes that the illustrations of moral and immoral conduct in *Sólarljóð* and *Draumkvedet* are of an extraordinarily precise and detailed nature. This has allowed us to trace connections between these portraits of eschatological justice and the codes of conduct defined elsewhere in the literary landscape of the region, first and foremost in the law codes. In certain cases the relationships between afterlife vision and medieval secular laws were particularly close, as in the reward singled out in *Sólarljóð* for persons who provided for their mothers in this life, and in the thievery stanzas of *Draumkvedet*; in these cases, I would argue,

⁶¹ *Den ældre Frostathings-Lov*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL* I, XIV:12; cf. *Supplement til Bjarköretten*, eds. Keyser et al., *NGL* IV, p. 86.

the local legal background significantly affects our understanding of the eschatological consequences described. The fact that all of the episodes we have looked at communicate values or project imagery identifiable as especially relevant to the social setting of medieval Western Scandinavia demonstrates that these eschatological visions are the products of a comprehensive process of adaptation; the ethical system of hell and heaven is conceived of from the perspective of a Northern cultural setting.

II. The Courtly Heaven

As we turn our attention to prospects of heaven in the second half of this chapter, I want to carry forward the key social theme that emerged from our discussion of eschatological justice in the previous section. Does the iconography of Old Norse depictions of this idealised space reflect particular values? If so, which are they, and how are they visualised? Idealised spaces are most elaborately conceived in *Sólarljóð*, *Gísla saga*, *Rannveigar leizla*, and *Eiríks saga*, and *Völuspá*. These texts share a common emphasis on heaven as a cultural sphere, a space dominated not by pastoral prospects, but by images of buildings, physical comfort, material refinement, status, and culture. In the following we will examine the facets of culture highlighted in each narrative, concluding with *Völuspá*, whose elaborate system of halls bears witness to a long-standing Germanic interest in this literary image and concept, and so points to the background for this iconographic tendency in the later primary texts of our corpus too.

Visions of Comfort in Sólarljóð and Gísla saga

Though it is impossible to determine which *Visio* or *Visiones* the *Sólarljóð* poet may have known, he has undoubtedly been inspired by that tradition in his portrayal of the afterlife. With the change of focus from earthly morals in the first third of the poem to the depiction of the eschatological realities in the last, the generic framework moves from native gnomic wisdom poetry to Latin eschatological vision. We have already observed that the poet has fitted this space

with highly original images and concepts. As Fidjestøl observed, the skald seems to have been more interested in conveying ‘poetiske syner’ (‘poetic visions’) than in depicting a ‘fastlagt system’ (‘formalised system’).⁶² Heaven is projected through vignettes of blissful conditions rather than as a grander topographical entity (sts. 69-74), and their unifying features must thus be sought on a more abstract figural level.

One recognisable structural feature of the five heaven-stanzas is that they evoke images from previous sections of the poem, and so invite audiences to trace figural themes across the larger poetic canvas: the image of the ‘hreinir kyndlar’ (‘bright candles’) hovering above the heads of those obedient to God’s laws (st. 69), for instance, figuratively counterbalances the ‘heiðnar stjörnur’ (‘heathen stars’) above the heads of those who have broken them (st. 60). The ‘himna skript’ (‘heavenly script’) read by angels to the charitable (st. 70) counterpoints the ‘blóðgar rúnir’ (‘bloody runes’) inscribed on the breasts of the envious (st. 61). A further impression of reward recalls in phrasing and theme two defining moments in the speaker’s encounter with his own mortality in the middle section of the poem. People who have shown great discipline in fasting are, as we recall, honoured in a particularly graceful way by the spirits of heaven: ‘englar guðs lutu öllum þeim’ (‘the angels of God bowed to all of them’) (st. 71), the speaker describes, adding that this reward is ‘*it æzta unað*’ (‘the highest joy’). This angelic gesture parallels two impressions of the protagonist himself bowing to the dawning recognition that he must depart this world. Firstly, there is the sombre gesture described in the prelude to the sun-stanzas: ‘Lútr ek sat,’ he recalls, ‘lengi ek hölluðumz;/ mjök var ek þá lystr at lifa’ (‘Bowed down I sat, ... long I cowered; I so greatly desired to live then’) (st. 36). And a few stanzas later, now within a new context he captures the same pose with different symbolic implications (st. 41):

Sól ek sá; svá þótti mér,
 sem ek sæja á göfgan guð;
henni ek laut *hin*zta sinni

⁶² Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 54.

aldaheimi í.⁶³

Each scene seems carefully stylised to codify a state of mind. The former conveys a strong sense of reluctance and anxiety about the prospect of departing into the uncertain hereafter, whereas the latter, accompanied as it is by a vision of God, implies that the speaker has come around to a new sense of acceptance of his fate. When the movement recurs in the image of the courtly angels in the hereafter it ties in with the former images on a figural level as a pattern of courtly gestures juxtaposing different spiritual conditions.

In addition to the details of the curtsyng angels, the lit candles, and the books of heavenly script, the heaven section of *Sólarljóð* depicts several other stations of reward that may be described as courtly in nature. Stanza 72, we recall, pictures the dwelling places on heavenly rays reserved for the souls who had cared for their mothers in this life; the nature of this reward appears, as noted earlier, to reflect the strenuous nature of this accomplishment. A second episode, depicted in stanza 74, visualises the route by which innocent victims of murder enter heaven: ‘Hávar reiðir’, the speaker describes, ‘sá ek með himnum fara;/ þær eigu götur til guðs’ (‘Lofty chariots ... I observed driving to heaven; they inhabit the roads to God’). The victims steering these carriages deserve the straightest and least troublesome journey through the otherworld. Thirdly, there is the heaven stanza lauding those who in this life had disciplined themselves physically. They are accompanied by heavenly maids who tend to their weakened bodies:

Helgar meyjar höfðu hreinliga
sál af syndum þvegit
manna þeira, er á mörgum degi
pína sjálfa sik.⁶⁴

This praise of self-castigation represents a kind of virtue most applicable to a monastic setting, but its reward evokes a different sphere of life. The scars of self-chastisement merit the attention

⁶³ *Sólarljóð*, st. 41: ‘I saw the sun; it appeared to me as if I was seeing the venerable God; I bowed to it one last time, in this world of the living.’

⁶⁴ *Sólarljóð*, st. 73: ‘Holy maids had cleansed the sin from the souls of those people who in this life often chastise themselves.’

of a hero's wounds; the maids washing these souls pure from sin evoke a courtly environment of tenderness and refinement. As in stanza 72, corporeal comfort captures the state of spiritual bliss. The scene adds, I think, to the impression that underneath the seemingly detached glimpses of heaven offered in *Sólarljóð* there is a unifying conceptual framework, a vision of heaven as a cultural, courtly space.⁶⁵ The images of the lit candles and heavenly books contribute to this hall setting both formally and as tokens of light, warmth, and culture, and the bowing angels display a courtly code. The perfected space in *Sólarljóð* is a sphere governed by learning, civility, and intimacy.

The important themes of intimacy and physical comfort occasioned Gabriel Turville-Petre to compare *Sólarljóð*'s conception of heaven with the otherworld visualised in the dreams of *Gísla saga*.⁶⁶ He highlights especially the image of the 'sæing blauta' ('soft bed') in Gísli's second dream by the better dream woman (st. 26), and the related idea projected in the comfortable 'hvíkur' of *Sólarljóð*'s stanza 72.⁶⁷ In each of Gísli's two dreams by the better dream woman the main focal point is a large house or hall. Though notions of intimacy and comfort are, in a way reminiscent of *Sólarljóð*'s heaven, central to both settings, neither of the dream halls can be identified with any particular Christian or mythological otherworldly sphere. They appear to be especially tailored to the experience of the protagonist and the cultural setting of tenth-century Iceland.

The prose and verse accounts of Gísli's dreams are not in fact in entire agreement as to what the protagonist perceived in his dreams. Referring to the first dream-location, the prose uses the terms 'hús' and 'skáli' (p. 70), two terms primarily denoting smaller, private types of housing. The verse, in contrast, evokes the grander images of a 'salr' ('hall') and 'rann' ('large house') (st. 16). According to both accounts, the building is occupied by a number of people seated at the fire drinking. Some of these appear to be familiar to the dreamer, who identifies

⁶⁵ Compare Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*, p. 54, who suggests that the setting evokes an 'overjordisk gudsteneste'.

