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"Not Unless Bound with a Chain": An Introduction to *Dróttkvætt*

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§I. Aim.

The target of this essay is to equip aspiring *skalds* (poets) with an understanding of far and away the most important Old Norse Skaldic verse-form, *dróttkvætt.* I aim to supply here a correct and orthodox, if needfully short and simplified, account of the technique and tradition of its poetics.

What follows is a not a paper of academic theory, but a statement ventured by a traditionalist practitioner. A how-to guide to the "nuts and bolts" of the versification will be found hereunder towards the close of this treatment **(§VII. Versification).**

The main Eddic versification is *fornyrðislag,* "Old-Story-Mode". Metrically this is essentially identical with Old English "alliterative" verse (so called). The paramount and quintessential Skaldic form is the *dróttkvæðr háttr,* or *dróttkvætt.*

§II. Disclaimers.

Metre is a debated issue theorists and (if any) practitioners disagree about as such. The battle over Metre in Modern English has been waged by dint of pamphlet and manifesto in public controversy since the days of George Puttenham in the Renaissance.

Proposed scansions of lines in any piece of verse may, normally within certain limits, be contested by different readers.

As to provenance, the immediate origins of Old Norse poetry lie in ancient Norway, yet our sources are texts written down later in the Middle Ages in Old Icelandic.

It should be confessed at the outset that we cannot surely know how the Viking skalds understood technically their traditional versecraft. We have almost nothing for Old German and Old English. For Icelandic, we have *Grammatical Treatises* from the twelve- and thirteen-hundreds, and Snorri Sturluson's treasured work, the *Poetic Edda*, of the early 1200s.

For all he bequeathes us, Snorri does not furnish a full system of metre in the modern sense. Nevertheless, the quantity and quality of the Old Norse evidence stands us in far better stead than our plight as regards Old English. Happily, it can hardly be gainsaid that their kindred traditions were essentially the same in metrical principles. However, in Scandinavia the inherited tradition was handled differently.

II.i, *Limitations.* Some preliminary qualifications. An overall allowance must be conceded. The doubt may be acknowledged even as to whether it is linguistically possible to recreate Old English and Norse versifications in Modern English with perfect correctness. We must be content with the understanding that what the Modern English revivalist assuredly can achieve is to contrive a more or less close allusion to the early mediæval poetry; a symbolic echo of the source-tradition. Each revivalist is likely to

differ intellectually and artistically as to how far he tries to go in honouring the originals, where he draws the line in his image of acceptable authenticity. The ideal target for the beginner should likely be, at least for a start, to strive as far towards faithful correctness as practicable.

The disagreeable truth is, Pound, The Inklings, Auden *et al.* notwithstanding, full and faithful Modern English recreation of Old English and Norse metre and verse-style, as discriminated from something like *Middle* English alliterative, has in reality been vanishingly rare hitherto.

The outline of the versification sketched in few pages here is offered as good enough for reasonably decent recreation of the form, as feasible in Modern English.

It is impossible and undesirable to escape making reference in the following discourse to Eduard Sievers' 19th-century system of metre for Germanic poetry. *Sievers' Types* define the accentual patterns of "Lifts" and "Dips" shaping the half-lines in this versification. To expound Sievers' system to readers with no prior knowledge would require another essay.

II.ii, *"Translation".* In a pregnant way, this whole undertaking may be seen as Philological: arising from the discipline of interpreting texts in ancient languages, and founded in notions of "*translation*".

However, it should be axiomatic that the greater the poetry —the more absolutely it fulfils the peculiar capabilities of its language— the *less* translatable it must be; hence, for instance, Mallarmé. *Dróttkvætt* is impossible to "translate", in our usual current sense, into the same versification. It is wellnigh impossible to *compose*; and for linguistic reasons, even nearer the event-horizon of impossibility in Modern English than it was in Old Norse. It is still "easier" to compose *new* poetry in a verse-form, than to make imitative translations. For this reason and others, example Modern English *dróttkvætt* stanzas are quoted below to illustrate this form —alongside an Old Norse model, as, nevertheless, there is no substitute for dutiful direct acquaintance with the sources.

