

Ekphrasis and the Old Norse Shield Poem

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Abstract

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This dissertation seeks to analyze and interpret the Old Norse shield poems as ekphrases and in light of their relationship to the *drótt*, the aristocratic warrior band/court of Viking Age Norway. The approach is broadly interdisciplinary and two-pronged, consisting in 1) a close reading of the two relevant poems and 2) an interpretation of the ekphrastic performance as a socially and culturally meaningful event.

The first chapter reviews the extant poem fragments which might be considered ekphrases, along with previous scholarship on these poems as ekphrastic, and discusses the theoretical concerns of this study.

Chapters 2 and 3 give the texts of the shield poems *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustlong*, respectively, along with extensive commentary on the texts as ekphrases. The martial phenomenology of the shield is explored and the associations of the shield with physical/personal integrity and with the hostile, martial Other are taken as significant, if implicit, aspects of the text/performance. The potentially apotropaic function of Viking Age Art on the shield is mentioned and connected to this martial phenomenology. The usual oppositions of Old Norse mythology (gods versus giants, masculine versus feminine, culture versus nature, etc) are found to be active in these poems alongside

oppositions such as see-er versus seen, voiced versus unvoiced, and subject versus object.

Chapter 4 summarizes the primary observations of chapters 2 and 3 and goes on to investigate other aspects of the larger context of the ekphrastic performance as a practice, first expanding the investigation to include the intermedial borrowings of skaldic terminology and then focusing on the details of the nature and context of the skaldic ekphrastic performance. In conclusion it is argued that the shield poem enacts a version of W.J.T. Mitchell's ekphrastic triangle, mediating the oppositions self versus Other and us versus them by projecting this conflict onto the encounter with the decorated shield. The "us" of this equation is the aristocratic, masculine *drótt*, and the ekphrastic performance aggressively centers the perspective of the *drótt* and asserts the subjectivity of its members at the expense of the socio-cultural Others.

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## Chapter 1

### The Skaldic Picture Poems

The history of ekphrasis begins, so the story is told, with the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*. It seems appropriate, then, to invoke that term,<sup>1</sup> as well as the millennia of accumulated thought on the topic, when we turn to the uncertain genre of the shield poems of Old West Norse literature. The flowering of ekphrastic, interart and intermedial theory of the last couple decades has served as the inspiration and starting point of this dissertation, even if it has turned increasingly to the theoretical perspectives of philology, mythology and cultural anthropology, with my direct borrowings from the body of interart theory being limited primarily to the work of W.J.T. Mitchell.

My project began with the question "Is this ekphrasis?" as applied to Old Norse literature, an approach which was taken up about the same time by Margaret Clunies Ross and Signe Horn Fuglesang at the 2006 Saga Conference in Durham (published 2007). As I developed this topic I found myself drawn to W.J.T. Mitchell's ideological deconstruction of interart discourse in his *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) and his parallel analysis of the phenomenological and ideological dimensions of ekphrasis in

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, basically interchangeable with *billedbeskrivende digt*, the term often used in the field. Like Margaret Clunies Ross (2007), I use the term ekphrasis to keep open the possibility of continental influence, although I also do so in order to invoke the theoretical work on the topic beyond Old Norse studies.

his chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other" in *Picture Theory* (1994). It became less important to me whether or not the poems in question conformed to established rules and definitions for "ekphrastic style" as my attention shifted to the cultural semantics of intermediality in Old Norse society.

In the end I have settled on a two part approach to the topic: 1) an extended commentary the two relatively well preserved, extant shield-ekphrases in Old Norse (with reference to *Húsdrápa* as well), developing the particularly "ekphrastic" nature of each in a close reading and beginning to marshal their details in a larger hermeneutic effort aimed at 2) a more general analysis of the ekphrastic performance of the shield poem in the socio-cultural context of the time and according to the cultural semantics of that time, insofar as they are recoverable or as we can reasonably speculate on them. While much of my analysis will be couched in the etic terms of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theory, I hope to provide a convincing description and analysis of these skaldic ekphrases, and the genre of the shield poem in particular, according to the cultural semantics of their context(s).

### The Corpus

Given the fragmentary nature of the early corpus we are fairly limited in our ability to investigate ekphrasis in Old Norse poetry. We know of only a few texts which are reliably labeled as "ekphrases" (see Clunies Ross 2007; Fuglesang 2007), and only three which are preserved to a degree which allows for some sustained interpretive engagement. The two poems investigated here are the shield-poems *Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustlong*. Further evidence that the shield poems constituted a genre or independent corpus, according to the Medieval Icelandic horizon of expectations, is found in the M

manuscript of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, in two episodes in which Egill is given a shield and apparently feels obliged to reciprocate with a poem about the shield. In the first (Sigurðr Nordal 1933:272-3) Egill's poetic protégé Einarr Helgason skálaglamm passes on to Egill a shield which he received from Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson, which prompts Egill to complain about his obligation to compose a poem in return for the gift—which he nevertheless does, giving us the supposed first stanza of *Skjaldardrápa*. The second comes in the very next chapter, in which a shield is sent from Norway to Egill from Þorsteinn Þóruson. Egill accepts the shield gratefully and composes *Berudrápa*, which we are given the first stanza of (Sigurðr Nordal 1933:275-6). We might be skeptical of the authenticity of these incidents and verses, but at the very least they tell us that the literary horizon of expectations of 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland included such “shield poems” and their attendant contexts in Viking age literature.

Fragments of other poems which seem ekphrastic, or at least derivative of the shield poems, may be found in the later corpus. Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* will be discussed in more detail below, as one of the better preserved ekphrases. Einarr Skúlason's *Øxarflokkur*, composed as thanks for the gift of an axe inlaid with gold and potentially mimicking the interlace of the artwork with the interlace of the sentences and clauses of the poem, may not qualify as ekphrasis *per se*, but clearly parallels the socio-cultural form, function and context of the shield poems. The same goes for his poem on a decorated horn, of which only a half-stanza is preserved (see Lie 1956:545). We also have a stanza on a wall hanging of the death of Fáfnir composed for Saint Óláfr, a

possible fragment from an ekphrasis of a Last Judgement,<sup>2</sup> and according to *Orkneyinga saga*, we have two stanzas on a tapestry by Jarl Rognvaldr Kali and Oddi lífli Glúmasson in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (see Poole 2007).

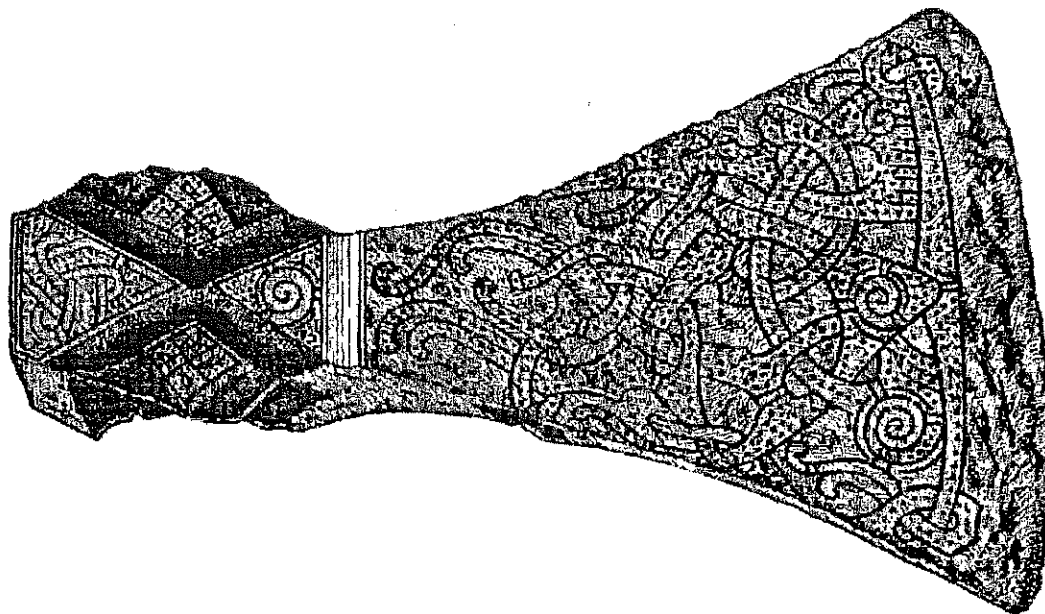


Fig. 1: The Mammen axe, from Paul B. du Chaillu 1890: *The Viking Age*. Vol. II, p. 88. An excellent example of both a decorated weapon and the interlaced bodies/threads typical of art throughout the Viking Age, though as an example of the late Viking Age Mammen style, it is later than the supposed dates of the extant shield poems, yet earlier than Einarr Skúlason's *Óxarflokkur*.