⁶⁶ Turville-Petre, 'Gísli Súrsson and His Poetry', pp. 138-142.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

some as his kinsmen and friends: ‘kennda ek marga inni frændr mína ok víni. Þeir sátu við elda ok drukku’ (‘inside, I recognized many relatives and friends of mine; they sat at the fires and drank’) (p. 70). In the verse, the people inside are described as ‘bekksagnir’ (‘bench-crews’) (st. 16),⁶⁸ and said to greet him ‘bliðliga’ (‘in a friendly manner; joyfully’), a greeting which he returns by warmly wishing them ‘heilan’ (‘good health’).

The dream hall, with its bench-crews of ale-drinking and partly familiar figures, is carefully choreographed, and evokes certain other portraits of the otherworld in Norse-Icelandic verse and prose. A vivid, often quoted account of purported pagan beliefs concerning life after death is found in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Here we are told about a shepherd who one night perceives the local hill opening and his master, Þorsteinn Þorskabítr, enter into an inner mountain hall:

fjallit lausk upp norðan; hann sá inn í fjallit elda stóra ok heyrði þangat mikinn glaum ok hornaskvöl; ok er han hlýddi, ef hann næmi nokkur orðaskil, heyrði hann, at þar var heilsat Þorsteini Þorskabít ok fõrunautum hans ok mælt, at hann skal sitja i ǫndvegi gegnt feðr sinum.⁶⁹

The saga tells us that this local mountain (Helgafell), was considered hallowed ground by Þorsteinn’s family precisely because they expected to be reunited there in the afterlife. These greet the deceased, like Gísli’s friends and kinsmen, as he rejoins their company. This passage is not unique in its vision of the pagan afterlife as a cheerful hall-setting. A particularly interesting further example is the passage of *Njáls saga* which delineates the lively mound-hall of the late Gunnar. Shortly after Gunnar’s burial, two men walk past the mound by moonlight when they observe the following phenomenon:

Þeim sýndisk haugrinn opinn, ok hafði Gunnar snúizk í hauginum ok sá í móti tunglinu; þeir þóttusk fjögur ljós sjá brenna í hauginum, ok bar hvergi skugga á. Þeir sá, at Gunnar var kátligr ok með gleði-móti miklu.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Cf. *Lexicon poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, s.v. ‘bekksögn’.

⁶⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson et al., p. 19: ‘opened up on the north side; he saw within great fires and heard from there much cheer and horn-sounds. And as he listened for any sounds of speech, he heard how Þorsteinn Þorskabítr and his companion were greeted and told that he should sit in the seat of honour opposite his father.’ Cf. Turville-Petre, ‘Gísli Súrsson and His Poetry’, p. 139. E. Davidson, *The Road to Hel*, pp. 87-90, discusses this and further literary descriptions of mountainous afterlife locations.

⁷⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), p. 193: ‘They see the mound opening, and Gunnar had turned around inside the mound so as to look towards the moon. They thought they saw four lights burn in the mound, and none cast any shadows. They saw that Gunnar was in good spirits and his complexion very cheerful.’

Seated like a chieftain in his hall, the dead Gunnar subsequently recites a verse on the circumstances surrounding his death. As noted in connection with the idea of the Hel-shoe in the previous chapter, one must of course be careful in regarding any such late literary accounts of the pagan afterlife in Norse-Icelandic literature as reflexes of genuine beliefs. Even so, we can observe that the vision of the cheerful otherworldly hall evoked in *Gísla saga* is a discernible convention in native literature. Indeed, both of the major mythological realms of the dead described in eddaic poetry – Valhöll and Hel – are conceived of as distinctly courtly, social environments.⁷¹

If Gísli's vision of the convivial hall is meant to represent an eschatological space, however, it is only shown to him as prospect of what he will not attain. Within the narrative context the function of this dream hall is first and foremost to provide a setting for the prophecy of his death. This is channelled through the image of seven fires in the hall: “váru sjau eldarnir, sumir váru mjök brunnir, en sumir sem bjartastir ... þat merkði aldr minn, hvat ek ætta eptir ólifat” (“seven fires were there, some were burnt for the most part, others at their brightest ... that marked the time I had left to live”) (p. 70). The detail of the fires is reminiscent of Gunnar's lights in the mound, and one that harmonises with the overall courtly atmosphere of the vision. Yet, they merit special attention because encoded in them is the key of their symbolic consequence. In the verse account, we may first note, the word ‘eldr’ is more prominent, occurring twice (sts. 16, 17); here, moreover, Gísli adds that the sight of them affected him deeply – they were ‘distressing’ (‘at meini’) (st. 16).

The seven fires have been connected to dream symbols of the Old Testament, where the number seven is also prominent in prophetic visions. Langeslag sees a ‘direct borrowing’ from the Pharaonic dreams of Genesis 41 which through the images of seven lean and fat cows foreshadows years of famine and growth respectively.⁷² Yet the main point in Gísli's dream

⁷¹ Cf. *Grimnismál*, sts. 9-10, 23; *Baldurs draumar*, sts. 6-7.

⁷² Langeslag, ‘Dream Women’, p. 61.

seems to me to be a linguistic one. The interpretative keys to dreams in the Old Norse sagas are often the punning connotations of images and words within them.⁷³ One particular linguistic association exploited elsewhere is just that between the noun *eldr* ('fire') and the verb *eldask* ('to grow old'), which is the central connection between the symbol and interpretation in Gísli's dream. It occurs, for instance, in a curious dream attributed to King Sverrir in the eponymous saga about him.⁷⁴ We read that Sverrir was one night guided to a fire ('eldr') and requested to eat of a human body roasting on it. He obliges, eating the entire body save the head. Upon awaking, the king surmises that the person on the fire must have been his main rival, Erlíngr jarl 'er þá tók mjök at *eldask*' ('who then was *growing old* fast') (p. 67; my emphasis). The pun is then extended further to include a reference to King Magnús – the preserved head – who Sverrir foresees will soon 'vera mjök *elt* at ráðum' ('be much *pressed* for advice'; my emphasis). In the verse account of Gísli's first dream, the noun *aldr* does not occur in the dream woman's interpretation, but even so the word play is inherent in the term 'eldr'. It thus seems likely that the skald first and foremost had this popular semantic play on fire and age in mind in designing the afterlife setting.

The second dream hall Gísli visits is, in contrast to the first, explicitly defined as the dreamer's destination in the afterlife. The prose account is more specific than the verse regarding the type of building visited: here it is said that they approached 'hús einu, því er nær var sem holl væri' ('a house, which appeared more like a hall') (p. 94), where the verse only states they are riding to the dream woman's 'heimr' ('homestead') (st. 25.). In contrast to the first hall, this has a luxurious and far more private atmosphere. The prose draws attention to the comfortably cushioned benches and rich decoration: 'þóttu honum þar vera hægendi í þollum ok vel um búit' ('he saw cushions on the benches and rich furnishings') (p. 94); the verse focuses especially on the already mentioned 'sæing blauta' ('soft bed') (st. 26).

The major characteristic of this second hall-dream is its emphasis on privacy. It depicts a

⁷³ Cf. Turville-Petre, 'Dreams in Icelandic Tradition', pp. 96-98

⁷⁴ *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifr Hauksson, ch. 42.

notably intimate space that contrasts with the crowded benches welcoming him in the first hall. As it cannot be associated with any other eschatological locus familiar to us from mythological or Christian didactic literature, we must regard this environment as a reflection on Gísli's unique condition. In view of the erotic death-motif underpinning the figure of the better dream woman, analysed in Chapter III, the dream hall could be said to betoken Gísli's heroic frame of character. Especially important in relation to our discussion is the fact that each of Gísli's better dreams centres on scenarios that represent peace, safety and comfort. Both of the carefully stylised dream halls present him with qualities of which he is deprived in his outlawed state, a dynamic which intensifies the remarkably realistic sense that Gísli's dreams grow out of the protagonist's mind and condition in the narrative setting.