Three stanzas from *Hávamál*, an Eddic text purportedly recording utterances from Odin himself, are quoted hereunder. These represent by the way the next most important Eddic versification after *fornyrðislag*, the "song-form" *ljóðaháttr*. The second shows the variation *galdralag* ("spell-metre"): note the added fifth internally-alliterating line, varying the content of the preceding. The third quotation shows the use of shortened half-lines. These verse-translations have been made by the present author.

§III. Beginnings: Theology.

III.i, *Runes*. Our earliest witness of alliterative verse is runic inscription. Crucial though it is to appreciate that alliterative verse was originally, and is essentially, oral-formulaic poetry addressed as speech to the ear, there was a natural early linkage between verse and the method of notation to hand.

The Roman writer Tacitus records that the barbarian Teutons recited by rote ancient songs about divine heroes; that their warlike tribesmen in battle-array boomed a chant into the hollows of their shields; and that they observed auguries practising sortilege by casting billets of wood engraved with magical symbols.

The word *rune* means "secret" and implies something whispered or muttered: it lived on for a while in English as *roun*, compare German *raunen*. It was borrowed into Finnish, wherein it means "poem, canto, incantation".

Runic inscriptions have been unearthed on artefacts such as weapons and talismans, jewellery, combs, bones and standing stones. Not seldom they are in verse. Many name gods and other magical beings. The epitaphs and boundary-claims often add curses. Some seem to be encoded. Several seem to be libretti for mysterious ululations we cannot now decipher: syllables sigilled as bind-runes, thought to be religious invocations, ritual war-cries, conjuring incantations. We can, for instance, learn from these that the title *earl* seems at first to have signified a warlord who sought triumph in battle by his mastery of versified rune-magic.

This body of inscriptions hints that alliterative verse was quickening amidst the formulas of runic magic and the liturgy of religious ritual in the Germanic hinterlands (that "womb of nations") of vast forests and mountains beyond the Northern frontier of the Roman Empire in the Iron Age.

Our words *book* and *write* recall runes. The latter means to "cut" or "carve". The former refers to *beech*-wood. (We still write them; on their leaves.) The word for letter, as for an alliterating speechsound, was *stave*, and several runes are named after trees: Birch, Oak, Ash, Thorn. The Celtic word *druid* means "oak-knower", literally in English "door-wit". The name

Gwydion, of the trickster-magician in *The Mabinogion*, affiliates him to trees. Compare the Irish "tree-alphabet", ogham. The icon the bards, who sought inspiration in the murmuring of branches, envisaged for its patron deity was a sage whose worshippers were enthralled to his tongue with chains.

III.ii, *Odin.* Tacitus tells that the god the Teutons worshipped most was Mercury, and that they offered him human sacrifice. The French still call midweek *Mercredi*; we call the day between Tyr's day and Thor's day *Wednesday*: the day of Woden. English *Woden* may also be traced in a lost word for "mad rage", which survived from Middle English into Early Modern, *wode*, *wood*. A word for poet or eloquent speaker in Old English was *wóþ-bora*, a bearer of *wode*-ness. *Woden*, *Wotan*, is cognate with Latin *vātēs*, a divinely-inspired poet-prophet. This is the supreme deity named Odin (*Óðinn*) in Old Norse. The stem *óðr* actually means "divine inspiration", passing into senses including "mind" and "voice, song". Hence the god's very name is "the *óðr*", construed as "master of inspiration", "lord of the possessed". As Adam of Bremen wrote: *Wodan; id est furor.*

So Odin was the Norse god of Poetry who bestowed ecstatic inspiration as a kind of *frenzy*. The skalds called Poetry "Odin's Mead", a flowing honeywine that gets you drunk, and loquacious.

III.iii, *Kvasir.* Yet Snorri teaches further. The tale goes that the two clans of gods sealed their truce after primæval cosmic war by spitting into a vat. The mingling mouthfuls of divine saliva begot the being Kvasir. His name is akin to "squash", "queasy", and is readily seen in the Russian-named Eurasian liquor *kvass*. The underlying meaning, a juice *squeezed* out and soured to fermentation. Kvasir was a sage of perfect wisdom who spoke in verse.