Hallvard Lie (1956:543) suggests “billedbeskrivende digt” status for two further Bragi fragments, as well as two lines by Ólvir hnúfa on Þórr’s fight with the world serpent, two Þórr poems by Eysteinn Valdason and Gamli Gnævaðarskáld, the *stef* of

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<sup>2</sup> Clunies Ross (2007) mentions this with reference to Diana Whaley’s (1998) revival of Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell’s (1965 [1883]) suggestion that the *helmingr* in question might belong to a poem for Gellir Porkelsson by Arnórr Jarlaskáld, mentioned in *Laxdæla saga*. The poem in question supposedly mentions a church Gellir had built, although the degree of description involved is unknown.

Kormákr Ögmundarson's *Sigurðardrápa*, a portion of Illugi Bryndælaskáld's poem on Haraldr Harðráði and even a stanza by Tjörvi hin háðsami on the picture he had made of his beloved and her husband on the wall of his outhouse and on the shaft of his knife, although so much speculation is involved in many of these that it seems overly optimistic to definitively place them in the corpus of the "picture poems." We might also mention stanzas 14-16 in *Guðrúnarqvíða önnor* (Neckel & Kuhn 1962:226) where Guðrún describes the picture-brocades which Þora Hákonstóttir sewed for her (see Lie 1956:545).

Despite these other more or less certain examples, I take the shield poem as the prototype for the skaldic ekphrasis, or if the other ekphrases are not derivative of the shield poem, then at least the shield poem is the most coherent as a genre in the extant corpus.

*Ragnarsdrápa* is certainly one of the best known of the skaldic corpus, apart from its status as a shield poem. Preserved (in fragments) only in manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*, the poem is ascribed to Bragi Boddason, a skald from the 9<sup>th</sup> century who served the kings Ragnarr loðbrók, Eysteinn beli, and Björn at Haugi, according to Snorri's *Skáldatal* (Jón Sigurðsson et al. 1848-87:270-286). The obvious conclusion would be that *Ragnarsdrápa* was composed for this same Ragnarr loðbrók, but Bragi's origins are far enough removed from even Snorri's time that we cannot be absolutely certain.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Bragi's position in the remote regions of the pagan past of Scandinavia seems to have led

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<sup>3</sup> Such a doubt is perhaps validated by the variant of stanza two in *Codex Upsaliensis*, which refers to the patron as the "son of Sigrún", rather than of Sigurðr, as in all other versions. See my commentary on stanza 2 in the following chapter.

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some early euhemerist, whether Snorri or a predecessor, to turn Bragi into the god of poetry.

The poem is only known to be a “shield poem” by way of its internal evidence—we have no other record of an original performance situation, although the poem itself, with typical skaldic reflexivity, provides many clues: 1) The poem describes a shield decorated with scenes from narratives, 2) the poem is a response to the gift of the shield, a repayment in the sense we find in gift-cultures (see Mauss 1990), 3) the poem is *for* the patron, but 4) there is another audience, shown here in the mysterious address to a “Hrafnketill”—whether this is merely a witness to this part of the transaction, or a messenger, who will memorize the poem and then deliver it to the patron (presuming he is absent), is unknown. The reciprocal gift-situation is also suggested by parallel instances, such as in *Egils saga* (see above). The relationship of poet and patron within the *drótt* itself suggests such a reciprocity between the gifts of the patron and the service of the poet, with the shield-poem exchange being just one particularly charged example.

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*Haustlǫng*, similarly preserved only in *Edda*, is ascribed to another poet of the earliest canon, Þjóðólfr of Hvinir from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. He is perhaps better known as the poet of *Ynglingatal*, a poetic review of the Norwegian kings which Snorri drew on for his *Ynglingasaga*. The poem’s title means “Autumn-long”, or “Harvest-long”, generally assumed to refer to the time taken to compose it. As with *Ragnarsdrápa*, we only have internal evidence to go on, as no external source preserves any performance context for this poem. Again, the reflexivity of skaldic poetry helps us and makes it clear that this poem is also about a shield, this time from a Þórleifr (*inn spaki*, according to North 1997:xxxii, Finnur 1894:444 and Jón Sigurðsson et al. 1848-87:401, vol. 3). While

Þjóðólfr's biography is slightly better known than Bragi's, we can still only reliably posit very general contextual features, such as those mentioned for *Ragnarsdrápa*: a patron, a poet, the reciprocity of shield and poem, and, given the association with the aristocratic *drótt*, the likelihood of an audience beyond the two principle players. The title gives us a further potential detail—while the title *Ragnarsdrápa* cites the gift-context of the poem, the title *Haustlǫng* gives us good reason to locate the performance, or at least the composition, of the poem during the harvest season. While this can be no more than speculation, it provides an intriguing perspective for interpretation of the poem, as we see in Richard North's edition of and commentary on the poem (although he takes quite a few more liberties that I am inclined to).

While the topic of this study is the shield-poems as ekphrases, we ought to also note the third relatively well-preserved ekphrastic text of Old Norse literature, the "House Poem" of Úlfr Uggason. Like the two shield poems, *Húsdrápa* is preserved only in *Edda*, but unlike them it is referenced in another source, *Laxdæla saga*, which also gives us an ostensible performance context, along with a larger historical/narrative context. Úlfr's biography and context is the best known of the three poets, not surprising considering his location in both time and space. As an Icelandic skald of the period around the conversion, he fits right in with the characters and stories of the Sagas of Icelanders, and in fact we find him mentioned in three sagas of that time (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Kristni saga* and *Laxdæla saga*: see Clunies Ross 1993c). However skeptical we might be about the account in *Laxdæla*, the saga nevertheless affords us an opportunity to take into account a 13<sup>th</sup> century understanding of an ekphrastic performance, and though the reference to the poem is brief and does not include the text of any part of the poem,

we might argue that the content of the poem, as we have it preserved, may be read as pertinent to the context given in *Laxdæla*.<sup>4</sup>

*Húsdrápa* apparently does not involve a gift, but the triangle patron (i.e., host), poet, audience is certainly present here. Even the name suggests the uniqueness of the poem, and given that we know of no other “house poems,” it seems reasonable to take this poem as an emulation of the ekphrastic tradition of the shield poems. Certainly this would flatter Óláfr pái, the owner of the house, and his aristocratic ambitions (he is the son of an Irish king, according to the saga), and would reinforce the insistence of the aristocratic 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelanders that they were legitimate descendants of the culture of the *drótt*. Taking *Húsdrápa* as such an emulation of the shield poems suggests that the act of ekphrasis was understood as a phenomenon independent of the shield poem *per se*. In fact, it is from *Húsdrápa* that we find one of the most striking intermedial borrowings in Úlfr’s metapoetic reference to his poem as “strands/threads of praise” (stanza 2, *mærðar þáttum*). However derivative of the shield poems, we cannot escape reference to *Húsdrápa* as one of the few preserved, if fragmentary, ekphrastic texts.

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<sup>4</sup> The poem is in fact fairly inappropriate for the occasion (a wedding), as Roberta Frank (1978:105) and John Lindow (1997:70-71) note, but if we keep in mind that this marriage is an unwise and doomed one to a disreputable outsider, then the content of the poem may seem to make more sense in the context of the saga. See particularly chapters 29 and 30, Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934:77-83.

### Previous Scholarship

Gísli Brynjólfsson argued in 1860 for a fourfold division of the shields described in the shield poems (cited in Clunies Ross 1993a). Given this, one would expect all shield poems to be made up of four topics/sections. This would affirm the inclusion of Bragi's Gefjun stanza and his Thor's Fishing Trip stanzas in *Ragnarsdrápa*, although we have no explicit evidence linking either to the poem. It also suggests that Þjóðólfr's *Haustlǫng* is missing two further sections, or that, for example, two scenes from each narrative were given on the shield.

