



# ORAL TO LITERARY: *KVÖLDVAKA*, TEXTUAL INSTABILITY, AND ALL THAT JAZZ

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Most scholarly and critical work concerning medieval Icelandic literature over the past one hundred and fifty years has assumed that the eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed a shift in the practice and mode of learning in Iceland from a dominantly oral tradition to a dominantly literate and literary one. The argument goes that with the invention and development of a method of the writing Old Norse/Icelandic after the advent of Christianity, Icelanders with the new technology gradually became the dominant voice in a culture that previously had been almost purely oral, runic inscription being the exception. My contention in this essay is that the oral and literary traditions at their extremes are different in kind, the oral being essentially a performance art, the literary a text specific one. Away from the extremes, however, there is a regular and fruitful interface between the oral and the literary that should always be borne in mind when considering the origins of the literature that we have today. During the years in question, and for a long time after, the oral and literary traditions happily co-existed. The older oral traditions weren't displaced, replaced, or suppressed by newer literate and literary modes as we so often assume. I hope to show here that a consideration of kinds of musical inscription and performance in the last two hundred and fifty years reveals an analogous development and variety that can shed light on the years during which old Icelandic literature was composed, performed, read, listened to and inscribed.

From the beginning, and for many centuries thereafter, Icelandic literature was largely a performance art – whether oral or written. Many elements of poetic and narrative production were shared in the community during the *kvöldvaka* (lit. evening-wake), the evening entertainment on farms during the winter. This was the arena for *sagnaskemmtun* (lit. saga-diversion or, more simply, story-telling) when, according to Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson in 1772 the head of the household or a young boy or a guest read or related sagas or performed *rímur*. The point of the exercise was to keep people entertained and alert as they got on with their evening chores. Such performances were not one-directional – reader or



teller to the audience – but were participatory. The audience wasn't passive. According to the Scots bible promoter Ebenezer Henderson, who spent the winter of 1814-15 in Iceland, “the reader is frequently interrupted, either by the head, or by some of the more intelligent members of the family, who make remarks on various parts of the story, and propose questions, with a view to exercise the ingenuity of the children and servants.” [Driscoll, 1997, 2, 197-198] This kind of performance atmosphere has more in common with audience and performers in a jazz performance than with either the much more formal and one-directional nature of the classical music performance which is so firmly rooted in a prescriptive notational tradition, or, indeed, with the experience of reading in silence to oneself.

Another common scholarly assumption is that many of these oral forms were suppressed by the Church and ceased to exist. Quinn puts it like this: “At the other end of the spectrum of oral discourses are ethnic traditions that were deliberately suppressed by the Church. Needless to say, the textualization of these traditions is unlikely to have taken place, but we do know a little about some of them from the wording of their explicit suppression. Bishop Jón Ogmundarson (d.1121) forbade the reciting of love poems (*mannsöngskvæði*, *mannsöngsvísur*), an apparently popular tradition in which a man and a woman exchanged improvised verses” (Quinn, 2000, 36). That Bishop Jón wanted to suppress a tradition doesn't necessarily mean that he was very successful. Icelandic literary history is packed with indignant clerics and intellectuals denouncing ‘wicked and foul’ or ‘vulgar and common’ modes of popular poetry. It is a list of notables including Guðbrandur Þorláksson (c.1541-1627), Ludvig Harboe (in Iceland 1741-1746), Magnús Stephensen and Hannes Finnsson in 1796, Jónas Hallgrímsson in his article in *Fjölnir* 1837, representatives of the Romantic movement like Benedikt Gröndal (1826-1907), and into the twentieth century. To be contentious and deadly serious about literary matters has always been a quality of Icelandic intellectual life. Consider, more recently, the parliamentary and legal furore concerning Ragnar Jónsson, Stefán Ögmundsson and Halldór Laxness's saga editions of the 1940s with modernised spelling, or the debate about whether the ‘Atom Poets’ were writing poetry at all. The exchange of verses (usually sung) between men and women remains a fixture of many a good *Þorrablót*. There are, clearly, several dominantly oral modes that might form a part of the *kvöldvaka* that continued in daily practice for centuries. In a similar oral tradition as recently as 1935 the popular people's poet Hjálmar frá Hofi was challenged to a poetic duel, ‘heiðarlega hólmönguáskorun’, by his rival Sveinn Skáld frá Elivogum. “Orustan var háð 30.



marz 1935 í Varðarhúsinu í Reykjavík fyrir fullu húsi af áheyrendum.” [battle was joined on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1935 in Varðarhúsið in Reykjavík in front of a full house of listeners]. Although a number of poems by both Hjálmar and Sveinn were published in mid-century, the poems from the duel were, in their nature, oral and are not, as far as I’m aware, recorded (Hjálmar frá Hofi, 1950, 121).