So Dwarves soon murdered him and brewed mead from his exsanguinated gore. This blood-beverage fell into the clutches of the Giants, who hid it in their mountain. But Odin burrowed through the rock in serpent's form, seduced the Giantess guarding it, swallowed all the mead, and escaped as an eagle. This Mead regurgitated from his craw is his gift of the Elixir of Inspiration to poets among Mankind. As an obscure 21st-century skald has written in *fornyrðislag*:[1]

> Thus pantheons' parley in pact of truce
> spewed forth from spittle the inspired minstrel,
> undwindled in power though Dwarves kill him:
> they brewed from his blood bards' honey-essence.
>
> This juice was passed through Giants' clutches,
> arms of Gunnloth, till by eagle and serpent
> the Gods regained gore of Kvasir
> and to Man bequeathed The Mead of Poetry.
>
> So spent spittlings and spilth of blood
> mulled the makings; murder and wily
> deceits suffered and sacrifices:
> both blood and honey blend the elixir
>
> distilled through struggle of storied beings,
> each race of Elves, through Ogre and Dwarf,
> airy eagle and earth-serpent,
> to be milked into mouths of Mortal poets.

III.iv, *Sacrifice; The Noose.*

> I witness I hung on a windy tree
> every night of nine,
> gored by spearpoint and given to Odin,
> myself unto myself,
> on that tree-gallows of which tells no man
> whence its roots may run...
>
> —*Hávamál*

The Elder Edda preserves the myth of Odin undergoing an initiatory ordeal recalling the practices of shamans and fakirs suspended on ganching-hooks. For he hanged "Himself unto Himself", impaled with his weapon the spear, from a noose on the World-Tree.

Yggr (compare "awe", "ugly") is one of Odin's many names. *Yggdrasill*, the name of the World-Tree, means "Ygg's horse". The victim is said to "ride the

[1] **Editor's note**: "an obscure 21st-century skald" and similar references later in this article should be interpreted as referring, modestly, to the author.

gallows" from watching the kicking movements of his legs as he strangles.

Odin learned thereby the occult knowledge from the Netherworld that is encoded in the runic *futhark*. The Hanged God could revive gibbeted corpses and enchant their dead lips to divulge their secrets. Elsewhere it is hinted that he forfeited an eye for prophetic vision: foresight and insight. Suggestive: as the eyes enmesh, crisscrossed, to the brain-hemispheres with their differing outlooks in interpreting what they behold. The seeming-misfortune of the Tarot's Hanged Man of dangling upside-down vouchsafes him the advantage of seeing reality revealed from another angle. Poetry is primarily a way of conceiving and perceiving the world: The Poetic is *a mode of thought*.

We glean from the literature that runes had to be written, that is, cut, but then "stained" or "coloured". This was with blood: understood to imbue the writing with sacrificial life-force that unleashed the power instinct in the glyphs.

III.v, *Riddles.* Therefore, Odin was held divine patron at once of Poetry and of the runes, of language and the mind, of hierophantic wisdom and sorcery. Wizard, weapon-dancing mystagogue, shapeshifter and trickster, he was the wellspring of secret knowledge and soothsaying, a god going under litanies of different names, who liked to travel in disguise, and to play at posing and solving riddles—whereby seemingly alien voiceless things conceal, and reveal, themselves by addressing us in enigmas.

Like his Græco-Roman counterpart Hermes-Mercurius, he was a *psychopomp*, that is, spiritguide of the Dead: eloquent but guileful messenger, traversing all three realms. Magicians in the Renaissance spoke of Hermes *Trismegistus*. The ancient North made not Thunderer nor Lawmaker king of the gods, but a figure of *intelligence*. Tellingly, from *Hermes-Mercurius* we get *mercurial*, we get *hermetic;* and *hermeneutics*: the interpretation of meaning from texts. *Analysis* is Greek for "unloose, unknot". Our words "glamour", and "grimoire", come from *grammar*.

III.vi, *The Fetter-God.* The word *religion* is akin to the word *ligature*. Odin knew runes that spellbound like chains, and unloosed them: not unlike his riddles, in which the answer is locked up then released upon solution. A story in Bede witnesses to similar beliefs among the English: a prisoner who cannot be bound by his captors is asked whether he must not have upon him "letters of releasing, as fables tell of", to account for the magical unlocking of his shackles. The English version has "unloosening runes".