This fourfold division has been generally accepted (see Finnur Jónsson's treatment of *Ragnarsdrápa* and his diagram of the shield, 1930-31:239), and it certainly seems reasonable enough—a circle is perhaps most easily divided into quarters, and it would be no surprise to find a *drápa* with four sections in the *stefjabálkr*, each with its own particular narrative topic and closed by a repeated *stef* or refrain. Still, we can hardly take such a division for granted, as we have no shield-poem preserved which is explicitly said to contain four such topics according to the Medieval sources, and while four topics per poem does sound plausible to me, I am unaware of any example of early Viking age art in which we have such a clear fourfold division of scenes around a circular hub. Similarly, we have no evidence of shields or other circular fields which are by quarters into four scenes around a hub.

Aside from speculation on the correspondences in details between shield and poem (or house and poem), scholars have also attempted to explain the origins of the decorated shields themselves. Clunies Ross notes (1981:281) that most "scholars... have opted for the view that these shields probably represent a survival of ancient Indo-

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European religious rituals in which votive shields, inscribed with scenes from significant myths, played some part in the worship of the gods or in funerary rites” (Rosenfeld 1936 and Ohlmarks 1944), with Anne Holtmark presenting a similar thesis in which the shields and poems both represent cult-dramas (Holtmark 1949:41-73). Clunies Ross is skeptical of the cult connection, noting that “an analysis of the literary presentation of the myths in *Haustlong*, coupled with the observation that Bragi’s *Ragnarsdrápa* does not recount the exploits of gods,<sup>5</sup> may suggest that we are dealing with a literary genre that developed as courtly panegyric at some remove from religious ritual.” (Clunies Ross 1981:281).

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My own investigation will only occasionally speculate on the correspondences between picture and poem, and I will avoid the question of the ultimate origin of the painted shields, focusing instead on the function and context of both shield and poem, insofar as we can discover both from the available evidence. As Clunies Ross reminds us, whatever the origin of shields and shield poems, their internal evidence clearly places them in the secular context of a reciprocal exchange/relationship between poet and patron within the *drótt*, and this in itself leaves us plenty of room for productive analysis and interpretation.

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<sup>5</sup> Possibly excepting the Þórr stanzas, though Clunies Ross does not include these as part of the poem.

It is in Hallvard Lie's work in the 1950s<sup>6</sup> that we find the most thorough treatment of the intermedial nature of the shield poems. In his "Skaldestil Studier" Lie is concerned with debunking the various "loan theories" for the admittedly unique elements of skaldic style, in particular the mangled syntax and the highly involved use of kennings. His solution is to argue for a continuous, coherent aesthetic sensibility which encompasses both the highly artificial visual art of the Viking period and the highly artificial verbal art of skaldic poetry, a theme which he develops further in '*Natur*' og '*Unatur*' i *Skaldekunsten*.

His argument for a "native" origin for skaldic style depends on an appeal to both this Norse aesthetic *Zeitgeist* and to the individual genius of the first shield-poet. While he occasionally admits that we cannot know for certain whether Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* was indeed the first such poem (1982a:136), it is clear that he is inclined to take the poem and poet as the foundation and founder of both the shield poem and of skaldic style itself, admitting that the more time he spends with *Ragnarsdrápa*, the more he is convinced that it is something radically new (1982a:115)—and regardless of the actual identity of the first poet to describe scenes on a shield, Lie's thesis still stands resolutely on the idea that skaldic style, in its most unusual and problematic aspects, derives directly from a single poet's attempt to replicate the "total effect" of the illustrated shield.

His derivation of skaldic style from Viking age art goes into far more detail than a simple appeal to a common aesthetic sense, as various bits of early skaldic style or

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<sup>6</sup> My citations for Lie's "Skaldestil Studier" (1982a [1952]) and '*Natur*' og '*unatur*' i *skaldekunsten* (1982b [1957]) are from the 1982 selection of his work, *Om sagakunst og skaldskap: utvalgte avhandlingar*.

*Ragnarsdrápa* itself are derived from some aspect of the hypothetical originary encounter with the painted shield. For example, internal rhyme and “other sound-effects” allow Bragi to create an aural translation of the visual color effects of the painting (1982a:140), with the mangled syntax typical of skaldic performing a similar function, the intertwined clauses mimicking the interlace of Viking art (1982b:224). Dense kennings, and large numbers of them, allow more weight to be placed on a figure which is represented much larger in the visual frame (1982a:138, 140), for example in the large number of visually-oriented kennings for the World Serpent, which Lie justifies by arguing that the serpent obviously took up the most room in the picture (1982a:150). Kennings also find a use in allowing the poet to hold the painting’s “pregnant moment” fast by keeping the epic context of the poem without the poem itself having to become “epic,” with the ultimate effect, or at least goal, of the poem being the “verbal reshaping of the shield-poem’s symbolic-emotional total-effect” (1982a:152). While Lie primarily ties this in to the mystical experience with the “numinous” which he finds in both art and poems (ibid), it seems clear that we are also dealing with the typical association of visual art with atemporality, and the ekphrastic act with the attempt to emulate such a “frozen moment” (see Mitchell 1986, 1994). In Old Norse studies, we might also remember the tendency to view skaldic verse as a particularly non-narrative art, an understanding discussed and challenged by John Lindow (Lindow 1982).

The device of *nykrat*, or the mixing of metaphors, distasteful in Snorri’s time but common among the early skalds, is supposedly derived directly from the “naturstridige” aesthetic of Viking age art, the blending of things unlike or unrelated, which Lie compares to the creation of the strand *Gleipnir*, made to bind Fenrir, from such patently

non-existent things as “a woman’s beard” and “breath of a fish” (1982a:144, 153). This of course may be applied to the other “unnatural” elements of skaldic style, and gives a general explanation for the reasoning behind the aesthetic—parallel to the struggle of the gods and the giants as a struggle between order and chaos, culture and nature, Viking art and skaldic poetry both function to bind the dangerous forces of nature, or perhaps even to bind the dangerous creatures/scenes which they represent—which touches on Lie’s magical-religious reading of these arts and their potentially apotropaic function, a topic which I will return to again in later chapters.

Among his early points, Lie contends that the metrical elements of skaldic style, particularly internal rhyme (also at the heart of the Irish loan-theories), leave their “natural-grounding” (*naturgrundlag*, 1982a:121) and become valuable in and of themselves, form for form’s sake, “abstracted and mechanized”—a quality shared with, and ostensibly derived from, the art of the Oseberg style, which Lie situates, along with the invention of skaldic style, in a period of great stylistic experimentation, “nervous energy” or “spiritual angst” (*nervøsitet* and *åndelig uro*, 1982a:134), and an increased “form consciousness” (*formbevissthet*, 1982:133). Lie’s thesis takes on a not-so-subtle ideological turn parallel to interart discourse of the last few centuries (see Mitchell 1986) as he speaks of skaldic style as a new “invention” of the masculine *ur-skald*, a “mathematically proportioned instrument” set in opposition to “Mother Edda” (1982a:115)—a case of masculine pseudoprocreation parallel to that which we find in the Norse myths (see Clunies Ross 1994 chapter 5, esp. p. 151).

Margaret Clunies Ross expresses skepticism regarding Lie’s thesis in her 1981 article on skaldic mythological poetry. While she notes that the interlaced syntax of

skaldic poetry could certainly be taken as imitative of Viking age art, she points out that "it is this aspect of the *dróttkvætt* style which is less developed in early skaldic poetry" (Clunies Ross 1981:289).<sup>7</sup> She admits that the kenning system is indeed fully formed in these early poems, but finds the label "unnatural" problematic when applied to kennings (1981:289), and when it comes to figural art of the Viking age she finds little parallel between the "rather simple, unsubtle narrative art" of the time and the shield poems (1981:290). While she notes that the use of kennings in poetry and of diagnostic motifs in visual art share a common part-to-whole mode of interpretation, she also points out that 1) this type of kenning is far from the most common, and 2) "There is no comparison between the generalized *langue* of this system and the "diagnostic signs" of early Scandinavian narrative art," as the latter are far more context-specific (1981:290).