Seats of Status: Rannveigar leizla and Eiríks saga

The trio of Northern guides in *Rannveigar leizla* lead the protagonist to a splendid urban prospect at the conclusion of her vision. Though structurally identifiable as heaven, what the scene in fact depicts is a social demography of the Icelandic religious community. The halls and houses to be seen there possess different degree of refinement: 'sa hon hallir fagar ok margar. ok hus bæðe há ok mǫrg ok fǫgr. sua at hon þottiz eigi skilea mega dyrð alla. ok voro þo eigi øll iafn dyrðleg' ('she saw numerous halls full of beauty, and houses, high, many and beautiful so that she seemed unable to distinguish all the beauty; even so, they were not all equally beautiful').⁷⁵ Though the guides note that all inhabitants here are holy, they also stress that not all are equal in rank. They vary in merit, as the variation among the houses in terms of quality and beauty illustrates. At the summit of the spiritual hierarchy stand the towering figures of the Icelandic church: 'ero þo helgazstir af þeim', we read, 'Jon byskup ok Thorl(akr) byskup enn yngri' ('the holiest ... are the bishops Jón and Þorlákr the younger') (ch. 59, ll.17-18).

Because of their special place in the history of Icelandic Christianity, the halls of these

⁷⁵ *Rannveigar leizla*, ch. 59, ll. 11-14

saints surpass even those of bishops Björn, Ísleifr and Þorlákr the elder in beauty. But the guides stress that less illustrious Icelanders too own homes in this township, first and foremost such that have demonstrated the virtue of patience in this life, ‘þui at þui helgare er hvern maðr er hann hefir meire þolinmæðe. firi Guðs nafne’ (‘for each man is to be considered holier the greater his patience in God’s name’) (ch. 60, ll. 3-4). Having thus surveyed the different spiritual quarters of the settlement, the guides finally draw Rannveig’s attention to one specific ‘hus’ (‘house’): it is ‘hatt ok gøfuglict’ (‘high and exquisite’), and distinct for its welcoming sounds: ‘þangat mantu heyra sǫng fagan ok hljóð mikit. ok dyrðlict’ (‘from there you may hear beautiful singing and much glorious chanting’) (ch. 60, ll. 7-8). This house, the guides say, belongs to Guðmundr Arason, whose prayers sustain Iceland just as their own intercessions sustain Norway and the Orkneys, and who will one day become the greatest ‘upp halldz maðr’ (‘supporter; beneficiary’) of Iceland (l. 12).

Considering that Iceland did not possess villages or towns before much more recent times,⁷⁶ the fact that *Rannveigar leizla* should describe heaven in urban terms is in itself curious. Larrington rightly notes the resemblance between this civitas and the village of bliss described by the anonymous soldier in Gregory’s *Dialogues*.⁷⁷ In this report, the visionary, looking over an Eden-like landscape of ‘vellir blomgápir’ (‘blooming pastures’), observes in its centre ‘bói fagra oc hallir lioss fullar, oc sa þar smiþat .i. hus or golli, oc vissi eigi, hvern þat hus atti’ (‘houses and halls full of light, and among them one house made from gold; he did not know to whom that house belonged’).⁷⁸ Of these bright buildings, some stand closer to the murky river and are at times enveloped by its mist. Others stand further removed in the clear.

Gregory’s interlocutor is understandably puzzled by the sight of the houses in heaven, for he doubts the need for such physical comforts in the afterlife.⁷⁹ The master dismisses this

⁷⁶ Cf. Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Cf. Larrington, ‘*Leizla Rannveigar*’, p. 240.

⁷⁸ *Víðrǫður*, ed. Unger, p. 250, ll. 23-24.

⁷⁹ A lacuna in the Old Norse MS occurs where these interpretative passages would have stood. See Gregory the Great, *Dialogi*, ed. de Vogüé, Book IV, ch. 37, ll. 125-135. The image of heaven in this vision appears to be inspired

comment as beside the point, emphasising that this prospect is merely illustrative; it demonstrates that through our conduct in this life we build our habitation in the hereafter in a transferred sense. It follows that asking who the houses seen by the soldier belong to is irrelevant too. If this famous *Visio* influenced *Rannveigar leizla*, it is clear that the latter explores the urban setting for rather different purposes. In the Icelandic heaven it does matter who inhabits the various houses, because the city presents a chart of the country's ecclesiastical hierarchy, and this in turn allows the authors to rank and define Guðmundr's status. In their concluding remarks, the guides extend this exercise from a national to an international level by way of a further component of the urban metaphor: 'man hann [Guðmundr] uerða mestr upp halldz maðr landi þessu. ok sitea eige i lægra sête. enn Thomas er Hibyskup a Englandi' ('he [Guðmundr] will become the greatest supporter of this country and not occupy a lower seat than archbishop Thomas of England') (ch. 60, ll. 11-13).

Even though this seating metaphor is itself common in Old Norse idiom,⁸⁰ in this context its associations with power, authority, and hierarchy reinforce the themes of leadership and religious status which define Rannveig's vision of heaven. It is instructive in this connection to draw a comparison with the afterlife vision of a controversial eleventh-century German ecclesiast in which the same themes are encoded in related imagery. St. Anno (d. 1075), once *Reichsbischof* of Cologne, was a divisive figure who, not unlike Guðmundr and Thomas à Beckett, sought to fortify the authority of the church and responded to opposition from the secular leaders of his district with uncompromising force. Anonymously penned a decade or so after his death in Siegburg, the Early Middle High German *Annolied* ('Song of Anno') represents the Bishop as a misunderstood figure, who endured hostility and aggression with patience after the model of Christ. While in exile from the turmoil of Cologne, Anno reportedly obtained a nocturnal vision of the existence awaiting him in the hereafter; his dream projects a splendid

by Christ's words according to John 14:2 ('in domo Patris mei mansiones multae sunt') which Gregory analyses to the same effect a few paragraphs earlier (ch. 36, l. 87).

⁸⁰ Compare the reference to Lucifer's ambition to 'sit on an equal level with God' in *Alexanders saga*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 146, ll. 19-21: 'ofmetnaðrenn ørði hann sva at hann villde iafnhatt sitia scaparanum.'

courtly setting, a ‘royal hall’:

... her quam in einin vili kuniglîchin sal
 ci wuntirlîchimi gesidele,
 sô iz mit rehti solde sîn ci himele.
 dû dûht un in sînim troume,
 wîz allinthalvin wêre bihangin mit golde.
 dî viuli tiurin steini liuhtin dar ubiral,
 sanc unti wunne was dir grôz unti manigvalt.⁸¹

After naming some of the prominent bishops seated there in star-like radiance, the dreamer focuses in on a splendid chair as yet standing empty:

dû stûnt dir ein stûl ledig unt eirlîch;
 seint Anno wart sînis vili gemeit.
 her was ci sînin êrin dar gesat;
 nû lobit hers got, dad iz alsô geschach.
 ô wî gerne her dû gesêze,
 den lîbin stûl wî gerner bigriffe!⁸²

Like Rannveig’s vision of the perfected sphere, Anno’s is a dream about status and political influence. It implies a statement about Anno’s claims to spiritual exaltation and excellence of motive, qualities – the author suggests – not fully recognised by his contemporaries. The empty seat in the royal hall is presented as a palpable symbol of this legacy.

Like Anno and the English saint he is compared to, Guðmundr of course fought determinedly for the increase of ecclesiastical influence in his country’s political landscape. The high seat evoked as a symbol of authority in Rannveig’s vision represents this key aspect of his ambition, and it is a symbol which would have had a natural appeal to medieval Icelandic audiences. For within the relatively egalitarian social structure of the country, hierarchies manifested, for instance, in arrangements of seating at public and private events carried much significance. Indeed, William I. Miller observes that seating in the hall ‘provided one of the few occasions in the culture where relative ranking was clearly visible.’⁸³ The images of village, hall,

⁸¹ *Das Annolied*, ed. E. Nellmann, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart, Reclam, 1986), ll. 713-720: ‘he entered a royal hall with splendid seats, just as they ought to be in heaven. In the dream it appeared to him, that they were draped in gold on every side. Most precious gemstones sparkled everywhere; the song and joy was great and manifold.’

⁸² *Ibid.*, ll. 727-732: ‘A chair stood there empty and very fine; St. Anno took great pleasure in it; it was placed there in his honour. Now he praised God that this was shown to him; how strongly he desired to take his seat there; how strongly to take possession of that chair!’

⁸³ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, pp. 29-30.

and high seat explored in Rannveig's vision in this way reflect conceptual ideals connected to the communal space, of urbanity, safety and material wealth. In addition to this, the Icelandic heaven is evidently designed to offer a visual chart of its illustrious inhabitants and their rank in terms of local prestige.