> This Fourth [spell] I know of: if foes shackle
> my bended limbs with bonds,
> I sing such sigaldry I saunter away:
> it springs my feet from the fetters
> and the hasp from off my hands.
>
> —*Hávamál*

Odin was likewise believed to weave an enchantment over armies called the "host-fetter". This enchantment spellbound warriors awaiting the onset with the paralysis of panic—yet also granted the unleashing of the frenzy which, as the shield-walls clashed and battle broke out, possessed the elite fighters who were his most zealous devotees: the *berserks* ("bear-sarked") and the "wolf-hooded".

Waiting to charge, their "berserk-going" would come upon them, a kind of staring-eyed trance with frothing at the mouth as they gnawed the rims of their shields. You can see this in the Lewis Chessmen; berserkers carved in walrus-ivory for the gameboard. Shocktroops, eaters of raw meat, they spearheaded the front line, howling like the beast-totems whose pelts they wore. A Norse skald speaks of them as "those blood-quaffers". They would bite out the throats of their foes; but while berserk no blade would bite on them.

III.vii, *Norse poetry* not *secular.* Hence it is a fundamental mistake to suppose Skaldic poetry was "secular" on the grounds that it is often, as is *dróttkvætt*, about war. "Secular" is a wholly modern post-Abrahamic category. In traditional cultures there is no concept of "secular"; and it is scarcely likely that any great art is not "religious".

"Mythology" is our term for pagan religious stories. (Other cultures throughout history understood "myth" to mean "truth": we have blasphemously reversed its meaning.) Eddic poetry is largely "mythological": therefore, religious. When Skaldic poetry is concerned with war it is equally religious—because, the chief god, also of Poetry, presided over war.

He it was who egged on mortals to combat and conquest; he inspired

battle-frenzy; he designed the woven pattern of conflict on the field, guiding the destinies of kings and nations by the allotment of defeat and the award of victory. His pet ravens feasted on the carnage—so they could whisper into his ears the secrets of the Dead. The scavenging wolves were also his messengers. Norse poetry about battle is religious: because it must be clear that, due to such creed, the Norsemen believed war was worship.

A number of passages in the surviving texts invite reconstruction of an archaic practice whereby before combat was joined a spear was hurled over the opposing battlefront, a ritual accompanied by a consecrating formula of dedication: "*Thus I give ye to Odin*!" Hence war was a form of *sacrifice*, an offering of the fightingmen slain in that immolation.

As "Father of The Slain" Odin chose heroes from the slaughter. The word for these battle-slain, *valr*, is the first term in such compounds as "valkyrie" and "Valhalla". The *valr* should be understood not merely as corpses, nor even honoured bodies of "the fallen", but rather as much closer to Saints, passionately martyred, the Elect. He was picking these dead champions for his own army, the *Einherjar* who feast with him in Valhall ("hall of the slain") till Ragnarok.

It was Odin who possessed mortals with ecstasy; he granted the altered state of the berserker, the *aretḗ*, killing-skill, of the transfigured warrior. Just so it was him bestowed the intoxicating gift of Poetry on the inspired skald.

That poetry celebrating, and in an important way transmuting into stylized aesthetic abstraction representing, this worship, is a religious poetry *because* it sings of bloody mayhem and violent death, an art presided over by the divine inspirer of berserk frenzy and poetic furor alike. As the aforementioned twenty-first century skald has written:

> Blood-blended Mead the brew of the skald;
> the hero drunk on the honey of battle:
> his frenzy is freed from the fetter-of-armies,
> as from locked letters: release of meaning.
>
> Bearsark and bard are brothers sharing
> the gift from their Father, gore of Kvasir;
> both bear the marks that bind them together:
> ruddy-stained the runes, as raw as their wounds.
>
> Chant chains the scop's chafing halter
> —the skald's scarring for skilled verses;
> the fighter pays the fee for glory:
> the wounds of The Spear; the weals of The Noose.

§IV. Background: Eddic and Skaldic.

By custom Old Norse poetry is sorted into two classes: *Eddic* and *Skaldic*. These do overlap somewhat.

The Eddic is the primordial tradition. The poems are anonymous and impersonal. They are narrative poems, if ballad-like and dramatic, retelling mythology about gods such as Thor and Loki, or legends of heroes such as Sigurd. This is the Epic poetry of Old Norse.