As I have already hinted at above, we might extend our critique of Lie's thesis even further, taking our lead from W.J.T. Mitchell's investigation of interart discourse from the Romantic era onwards (Mitchell 1986), in which the seemingly harmless opposition of visual media to verbal is found to be complicit in a whole range of ideological baggage, from the opposition masculine subject versus feminine object, to the political formulation of German/English versus French (the latter re: Lessing, see Mitchell 1986:105). The sheer grandeur of Lie's claims warns us that something may be up: the *billedbeskrivende digt* is no longer just an obscure, little used genre from the early canon, but instead recapitulates the encounter between verbal and visual art which

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<sup>7</sup> I am not so convinced myself that this rules out such a connection—there is enough such "interlace" in the two extant shield poems that one might argue for just such an origin, even if it was a technique taken to extremes by later, non-ekphrastic poetry.

created skaldic style—or perhaps *Ragnardsrápa* is itself the origin of skaldic style, and Bragi the inventor of both genres at one go. The thesis is attractive in its ambition and its ability to explain the existence of an anomaly such as skaldic style, but as we have seen, it is not without its critics. In this poststructuralist era we might suspect even the ambition to reconstruct a lost origin for skaldic poetics. The solution is just a bit too tidy, as though the “artificial” excesses of skaldic style needed to be reigned in by some master narrative or theoretical framework which can account for those excesses, fixing them in their historical-cultural place on the map and, incidentally, preserving a distinctly native/Scandinavian origin for this unique genre.

Not that origins are of no interest, and certainly skaldic style is enough of a puzzle to warrant speculation, but in this case it is a bit too easy to re-deify Bragi (assuming the god was indeed the same as the poet) and create a myth set *in illo tempore* of prehistoric Scandinavia, the archetypal origin of the genre conveniently present in the illusory whole of *Ragnarsdrápa*, which in turn takes on the status of “the first” and gratifies our need for the “authentic,” the genuine piece of the primordial past which validates our existence and activities as scholars.<sup>8</sup>

While I am skeptical of this search for origins, I do not mean to discount Lie’s contribution out of hand. Regardless of how the skaldic art actually came to be, we are certainly not barred from exploring ways in which skaldic style may have been understood in relationship to the material arts. As I have noted, in this dissertation I will abandon the search for origins and instead deal with a more synchronic web of actual or

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<sup>8</sup> See Regina Bendix’s (1997) critique of a similar obsession with “authenticity” in Folkloristics.

potential, explicit or implicit, articulated or unarticulated intermedial borrowings and correspondences, and where a traditional interart treatment like Lie's may be found to project a particular set of ideological oppositions onto the topic, I will attempt to recover, to some degree, those ideological oppositions and phenomenological concerns at the heart of the Old Norse ekphrastic texts and performances in their own time and place.

For example, suppose that with Clunies Ross we abandon Lie's attempt to found skaldic syntax on the visual impact of Viking art, but continue to ask whether there are aspects of each which could, according to the sensibilities of the time, be understood as parallel. Even if we take into account the especially immaterial nature of oral poetry, one must admit that the comparison between interlace in art and interlaced syntax in poetry is available to be made, particularly when just such an interlaced clause in *Húsdrápa* specifically refers to the poem as "threads of praise", making use of a textile-metaphor (*þáttir*) which we also find with reference to chapters of longer prose narratives.

This example serves as a warning that the topic is potentially more complicated than the simple opposition "poetry versus visual art"—the interlace of so many examples of Scandinavian art may be reasonably taken as a three dimensional representation of a weave or intertwined threads, and even interlace made up of the elongated bodies of animals may arguable derive from the idea of intertwined threads. The *þáttir* metaphor in verbal art likely derives directly from the semantic field of textiles, rather than coming through the intermediary of carved or painted art. The "material metaphors" of skaldic continue in Snorri's poetics, where he reports (or invents?) terms taken from carpentry and/or shipbuilding, and William Sayers finds similar tools in the skaldic toolbox in his article "Scarfig the Yard with Words" (2002). With this breadth of connections in mind

I will take my investigation to include problems of a more general intermedial nature, although my focus will be on the shield poems as ekphrases.

The topic of skaldic ekphrasis saw a dramatic surge in interest in 2006, with the roundtable discussion at the Saga Conference in Durham (with papers by Margaret Clunies Ross, Signe Horn Fuglesang, John Hines and Russell Poole, published in 2007 in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3), along with an article and two papers (one at the roundtable, the other unpublished) by Margaret Clunies Ross. Breaking with previous scholarship, the term “ekphrasis” has taken center stage, perhaps simply due to the fact that these recent publications were in English,<sup>9</sup> but it is also indicative of an increased interest in potential connections between the Norse material and the well-established Continental tradition of ekphrasis, very alive in Latin poetry of the time and in ecclesiastical poetry with the *titulus*, and tracing its very respectable roots back to Classical Antiquity.<sup>10</sup> Clunies Ross and Fuglesang briefly treat the possibility of such influence, or even direct borrowing, Clunies Ross in her article “The Cultural Politics of the Skaldic Ekphrasis Poem in Medieval Norway and Iceland,” as well as in her contribution to the roundtable, “Stylistic and Generic Definers of the Old Norse Skaldic Ekphrasis”, and Fuglesang in her “Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia.” Clunies Ross notes that some elements of Viking age visual art are

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<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the Scandinavian term “billedbeskrivende digt.”

<sup>10</sup> See Clunies Ross 2007:162 n.3: “I prefer to use the term *ekphrasis* because it acknowledges the possibility of foreign as well as indigenous influence on the genre’s development.”

suspected to stem from foreign influences, and suggests that, given the trade routes connecting the North at the time, it is entirely possible that Norwegian aristocrats could have become aware of “a connection between luxury material objects or buildings ornamented with pictorial narrative subjects and the composition of elite poetry about them.” (2006:229) She suggests that the “most likely conduit” for the knowledge of (and, one assumes, taste for) such poetry in Scandinavia was the Danish king Haraldr Klak during his visit to the Carolingian court in 826 (2007:163). As though to underscore the point, the visit is described in the poem *In honorem Hludowici*, itself an ekphrasis by Ermoldus Nigellus (ibid). The evidence, unfortunately, is subjective and circumstantial, and as Clunies Ross admits, there is nothing to do but “keep an open mind about whether skaldic ekphrasis was a largely indigenous development or one influenced from abroad to a greater or lesser degree.” (2006:230) As with Lie’s attempt at a founding myth for skaldic verse, the search for origins becomes little more than speculation on possibilities and probabilities.

Such speculation is only a small part of these recent publications on the topic. The bulk of Clunies Ross’ article “The Cultural Politics...” is given to covering the various manifestations and potential connections of ekphrasis in Old Norse poetry and, of course, situating the practice of ekphrastic poetry in the cultural and political context of Viking age Norway and Iceland. Applying herself to the problem of the replacement of shield poems and other examples of skaldic “oblique praise” with more conventional and straightforward praise poems, she suggests that the skaldic ekphrasis was dependent on a “personalized relationship of patronage, dependent upon the expected flow of gifts as a mark of personal regard and status” (2006:236). Clunies Ross suggests that:

...as the Viking Age progressed, direct encomium, in which the ruler was praised in person for his various achievements and the skald functioned as an eyewitness to events (if possible), superseded ekphrasis... In a state growingly organized along hierarchical lines, in which generosity, while still important, was complicated by less individualized issues, ekphrasis became a less suitable medium for encomium... (2006:236-7).

Clunies Ross' and Fuglesang's contributions to the roundtable are primarily concerned to establish/clarify the topic of skaldic ekphrasis, reviewing all relevant evidence, material or verbal, defining what skaldic ekphrasis is, and setting guidelines for identifying ekphrases and their characteristics. In her article "Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia" Fuglesang suggests two criteria: "Firstly, the poet must state explicitly that the poem describes pictures; secondly, his descriptions should not deviate too far from scenes that actually survive (or, by analogy with surviving scenes, might have existed)." (Fuglesang 2007:193) As both Fuglesang and Clunies Ross point out, "both these criteria rarely occur together, and... one must also allow for external criteria, such as the context and transmission of the poem, to support the identification of a poem as ekphrasis." (ibid) Fuglesang restricts herself to these criteria as closely as possible, leaving only three poems: *Ragnarsdrápa*, *Haustlǫng* and *Húsdrápa*. She begins by running through the correspondences, more or less certain/direct, between the topics of the poems and visual art of the time, a thorough treatment which I will have occasion to return to at various points in my later chapters. She follows this with a discussion of narrative visual art in its own right, giving us a general idea of what narrative art at the time was capable of and concluding that "picture and poetry seem—in the early period—

to be parallel forms of ‘praise manifestations’” (2007:220), derived from the same myths, centered around a “single dramatic scene” (2007:214) which “most effectively displays the strength and prowess of the protagonist” (ibid)—to borrow from Clunies Ross’ 1981 article, both visual and verbal art praise the patron obliquely by juxtaposing patron and mythic or legendary protagonist/prototype in the double focus characteristic of skaldic verse.

