

“HARD IT IS TO STIR MY TONGUE”

“HARD IT IS TO STIR MY TONGUE”

Raiding the Otherworld
for the Elixir of Poetry

Clive Tolley

Helsinki 2019

SUOMALAINEN TIEDEAKATEMIA
ACADEMIA SCIENTIARUM FENNICA

Folklore Fellows' Communications is part of the publishing cooperation
between the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters and
the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters

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ISBN 978-951-41-1140-2
ISSN-L 0014-5815
ISSN 0014-5815

Cover design by Clive Tolley
Typeset by Word and Page, Chester, UK

Tallinn 2019
Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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Front cover. *The Bard*, by John Martin, c. 1817

Back cover. *Except Seven*, by Bruce Rimell, 2013,
evoking the Welsh poem *Preideu Annwfn*

Note on the front-cover illustration

John Martin's 'The Bard' depicts the scene of Thomas Gray's ode of the same name, published in 1755. Gray was a keen student of early Welsh and Old Norse literature; his ode combines themes from poems in both traditions. Gray's poem relates to the expulsion of the bards of Wales by the English Plantagenet king, Edward I, fearing their political sedition (which was not, in fact, a historical event). The bard curses the king, evokes the glories of past bards, and utters a prophecy of great bardic success to come under the scion of Wales, Queen Elizabeth I, before casting himself from the crag into the torrent below. Gray's poem had significant influence on the Celtic revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was a precursor of Romanticism; one of the first to be influenced was James Macpherson, who claimed that his own Ossian poems were a true rendering of very ancient Gaelic poems, and who became a major source of inspiration for the Celtic revival. The movement in general, and Gray's poem in particular, may be regarded in a sense as a sprouting of poetry out of death – that of the bard himself being a metonym of the death of medieval Celtic poetic tradition in general, which was seen to have found new life in the hands of Gray and his successors.

In memory of dear mentors and colleagues now departed

Richard Chapman

Åke Hultkrantz

Ursula Dronke

Anna-Leena Siikala

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume began life as a short presentation to the conference “Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys”, held in Munich, 25–7 February 2015, which was devoted to the concept of passage between worlds, whether conceived in literary, archaeological or any other terms. Although a long contribution was made for the conference proceedings, my investigation has continued to grow: I have therefore developed the discussion to present it in the form of the present book. However, despite its length, I am the first to admit that the work has not grown enough; but the practicalities of life preclude me from producing a more thorough study of the topic, on a par with my *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*. Hence, a number of compromises have had to be made; I outline these in the Prolegomena, where I also set out something of my approach to the topic.

The cultural breadth of the discussion in the present work has necessitated my “trespassing” on fields beyond my usual ken. I would like to express my particular thanks, therefore, to Prof. Séamus MacMathúna of the University of Ulster, and Dr Matthias Egeler of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, for their many suggestions and comments on Irish materials, and Prof. Pederdur Lynch, of Bangor University, for commenting on matters relating to Welsh traditions and offering bibliographical advice at an early stage of the book’s composition, and for the gracious interest these scholars have shown during the writing of the book. The particular interpretations offered are, of course, my own, as are any errors or misunderstandings that remain. I thank Prof. Wilhelm Heizmann for the original invitation to present a paper at the conference in 2015 and the friendly welcome to Munich, where many years earlier I had spent several months on research towards my doctorate. I am also indebted to Gerald Kelly, with his wide reading of English literature, and my wife Patricia for working through the book and making suggestions, and for checking the text. I am grateful to the anonymous readers for Folklore Fellows’ Communications, and also to the series’ new editor, Frog, for their many valuable and meticulous suggestions, corrections and support. Their generous engagement has certainly resulted in the book being a better work than it would otherwise have been.