Whereas, the Skaldic poems are not immemorially ancient. They are not narrative, albeit they refer to narratives. Their authors are usually known, individual named poets, understood to be composing and speaking these verses. Although typically fraught with mythological allusion, they are personal, even autobiographical, showing the poets reflecting upon themselves and their experiences, in a fairly modern fashion that reminds us of Lyric. A number of skalds are the eponymous heroes of prosimetric sagas, biographies which portray them speaking their poems.

It is true that *skald* is the common term for "poet" in Old Norse. This noun sounds like English "scold", and is likely related: that is, someone who drones on nagging noisily. Something like this may be seen in the strangely browbeating manner African *griots* use barking the genealogies of their chieftains. (In Germanic culture these would be *thuls* reciting *thulas*).

Yet the title *skald* is most meaningfully applied to the professional court-poets of the Viking Age who often served in the entourage of kings—who could themselves be accomplished poets and nitpicking critics.

The main poetic purpose of the skald was to celebrate his patron's prowess in battle, for which he would usually be handsomely paid in such valuable goods as treasure, weapons, slaves. The calling of Poetry is rather less well-rewarded today.

Likewise, skalds composed poems in a very large range of verse-forms, including Eddic forms such as *fornyrðislag* and *málaháttr*. *Fornyrðislag*, "Old-Story-Mode", was the original form of verse, synonymous with poetry as such in Norse culture. When characters in the prose sagas telling ancient

legends speak in verse, they utter *fornyrðislag* stanzas. However, though skalds did write in Eddic forms, they developed and specialized in other versifications, duly called *Skaldic*, especially practised by the skalds, and not appearing in the Eddic corpus.

IV.i, *Poetic Diction.* It is also the case that some of the poetic *diction* is shared in common by both Eddic and Skaldic. Raising the issue of diction invites stressing the point that versification (verse-making) is not an art limited to *metre*. Metre is not the whole story. He that presumes to compose in a given tradition of poetry must do more than accomplish the metre only (even successfully). It is but a part, necessarily interwoven with *diction* and indeed *style* more broadly, such as with the verse-rhetoric and verse-syntax.

A handy demonstration of the way diction and metre interact is to notice how compounds lend themselves to the building of Sievers' Types C (wSSW, x//x), D (SSsw, //\x), and E (SswS, /\x/), which of course demand abutted lifts.

In Germanic poetry the outstanding element of poetic diction is the *kenning*. Borges was rare amongst twentieth-century writers in perceiving this trope's potential. For example, putting *Odin's mead-gift* or *the dwarves' ransom* instead of "Poetry", saying *brow-moons* for "eyes", *bone-house* for "body"; ears can be *hear-hands*, graspers of sound. *The heaven-candle* or *elf-roundel* may be used in place of "sun". *The sickness of serpents* was winter; hail was *the coldest of corns. The foe of branches* is fire. *Giants' roads* are mountains; *Dwarves' doorways*, rocks. By the same token, *the swans' sailroad* means "sea"; it is also *the blue land*, and *the fields of fish*. Ships yield many: *stag-steed of waves, beast of billows, antlered elk of tides, foam-furrower*. A viking *steered steeds of the sea*. Woman (almost as beautiful as ships) can be *the goddess of linen-kerchiefs*, or *necklace-Freyja*. Thor could be named as *the goat-goader*, and Odin as *bosom-burden of Frigg*, Heimdall *the son of eight and one mothers*. —*Riddles*, again. Shakespeare (an Odinic name if ever there was one) has Macbeth blurt out a whole *thula*, or rigmarole, of *kenning*-like variations on the theme of "Sleep". Battle was *the storm of steel, the clash of banners, the kiss of axes*. The warlord was *steel storm-urger, battle-abetter, woundsnake-wielder*, he *gluts gulls-of-wounds*.

The skalds sandwiched double- and triple-decker kennings together. A simple instance would be *the gulltrack-steed* for "ship". Victorious kings, *wolf-tongue-reddeners, speeders of spears*, were often hailed as *saters of the wolf* or, naming that other carrion-creature, *gladdener of ravens*. Offerings to Odin. Yet as wolves were depicted mythologically ridden by Giantesses, one might say the versified equivalent of *the ring-bestower feasted with wound-dew the trollwife's mount*; or, *the tall tree of battle regaled the gull of gashes with blade-liquid where the whale rides*.