If I’m right that the oral and newer literary traditions co-existed quite comfortably in twelfth century Iceland then we might expect that the surviving written texts from the period would be less fixed and specific, and might exhibit a greater variety of nuance and suggestion, than the writing from a later, more text dominated period. It is part of our intellectual tradition either to ignore or avoid the oral tradition or to treat oral texts that have been inscribed as if they were the same as authored texts. The differences between the two, however, are great. The authored text is far more prescriptive, specific and, in a way, limited than its oral counterpart. As Foley puts it: “[the] written text is a more deterministic libretto, its unitary character providing enough (and precise enough) signals to marshal the reader’s activity quite - or at least comparatively – strictly; variation in the experience of a written work is thus relatively closely controlled by the work itself. However the reader performs the written work, the text from which he creates the experience is fundamentally original and unique, the only one of itself.” (Foley, 1987, 198). In the oral tradition the variety of performance prototypes would be neither so strictly controlled nor so singular in specificity – that is, there is a larger number of *types* of sagas and stories than we normally acknowledge.

I’d like to suggest a further analogy that sheds light on the differences in question. That is a comparison of musical performance (and inscription) in the classical tradition and the jazz performance. I’m using ‘classical’ here in Charles Rosen’s sense to denote the stylistic developments of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and what followed from those developments. The classical performance is in the literate tradition. At the start of the process the performer ‘reads’ the text (not necessarily in the performance itself since Liszt). Since the late eighteenth century the text dictates an increasing multiplicity of directions: in addition to key and time signatures and the pattern and duration of notes and rests in harmonic space (which are essential for *any* musical notation) are directions for tempo, phrasing, dynamics, mood, and so on. A text for piano by Schumann will have twenty-eight or more directional indicators (see appendix). The performance, thus, is a re-



presentation of an original and unique text strictly determined by the composer. In the performance, which is not unlike a religious ritual, a passive audience sits in rapt silence to watch and listen to the re-creation of a somehow ‘sacred’ text by an inspired player. The performance is judged, partly if not largely, upon fidelity to an original text. Pushed to extremes this can lead to the idea of the ‘perfect’ performance that is an ‘exact’ representation of an original.

Jazz, on the other hand, is centrally improvisational and communal. Usually there is a basic idea (a traditional song or tune) and certain formulaic grammars and structures (12 bar blues, for example) but the end of a jazz performance is an ever-new interpretation of, or play with, these basic motifs. No two jazz performances will be alike. To inscribe, to write down, a particular performance is to fix it, certainly, and to preserve it for future improvisation, but, in itself, the inscription is a pretty minimalist exercise. But any real jazz performance, whether based on an inscription or not, will be unique and different from all others. The ideal jazz gig is a collection of players who join the evolving musical process when they have something to say. As in the oral prose tradition there is a grammar (modal and harmonic structures), there are traditional motifs, a ‘formulaic diction’ if you will. But there is always a good deal of freedom. The arrangement of the Thelonius Monk number (see appendix) has just over a third of the directional symbols as the Schumann: as few as eleven. This distinction between the classical ‘written and read’ tradition and jazz improvisational tradition has more than simply analogical or metaphoric significance to our concerns with the oral as opposed to the written narrative traditions. In music, as in literary studies, it is during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the text achieves such complexity and dominance. Earlier composers and performers were given less direction and, one imagines, expected to be more improvisational. The score of the Bach ‘Ricercar’ (see appendix) sent to Fredrick the Great as part of his ‘Musical Offering’ in 1747 is closer to Monk than to Schumann: here there are as few as nine commands. Performers would be expected to play with it, rather than simply reproduce it. In fact the ‘Ricercar’ is Bach’s own later inscription of his improvisation on the theme during his visit to Fredrick’s court at Potsdam in 1744.