I extend my thanks to various individuals and institutions who have granted permission for the reproduction of photographs: Bruce Rimell for details from two of his art works; Antti Huttunen for his photograph

of Läpisyöksy; Juha Pentikäinen for his photograph of the shaman Ivan Sepochin; the Archäologisches Landesmuseum, Baden-Württemberg, for the outline drawings of the Trossingen lyre; the Finnish Heritage Agency for the photograph of Teppana Jänis, and the folkloristics section of the Humanities Faculty of Turku University for covering the reproduction fee. Most of the illustrations are taken from line drawings by myself: I hope the reader will agree that this is a better way to communicate the artistic genius of the artefacts (allowing for my own artistic deficiencies, of course) than the cold objectivity of photographs, given that this is a work about inspiration, not archaeology. Any reader wishing to see photographs can readily find them on the internet.

I am rarely able to access libraries that hold the materials necessary for this sort of study, and I therefore thank those who have assisted, on an *ad hoc* basis, in obtaining such materials for me: Frog, Henni Ilomäki, Leena Mari Peltomaa, Maria Vasenkari.

PROLEGOMENA

Otherworlds – often conceived as the abode of the dead, but including also other spirit worlds existing alongside the mundane world – have lured people since time immemorial. The dying have no choice but to pass to another world; yet the living are always drawn to uncover what these hidden worlds contain. The present study might be described as an attempt to reveal a little of this secret cosmos.

What, then, is this book about? Rituals, in myriad forms, are used in all societies to dispatch the departed to their new abode: I am not concerned with this aspect of contact with the Otherworld. The focus of this study is the mythological or legendary presentation of a visit by the living to an Otherworld, or more broadly any encounter with an Otherworld, in connection with the acquisition of the gift of poetry. Many of the texts that take up this theme present the encounter as a raid; but just as the poetic Otherworld is, almost by definition, a world of metaphor, so too the “raid” is to be taken in a similar vein: many of the “raids” are only loosely military in character. I seek to discuss the variations in emphasis upon aggression when this seems pertinent.

This work is an interpretative survey. I am not setting out a thesis which I aim to prove, so the reader should not expect a progression of any particular argument from one chapter to the next with a culminating QED-type conclusion. My investigation is not intended to be exhaustive: the topic of poetic inspiration is huge, and even the more specific theme of its connection with the Otherworld calls for a much deeper investigation than it is possible to present in a single volume. This more particular theme is, if not ubiquitous, at least widespread, and only a small selection of traditions can be examined here, and even those only by way of a few striking examples drawn from wider bodies of material. Other cultural traditions, and other themes relating to poetic inspiration, could well have been chosen; the limits I set to the presentation are determined by the practicalities of dealing with a potentially huge topic, but also, to a degree, by geographical or cultural connections between the cultures concerned, or a thematic connection between the motifs considered. Within these terms, I take a selection of instances of the acquisition of poetic skill and investigate them in whatever way seems to me to best evince their significance. The reader should not expect any methodological restriction here: sometimes, for example, I engage in formal comparison between stories or motifs, sometimes I consider types of

acquisition of numinous knowledge which are parallel to, but do not directly exemplify, the main motif of aggressive acquisition.

In order to keep the study within manageable bounds, it is only to a limited extent that I discuss the historical background of traditions, or aspire to contextualise the works discussed within their cultural or literary milieux. I do not seek either to investigate all the issues of interpretation that arise or to cover the broad swathes of scholarly literature that have dealt with these works. Moreover, I do not attempt to offer much in the way of tracing genetic links between the works or traditions discussed. Rather, I aim to chase a motif across a number of cultures and to hunt down examples of its manifestation to illustrate the different ways it is utilised: thereby, I seek to show the poetic imagination at work in at least a few of its manifold forms. The central focus is upon imagination within poetic inspiration and motifs associated with it (in particular, the raid on the Otherworld); I do not aim to survey the imaginative aspect of the acquisition of knowledge generally.

Much of my approach is philological – but not linguistic; this is to say that I am not interested in using texts as raw material for arguments about language, but rather in using discussions of language to elucidate the meanings of texts. The book is about poetry: and poetry relies on the uses of the words within it, so it is incumbent on us to investigate those words. Yet the background to these words, and the contents of the poems discussed, is often mythology, which is a cultural as well as a linguistic phenomenon.* A consideration of myths, however, poses many provocative but often insoluble questions.