The second dictional ploy is the *heiti*, a word akin to archaic English *hight*, "call". *Heiti* calls something not with a kenning but by replacing the common noun with a poetical synonym, such as *steed* for "horse", *brand* instead of "sword". *Brand* is a *heiti*; *wound-fire* a kenning. *The main* for "the sea" is a *heiti*; *Ægir the Alesmith's brewfroth* is a kenning. The two kinds of circumlocution can of course be combined.

Whilst these devices do feature in Eddic poems, as also in smaller measure in Old English poetry, Eddic poetry uses kennings far less often and is altogether plainer and more straightforward. Skaldic verse cultivates riddling circumlocution and convoluted, disrupted syntax to baroque excess, seeking thrills in risky extravagant artifice.

Eddic poetry, the collective utterance of the race, tends to be closer to rough-hewn, even *naïf*, folk-art. The verse-forms of the skalds are much more exacting, and inordinately more complicated, than the Eddic forms, their achievement feats of ostentatious literary craftsmanship performed by self-conscious artists for an audience of connoisseurs.

IV.ii, *Composition & Performance.* In the sagas we read of skalds composing and uttering meticulous stanzas sometimes on the spot (often tight ones). We read of long poems being shaped in their heads overnight, and performed from memory. And it was a poetry of spoken sound, voiced by mouth to the ears of hearers. This was a poetry made by poets who did not write: it was not drafted on paper and was not meant to be read on the page; although in *Egill's Saga* the hero's daughter records his *kviðuháttr*-threnody for his sons in runes.

IV.iii, *It was* not *sung to the harp.* An oral-aural performance; yet it should be remarked that all the evidence, as well as intelligent appreciation of the inherent nature of this versification, turns out to weigh heavily against this poetry's being sung musically to instrumental accompaniment. The sagas invariably phrase it "he spoke, said, this verse". Description of

composition, or performance, to the harp is wholly absent (as also, NB, in the thumbnail of the *scop* composing a heroic lay in *Beowulf*). The typical response is "that poem was well-recited". Hence Skaldic verse was, presumably in some fashion that rendered manifest its intricate architecture, chanted by the speaking voice alone.

§V. The *Dróttkvætt*.

The foremost, indeed royally prestigious, verse-form practised by the skalds was *dróttkvætt*.

V.i, *Parsing the term.* The second word in this compound is the Old Norse cognate of our word *quoth*, [*be*]*queath*: a common word with the sense "say, speak", with forms meaning "recitation, poem".

The first element *drótt* refers to the household, entourage, of a king as leader of the warband, compare Old English *drhyten*, "lord", *gedryht* "retinue".

The compound has been rendered "courtly metre". This may risk misleading suggestions in English. *Dróttkvætt* expresses the idea of a form of poetic recitation deemed fitting for the retinue of a warlord; poetry for the chieftain and his serving bodyguard, his *comitatus* of housecarls.

V.ii, *The Battle of Stamford Bridge.* In the unspeakably disastrous year 1066—the ruinous outcomes whereof are still very much with us to this day—there were of course two invasions. On the 20th of September King Haraldr III Sigurðarson of Norway, nicknamed *harðráði*, "hard-rede-y, of stern counsel", that is, Harald "Hardrade", and his ally the banished traitor Tostig Godwinson, brother of the English king Harold, moored their dragon-ships at Riccall and triumphed in battle against Earls Morcar of Northumbria and Edwin of Mercia at Fulford, two miles south of York. Ouse and Foss ran red.

The city, already an Anglo-Norse enclave, surrendered on the 24th. Yet on that day Harold Godwinson at the head of his forces, need having driven them north with haste, marching four days from London reached Tadcaster and pushed on to Stamford Bridge on the Derwent. There on the 25th, a day of belated summer heat, the enemies encountered; though Hardrade had not thought to face the English there and so soon. Thus the Norse warriors were taken at unawares; and, for the heat, had doffed their mailcoats and left them onboard. But it is said the helms and hauberks of the outnumbering English host glittered like ice in the sun. At parley before, Harold offered Tostig his brother his erstwhile earldom of Northumbria; adding however that Hardrade might seek at his hand only "seven feet of English earth; or more by so much as he is taller than other men."