Prestige, as we recall from Chapter II, surrounds the figure of Eiríkr in *Eiríks saga* too. His quest to the otherworld signals a young nobleman's quest to prove his heroism, and due to Eiríkr's royal status kinship with the first settler of Norway, his personal enterprise is of course of national consequence. As portrayed in the saga, the otherworld underscores his status as well as to his typological function in the narrative. When he first reaches across the *steinbogi*, the scene he enters is distinctly pastoral, and very similar in detail to the garden landscapes depicted in *Visiones* such as *Drythelms leizla* or *Gundelinus leizla*. It is described as a

fagrt land grausin huit sem purpuri vid sætum ilm ok myklum bloma ok flutv hunangs lækir um alla uegu landzins. Þetta land uar langt ok slett. Sol skin var þar sua at alldri var þar myrkt ok alldri bar skugga a. lognn uar þar i loftu en litill vindr a iordu til þess at þa kende hinn sæta ilm helldr en adr.⁸⁴

This Paradise is characteristically wide and flat, devoid of any deep and shadowy valleys in which agents of evil may reside. Its fertility and flowing honey encapsulate the ideal of spontaneous, unlaboured munificence, an ideal we will find illustrated again in the 'ósánir akra' ('unsown fields') of *Völuspá's* new earth (st. 59). Eiríkr, however, is not fully content with this prospect of natural beauty; instinctively he marches on to find 'nokkurar bygdir edr herut' ('some habitations or communities') (ll. 225-226) – a cultural centre of this dominion. Finally, after a long period of wandering Eiríkr and his companion discover the following remarkable edifice:

Sa þeir þa þui likazst sem stöpull uære ok henge j loftinu ok óngir stolpar vndir. þeir nalgazst þangat. þar sa þeir at hek a turnn j loftinu a óngum stolpum. Sunnan vid turninn stod stige. þeir vndruduzst miog þenna kraft ok þotti þetta kynligt⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *Esv*, ll. 218-223: 'beautiful country of grass white as costly garments, with sweet scents and plenty of flowers; around all that land flow streams of honey. This land was wide and even. The sun shone so that there never was darkness nor did any shadows fall there. The air was calm, but along the ground there was a gentle breeze so that the sweet scent was even more noticeable than before.'

⁸⁵ *Esv*, ll. 226-230: 'Then they saw something resembling a tower hanging in the air without poles underneath. They approached that place, and saw that a tower stood in the air without any pillars. To the south of the tower stood a ladder; they wondered much at what kind of force this could represent, and thought the spectacle strange.'

Curious as this scene of the suspended tower is, it is not without structural importance within the brief saga. The angel who appears in his later dream refers the phenomenon of the pillar-less structure to underline the lesson of God's power. And earlier on, when the prince underwent schooling at the court of Constantinople, the king had employed the analogous image of the ethereally suspended earth as evidence of God's limitless control: 'Vmhuersis iordina telia frodir menn hundrad þusunda rasta ok atta þusunda ok hallda henni óngir stolpar upp helldr gudligr almatt' ('the circumference of the earth is counted by wise people to be one hundred and eighty thousand miles, and no pillars support it, but rather divine omnipotence') (ll. 118-121). The clear figural and verbal links between the two scenes, identical in both medieval redactions of the saga, underline a central pedagogical motif in Eiríkr's quest.

Yet, in the same way that the motifs of *Ódáinsakr* and the *steinbogi* discussed in previous chapters transcend the isolated saga context, so also this vision of the suspended tower, the furthest point of his journey, produces strong intertextual links. Critics have in particular drawn attention to a comparable motif in *Gundelinus leizla*.⁸⁶ After ascending to heaven by a ladder, the eponymous monastic novice reportedly saw 'eina kapellu hangandi i loptinu suo litla, at hann vndradi miok, til huers suo litil kapella mundi vera' ('a chapel, hanging in the air, and it was so small that he wondered whom such a little chapel could be for').⁸⁷ As in *Esv*, the suspended building elicits the astonishment of the traveller, and it is noteworthy that also Gundelinus' guide presents this phenomenon as a lesson of God's unlimited creative power (l. 27 ff.).

Given the peculiarity of the image, it seems plausible that the Icelandic author may have looked to a Latin or Norse version of this *Visio* for inspiration. If so the extent to which he reconfigures it is the more striking. For where Gundelinus observes the Virgin Mary washing the feet of the blessed, Eiríkr enters a lavish aristocratic setting:

þeir sa hann hinum fegrstum gud uefiar pellum buinn. þar stod bord buit fagrt ok stod a silfr disk. a honum uoru allz konar krasir ok hann uar hladinn af huitu braude med sætum

⁸⁶ Cf. Jensen ed., *Esv*, pp. XXIV-XXV.

⁸⁷ *Gundelinus leizla*, ed. Unger, p. 1163, ll. 25-26.

ilm. kanna var þar sett med gulle ok gimstæinum. kalekr var þar fullr af yine. Rekkiur uoru þar uel bunar ok breiddar gullofnum *klędum ok guduefiar þellum.⁸⁸

Lavishly furnished and richly provisioned with food and wine, the luxuriousness of the hall of course renders the protagonist's decision *not* to stay when given the choice by the guardian angel the more remarkable. He chooses instead to return and proselytise among his people, a decision, the narrative suggests, which demonstrates that he has at last come around to a deeper understanding of his calling.

Of the three main loci of action in the short narrative – the courts in Þrándheimr, Constantinople and Paradise – the last hall is the most advanced in several respects. Representing the principal steps on the protagonist's religious journey, the string of courts neatly brings together the geographical and spiritual dimensions of his quest. As is often the case in Icelandic saga narratives, especially in the *fornaldarsögur*, the journey east becomes associated with prestige, knowledge, and self-discovery.⁸⁹ The stages in Eiríkr's quest outline a thematically important itinerary, taking us from the shadowy fringes of the medieval Christian world into its geographical and cultural core and subsequently beyond to the Earthly Paradise, before returning to its starting point. On a figural level the saga delineates how a Scandinavian royal prototype, significantly aged somewhere between child and adulthood, engages on an initiatory journey of self-discovery. From a typological perspective it follows that Eiríkr's journey is also that of the lineage he is part of – that of the Norwegian monarchy. On this journey, the courtly tower within the Christian other world marks the seminal turning point, the outer- and innermost destination. As an allegory of Norwegian conversion history, this quest's culmination comes to represent the turning point of the quest of Western Scandinavian history.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Esv*, ll. 231-238: 'There he saw the most finely crafted, preciously cased pillows. A table stood there beautifully prepared and on it silver plates. It was decked with all kinds of delicacies and white bread smelling sweetly. A cup stood there plated with gold and beset with gemstones, and a chalice stood there filled with wine. Benches were further placed there which were finely crafted and covered in golden material and precious cloth.'

⁸⁹ Cf. C. J. Clover's discussion of this in 'Travel Pattern' in Icelandic sagas in *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1982), especially pp. 31-33; compare also M. Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2010), pp. 136-139.

⁹⁰ This typological theme of *Esv* is one that resonates with particular force through the saga's codicological link with the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and St. Óláfr in *Flateyjarbók*, as Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, ch. 4, has

The visions of the perfected space in *Sólarljóð*, *Gísla saga*, *Rannveigar leizla*, and *Eiríks saga* share a partiality for culture over nature in describing this realm. Appended to the images of halls, courts, and villages we discern ideals of manmade order, of physical comfort, material munificence, of safety, and enclosed spaces. In the following section, I will outline the literary tradition behind these views of the perfected space and the ideals projected in them.

The Hall in its Setting

Each of perfected spheres analysed above incorporates facets of a greater motif-complex centred on the ideal of the courtly space. Heaven is neither a Garden of Eden nor a Heavenly Jerusalem; intimacy and individual fates represent a stronger focus than typically evinced in the heaven-portraits of the *Visiones*. We have had occasion to note that this ideal of the cultural space governs representations of the hereafter set in pagan contexts. Literary descriptions of Valhøll, Hel, the holy mountain in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the mound of Gunnar in *Njáls saga* display variations of the same theme.

I would like to suggest that, on a literary level, both the Christian and so-called pagan afterlife visions reflect the importance of the hall complex in Germanic literary traditions more generally (heroic, mythological, and Christian). A considerable body of archaeological research carried out over recent years indicates that the ideals connected with literary concepts such as Valhøll or Gimlé in *Völuspá* reflect the hall's political, religious, and cultural importance in Germanic societies.⁹¹ Before turning to the hall-paradigm in the eddaic prophecy, I shall draw attention only to a small number of reflexes of the literary tradition surrounding this motif in early medieval vernacular poetry that seem representative and particularly significant. This will

convincingly demonstrated.