One of these questions is: how do we compare myths? My approach is broadly structuralist, but not particularly Straussian. Thus, to give an example in cruder terms than it deserves, I would posit that the Norse myth of the theft by a giant of the goddess Iðunn, “Renewer”, with her apples of life manifests the same underlying motif as that of the goddess Freyja, “Lady”, losing her necklace, the Brísinga men, when it is stolen by the giant’s son, Loki: namely, the (temporary) loss to the forces of death of a life-giving object necessary for the gods’ (and by extension humans’) well-being; yet there are obvious differences, particularly in whether the goddess herself is abducted (in which context it is worth noting that the giants were always trying, at least, to abduct Freyja, but fail, whereas Iðunn’s abduction is successful). Tradition takes well-known motifs, and plays on them, so one manifestation almost automatically alludes to others. Various opportunities for investigation arise once this allusive aspect of tradition is accepted; some of these will emerge

* I view a myth as existing solely in the forms in which it is expressed. Compare the remarks of Herren on ancient Greek views of myth as existing within the poems that contained them, rather than entities in their own right.¹

in the discussions of the sources. Here may be the place, however, to emphasise a consequence of accepting this allusive principle: it is fundamental to my study that I branch out beyond looking solely at overt instances of the seizing of poetry by force to look at other myths which share some of the underlying motifs.

A perhaps greater source of consternation than allusive use of motifs within a single tradition is the ostensible occurrence of one and the same motif realised in similar ways in different cultures. I discuss the instance of Iðunn in connection with the Finnish-Karelian *sampo*, a guarantor of well-being. There are clear narrative and motival parallels between the two myths, yet the *sampo* is associated with the production of poetry, while Iðunn and her apples are not. It is probable that story motifs were shared by neighbours such as the Norse and Finnic cultures of Fenno-Scandinavia, and adapted within each in different ways. It can be illuminating to see how these adaptations were realised (whether or not the motifs were borrowed from one culture to another, or were merely held in common as areal features).

More problematic still is when motifs occur in similar narratives from disparate cultures. Sometimes an ancient genetic relationship may be proposed, such as the shared Indo-European heritage of Norse and Indian traditions. At other times, it is difficult to see genetic connections as viable: for example, both the Norsemen and the Aztecs had a notion of a world tree, with an eagle at its crown and a serpent below. Fortunately, it is not necessary to solve such puzzles of mythological coincidence here: my survey seeks primarily to compare and contrast (and only incidentally to discuss historical connections), not to explain origins.

How do we determine what myths mean? Different disciplines take varied approaches. The present study is informed by the approaches of literary studies, of medieval (textual) studies, and of anthropology; a folkloristic approach is also implicit in some aspects of the discussion. Let me make a few points about these in reverse order.

An important contribution of folkloristics to the study of the sources considered here is the recognition of tradition and audience as determinative factors in interpretation of the overall meaning of a text. In a sense, tradition and audience might be viewed as one phenomenon, viewed diachronically and synchronically respectively. A text represents a dialogue – with tradition, which is to say a meaning built up over the course of transmission, and also with the current audience in the particular circumstances which surround an individual performance.

Some useful comments on tradition are made (for example) by Stahl.² She notes that the interplay between tradition and its opposite, innovation, is central to folkloristics. All innovations have antecedents, and hence follow

tradition, their newness being a recombination of antecedent parts. Tradition and innovation are relative terms, and in principle anything could be regarded as traditional or innovatory: it is a matter of which characteristic is more emphasised in individual cases. Once an innovation is made, it becomes part of tradition as soon as it is adopted.

In dealing with medieval texts (in particular) we might make a distinction between “social” as opposed to individual innovation: an innovation may represent something adopted from another tradition – which may include learned tradition (in the form of printed books, for example) – or it may be a unique invention by a particular poet.

One challenge with medieval texts is that we often have no knowledge of the audience other than in the most general terms, and our knowledge of earlier tradition is, moreover, likely to be very limited. We simply have to do our best with the limited resources we have.