Clunies Ross’ “Stylistic and Generic Definers...” is intended to “identify which poems we should include in our survey and which we should probably discard, to determine identifying characteristics of skaldic ekphrasis, and to see how the poetry fits what we know of the visual repertoire of figural and narrative art from Scandinavia and Scandinavian-influenced territories...” (2007:165). Key criteria include internal evidence, i.e., reference in the poem itself to the picture/object described, the use of deixis, and a visualizing style (see her chart on pp. 174-5), although several other common features are noted, such as a tendency towards agonistic scenes, liminal settings, and the use of the preterite tense, with occasional excursions into the present to convey a sense of immediacy.

Several casualties result in this analysis, including Egill’s two supposed shield poems (as there is no evidence that the poems described pictures on the shields), Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s *Þórsdrápa* (which offers no evidence of having been a shield poem) and Einarr Skúlason’s *Óxarflókkur* (which does not describe pictorial art). Three stanzas by Bragi are also excluded: the transformation of Þjazi’s eyes into stars, Þórr’s killing of Þrivaldi, and a fragment on Sleipnir (2007:171). The stanzas on Gefjun and Þórr’s

Fishing Trip are disassociated from *Ragnarsdrápa*, but still considered potentially ekphrastic.

John Hines<sup>11</sup> and Russell Poole both confine their papers to close analyses of particular poems, in Poole's case only two stanzas, and with Hines a portion of Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*. John Hines' "Ekphrasis as Speech-Act: *Ragnarsdrápa* 1-7" covers much of the same ground that this dissertation intends to cover, using a close reading of the text to elucidate the immediate performance and cultural contexts of Bragi's poem. Like Fuglesang he discusses the relationship to visual art of the time, although he spends more time speculating on exactly what was represented on the shield, via the evidence of the poem. He suggests that images "may very well have functioned *in a regular way* in Norse Viking-period culture as stimuli for extempore composition, retelling the story represented" (Hines 2007:237), so that visual artifacts of this nature served "as the codices of the largely preliterate culture" (2007:241). He contrasts classical ekphrasis with skaldic ekphrasis thus:

If classical, and indeed continental early medieval, ekphrasis was concerned first and foremost with the description of objects than the telling of stories, in skaldic ekphrasis the object was an appropriate frame—not merely a frame, an *essential* frame—for the re-call and re-presentation of a narrative. (2007:241)

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<sup>11</sup> Professor Hines graciously made a draft of his roundtable paper available to me before publication, as I was unable to attend the 2006 Saga Conference myself. That draft, along with the online conference preprints of Clunies Ross' and Fuglesang's papers, informed earlier versions of my own research, including my paper on the topic given at the 2007 conference for the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies.

Hines cautions against reducing physical props to mere “inert matter” on which image-texts might be inscribed, insisting that “[i]n the earlier Norse circumstance... both the object and the tale... had their own specific value” (2007:241), a value which was itself multivalent and variable. He focuses particularly on the differences between *Hamðismál* and *Ragnarsdrápa*, underscoring the potential for a story to be “reassembled, reused, and reinterpreted over the historical period and across the different social and cultural contexts from which these sources derive” (2007:241-2), and we would do well to remember the potential for such variation in reception even within the history of an individual text like *Ragnarsdrápa*, itself an element and tool in one particular instance of reception of the shield as both text and significant object.

Poole’s “Ekphrasis: Its ‘Prolonged Echoes’ in Scandinavia” is in a sense the odd man out in this roundtable, the only one to deal with a late, extemporaneous example of ekphrasis, in this particular case two stanzas from *Orkneyinga saga*. While this late example is less pertinent for my analysis of the shield poems, Poole notes the primacy of liminality in both these and the older ekphrases, as well as the prominence of transportation-motifs in the kennings of the earlier poems, both of which are interesting observations regarding the poems in this particular study.

### **Theoretical Concerns and Perspectives**

This project is broadly interdisciplinary, drawing on tools and perspectives from discourse systems as varied as philology (“new” and “traditional”), cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism, phenomenology, cognitive poetics, narratology, ideological critique, folkloristics, oral and performance theory, and others.

While it would be counterproductive to review my involvement with all of these, there are several theoretical points, as well as notes on my own use of theory and terminology, which ought to be clarified early on, as they are either used in a specific way or are central enough to this work that it would be prudent to establish them right from the start.

*What constitutes ekphrasis?*

As I noted before, much of the recent work on this topic revolves around the question "Is it ekphrasis?" The question is a valid one, as the term carries with it such a varied history and has attracted so many definitions. If we reduce ekphrasis to mere description, then the term loses its association with translation between the arts, along with much of its power to define a genre or a rhetorical tradition. If we insist on rigorously confining the term to the (admittedly many) branches of Classical tradition which have grown more or less continuously from Homer to the present day, then we are left with terms such as "picture describing poems" for the skaldic shield poems and their followers, should they prove unrelated (and determining that relationship is an especially problematic and subjective endeavor.)

"Picture (describing) poem" or "billedbeskrivende digt" is the preferred term for many scholars (Fuglesang, Lie), whereas Clunies Ross prefers "ekphrasis," as this emphasizes the potential connection to the continental genre. I am more inclined to treat the term "ekphrasis" as a typological one. I prefer it to "billedbeskrivende digt," which has primarily cropped up around the skaldic poems in question, because it seems to me that ekphrasis works as a broader typological identification which holds across cultural boundaries. In particular I use the term "ekphrasis" according to Heffernan's definition: a "verbal representation of a visual representation" (Heffernan 1993:3), although we

might also note Clüver's refinement of the definition: "Ekphrasis is the verbalization of real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system." (Clüver 1998:49).

### *Oral/Performance Theory*

While much of postmodern interart theory has been concerned with the intersection of written/print literature and the other arts, there is another intermedial opposition at play in the case of the skaldic ekphrases: oral texts versus written. As John Hines and Margaret Clunies Ross have already demonstrated, these highly reflexive poems very clearly situate themselves in a particular performance context, even if we cannot recover all the details of that context.

A performance analysis of a text long since written down, and without the benefit of contemporary practice in field research, is obviously impossible in a strict sense. Still, a skaldic text of the early period was originally a performed text, and when read was understood as having first been such. After a more traditional "text based" examination of the poems in question in chapters 2-3, in the second half of chapter 4 I will attempt to sketch out that which we know or can speculate about in the case of these skaldic performances and will incorporate these into an interpretive analysis of the "ekphrastic performance" in more general terms. The picture is inevitably incomplete, but there is still a decent body of evidence to be marshaled from the poems themselves, from our knowledge of skaldic poetry and poetics, from saga evidence, and from the lessons we have learned from comparative study of oral performance throughout the world.

We should also keep in mind the specific problems of an *oral* ekphrasis—a literary ekphrasis might make a claim to temporality and set itself in opposition to "atemporal" visual art, but a written text is itself a visual artifact, and intermedial

mimicry and borrowing between verbal and visual art is aided by this precedent. It is far more interesting to find an oral culture dealing in such material/immaterial translation, or making use of the metapoetic conceptual metaphor POETRY IS A CRAFTED WOOD PRODUCT OR VERBAL TEXT IS THREAD, the latter of which we find in *Húsdrápa*.

### *The Drótt*

This study seeks to explicate and interpret the shield poems in the context of the *drótt*, the Old Norse warrior band or court. The concept of the *drótt* which is assumed in this study is that of a group of aristocratic, landowning, male warriors who owe loyalty to one particular leader, chieftain or king. This accords largely with John Lindow's investigation of the terminology and nature of Germanic warrior bands, from the *comitatus* to the Viking Age (Lindow 1978), and I follow his lead in giving the term *drótt* pride of place. Note that I am not arguing that such a warrior band or court functioned according to the same model throughout those centuries—the *drótt* is not taken as identical to the *comitatus* of a millennium earlier.

Faulkes (1993:18) speaks of the skald as a representative of the "common viking," which may seem at odds with the aristocratic focus of this study. Certainly the skald in Medieval Iceland could be described as "common" to some degree, but we must also note that even the Icelandic skalds of the Family Sagas are typically part of the landowning class, and that the most accomplished of these poets are associated in some way with the courts of Norway and England. The earliest skalds are even more clearly associated with kings, chieftains, and other nobility, and so I take the aristocratic standing of the skald to be a reasonable assumption.