We can better understand the way the jazz tradition functions if we consider the recording of two performances by the Modern Jazz Quartet in the 1950s. ‘Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise’ (from Oscar Hammerstein and Sigmund Romberg’s *New Moon*) was a regular part of their



performance repertoire. In the April 1952 recording with Milt Jackson (vibes), John Lewis (piano), Percy Heath (bass) and Kenny Clarke (drums) the performance lasts for three minutes and twenty-five seconds (Savoy Record Company, Newark, New Jersey). On their album ‘Concorde’, recorded in July 1955, with Connie Kay on drums, the performance lasts for seven minutes and fifty-seven seconds (Prestige Records, Berkley, California). The differences are instructive. First of all the line-up of players is slightly different. The second recording is still based on the Hammerstein/Romberg idea but it is now started and concluded with a play with ‘Canon V’ from Bach’s ‘Musical Offering’ (see appendix) from 1747. The Bach makes perfect musical sense in the context. Each time the MJQ performed ‘Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise’, or indeed any other number, they performed it differently – a prime example both of freedom of improvisation and of textual flexibility – indeed, a near absence of text altogether in some cases.

Roger Scruton makes an interesting observation in this context: “The jazz performer is, in a sense, also the composer, or one part of a corporate composer. But to describe free improvisation in that way is to assume that composition is the paradigm case, and improvisation secondary. It would be truer to the history of music, and truer to our deeper musical instincts, to see things the other way round: to see composition as born from the writing-down of music, and from the subsequent transformation of the scribe from recorder to creator of the thing he writes. Jacques Derrida has famously criticised Western civilisation as ‘logocentric’ – privileging speech over writing, as the purveyor of human intention. The criticism is the opposite of the truth: writing has been so privileged by our civilisation, in religion, law, and politics, as well as in art and literature, that we tend to lose sight of the fact that written signs owe their life to the thing which is *written down*.” (Scruton, 1997, 439).

Written texts are more prescriptive and determined than their oral counterparts, which depend much more on the freedom of performance. If I’m right then we should be able to discern some qualities in the saga style that suggest performance like the often noted paratactic style, terseness, laconicism, few or no adjectives, and little or no qualitative commentary from the saga inscriber. Imagined back into the *kvöldvaka* situation during which, as we know, the listeners might often interrupt, and members of the household might have their thoughts and feeling solicited, the performance situation becomes much clearer – the function of the ‘text’



as it has been transmitted to us, becomes more transparent and, perhaps, potentially even more unstable.

I'd like to return to an old debate about the following passage from *Þorgils saga og Hafliða* about the wedding feast at Reykjahólar in 1119:

“Þar var nú glaumur ok gleði mikil ok skemtan góð ok margskonar leikar, bæði dansleikar, glímur ok sagnaskemtan. Þar var sjau nætr fastar ok fullar setit at boðinu...Frá því er nökkut sagt, *er þó er lítil tilkoma*, hverir þar skemtu eða hverju skemt var...Hrólfr af Skálmarnesi sagði sögu frá Hröngviði víkingi ok frá Óláfi liðmannakonungi ok haugbroti Þráins berserks ok Hrómundi Gripssyni, ok margar vísur með. En þessari sögu var skemt Sverri konungi, ok kallaði hann slíkar lygisögur skemtiligastar. Ok þó kunnu menn at telja ættir sínar til Hrómundar Gripssonar. Þessa sögu hafði Hrólfr sjálf samansetta. Ingimundr prestr sagði sögu Orms Barreyjarskálds ok vísur margar ok flokk góðan við enda sögunnar, er Ingimundr hafði ortan, ok hafa margir fróðir menn þessa sögu fyrir satt.” (Brown, 1952, 17-18, my emphasis)

[And now there was much merriment and happiness, good entertainment and many kinds of games, dancing as well as wrestling and saga entertainment. The feast went on for seven full days and nights... People have told, *although this is hardly a matter of importance*, who provided the entertainment and how it was done... Hrólfr from Skálmarnes told the saga about Hröngviðr the Viking and Óláfr Liðsmanna King and how Þráinn the Berserk broke into the burial mound and about Hrómundr Gripsson, and several verses were included. This saga was used for King Sverrir's entertainment, and he said that such lying-sagas were the most enjoyable.... Hrólfr himself composed this saga. Ingimundr, the priest, told the saga of Ormr Barreyjarskáld including many verses and at the end of the saga, a good poem, by Ingimundr...]