A traditional view of folklore would see folkloristics as dealing with “oral” materials (leaving aside material culture, which some disciplines of folklore encompass); but folkloristics researchers are well aware that much of the “folklore” that falls within the subject’s arena now consists of written and graphic materials on the internet or SMS messages.³ Folkloristics may, in reality, be less concerned with the forms in which folklore is expressed (oral, literary and so forth) than with questions of dissemination and operation within cultural contexts, the main focus of interest being upon how artefacts (expressing particular knowledge and competencies) are shared directly, person to person, in contrast to the culture of written texts, which are assumed to have a more or less stable form and existence, and which are likely to be viewed as reflecting institutionalised learning, and are disseminated more remotely. In post-industrial societies, drawing such a distinction may be justified, though it is open to question even here. In medieval culture, in particular, it becomes very difficult, and not helpful, to attempt to make any dogmatic distinction between folk and elite expressions of tradition, even though we must recognise that, for example, the complexities of Old Norse skaldic verse or some of the equally ornate court poetry of Wales are at an exalted “literary” (but nonetheless not originally literate) level. My choice of materials for the present study hence implicitly questions how far works of a supposedly literary type should be excluded from a folklore-oriented perspective.

I therefore have no qualms in setting Aristophanes alongside Homer or Hesiod, or Coleridge alongside Cædmon. Coleridge was operating within a creative tradition – a Romantic one, philosophically speaking – just as much as Arhippa Perttunen too was working within a tradition, in his case of Karelian epic song. The compositional heritage of each thus reflected a traditional world-view (or philosophy). The balance between tradition and

innovation may (or may not) be different, but both had to exhibit creativity and originality within the bounds of the traditions they followed. Coleridge, of course, lies well outside medieval or folk traditions: my point, in selecting such an obvious anomaly, is to decry the limitation of study to some arena which is predefined on principles that do not derive from the inherent nature of the study itself; in particular, I feel it is important to emphasise that the motifs of poetic inspiration as considered elsewhere in the study are not confined to pre-modern societies, and that studies of more modern literature can be illumined in new ways by bringing them within the ambit of a study such as this.

If we consider the Greek examples just mentioned, there may be an unspoken assumption that the earlier an author lived, the more “traditional” he was, so that Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns score high in terms of “traditionality” (and closeness to supposed orality), and Aristophanes low, with Pindar somewhere in the middle. This does not bear examination, particularly in light of recent research into the origins of many of the myths that Hesiod and his successors related; Lane-Fox, in particular, has shown that Hesiod, manipulating traditions of myth derived from the Near East, is likely to have been a hugely innovative poet, arguably more so than Aristophanes (though that is to compare chalk and cheese).⁴ Both were manipulators of tradition, in dialogue with it and with their audience; the fact that we know a lot less about Hesiod’s audience, and the antecedent tradition, should not lead us astray into seeing an essential difference between them. As for Cædmon, the whole point of Bede’s account is to demonstrate how an old tradition was wholly overturned and adapted to serve a new faith, preserving some of the formal structures (of alliterative verse), but importing an alien philosophy. One generalisation may be made, however: all the cases I consider represent negotiations with tradition by creative composers.

Turning to anthropology, one of the ubiquitous features of anthropological research is the conversation that goes somewhat as follows (I caricature, of course). Anthropologist: “Why do you do such-and-such in this ritual?” Native informant: “Because we’ve always done it that way.” The anthropologist seeks to uncover the underlying meaning of a ritual, but the tradition-bearers cannot give an explanation. While ethnography might be satisfied with simply presenting what is observed and what the native informants say, anthropologists in general seek meaning in what they observe. Native informants do vary, of course, and sometimes ones are found that are able to offer better explanations, but it remains true that some of the greatest anthropological investigations rely for their insights on the ingenuity of the anthropologist’s fathoming of the culture in question; an example (a great many could be

cited) might be Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's studies of the Tukano Indians.⁵ What has characterised much classic anthropological research, then, is the principle that the myths and rituals of a people may hold meanings which any individual member of the society, and possibly even the society as a whole, could not enunciate, but which may nonetheless be discerned through careful research, relating the myths and rituals to the observed beliefs and practices of the people and perceiving underlying patterns in them. Meaning, therefore, is not dependent on the producers of the myths or rituals being conscious of it. As a consequence, if we accept this principle (which I do), it is not a valid retort to say "such-and-such an interpretation was not part of such-and-such a tradition", in terms of it never being made explicit within that tradition. If a researcher's interpretation is borne out by the texts and relates to features of the culture that produced them, then it is valid.