### *Conceptual Metaphor*

While cognitive linguistics or poetics do not play a central role in my thesis, I will at times draw on the terminology of conceptual metaphor, as well as the practice of writing conceptual metaphors in small capitals: for example, UP IS GOOD, DOWN IS BAD, conceptual metaphors which underlie phrases like “on top of the world” or “down in the dumps” (Stockwell 2002:109). My technical engagement with cognitive poetics will be minimal, but I find the perspective of conceptual metaphor useful when dealing with the topic of intermediality and ekphrasis in skaldic poetry. For example, in chapter 2 I will point out the use of an underlying SHIELD IS GROUND metaphor which is involved in a series of shifts in deictic level at the very start of *Ragnarsdrápa*, and in chapter 4 I will examine the metaphorical complex at the heart of skaldic metapoetics (for example, A POEM IS A SHIP, OR SKALD IS CRAFTSMAN/CARPENTER) as part of my investigation of intermediality in skaldic poetry, whether ekphrasis or not.

### *Cognitive Deixis*

The importance of deixis in the skaldic ekphrases has already been pointed out by Margaret Clunies Ross and John Hines. I will be dealing with this topic as well, although on two different axes, as summarized in Peter Stockwell’s *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (2002). First, I will be attentive to deictic gestures and changes in a more straightforward sense—when Bragi “points” to the shield with his words, for example, or when we shift from the deictic center of the gods to the deictic center of the giant Þjazi in *Haustlong*. Second, I will also be discussing instances in which we have a *deictic shift* from one level to the next. In Stockwell’s account, these levels are a combination of those found in narratological theory: at the top we have the real author and the real

reader, below that the text and then the extratextual voice/idealized reader, then the implied author and the implied reader, then the narrator/narratee(s), and then the character(s) (Stockwell 2002:42). A deictic shift upwards, say from the level of the characters to the level of the narrator/narratee, would be called a “pop,” while a shift down would be a “push.”

However, Stockwell’s summary of narratological levels is obviously derived from a print culture and the modes of reception which follow from that. The issue is complicated by the status of the skaldic ekphrases as oral poems preserved by a manuscript culture. As far as the oral performance goes, which admittedly can only be speculative and hypothetical to us, I believe we can at least count on the levels 1) Performer/Audience (which is also the level of the shield as a physical artifact), 2) Narrator/Narratee (note the “double scene” in *Völuspá*, to borrow a term from Lars Lönnroth, 1978), and 3) the characters. The poem and the shield as present “artifacts” I would include in the first level, as it is at the level of the performance context that the poems highlight both poem and shield as texts/representations, while from the deictic centers of the characters we “forget” that we are “in” a representation.

With the manuscript context of these poems we must add further levels. Levels such as “Real Scholar/Real Scribe” or one concerned with critical editions would unnecessarily complicate things, so I shall only add the levels of scribe (or redactor)/reader (and perhaps a listening audience) and of reteller/learner (the level of oral transmission post-original performance). This latter level is wholly implicit, and only hinted at by variations in multiply attested verses which might (but do not necessarily) suggest regional variations since the original performance. At the top of this

virtual tree, then, we have 1) redactor/reader (level of the manuscript), then 2) reteller/learner (oral transmission, or the level of regional or individual repertoire), 3) poet/audience (at the level of the hypothetical original performance, and *always* at least implicit in skaldic poetry), 4) narrator/narratee (if present), and 5), the level of the characters.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive attempt to lay out the narratological levels of an oral/manuscript culture, and certainly this could be vastly refined and complicated. However, it does demonstrate the necessity of adjusting this branch of “literary” criticism for the particular problems of oral and manuscript cultures. In fact, one might find it necessary to customize such a hierarchy of levels for any particular body or tradition of oral or early manuscript texts—certainly we can see the difference between skaldic and eddic, as the level of “original performance” is a nonsensical one for the study of eddic poetry, as well as for most genres of oral poetry, where the story material stems from tradition and each poetic embodiment of that story material is itself unique, different with every performance.

#### *Structuralism, Psychoanalysis and Cultural Semantics*

I largely follow Clunies Ross’ overview of the binary oppositions in Norse Mythology in volume one of *Prolonged Echoes* (1994), although I also want to keep in mind her reservations about overemphasizing the system of oppositions we construct against the witness of the texts themselves. The use of oppositions, while pervasive in my analysis, should always be understood as a hermeneutic tool, rather than the thing itself.

Something similar could be said for psychoanalysis. I occasionally attempt to use the perspective and accompanying theory of psychoanalysis as a tool to explore culturally specific phenomena, rather than some reified universal to be uncovered through correspondence to Freud's theories. This dissertation is not meant to be overwhelmingly psychoanalytic in approach, although I do draw on it to a greater or lesser extent as seems appropriate. In chapter 4 in particular I will use some terminology derived from Lacan—this is not meant to bring the entirety of Lacan's program into my thesis, but is rather just a borrowing of some relevant concepts which seem to me to be appropriately articulated in Lacan. For example, the "Symbolic Order" as the world of language, meaning, the dissection of the world into objects, and confrontation between competing subjects, seems to me particularly suited to my interpretation of the ekphrastic performance in the context of the world of aristocratic, constructed male subjects. With both this and some of my more phenomenological readings of the text/context my arguments may seem to lean towards an appeal to a universal of some sort, whether Lacan's symbolic order or the pre-linguistic body of Merleau-Ponty, but my intention is to focus on the culturally specific expressions of these things, whether we consider them true "universals" or not.

This attempt to illuminate the culturally specific may be compared to Geertz's hermeneutic approach to anthropology (see Geertz 1973), although our distance from the context precludes a "thick description" of the quality which an anthropologist on site would be able to achieve. Despite the limitations of the medievalist, I have attempted, particularly in chapter 4, to take into account all we can reasonably assume or guess regarding the performance context, as well as the larger web of cultural semantics, so far as we can recover them.

### *Phenomenology*

As with psychoanalysis, this dissertation is not meant to be a “phenomenological dissertation” *per se*, but a “phenomenological perspective” certainly finds its way into many important parts of my argument. “Phenomenology” is a troublesome term, being attached to philosophers as diverse as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Derrida, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others, and being used very differently in other disciplines. My own theoretical interests lie in two directions, 1) with the philosophy of embodiment which we first meet in Heidegger and which is then further developed by Merleau-Ponty (and which I met through the work of Hubert Dreyfus), and 2) with the hermeneutic phenomenology which again began with Heidegger and which I met in the work of Ricoeur, who in turn influenced Geertz. The attention to embodiment and the way in which our embodied situation in the world contributes to (and is informed by) our construction/experience of our semantic world in particular lends itself to my interpretation of the shield as a martial artifact, something intimately associated with a person’s physical integrity in battle and, in my reading, thus associated with the integrity of the constructed aristocratic masculine subject.

### *W.J.T. Mitchell: Interart Ideology and Ekphrasis*

Some might question the lack of emphasis on “real” distinctions between the visual and verbal art of the Viking Age in this study, or the lack of attention to technical problems of the translation from one medium to the other, or, following Lie, of the inspiration of one medium by another. While I do not mean to suggest that such a study would be necessarily useless, I do find it laced with problems.

At the heart of many of the past approaches to the interart question is an insistence on a fundamental, essential difference between the two sign systems, often reified in terms such as "nature" versus "convention."<sup>12</sup> It is this perceived chasm between the two that makes the translation from one system to the other so interesting, and perhaps so transfixing, in Western thought. W.J.T. Mitchell has gone to great lengths to find and deconstruct the ideological baggage of this tendency in interart discourse. Regarding the opposition between visual artwork as engaged with space and verbal with time, he contends "that the whole notion of "spatial" and "temporal" is misconceived insofar as it is employed to sustain an *essential* differentiation of or within the arts." (1986:98) More thoroughly in *Picture Theory* he claims that

...from the *semantic* point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images, and thus no gap between the media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies. Language can stand in for depiction and depiction can stand in for narrative because communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called "speech-acts" are not medium specific, are not "proper" to some medium or other. (1994:160)

In other words, "[w]hen vases talk, they speak our language." (1994:159)

This collapsing of the radical distinction between verbal and visual may be approached in other ways as well. Regarding the contention that visual art is naturally

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<sup>12</sup> See Mitchell on Goodman and Gombrich, 1986:69, 75-94, or Krieger on "spatial fix" versus "temporal flow" or the "natural sign," 1998:5-6.