⁹¹ See, for example, F. Herschend, *The Idea of the Good in Late Iron Age Society*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology 15 (Uppsala, Uppsala University, 1998); T. Gunnell, 'Höf, höll, goð(ar) and dvergar: Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Skáli', in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn, Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003*, eds. R. Simek and J. Meurer (Bonn, Universität Bonn, 2003), pp. 187-197; T. Gansum, 'Hallene og Stavkirkene: Kultbygninger i en overgangstid', in *Facets of Archeology: Essays in Honour of Lotte Hedeager on the 60th Birthday*, eds. K. Chilidis et al., Oslo Arkeologiske Serie 10 (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2008), pp. 199-213.

allow us to examine the subtler facets of *Völuspá*'s imagery more fully, and at the same time provide an outline of the tradition this and the foregoing visions of the courtly heaven grow out of.

In a seminal article published around four decades ago, Kathryn Hume drew attention to the complex uses of the hall-motif in Old English poetry.⁹² She lucidly demonstrates that the motif of the hall, one of the most prominent in Anglo-Saxon verse, is encoded with a range of political, social, and religious ideals which are brought to bear on different thematic contexts in differing ways. Consider, for instance, the 'beorg' ('mound') inhabited by the dragon in *Beowulf* with its numerous prominent hall-subversions.⁹³ In addition to the 'stānboga' ('stone arch') (l. 2545), which we discussed in the previous Chapter, it contains a 'sess' ('seat') (l. 2756) and a hoard consisting of prestigious courtly artefacts, among them a resplendent 'seġn eall gylden' ('golden standard') (l. 2767). The physical imperfections of the dragon's hall, rustically placed as it is 'under stāncleofu' ('under the rocky cliff') with a 'strēam' breaking ('brecaŋ') forth from inside (ll. 2540-2546), underline the antagonistic relationship in which it stands to the hall of Heorot and the social ideal that centre embodies. For whereas the *perfected hall* is a place of conviviality and feasting, this *anti-hall* is geographically peripheral and identified with wilderness and alienation.

A concept evoked with different spiritual connotations across Germanic poetry to define life in the hall is the *symbol* (aslo *sumbl*) – the 'banquet' or 'feast'.⁹⁴ It is the defining quality of Hrōðgār's hall in its serene state, as for instance following Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. Restored after the beast's destructions, and ornamented for a *symbol* with all dignitaries present (l. 1010), this portrait of Heorot at feast encapsulates a world unencumbered – if only momentarily – from persecution and threat. The Biblical overtones of this scene and condition are pregnant; as Alvin Lee has argued, the ideal Heorot in quite pronounced ways serves as

⁹² K. Hume, 'The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974), pp. 63-74.

⁹³ *Beowulf*, eds. Klaeber et al., ll. 2542 ff.

⁹⁴ Cf. J. Bosworth and T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1921), s.v. 'symbol'; H. Tiefenbach, *Altsächsisches Handwörterbuch* (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010), s.v. 'sumbal'; Frizner, *Ordbog*, s.v. 'sumbl'.

earthly analogue to the eternal ideal of paradisiacal existence: set against the menace of the monsters, the Danish court stands out as an emblem of ‘the sacred’, in which ‘the condition of *dream* (joy) is symbolized by banqueting in the hall’.⁹⁵ The *symbol* characterising the hall at its best in this way mediates between earthly and heavenly ideals of existence.

In Anglo-Saxon and medieval German writings of a more explicitly didactic nature, halls and anti-halls often signify more clearly didactic conceptions of spiritual values. A tenth-century poem about St. Guthlac describes how the Mercian nobleman at one point in his life decided to reject the ‘sumbeldaga’ (‘banqueting days’) of his past,⁹⁶ and chose instead a life in an antithesis of a *sele* in the wilderness of Lincolnshire (l. 742). Comparably negative spiritual connotations surround the concept of the *symbol* in the Old Saxon biblical paraphrase *Héliand*. Paraphrasing the parable of Lazarus and the man of wealth (Luke 16:19-31), the Saxon poet expands considerably on the source passage when it comes to the delineation of the latter’s lavish courtly life style, indicating that this was a motif that resonated particularly strongly with contemporary audiences. The lord is described as lingering day by day in his ‘gestseli ... sittien at sumble’ (‘guest hall ... seated at the banquet’). Here the notion of the courtly *symbol* crystallises the spiritual dichotomy between him and wretched Lazarus, hovering ‘at them durun foren’ (‘outside that gate’).⁹⁷

Set against the exorbitant halls and the lifestyles associated with them in the two poems, Lazarus’ place at the gate and Guthlac’s hall of exile are morally analogous. Their liminal dwellings capture a theological perspective on earthly life as a temporary state of exile from the principal and eternal home of heaven; in the last hall only, the poets imply, will one find the *symbol* of true substance.⁹⁸ One of the most memorable otherworld portrayals in Old English literature, the ninth-century *Dream of the Rood*, visualises this heavenly feast in the following

⁹⁵ A. A. Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden: Four Essays on the Design of Old English Poetry* (Yale, Yale UP, 1972), p. 180.

⁹⁶ *Guthlac A*, ed. J. Roberts, *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979), l. 165.

⁹⁷ *Héliand*, ed. Cathey, ll. 3334-3340.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 3360-3362; *Guthlac A*, ed. Roberts, ll. 680-684.

terms:

	þær is blis mycel,
drēam on heofonum,	þær is Dryhtnes folc
geseted tō symle,	þær is singal blis;
ond hē þonne āsette	þær ic syþþan mōt
wunian on wuldre,	wel mid þām hālgum
drēames brūcan. ⁹⁹	

The *Rood*-poet makes the ineffable prospect of heavenly bliss palpable through the conceit of the *symbol* attended by all the *folc* of God. Elevated to an eschatological dimension, the hall-like qualities associated with heaven entail companionship, security, physical comfort, and nobility of status.¹⁰⁰

A final example of the literary hall-ideal before turning to *Völuspá* may be taken from the eddaic corpus. In *Lokasenna*, a courtly ‘sumbl’ is depicted which, like the banquets seen above, represents a condition beyond the narrative event itself.¹⁰¹ The highest members of the divine pantheon (except Þórr) are gathered at Ægir’s gold-lit hall for a feast. It is ‘a place of profound peace’ (‘griðastaðr mikill’) and harmony, but only until Loki makes his entrance and stirs up animosity. Bragi reveals why he was not invited in the first place – ‘Þvíat æsir vito,/ hveim þeir alda skolo/ gambansumbl um geta’ (‘Because the gods know for which persons they should prepare a joyful feast’) (st. 8). Loki gains a seat at the banquet nevertheless by reminding Óðinn of their once sworn kinship (st. 9), a circumstance which apparently complicates Óðinn’s loyalties. The dilemma calls to mind the circumstances surrounding the death of Baldr, the complications of kinship ties which, as we discussed earlier in this Chapter, condition the disintegration of the old world order. Through these allusions, Loki’s intrusion at the peaceful *sumbl* obtains overtones of the coming cosmic confrontation. The idealised hall of Ægir’s

⁹⁹ *Dream of the Rood*, ed. M. Swanton (Exeter, Exeter UP, 1996), ll. 139-144: ‘there is great bliss/ joy in heaven/ where the people of God are/ seated to feast, where there is everlasting gladness,/ and may he set me there where I then may/ dwell in glory, with those holy/ to enjoy delight.’

¹⁰⁰ Later clerical voices would question the kind of heavenly state depicted in the *Dream of the Rood* as misleadingly concrete; compare the elegiac Middle English ‘Contempt of the world’, ed. R. T. Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963), no. 8.

¹⁰¹ *Lokasenna*, sts. 3, 4, 7 etc.

emerges as an emblem of cosmic peace and stability, the former world order anterior to Loki's deception.

The Hall-Paradigm in Völuspá

As we turn to the halls of *Völuspá* we note that interest in the symbolic interpretations of this motif relates the literatures of this extended Germanic cultural region. In Scriptural tradition, urban places such as Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, or the Tower of Babel, are represented as breeding places of immorality and social chaos. The idealisation of the cultural space thus appears to have roots independent of Christian learning, and Hume points to projections of the homes of the gods in Snorri's *Edda* in suggesting a common background in Old Norse myth.