A similar principle is, surely, generally accepted within literary studies. If an interpretation of a text can be argued on the basis of the text and the culture that produced it, then it does not matter if the author or members of the culture have not espoused it (some, of course, would go further, and argue that whatever a text means to an individual reader is valid, even if it is directly contrary to the author's intended meaning). It is well-nigh impossible to pin down the understandings of individual early authors; I attempt something close to this in considering Egill Skallagrímsson, but even here, we are faced with largely circular arguments, since what we know of the poet is mainly derived from his poems; his biography, *Egils saga*, may contain reworkings of traditions about him, but much of it is probably inference from his poems, framed within an attempt to present him as an Óðinnic figure. Given our lack of sources, it is difficult even to determine what the response and understanding of a wider audience for particular medieval works would have been. Hence the question of whether we are entitled to elicit from texts or myths interpretations that the original readership (or audience) would not have espoused is generally a mute one. Some researchers, however, are more informed of anthropological interpretation, and the question may be forced more to the fore. Thus, when Margaret Clunies-Ross interprets Óðinn's retrieval of the mead of poetry as an act of pseudo-procreation (arrogating to the male what is biologically the prerogative of the female; see p. 35), it seems questionable, given what we know of Norse society and norms, whether anyone at the time would have come out with such a reading. Yet she is surely right to read the myths in this way: and, while the interpretation forms just one way of looking at the myth, we may feel we understand an important element of it far better. I am thus not preoccupied by worries over whether any particular interpretation would have been explicitly espoused by bearers of the tradition in question

(and even less by whether such an interpretation can be demonstrated to have been espoused), so long as it is borne out by the texts and is not clearly inconsistent with that tradition.

My approach, then, is informed by such aspects of the various fields of study mentioned. My focus, however, is ultimately upon what might be termed the “semantics” of expression, the aim being to examine similarities and particularities in the use of motifs across the various cultures. A thread that links all the traditions under consideration is the forceful manipulation by poets of the motif of the Otherworld visit or raid to emphasise their own poetic skills, and one of the chief points of interest is the differing imaginative responses they evince in this quest; I hope that, despite its limitations, the present study traces this clew with sufficient clarity and fascination to see the reader emerge hale from “the labyrinthine ways” of the poet’s mind.



The structure of this work is not based on the principle of demonstrating any specific thesis. Rather, I have allowed the individual expressions of poetic genius under consideration to lead me from one theme to another, within a broad geographical framework. I may, perhaps, seem to some to emulate Pindar’s bee rather too closely, flitting from one story flower to another; but the bee gathers nectar and pollen, nonetheless, and returns to its hive when its day’s mission is done. My aspiration, in any case, has been to deal with inspiration in an inspirational manner and base the structure of the work on this principle, rather than to attempt to confine poetry within prosaic boxes (however inspirational the Gaelic bards may have found the close quarters of their gloomy cells).

The arrangement is a compromise between two principles: geographical and thematic. I follow a loosely geographical ordering, starting with Scandinavia, followed by the British Isles (which was within the Scandinavian sphere of influence in Viking times). The motif of the raid tends to take a more literal form here, as a violent incursion against the Otherworld – but not always, and I am not arguing strongly that the violent Otherworld raid is a specifically north-west European areal feature. Nonetheless, moving outside this area, we find examples of poetic engagement with the Otherworld which are less violent, yet share the principle of hardship involved in securing otherworldly poetic powers. I look first at Greece, then move outside the Indo-European area to consider Finland-Karelia, and shamanic traditions of Siberia. The last chapter (apart from the Conclusion) brings us back to England of a much later period, where I consider Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Khan* in terms of the motifs of the Otherworld raid that have been presented in earlier chapters.