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spatial, I would suggest that (under certain circumstances at least) even the “sign” of visual art may be as non-dimensional in its function as a carrier of meaning as the written linguistic sign. The line used as a contour, for example, is an inscription of something which does not exist in the reality presented. It is not the line which we see when we view a picture, but a face, a hand, a bird, whatever it is that the configuration of the line is meant to represent. There are no “lines” in this sense in nature: the line is the invisible, non-dimensional boundary which marks out the dimensions of the world, or the world itself, carving it up into a variety of objects. In this sense visual art serves a similar structuring role to language in our semantic world, defining, refining and deriving from the world of meaning which we inhabit. In addition we may note that the “sign” of visual art is, in its ability to communicate meaning, as independent of spatiality as the written word is. Imagine that I have drawn a picture of a face in which the eyes are looking to your left. No matter whether you face the picture straight on or from the side, so long as the face is “legible,” that is, identifiable as representing a face, the eyes will continue to look to your left. The same goes for eyes which seem to look right at you—move about the room, and they will continue to stare at you, regardless of your angle to the actual canvas. This is analogous, of course, to the relative independence of a written word, as a bearer of meaning, from spatiality—so long as it is “legible” it may be “read” and will mean the same thing each time.

The status of visual art as fundamentally atemporal also runs into problems. Aside from the fact that visual art must be scanned in time just as verbal art must (and the fact that written verbal art is just as “frozen” in a physical artifact as visual art is), we must note that visual art is perfectly capable of representing a temporal sequence. That

visual art is in fact capable of representing movement, i.e., space + time, is defended by Merleau-Ponty in his late essay "Eye and Mind":

Movement is given, says Rodin, by an image in which the arms, the legs, the trunk and the head are each taken at a different instant, an image which therefore portrays the body in an attitude which it never at any instant really held and which imposes fictive linkages between the parts, as if this mutual confrontation of impossibles could, and could alone, cause transition and duration to arise in bronze and on canvas. The only successful instantaneous glimpses of movement are those which approach this paradoxical arrangement—when, for example, a walking man is taken at the moment when both his feet are touching the ground; for then we have the temporal ubiquity of the body which brings it about that the man *bestrides* space. The picture makes movement visible by its internal discordance. Each member's position, precisely by virtue of its incompatibility with the others' (according to the body's logic), is otherwise dated or is not "in time" with the others; and since all of them remain visibly within the unity of the body, it is the body which comes to bestride time. (1964:185)

While Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the representation of temporality as movement, I would suggest that some common characteristics of Viking Art may be seen to "bestride narrative" in the same way that Merleau-Ponty's painted body "bestrides time." The clearly identifiable examples of narrative art are few, so I take as examples several of those in Sue Margeson's article "The Volsung legend in medieval art," as an overview of one of the better represented narrative traditions in both verbal and visual art.

The most famous and appropriate example is the representation of the killing of Fafnir and its aftermath at Ramsund in Södermanland, Sweden, Margeson's figure 9. Here we have the killing itself as the frame, with Sigurðr outside, plunging his sword through the body of Fáfnir, which both holds the runic inscription and wraps around a portrayal of Sigurðr sucking his thumb after burning it on the dragon's heart. To the right we see a horse tied to a tree with two birds in it, potentially (but not necessarily) occupying the same moment as the figure of Sigurðr. However, to the left we see the decapitated head of Regin, an event which only occurs after Sigurðr has tasted the dragon's blood and learned of Regin's treachery through the birds. The temporal sequence represented would seem to go from the frame (the killing of Fáfnir), to the center (tasting the dragon's blood), to the right (The birds in the tree, whose chatter brings about the next moment represented), to the far left (the decapitation of Regin). Alternatively, we may contrast the central action represented (tasting the dragon's blood) with the two static scenes to the sides, and read those surroundings as allusions to the unfolding of the narrative as a result of this action: the killing of Regin (immediate) and Sigurðr's future rise to fame (the larger narrative tradition), precipitated again and metonymically represented by the birds, who advise him to seek out Sigrdrífa.

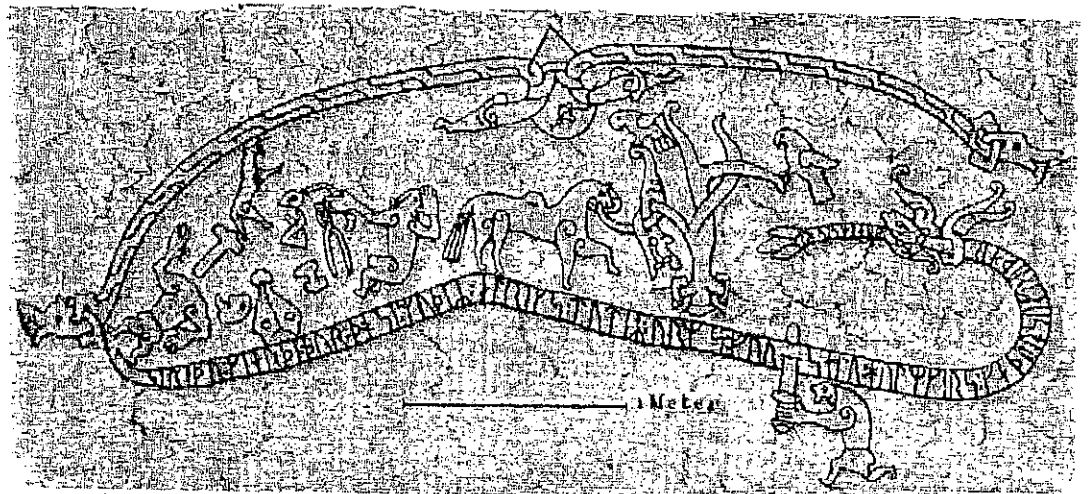


Fig. 2: The Ramsund stone, from Paul B. Du Chaillu 1889: *The Viking Age*. Vol. I, p. 187.

The Ramsund carving thus gives a combination of elements within one frame which clearly “bestride narrative,” in terms of presenting the temporal progression of the narrative within a visual whole. We might also take the progression within the frame to metonymically stand in for Sigurðr’s story as a whole, in which case we have the frame, Fáfnir’s killing, serving as both that which marks out the ground for the figural portrayal of the legend and that narrative event which causally grounds the events portrayed.

While this is the clearest case of this particular sort of “bestriding narrative,” other examples suggest that this is not an isolated technique in Viking age art. In Margeson’s figure 1, the cross-slab at Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man, we see Sigurðr killing a vertical Fáfnir, with Sigurðr represented again above, roasting Fáfnir’s heart, with the heads of a horse and a bird above him. All these aspects are again united in the same visual representation, even tied together to some extent by Fáfnir’s ribbon-body. The progression of the myth as a whole is, of course, immanent in even the representation of a lone high point in the story, but here the progression of the myth is itself represented in two clear scenes from the same story, and in the presence of the horse and the bird, who



p. 187.

refer to parts of the story which are not themselves represented: the carting away of the treasure and the advice of the birds. While it is difficult to make out, Margeson believes that the cross slab at Maughold (from Ramsey), Isle of Man (her figure 5), contains an otter with a fish in its mouth beside what may be Sigurðr roasting Fáfnir's heart, with a horse above. Margeson's figure 6, a churchyard cross at Halton, Lancashire, England, gives representative moments from the narrative in three scenes, similar in its serial illustration to the medallions on the portals of the Norwegian stave churches (Margeson's figures 15-21). In Margeson's figure 11, the top of a picture stone with runes at Drävle in Uppland, Sweden, we have a triangle with Sigurðr at the top, again piercing the framing dragon, although Sigurðr is himself within the frame this time. The two lower corners of the triangle may represent the meeting of Sigurðr (left) with Sigrdrífa (right). The larger narrative of Sigurðr's life is represented by two central scenes, his greatest victory and his subsequent encounter with the valkyrie.