As we have seen, however, examples of this can be traced in mythological, heroic, as well as Christian contexts. That the poet of *Völuspá* has been influenced by several currents of literature, including Christian lore, in his portrayal of Ragnarøk and earth's regeneration is, I think, beyond doubt. The tokens of the world in decay described in the last third of the prophecy echo poetic prognostications of the Christian apocalypse in imagery and language. As in the Book of Revelation, fire, personified in *Surtr*, ravages the earth;¹⁰² nature must be 'purged' before a new order can emerge. The members of the giant race approaching to fight are identified as the sons of *Múspell* (st. 48); also this destructive figure personifies a concept known from apocalyptic writings, notably the two early medieval German poems *Muspilli* and *Héliand*, both of which describe the final epoch of global degeneration before the Christian Apocalypse.¹⁰³ As Dronke observes, a Christian homiletic concept has here been 'translated into a demonic personality'.¹⁰⁴ Though *Völuspá* in this way contains distinctive Christian motifs, they are part of a poetic symbiosis adapted to the theme and rhetoric of this distinctive poetic narrative.

The most impressive manifestation of this interaction between various strands of literary

¹⁰² *Völuspá*, st. 50; Revelation 8:7 ff.

¹⁰³ *Muspilli*, eds. M. Curschmann and I. Glier, *Deutsche Dichtung des Mittelalters*, 3 vols. (Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1980), Vol. I, l. 57; *Héliand*, ed. Cathey, l. 4358.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, pp. 146-147. The term also occurs in *Lokasenna*, st. 42.

traditions comes in *Völuspá*'s projection of the perfected hereafter. The imagery here presented ties in with seminal images of earlier sequences of the poetic vision and brings together a complex set of eschatological principles. On the far side of the natural and moral confusion surrounding the collapse of the old world order, the *völva* perceives the earth emerging in fresh form. It will be green and fertile, fields will yield without labour: 'muno ósánir/ akrar vaxa ('fields will grow unsown') (st. 59). Amidst such glimpses of Eden-like natural beauty and munificence, she sees a hall-structure inhabited by an elect band of individuals:

Sal sér hón standa
 sélo fegra,
 gulli þakðan
 á Gimlé.
 Þar skolo dyggvar
 dróttir byggja
 ok um aldrdaga
 ynðis nióta.¹⁰⁵

The place identified thus as Gimlé is nowhere else described in poetic sources, and cannot be said to match any known mythological or Christian eschatological localities. Rather, it incorporates motifs known to us from both traditions.

Which is the virtue, for instance, represented by the 'dyggvar dróttir', said to dwell in this place? Dronke translates the phrase 'worthy warrior bands', and suggests that these are the 'noble companies of warriors who fought by the side of the gods' at Ragnarök.¹⁰⁶ The adjective 'dyggr' is used in courtly contexts elsewhere in Old Norse poetry too, specifically with reference to the bravery or the *hirðmenn* ('royal retainers').¹⁰⁷ This would lend Gimlé distinctively aristocratic connotations, calling to mind the concept of Valhöll. But the term also contains allusions to more firmly Christian ideals. *Konungs skuggsiá*, a thirteenth-century mirror of princes from Norway, contains a paraphrase of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Referring to the Harrowing of Hell, God here announces to the serpent that his son will in the fullness of time

¹⁰⁵ *Völuspá*, st. 61: 'A hall she sees standing there, more beautiful than the sun, golden roofed at Gimlé. There will the innocent people live, and for all time enjoy delight.'

¹⁰⁶ Dronke ed., *Völuspá*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁷ E. g. in Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson, *Lausavísur*, ed. K. E. Gade, *Skald* II:1, st. 10: 'Hjoggu harða dyggvir/ hirðmenn Dani stirða'.

come to ransack ('rannzaka') his abode and lead Adam as well as 'hans dyggar kynsloðer' ('his worthy descendants') away to paradise.¹⁰⁸ An Old Norse translation of the *Vitæ Patrum* contained in *Heilagra manna sögur* employs the same adjective to translate the Latin 'virtus' ('virtuous'),¹⁰⁹ and so Gimlé's connotations with spiritual bliss in a Christian sense are certainly strong too.

The very prospect that a select group of in some sense ennobled persons will hereafter find a home reserved for them in perpetuity itself seems to betray Christian influence. Hjelde points to Old Norse homilies formulating the prospect that 'allir goðer menn' ('all good people') shall find a life of eternal joy in the hereafter, and argues that such a homiletic conception has influenced the vision of the 'dyggvar dróttir' in the stanza above.¹¹⁰ In Snorri's description of the same mythological place, Gimlé is associated with 'góðir menn ok réttlátir' ('good and righteous men').¹¹¹ The Icelandic mythographer places this hall within a heavenly setting that is in its entirety strongly shaped by Christian conceptions of the otherworld.¹¹²

Völuspá's Gimlé displays undeniable similarities with the realms of the blessed depicted in certain *Visiones*. Dag Strömbäck most likely had the now familiar vision of the golden hall in Gregory's *Dialogues* in mind when he identified Gimlé as *Völuspá's* strongest imprint of the *Visio* genre.¹¹³ Yet *Völuspá's* golden hall is not necessarily more closely related to the hall in this *Visio* than it is to a motif like *Beowulf's* gold-roofed Heorot. It too encapsulates a collective experience characterised by unending joy in a courtly environment. The truly unique feature of Gimlé is its name. The term has recently been suggested to derive from the Old Norse term for jewel or gem ('gimsteinn'), yielding the reading 'Jewel Clearing', an image which would recall

¹⁰⁸ *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. L. Holm-Olsen (Oslo, Kjeldeskriftfondet, 1945), p. 81, ll. 39-40.

¹⁰⁹ For this and further occurrences of the word, see Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (Copenhagen, 1983-2011), <<http://www.onp.hum.ku.dk>>, .s.v. 'dyggr'.

¹¹⁰ Hjelde, *Norsk preken i det 12. århundre*, p. 271.

¹¹¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 20, ll. 9-10.

¹¹² Cf. Abram, 'Representations', p. 55.

¹¹³ Cf. D. Strömbäck, 'Resan till den andra världen: Kring medeltidsvisionerna och Draumkvædet', *Saga och Sed* (1976), pp. 25-26.

the description of the pearly New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9-11.¹¹⁴ Most critics, however, have preferred to identify the first element with the Old Norse term for ‘flame’ – ‘gim’ – producing a reading along the lines of ‘fire-shelter’.¹¹⁵ In my view, this second etymology is preferable because it supports Gimlé’s function within the figural texture of the poem, as we will see in the following.

We have noted that fire is one of the major forces heralding Ragnarøk. Stanza 54 describes how the flames rage as the battle approaches – ‘leikr hár hiti/ við himin siálfan’ (‘heat plays upwards, against heaven itself’). Because fire is a symptom of the degenerating world, the attribute of protection against it encoded in Gimlé’s name is important. On a symbolic level the golden hall of refuge is emblematic of an intrinsic good in the world sheltered from the reach of the moral perversion leading up to Ragnarøk. The image of the hall, moreover, encapsulates the fundamental structures of the cosmos. The metaphor of the *salr* is produced in the beginning of the prophecy to visualise the shaping of *Miðgarðr* (‘The Middle Yard’), one of the seminal early junctures in the genesis of the universe. For anterior to its formation there was only the nothingness of *ginnunga gap*, memorably defined in stanza 3 in the lines, ‘vara sand né sær,/ né svalar unnir./ Iqrð fannz æva/ né upphiminn’ (‘there was neither sand nor sea, nor cool waves. There was no earth, nor heaven above’). Set against these negations, the images used to describe the earth taking shape attain added visual poignancy:

Sól skein sunnan
 á salar steina –
 þá var grund gróin
 grænom lauki.¹¹⁶

The earthen hall emerges as an emblem of order, a sense of harmony governed by natural fertility and the benevolence of the sun. The lush greenness evoked defines this first earth as well as the reborn earth in the post-apocalyptic universe (cf. st. 56). Through the analogy with the hall,

¹¹⁴ North, ‘*Völuspá* and the Book of Revelation’, pp. 404, 410.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Lexicon Poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, s.n. ‘Gimlé’; G. Steinsland and P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *Völuspá* (Oslo, Pax, 1999), p. 69.

¹¹⁶ *Völuspá*, st. 4: ‘The sun gleamed from the South, on the hall-stones – then was the ground overgrown with green leek.’

Miðgarðr comes across as a sphere defined by security, culture, and civilisation, a firm figural contrast to the nothingness that was before.