As each chapter is in essence self-contained, the significance of the ordering is not to be overestimated, as the arguments proffered do not in general rely on any particular geographical arrangement. Geography in any case offers only a weak framework; when it seemed more informative to pursue a theme in a continuous presentation, I have ignored geographical constraints (hence a Norse tale of poetic inspiration while sleeping is considered alongside the Old English tale of *Cædmon*, for example). Thus the core of each chapter is a comparative discussion of one or more chosen exemplars of the motif of the Otherworld raid, around which I build discussions of similar or related motifs within the culture under consideration, but also draw in analogues from other cultures. Some tangential considerations are presented in addenda to chapters, and texts or myths which in one way or another do not fit well into the main discussions are presented in appendices after each chapter.

I include a few pictures which may suggest further thoughts on some of the issues discussed. These are not, in general, intended as direct illustrations of points raised; rather, they function as glimpses into additional aspects of the encounter with the Otherworld which are not necessarily dealt with elsewhere in the study. Further investigation of the parallels in figurative representation between pictorial and verbal art forms would be illuminating, but calls for a study of its own.

Quotations in original languages are given in speech marks, as are translations (which usually follow immediately after the original). Words and phrases treated as lexical items, rather than direct quotations, are given in italic.

Translations, unless indicated otherwise, are my own in the case of Latin, Germanic and Finnish/Karelian texts; others are from published editions.



I give below a brief summary of what is dealt with in each chapter.

1. INTRODUCTION. I briefly consider the meaning of “Otherworld” and the nature of poetic inspiration in early sources.

2. SCANDINAVIA. I present the myth of Óðinn’s retrieval of the mead of poetry from the giant Suttungr, as recounted in prose by Snorri Sturluson, and in a fragmentary poetic version in *Hávamál*. A number of motifs that occur in the myth are analysed, and parallel sources brought into the argument: these include the primordial giant Ymir, from whose body the world was fashioned, his blood becoming the sea, which in turn becomes, in poetic tradition, a metonym of the mead; the lady with the chalice; knowledge as a liquid, which is only effective in combination with memory; death and rebirth. The last section deals with Egill’s poem *Sonatorrek*, in which many of the motifs discussed are alluded to in a work characterised by the finesse of the poet’s craft.

3. WALES. Poetic inspiration, *awen*, is particularly associated with the legendary Taliesin, who became an archetypal poet figure in Welsh poetic tradition. *Awen* is linked both with a cauldron and with its female guardian; in one tale, Taliesin becomes a poet after imbibing drops from Ceridfen's cauldron. I look at the Irish origins and analogues of the cauldron, and consider the difficult Welsh text, *Preideu Annwfn*, which features a raid on an Otherworld cauldron. Other themes considered include the notion of inspirational confinement, the poet's transformations (displaced, in *Preideu Annwfn*, onto the landscape), Annwfn as a "non-world", the identification of *awen* with intoxicating drink, death and rebirth. I consider the clearest description of the origins of poetic inspiration, the *Ystoria Taliesin*, and argue that, although it contains ancient elements of myth, as it stands it is a smoothed-out and late version of traditions concerning poetry.

4. IRELAND. I begin with the classic account of Finnécés fishing for the salmon of knowledge, and being beaten in his quest by his apprentice, Finn. This account, however, is probably a composite made up of pieces of earlier tradition, some of which are discussed. Examples of the motif of the fairy cup are considered, in which an otherworldly girl offers a drink or the hero seizes it from her. The source of otherworldly waters has myths associated with it, particularly the sources of the Shannon and Boyne, rivers which are personified as female beings. Bóand (Boyne), in particular, sought knowledge from a spring, but was dismembered, an act which may be connected with ancient cosmogonic myths. The otherworldly liquor is naturally seen as bright and illuminating (which is also the meaning of Finn's name). I look at the legend of Finn's accidental acquisition of otherworldly mantic and poetic power as deriving in part from Norse legends of Sigurðr, who gained supernatural knowledge when sucking his thumb after slaying a dragon. Finally, I consider a few aspects of the Irish legends which particularly emphasise the liminal nature of the encounters with the Otherworld.