I present these examples as evidence of the ability of Viking age art to represent not just scenes from narrative, but the temporal sequence of the narrative by bringing "out of synch" elements of the narrative together into a unified art-object. The boundary between visual and verbal art becomes less relevant when we consider that both share a common referent in the temporality of human being. Visual and verbal art are each *both* temporal and spatial in that the viewer/reader/hearer, in order to understand the work, in order for the work to fulfill its mimetic function, to be perceived as more than paint on canvas, ink on vellum, sounds in sequence, etc, must inhabit it both temporally and spatially, seeing it as a presentation of an understandable object (a cube, a hero, a story) by virtue of an imagined deictic projection into the world represented. We do not receive

visual or verbal art as the medium alone, but as “the project of a world, the proposition of a mode of being in the world that the text opens up in front of itself.” (Ricoeur 1976:94)

This does not mean that there is no productive way in which one might differentiate between verbal and visual media, but such differentiation is not the purpose of this study. I am interested in the web of meaning in which these texts are embedded, their interaction with that context and the conceptual categories at play—which may, in fact, include the explicit or implicit differentiation between visual and verbal art in effect in the cultural context of the poems. While W.J.T. Mitchell argues that the “notion of image as a “natural sign” is, in a word, the fetish or idol of Western culture” (1986:90), this fetish and attendant essentializing of the categories of the verbal and the visual are deeply rooted, and afford a productive perspective on interart and intermedial discourse in both primary and secondary literature. Mitchell examines the way in which the ekphrastic moment is ideologically charged with oppositions such as see-er/seen, male/female and white/black, and ties ekphrasis in to the more fundamental opposition of the self and the Other:

The ambivalence about ekphrasis, then, is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation. Ekphrastic hope and fear express our anxieties about merging with others. Ekphrastic indifference maintains itself in the face of disquieting signs that ekphrasis may be far from trivial and that, if it is only a sham or illusion, it is one which, like ideology itself, must be worked through. (1994:163)

In Mitchell's view, this "working through" is one of the principle themes of ekphrasis.

The cultural semantics of the Old Norse *drótt* may not involve so radical a differentiation between the arts as we find in our more contemporary Western discourse, but there is still abundant material to be found concerning intermediality and the opposition "see-er versus seen" in the Viking and medieval Scandinavian world, as we will discover in the course of this study.

The potential problem with my use of Mitchell is that he critiques modern and classical literature, not medieval and certainly not skaldic. My aim is not to take his template and force the skaldic ekphrases into its mold, but rather to take his theoretical perspective as a starting point from which to interrogate the skaldic material and to develop a culturally specific investigation of related concerns, if such can be found.

In his chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other" (*Picture Theory* 1994) Mitchell works with what he calls the "ekphrastic triangle." He derives this partially from the idylls/pastoral: "These poems often present singing contests between male shepherds who regale each other with lyric descriptions of beautiful artifacts and women who exchange material gifts as well." (164) The seen, described object is passed between the two masculine subjects, the two pairs of eyes on one side of the triangle turned from each other and focused on the one corner (often coded female), presumably not looking back. Mitchell says of ekphrasis: "its social structure cannot be grasped fully as a phenomenological encounter of subject and object, but must be pictured as a *ménage à trois* in which the relations of self and other, text and image, are triply inscribed." This

triangle is implicit in literary, print ekphrasis, but in the original performance of a skaldic ekphrasis all parties would be present.

Early in the same chapter Mitchell introduces three terms: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear. The first is founded on the belief that the verbal can never actually re-present the visual, can never truly "bring it before our eyes." Ekphrastic hope, on the other hand, is the hopeful belief that just such a thing can be done, that the absence of the image can truly be turned into presence in the verbal re-presentation of the image, or the hope that the verbal text can fully emulate the visual text. Ekphrastic fear is the fear that this might actually happen, freezing the verbal or the speaking subject, inverting the subject-object paradigm so that the image takes over the verbal subject, just as Medusa's gaze freezes those who see her. Potentially related is the acquisition of a voice by the ostensibly mute, visual object, and so the deprivation of the speaking subject of his voice.

Medusa is a potent symbol for ekphrastic fear, and one I will return to in my analysis. It is especially in ekphrastic fear that the ideologically charged oppositions of see-er/seen, etc, are relevant and the visual other becomes not just an object to be described, but a potentially hostile subject, conflated with the prototypical Other, whether conceived in terms of gender, class, or just in terms of the intersubjectivity of the Symbolic Order, to return to my borrowed Lacanian terminology.

## The Plan of this Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to offer an interpretation of the extant shield poems and of such poems as a performance. Chapters 2 and 3 will each present the text of the one of the poems in question (*Ragnarsdrápa* and *Haustlong*) and give a stanza-by-stanza commentary on each, with a primary focus on their identity as skaldic ekphrases. Among other things, I will argue that a variant of Mitchell's "ekphrastic fear" finds its way into even these early poems, tying the ekphrastic performance directly to the paradigmatic concerns of the gods *in illo tempore*. In chapter 4 I will turn my attention to the shield poem as a distinct genre, exploring its relationship to the mythology and the metapoetics of skaldic poetry at the time, ultimately interpreting the ekphrastic performance of the shield poem as an act with both a normative and a socially cohesive role, evoking the paradigmatic oppositions of the primordial mythic time and aligning them with the world of the aristocracy, validating and reinforcing the semantic world of the *drótt* and its social and political power.

My primary sources are several, with Anthony Faulkes' multivolume edition of *Edda* playing a central role. I have taken the text of the poems from Faulkes, although I have tried to make fairly transparent the diversity of the manuscript variants as well as later editions, translations and interpretations by means of the footnotes and my own summaries of the various possible translations. Faulkes' 1987 translation of *Edda* has also been helpful, along with Turville-Petre's 1976 treatment of various canonical stanzas, Edith Marold's 1983 treatment of the kennings in Bragi and Þjóðólfr's poetry, and the many articles and books on the individual poems. Although the volume on the mythological poems is not out yet, I have gladly made use of the online resources of the

Skaldic Project (<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php>). While this site has been a handy source for both texts and contemporary taste on the allotment of stanzas to each poem, the texts I am concerned with are at the moment identical to those in Finnur Jónsson's *Skjaldedigting BI* edition of the skaldic poems, another valuable source (and to a lesser extent, Finnur's 1931 edition of *Edda*). The *BI* volume has been useful as a foil to Faulkes' edition and interpretations, but I have particularly valued the *AI* volume as a means to check my own notes on the manuscript variations. My notes on the variants are not quite as detailed as Finnur's but I have attempted to at least take into consideration all variations which would significantly affect the interpretations of the poems. The 1848-87 Hafniæ edition of the various manuscripts of *Edda* (Jón Sigurðsson et al.) was also helpful when it came to the very difficult to read *AM 757 4to*.

Along with the various editions, commentaries and articles of/on the poems in question I have made extensive use of the various facsimiles of the manuscripts of *Edda*: Wessén's 1940 edition of *Codex Regius* and his 1945 edition of the fragments *AM 748 I* and *II 4to*, Sigurðr Nordal's 1931 edition of *Codex Wormianus*, the two volumes (facsimile 1962; diplomatic edition 1977) of *Codex Upsaliensis* by Grape *et al.*, and the 1985 edition of *Codex Trajectinus* by Faulkes. *757 4to* is unfortunately not available in facsimile, either in print or digitally, but I was able to look through the manuscript during my time as a guest scholar at the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar in Reykjavík through the support of the Leifur Eriksson Foundation.

In addition to print resources, several digital resources were particularly helpful. The Skaldic Project webpage I have already mentioned. The Icelandic website for Stofnun Árna Magnússonar was useful for its collection of photos of many of the

manuscripts in its collection (<http://www.am.hi.is/WebView/>), particularly when the relevant facsimile editions were in use. Similarly the "Touch & Turn" CD ROM of *Uppsala Eddan* was handy when the facsimile and diplomatic editions proved to be particularly popular.

I have retained the relatively well-known sigla for the major manuscripts of *Edda* (R=*Codex Regius*, or GkS 2367 4to; W= *Codex Wormianus*, or AM 242 fol.; T=*Codex Trajectinus*, or University Library Utrecht MS No. 1374; U=*Codex Upsaliensis*, or "Uppsala Eddan," University Library Uppsala DG 11), but will refer to the fragments as 748 I (=AM 748 I b 4to), 757 (=AM 757 a 4to), and 748 II (=AM 748II 4to). I have chosen to treat only *Codex Trajectinus* out of the post-medieval manuscripts of *Edda*, as it is believed to be copied directly from a thirteenth century manuscript.