In his employment of the hall to visualise parts of the cosmos, the poet draws on a familiar rhetorical feature of Old Norse poetics. The term Miðgarðr (‘the middle wall or fortification’) is itself a symptom of this conceptual metaphor. Skalds repeatedly draw on the hall-complex for kennings describing different parts of the universal structure.¹¹⁷ Heaven can be visualised as hall of the sun (‘sólar sal’) or ‘roof of the world’ (‘heims hrót’); the sea as ‘hall of the sand’ (‘sanda-salr’). The metaphor can further extend to the human body; we find kennings such as ‘hall of the heart’ (‘hjarta-salr’) to denote the chest, and ‘hall of speech’ (‘dóma dæmi-salr’) to designate the mouth. In this way the image of the hall can serve as microcosm of the universe and macrocosm of the human being. As a conceptual metaphor that captures these elementary structures of human experience, the image itself encompasses ideals of order in nature, thought, language, and poetry.

The poet extends the analogy between earth and the hall-construct in stanza 17, where he retrospectively describes the Æsir’s arrival ‘at húsi’ (‘at the house’), the image here representing the as yet uninhabited middle earth. He next employs the conceit as emblem of the realms of Sindri the dwarf, the giant Brimir, and Hel; each of these figures and locations are identified with a *salr* (36, 42). We are reminded of the stanza group in *Grímnismál* that project various divine spaces through a vast system of named halls of varying splendour (sts. 5-16). Each class of being is appointed a distinct hall – a token that the dominion is inhabited and an integral component of the larger cosmic matrix of halls and their realms.

On one level, then, the hall on Gimlé is part of a system of edifices in which each represents a category of beings. Over the course of the poetic narrative the image of the hall serves as a figure for Miðgarðr, but also for the various other power-centres that make up the universe, and lastly for the universe itself in that it represents a conceptual framework that

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Lexicon Poeticum*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, s.v. ‘salr’.

encompasses all these components. The hall on Gimlé stands out from the hall-images inspected thus far in that it appears to entail a moral condition, housing as it does an elite portion of human civilisation preserved for perpetuity after the cosmic collapse. This spiritual implication emerges most clearly when the hall is set side by side with its *anti-hall* in the poem, the eerie structure described in st. 37:

Sal sá hón standa
 sólo fiarri,
 Náströndo á,
 norðr horfa dyrr.
 Fello eitrdropar
 inn um líóra.
 Sá er undinn salr
 orma hryggjum.¹¹⁸

This edifice on the corpse-beach marks the gravitational centre of the moral degeneration described in stanzas 38 and 44, and is as such intimately related to the hall occupied by Beowulf's dragon and other anti-halls portrayed in Old English poetry. It stands in an antagonistic relationship with Miðgarðr itself, the pristine hall of civilisation depicted in stanza 4, as well as with Gimlé as the centre of peace and enduring life.

The rhetorical echoes between stanzas 37 and 60 augment their dualistic relationship: the opening lines of the two stanzas are parallel constructions; line one announces the significant vision of a hall; line two sets the edifice in relation to the sun – the former by dissociation ('sólo fiarri'), the later by comparison ('sélo fegri'); lines three and four respectively connect the hall to place names which underpin their antagonistic thematic relationship (both are hapax legomena in Old Norse poetry); the first is exposed on a liminal shore and associated with decay; the second is envisioned as a sheltered place, identified with revival and immortality.

By rhetorically interlinking the two structures in this way, the poet draws attention to their deeper thematic relationship. We recall that already the first projection of a hall-structure (*salr*) in the poem was married to the image of the sun (*sól*) (st. 4) – a pairing which there

¹¹⁸ *Vǫluspá*, st. 37: 'A hall she saw standing, far from the sun, on the corpse-beach, its door turning north. Drops of poison trickle through the roof. The hall is built from serpent's spines.'

conveyed the fertile benevolence of the freshly created Miðgarðr. The sun's distance from the hall on Náströnd itself indicates the degeneration of the world from its pristine state, and foreshadows the solar eclipse which accompanies the world's destruction in stanza 54. By the same token, Gimlé's superiority in splendour even to the sun also implies its superlative spiritual condition. It is interesting to note that this precise attribute is often highlighted in *Visiones* too: compare Owain's first impression of paradise in *St. Patrick's Purgatory*: 'Respiciensque intra portam patriam solis splendorem claritate nimia uincente lustram uidit' ('Looking inside the gate, he saw a country of very great splendour, exceeding the brightness of the sun').¹¹⁹ Gimlé's edifice, we may thus emphasise, unites figural and spiritual manifestations of refinement. Roofed in gold, the material splendour of the edifice recalls the golden age which epitomised the early era of Miðgarðr (cf. st. 8); this quality is part of a hall-ideal which Frands Herschend on literary and archaeological bases has identified as representative of a deeper seated conception of 'the good' in Germanic societies.¹²⁰ In stark contrast to this, Náströnd's edifice is a carefully forged antithesis of the idea of the hall. In this respect it recalls loci like the 'wyrmsele' ('serpent-hall') evoked in the Old English *Judith* with reference to hell.¹²¹ Like the latter, the hall on Náströnd produces associations both with the grave and the inferno, connotations which underline its eschatological and moral consequence.¹²²

III. Conclusions

I have sought through this closer analysis of the hall-complex in *Völuspá* to highlight how essential this metaphor is to this poem as emblem of order and culture, and as figural framework for describing various stages and states of civilisation. Though *Völuspá* is distinctive,

¹¹⁹ *Tractatus De Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, ed. Easting, ll. 763-764; cf. *Visio Godeschalci*, ed. Assman, p. 110, ll. 8-12; *The Vision of Adamnán*, trans. Boswell, ch. 10. The association with Wisdom's description in the eponymous apocryphal Book of the Vulgate augments the significance of this detail (7:29): 'Est enim hæc speciosior sole et super omnem dispositionem stellarum luci comparata invenitur prior'.

¹²⁰ Cf. Herschend, *The Idea of the Good in Late Iron Age Society*, pp. 49-51.

¹²¹ *Judith*, ed. M. Griffith (Exeter, Exeter UP, 1997), l. 119.

¹²² Hume, 'The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry', p. 68. An eddaic motif that seems to play on the same associations is the 'ormgarðr' ('snake-yard') situated in Myrkheimr ('World of Darkness') in which Gunnar meets his death according to *Atlakviða*, sts. 16, 32. On the motif's origins, see Dronke's comments, pp. 65-66.

I think, in that it is an uncommonly elaborate composition, we can observe reflexes of the same conceptual framework also in the afterlife prospects contained in *Sólarljóð*, *Gísla saga*, *Rannveigar leizla*, and *Eiríks saga* discussed earlier. Each of these texts centred on aspects of the courtly environment and explored its connotations with status, wealth, beauty, comfort, and security. Even these later texts thus evince affinities with a longer-standing interest in the hall as emblem of the ideal in Germanic literature and society. Collectively, these texts convey an ideal centred on civilisation, on inhabited spaces where nature is forged into protective structures that stand in opposition to nature in its raw, uncontrolled form. In drawing out the dichotomy between a cultural utopia and anti-cultural dystopia these visualisations of the ideal hereafter harmonise with the parameters observed in portrayals of eschatological justice in the first section.

The conceptual opposition between culture and nature, or more specifically ‘the social’ and ‘the wild’ is a defining feature of Norse-Icelandic literature and culture. As Kirsten Hastrup and Margaret Clunies Ross have shown in their influential studies of medieval Icelandic society, it can be traced in Old Norse mythology, in settlement patterns, in law, and poetics.¹²³ Sources on the order of the mythological cosmos describe a fundamental dichotomy between the dominions of gods and humans on the one hand (Miðgarðr), and those of the giants on the other (Útgarðr). The former is conceptually linked with culture, the latter with nature in its hostile form. In law, this paradigm finds expression in the exclusion of the outlawed from the social sphere. The status of the ‘útlagr’ (‘outlawed’), moreover, transcends that of legal procedure in that ‘lög’ (‘law’) in Old Norse literature is itself bound up with the health of the ‘land’ (‘country; land’) and the state of ‘friðr’ (‘peace’).¹²⁴ The eschatological structures we have examined build on and reflect these more fundamental conceptual paradigms. And in this they collectively represent distinct culturally determined visions of the afterlife.

¹²³ See K. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 136-145; Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, Vol. I, especially ch. 2.

¹²⁴ *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 17; cf. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, pp. 199; 205-206.