Much of the scholarly discussion has suggested that the ‘matter of importance’ has to do with the historicity or otherwise of the sagas and their genealogies and poems that were provided, and whether they were presented orally or had been written and read by Hrólfr and Ingimundr. Might this not also refer to *identifying* Hrólfr and Ingimundr? That is, who actually performed the *sagnaskemmtun* was of little significance. Perhaps almost anyone in the company could have done so; or at least enough that *naming* two is peculiar and worthy of comment. Hrólfr and Ingimundr, of course, feature in the saga in other capacities (the feast is at Ingimundr's farm) so to name them isn't surprising, but in the context of the wedding feast when others would certainly have said sagas and poems, and read saints' lives and homilies, and sung drinking songs and so on, to single out two performers might lead the author to make the comment that *er þó er lítil tilkoma*. We are told that the feast went on for seven full days and



nights. There would surely have been more *skemmtun* entertainers (singers *and* speakers *and* readers) than Hrólfur and Ingimundur. What other saga entertainment might there have been?

Just for fun, but with serious intent, I would like to propose that the þáttur *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr* ('Star Oddi's Dream') was first composed and performed as part of the entertainment in 1119; further that a particular version of it was written down at around the same time that *Porgils saga* was written, probably during or soon after 1237 (Brown, 1952). Finally that we might see *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr* as a very early ancestor of what would become the *lýgisaga-rímur-kvöldvaka* tradition that was so central to popular entertainment in Iceland for so many centuries. *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr* strikes me as a self-conscious – and very funny – demonstration of both the creation of a saga in an oral tradition and a suggestion of some, at least, of the elements that inform the nature of narrative in the sagas. It is around 1119 that the eponymous Oddi Helgason (c.1070/80 – c. 1140/50), from Múli in Aðalreykjadalur was working on his treatise on *computus* – the arithmetic combined with astronomical observations and calculations on which the calendar of both Alþingi and church were based (*Íslensk Fornrit*, XIII, 1991, ccxiii). Oddi's work and the fruit of his observations are embodied in a treatise on *computus* which was compiled shortly after his death, from his own records, and is preserved in a manuscript from the end of the twelfth century. It is based partly on foreign, Latin, sources, suggesting that Oddi was Latin literate, but also on independent observation of Icelandic conditions at 66° North.

Because much of the piece is a self-conscious parody of many saga conventions it gives us a unique insight into all these issues of oral tradition, audience expectation, and *sagnaskemmtun*. It also suggests a key to larger questions of narrative method. The story is strangely fragmented. The core 'story' is a *lygisaga*. Any audience at a *skemmtun* performance would expect certain *topoi* in this genre – and old king in Gotland; an Earl with a valkyrie for a daughter; the king's lamented death leaving an under-age heir; berserk bandits with a house deep in the forest and their defeat by the young heir; a court poet who delivers *flokkr* and *drápa*; loose shoelaces; Viking raids; sea battles; shape changers and slaughter; magnificent feasts and royal weddings. I could push this list even further but this will suffice for now. The *lygisaga* element of *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr* has all these and more.

Lygisögur are, by definition, unlikely, but, as I've said, the story here is a parody. The teller is clearly playing it for laughs and paying little heed to narrative coherence. One example is



Dagfinn the court poet's expedition with King Geirvið against the berserkers Garp and Gny. Geirvið has just turned twelve and announces his intention to confront and kill the pair. He will take only one other person with him. Dagfinn volunteers making the statement: "Herra," segir hann, engan mann veit eg þér meiri sæmd eiga að launa í alla staði en mig. Er eg og því skyldari að skiljat aldrei við þig er þú ert í meira háska staddur ef þér viljið þiggja mitt föruneysi og fylgd og er til þessar farar alþúinn þegar þér viljið."(465) ["My Lord," he said, 'I know of no man who has more honour to repay you than I have. And the more danger you are in, the more I am bound never to leave your side, if you are willing to accept my company and service. I am ready for the trip whenever you wish.'"(451)(trans. Marvin Taylor, Complete Sagas of Icelanders)] Soon after they spot the berserks from the top of a convenient hill: "Þá mælti Dagfinnur: 'Herra, eg vil yður kunnigt gera að eg er eigi mjög vanur vopnaskipti og kann eg lítt að treysta hug mínum né vopnfimi. Nú vil eg að þér kjósið um tvo kosti, hvort þér viljið heldur að eg ráðist í mót berserkjunum með þér eða viltu að eg sjái til yðvarrar sameignar af hólunum og kunni eg frá að segja öðrum mönnum.' Konungur svarar: 'Ef þér lér nokkuð tveggja huga um þetta mál þá þykir mér einsætt að þú sért hér á hólunum og sjáir héðan til sameignar vorrar og komir eigi nær við vor vopnaskipti.'Dagfinnur tekur það ráð sem konungur mælti og dvaldist eftir á hólunum og kemur hvergi nær og þykir honum það allráðlegt en konungurinn sjálfur ræðst ofan af hólunum í móti stigamönnum." (466) ["Then Dagfinn said 'My lord, I want to let you know that I am not much used to fighting with weapons, nor am I very confident in either my valour or my fighting skills. Now I should like you to choose between two things: do you wish me to attack the berserks with you, or shall I watch your encounter from the hill, so as to be able to tell others about it later?' The king answered, 'If the answer is not obvious to you, then it is clearly best that you remain here on the hill. Observe our encounter from here, and come no closer to the fighting than that.' Dagfinn took the advice that the king gave, stayed on the hill and came no closer, which seemed to him very good advice indeed, while the king went down the hill toward the robbers.'"(451)]