5. NORTHUMBRIA. I consider Bede's tale of the first English Christian poet, Cædmon, and some of the depictions on the Franks casket. In both cases we encounter an engagement with tradition, which is transmuted into something new to suit the Christian context after the recent conversion of the English. Some traditional motifs are retained, but are often subverted to give them new purpose outside the indigenous warrior-based Germanic culture.

6. GREECE. The raid of the sun god Apollo's cattle forms the starting point of this chapter; I look at an example from the *Hymn to Hermes*, where it is more clearly linked than in the *Odyssey* to the acquisition of poetic ability. I then consider the classic case of poetic inspiration from the Muses, as

recorded by Hesiod. Some thoughts follow on the visit to Hades to bring back an actual poet to Athens, as recounted by Aristophanes in his *Frogs*, and I conclude with an examination of how Pindar uses the imagery of the Otherworld, particularly the Hyperboreans, in his victory odes.

7. FINLAND-KARELIA. After an introduction to Finnish-Karelian traditional poetry, I start with the Singer's Words (as recorded from the Perttunen family), which were used to open a performance of verse. This leads to a consideration of some of the motifs these verses evoke: the knee, the *sampo* (a mill-like object that produced wealth, and, in this poetic context, words) and the *kantele* (a zither: it was often played at the same performances where traditional songs were presented). All of these appeared in verses connected to cosmogony, or alluded to cosmogonic myths. The Singer's Words, in the version cited, introduced the tale of the seer Väinämöinen's visit to another, dead, seer, Vipunen, from whom he obtained words necessary for his charms: a wresting of inspiration from the Otherworld of the dead. The *sampo*, which symbolised the source of words for the poet, was also the object of a raid against Northland; the imagery of this gloomy land linked it with the world of the dead. I also look at parallels between the myth of the *sampo* and the Norse myth of the abduction of Iðunn, guarantor of the gods' youth.

8. SIBERIA. I present part of a song by the Khanty shaman Ivan Sopočin, some excerpts from Daur Mongol shamanic songs, an abbreviated account of a shamanic session among the Chukchi, and some examples of myths relating to the Finnish-Karelian seer, the *tietäjä*. The shamanic Otherworld is an inchoate pre-world, a disordered existence on which the shaman imposes order; in ritual terms, he restores the balance lacking in a chaotic world where disease and strife reign. The shaman manipulates a world view which he shares with the poets of his own society, and the expression of his craft often takes place in poetic terms. The shaman makes impossible realities real, while the poet expresses the non-existent, if not the impossible: both are visitors to the Otherworld, and raiders of its treasures.

9. ENGLAND OF THE ROMANTICS. I consider Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan* as an expression of the "raid" on the Otherworld, where the raider is the poet himself, making real, in his words, an evanescent vision of a long-lost city.

10. CONCLUSION. Some of the main themes discussed in the book are brought together in a concluding summary. The imagery of the origins of poetic craft are often complex, and form a network that crosses cultures, exhibiting variations upon recurrent themes. Traditions related to the Otherworld as a source of poetic power are sometimes exploited by individual poets to express their particular concerns, as with Egill in Iceland; in a very different way, the same could be said of the much later poet Coleridge. As has become increasingly clear as a result of the shift in emphasis in research

into folk poetry, individual singers in the Finnish-Karelian tradition (and no doubt elsewhere) also patently manipulated songs to emphasise their own skills. The notion of poetry as derived from the Otherworld, often conceived as a world of non-being, ultimately alludes to the mysterious appearance of poetry *ex nihilo*. Coleridge perhaps came closest to enunciating how the very act of seeking to explain poetry destroys its inspirational heart – but this paradox is implicit in all the accounts under consideration. It is only in and through poetry itself that poetry can be “explained”.

*A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw;
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
Kubla Khan

INTRODUCTION

The Poet's Craft

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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