VI Conclusions

In this thesis I have sought to trace the impact of an important medieval didactic genre of writing, the Latin *Visiones*, on Norse-Icelandic literary culture. This topic brings together two major disciplines of medieval scholarship. Before offering some concluding remarks on the significance of the foregoing analysis with reference to scholarship on Norse-Icelandic literature, I would like to offer some observations on its value from the perspective of genre studies.

Historically and culturally Western Scandinavia represents a special case with regard to medieval European genre studies. Even after the region became officially Christian, the pre-conversion myth-complex remained a fundamental source of narrative, meaning and rhetoric long after the conversion. As a basis for creative, historical, and learned writing, moreover, the vernacular was unrivalled. Given these conditions, the region's literary corpus lends itself especially to studies of literary adaptations and processes of *cultural turns* in literary translation and generic adaptation. In the past, little attention has been paid to the anthropological contexts of individual *Visiones* including the social norms, cultural values and imaginative force woven into their texture. I hope this study will encourage fresh critical interest in the genre of *Visiones*, in particular with reference to its dissemination across different regions of medieval Europe, inroads into vernacular languages, and resonances in fresh aesthetic contexts.

In material terms, one can trace the circulation of *Visiones* in medieval Western Scandinavia from the twelfth century onwards in the surviving translations of St. Gregory's *Dialogues* and the *Visiones* of Paul, Drycthelm, Furseus, Tundale, and Gunthelm. The impact of the genre on native culture beyond the stage of translation is less easily quantifiable and requires us to adopt more nuanced standards of assessment. I hope to have shown, however, without any claims to completeness in doing so, that the key topoi of the genre resonate on an extensive scale in the Old Norse literary corpus. The reception of the Latin tradition was *broad*, in that conventions associated with it have evidently been integrated in a wide variety of fresh literary

contexts, and *deep*, in the sense that this literature remained an important source of literary inspiration over a large period of time – from *Vǫluspá*, from around the turn of the eleventh century, to the *Draumkvedet* tradition which was manifestly very much alive well into the latter half of the nineteenth century.

It is striking to observe, furthermore, that these conventions, in all the examples foregrounded, interact with native literary forms, subjects, themes and symbolism. Adaptations of *Visio* conventions in Old Norse literature are bound up with interest in the local as much as the foreign and with invention as much as simulation. As far as we can see, the reception of the genre in the North stands out from that in other cultural areas of medieval Europe in breadth and diversity.

Important questions about which Christian forms of writing influenced the Norse-Icelandic literary culture and how these impulses shine through in the centuries after the conversion have not yet received the attention they warrant. It is my hope that this study will go some way towards advancing our basis for approaching them. Though I have been concerned with one particular genre of writing, the evolution we have traced may in some respects serve as a case study of broader tendencies within Old Norse literature. It is one of numerous genres, including hagiography, miracle collections, sermons, and historical writing, which shaped the area's distinctive literary culture in marked ways. We have seen very clear evidence of an ability on the part of Old Norse writers to merge literary concepts and conventions with their native heritage. This interest and flexibility in adapting foreign models can be seen on the levels of language, literary form, context, imagery, and religious themes. And this bears witness to a creative curiosity, sensitivity, and self-awareness which characterises Norse-Icelandic approaches to foreign literary impulses more generally.

It is, however, also important to recognise the characteristics that set this Christian literary tradition apart from others. Most striking in this respect is the genre's sharp theological bent and focus on Christian eschatology in particular. In our introductory chapter we noted that

the lacuna marking this topic in the New Testament writings constitutes one precondition for the growth and consequence of this literary tradition in medieval Europe. Yet the idea of the literary vision of the hereafter seems not in itself to have been a concept freshly introduced to Norse-Icelandic literary culture via this Latin genre. We find dreams or visions as frames of extended eschatological narratives in eddaic verse. And several examples of the motif of the post-mortem journey to the worlds of the dead found in the Norse corpus seem to have an origin independent from the Latin tradition. Narratives such as *Baldrs Draumar* and even *Hermoðrs hel-ride* revolve around a quest scheme which is in important ways different from the revelatory journeys of the Latin visionaries.

From a creative point of view one can thus observe a continuity of interest in the afterlife as an object of literary exploration across the extended conversion era. Linguistic reflexes of the death as journey metaphor, and ritualistic traditions centring on the passage across the threshold from this world to the next reinforce this impression. I would suggest, moreover, that the pre-existence of eschatological and visionary writing in indigenous traditions and the creative diversity of these narratives influenced the reception of Christian vision literature in Western Scandinavia. As signs of the fact that native authors intuitively recognised the genre's literary potential one may highlight the artistic freedom, the uncomplicated attitudes towards doctrine, and the interest in traditional narratives and symbology reflected in the primary texts analysed in this study.

To reiterate the opening observation of this study, we have been concerned with a tradition of writing in which literary aesthetics intersects with theology, popular belief, myth, as well as socio-political concerns. It is my view that these aspects mutually support and stimulate each other, and thus one should not seek to distinguish literature from religion, imaginative writing from belief, fiction from reality in line with modern understandings of these categories. We began this thesis with a discussion of post-conversion Scandinavian beliefs relating to life after death as we find them articulated in early homiletic writing from Norway and Iceland. In

this connection we determined that Old Norse homilists hesitate to speak about the space and time explored in the *Visiones* – the interval between death and universal judgment. Given the important theological theme of the Norse texts we have studied, can one regard them as useful testimonies of contemporary religious beliefs about the afterlife? From the body of Norse texts we have examined certain fundamental theological principles can be abstracted. One premise inherent in the framework is of course the conception that human existence transcends life on earth. The end of an individual's corporeal existence is one juncture within a larger journey whose ideal end is a condition of joy and incorruptibility in the eternal hereafter. As part of this journey every individual must confront the moral profile he has shaped for her or himself over the course of this life. Each person's moral status quo determines her or his destination in the other world. In our texts it is generally unclear, however, whether the destinations of purgation and reward described represent interim or final states. On the whole, Norse visions of the hereafter show little interest in doctrinal nuances; there is no explicit mention of purgatory, for instance, or distinctions in consequence between capital and venial sins. In the Latin examples that found their way to the North, in contrast, these eschatological structures and hierarchies represent a main point of interest.

In the visions in which moral retribution is most concretely defined and visualised – *Völuspá*, *Sólarljóð*, *Rannveigar leizla*, and *Draumkvedet* – interest in moral actions predominates over interest in the motivations behind these actions. In view of the growing emphasis on conscience in twelfth and thirteenth-century theological debate, the externalised portrayal of sin and virtue in *Sólarljóð* and *Draumkvedet* in particular seems conservative.¹ Yet the strong focus on conduct could be explained in the light of the undeniably pedagogical function of such moral vignettes. Visual clarity reinforces the abstract argument. The premise underlying the genre as a whole is the paradoxical assumption that spiritual realities, above all the nature of the soul, may

¹ Cf. Pfeil, *Die 'Vision des Tnugdalus' Albers von Windberg*, pp. 184-186, where signs of this shift in theological emphasis are traced in a Middle High German translation of the *Visio Tundali* from the late twelfth-century.

be externalised and captured in physical forms. It is important to appreciate that everything visualised in this genre gestures towards less tangible truths.

This leads us finally to the most striking characteristic of the collective body of the Norse afterlife visions inspected, namely the sheer diversity of imagined routes to the other world, regimes of retribution, landscapes, topographies, buildings, guides and symbols visualised within them. As a group the Norse examples we have described move far beyond the terrains chartered by the *Visiones*. Their local colour shows most clearly in images such as Gimlé, the chair of the norms, the Gjallar brú, the valkyrie guide, or Ódáinsakr – concepts anchored in native literary tradition. But in addition, the echoes of secular law discernible in portrayals of eschatological justice and the diversity of literary contexts in which Visio conventions can be traced indicate that the medieval Norse afterlife was a sphere of continuous imaginative exploration. It represented a literary framework, moreover, which could be employed for a wide variety of literary purposes.

Even though there was a general conception that the soul survived biological mortality, this conception accommodated multiple views of the nature of this state. Visions of the afterlife thus allowed contemporary writers and audiences to engage with and explore personal hopes and fears with regard to life after death. Our corpus represents a salient illustration of the ‘social diversity’ Nedkvitne recently identified as a central trait of contemporary religious life. We can above all observe that religious life was marked by diversity in literary terms. Whether conceived for creative, political, or didactic purposes, the quality that unites the Norse prospects of the afterlife most strongly is the evident appreciation of the hereafter as source of creativity, continuity, and cultural identity.

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