Another example of the storyteller's high-handed disregard of narrative coherence concerns Dagfinn's marriage to the king's half-sister Hlaðreið at the end. The princess is described thus: "Hlaðreið konnungssystir var þá gjafvaxta og þó ung mjög að aldri en kvenna var hún fegurst og friðust og best að sér ger um alla hluti.(476) ["Princess Haldreid was then of marriageable age, though still very young, but {of course!} the fairest and most beautiful of women and



very capable in all things.”(456)] However you attempt to construct a chronology in the story – the death of the old king – the earl’s marriage to the king’s widow – the birth of Hlaðreið – the death of the earl prompting the immediate return of Hlégunn – the princess *can’t* be more than about two years old. And I think such cavalier recklessness with the *topoi* of the genre is entirely intentional and lies at the root of the humour.

Now to the narrative method. To whom are we listening? The first paragraph employs a number of what Robert Kellogg has called ‘formulaic’ elements of traditional saga ‘grammar’ in *The Nature of Narrative*. Oddi himself isn’t given much of a genealogy beyond his father Helgi, but his calendar calculation is featured. It’s also stressed that he wasn’t a poet nor did he recite much poetry. He’s frightfully honest, not terribly well off and not much of a worker. There has been a lot of speculation about Oddi Helgason himself based on this thumbnail sketch. Þorkell Þorkelsson worries about the description ‘félittið’. Given Oddi’s Mývatn roots and other relationships, both family and political, he finds it hard to imagine that Oddi would be hard up. I would like to suggest an alternative: what is said about him is largely a joke. He wasn’t poor; nor was he a mediocre worker. He was an accomplished poet and reciter of poetry. An original audience familiar with the man, and succeeding audiences aware of the tradition, would share in the good humour. One need only remember Chaucer’s characterisation of himself in the link between ‘Sir Thopas’ and ‘The Tale of Melibee’ in *Canterbury Tales* to appreciate how an audience familiar with Oddi might enjoy the joke. Chaucer the pilgrim, described by Harry Bailey as shy and peevish, protests that he only knows one poem. He proceeds to recite what must be the most remarkably bad poem of the fourteenth century in any language. So bad it is that the Host stops him in his staggering tracks:

“‘Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,  
 Quod oure Hooste, ‘for thou makest me  
 So wery of thy verray lewednesse  
 That, also wisly God my soule blesse,  
 Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche,  
 Now swich rym the devel I biteche!  
 This may wel be rym doggeral,’ quod he.



‘Why so?’ quod I, ‘why wiltow lette me  
 Moore of my tale than another man,  
 Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?’

‘By God,’ quod he, ‘for pleynly, at a word,  
 Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!’”(351)

In the second paragraph we are, ostensibly, listening to the report of a speaker who has heard the story from Oddi himself. Sent to Flatey from Múli for fish Oddi falls asleep. He dreams he is back at Múli at bed time. A guest arrives and is asked to entertain the others with a saga (*beðinn skemmtunar*). Here begins the *lygisaga* of King Hrodbjart, Geirvið, Dagfinn et.al. In the space of three paragraphs we have the notion of three narrators – the anonymous speaker, Oddi himself, and the guest; and three settings – Múli, Flatey and Gotland. Or should we count Múli twice and make it four? This multiplicity of possibility is delightful. It is the play with this device of shifting narrative voice and place that informs the mechanics of the rest of this short piece.

The start of Chapter Four compounds the felony. Geirvið has a court poet, of course. Dagfinn is not physically courageous, but terribly loyal and quite able to provide flokkur and drápa when the need arises. Consider carefully (if you can) what happens, bearing in mind that there are already three narrative possibilities: “En þegar þessi maður, Dagfinnur, var nefndur í sögunni þá er frá því að segja er mjög er undarlegt að þá brá því við í drauminum Odda að hann Oddi sjálfur þóttist vera þessi maður, Dagfinnur, en gesturinn sá er söguna sagði er nú úr sögunni og drauminum en þá þóttist hann sjálfur sjá og vita allt það er heðan af ef drauminum.”(465) [“Now when this man, Dagfinn, was named in the saga, something very strange happened in Oddi’s dream: Oddi himself seemed to be Dagfinn, while the guest, the man who told the saga, is now out of the saga and out of the dream, and it seemed to Oddi that he himself saw and heard everything that came afterward the the dream.”(451)] It’s a common device in saga literature generally for a character who is no longer instrumental quite bluntly to be ‘out of the saga’- the eponymous *Ölkoфра* (‘Ale-Hood’) is a good example – but this must be a unique instance where the man *telling* the saga is ‘out of the saga’ and, of course,



‘out of the dream’. Try to imagine the complexities to the narrative that would arise if the guest were ‘out of the saga’ but still in the dream! Oddi becomes Dagfinn and off the story roars again.

After a series of unlikely and typical events the saga does it again. Loose shoe-laces are common motifs, often signalling an exciting event (think of Skarphedin before he kills Thráin in *Njála*. A better example for our purposes, given the time and place, is the episode in *Reykðæla saga og Víga-Skútu* [*The Saga of the People of Reykjadal and of Killer-Skuta*] when Skúta’s shoe-lace comes loose. Whilst retying it he is attacked by Grím, whom he defeats then ties to a stake on an island in Lake Mývatn, stark naked, and leaves to starve to death tormented by midges). Here Dagfinn’s lace loosens. “Og síðan bindur hann þvenginn og þá vaknaði hann og var þá Oddi, sem von var, en eigi Dagfinnur.”(471) [“He retied it, but then he awoke and was Oddi again, as could be expected, not Dagfinn.”(453)] Oddi goes out to look at the stars. He remembers the dream as well as five verses from the *flokkr* Dagfinn (Oddi?) had composed. Remember that Oddi is said to be neither a poet nor a reciter of poems. Falling back to sleep the Dagfinn story continues, passes through its bloody climax in a sea battle, appropriate celebration including a *drápa* from Dagfinn, Dagfinn’s (paedophile) marriage and happy life-ever-after. The dream is finished and Oddi awakens. He recalls the entire dream but only 16 verses of the 30 verse *drápa*. The verses of both the *flokkr* and *drápa* are fairly dismal.

The oral and literate (reading) traditions of narrative entertainment coexisted in Iceland for centuries in the same fashion that the literate and the newer sound and image based (Radio, TV, Cinema, IT, DVD) traditions coexist in our culture. Of course the oral performance is here now, too, in a variety of forms. In the text of *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr* we have the inscription of a particular, and probably fairly late, performance of what must have been a popular *skemmtun* performance piece. If I am right in my suggestion, the dating of the first performance, on philological evidence from the poems contained, is impossible or irrelevant. It sounds in certain respects to be contemporary with *Borgils saga* – characterisation, turns of phrase and so on. The speaker’s diction is self-consciously referential and conversational – although he talks of ‘writing’ twice the effect is like listening to a storyteller, rather than reading an author, which fits perfectly well in a *kvöldvaka* situation. It is like a short written text or series of notes and reminders rather than a fixed and sacred text. This corresponds well



to my analogy with music: in both Bach's two-voice canon and the Monk arrangement certain ideas are sketched out but their development, finally, is a matter for performance. In a consciously 'written' score like Schumann's there are nearly three times as many directional signals than in the improvisational scores. Each performer (or groups of performers) would be free, would be expected, to compose *flokkr* and *drápa* on the night. A part of the fun for succeeding audiences over the years would arise from variations on the theme. The story's final sentence – 'Nor need it surprise anyone if the poetry is somewhat wooden, since it was composed in Oddi's sleep' – is the performer's passport to improvisation.

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