Upon the brink of battle King Harald, who, unlike William The Bastard of Normandy counted poetry among many talents, had spoken one stanza in *fornyrðislag*, having eight lines with at least two alliterating staves in each, every one showing the metrical patterns shaped by syllable-count, stress, and syllable-length, the simplest metre. But the King declares that poem "ill wrought", and, as the shieldwalls embrace, proceeds to chant, as his berserk-going came upon him like the aura of a migraine, a poem conjuring up a spinetingling, shimmering hallucination of terribly beautiful valkyries interceding in the slaughter before him:

> Krjúpum vér fyr vápna,
> valteigs, brǫkun eigi,
> svá bauð Hildr, at hjaldri,
> haldorð, í bug skjaldar:
> hátt bað mik, þars mœttusk,
> menskorð bera forðum
> Hlakkar íss ok hausar,
> hjalmstofn í gný malma.

A challenge even to gloss verbal denotations but by way of dull echo:

> We do not creep behind the hollow of the shield into combat before of the crash of weapons: so, holding her word, Hild {"Battle"} of the [carrion-]hawk's allotment {=the arm} (=valkyrie) bade me, the necklace-wand {slender prop of necklaces} (= female) had told me before to hold the helmstem (=my head) high where Hlokk's ice {icicles of the valkyrie named "Battle-noise"} (= blades) meets brainpans amid the grinding din of forged metal.

The king strode into the mellay wielding his sword two-handed in fury. In the havoc of the oncoming ranks he fell with an arrow through his throat. (Probably shot by a poetry-hating Anglo-Saxon, whose prolific progeny survives.)

Hardrade's death, and that, but some twenty days later at Hastings, of

Harold Godwinson, marked the end of the Viking Age. Godwinson was the last English king; and kinsman himself, on his Danish mother's side, to Knut, the king in the legendary parable about commanding the unstoppable tide at Gainsborough.

VI.iii, *How to die in Old Norse.*

Die kine, die kindred,
dies oneself the same;
but renown of Glory shall never perish
for the warrior who has won it.

—*Hávamál*

One thing is sure about mortals on Middle-earth: our Death is certain and inexorable. The Norsemen believed it foredoomed to each of us by Fate, the rune-casting of those Weird Sisters the Norns. Not an If but a When, for a warrior in the Dark Ages it was likely to befall soon.

Soon or late, you cannot escape it. What matters therefore is the way you face and undergo that which truly is in whatever way predestined us, imposed indifferently regardless: what remains yours is how well you endure, and perform, it.

If you wish for a Norse picture of Life, it is being bound in a snakepit playing the harp with your toes. This is the iconic image of Gunnar tortured by Attila the Hun for the Nibelung Hoard. For a little while, Gunnar's music charmed the serpents.

Thus Gunnar outbraved and outwitted Attila in death, manœuvring to impose his own unyielding will, to die defying and thwarting his killers, and *with style*: remaking defeat and imprisonment into psychological and aesthetic victory. This ethos is a typical "moral" or message taught in this literature.

Gunnar's legendary doom gets replayed in the story of the still-famed Ragnar Loðbrók in King Ælla's "wormgarth" outside York. "Laughing I die", and with threatening jokes about his sons avenging him; and a deathsong of twenty-nine spur-of-the-moment Skaldic stanzas.

As a warrior is likely to meet his death at the hands of foes, he must finally cheat them of the satisfaction of their subordination of his will to theirs. Gunnar is, as he expected, utterly defeated, completely prey to Attila's merciless power, and yet no victim: unconquered, indomitable, never beaten or broken. Attila loses face; his captive stage-manages even this extremity to deny him his prize and show him up. In the end the tables are turned: it is Gunnar who holds the power. Tyrants and tormentors cannot prevail over a man so long as he commands himself. Ragnar takes the last laugh from Ælla. Attila's henchmen tie Gunnar's brother Hogni down: he laughs in their faces as they rip out his heart.

The last great accomplishment was to assert heroic control over Death itself, and transmute it into an act of deliberate aesthetic performance: like the Thane of Cawdor, or Mishima.

In Norse belief Odin's valkyries have throughout human history been harvesting heroes, "lone-fighters", from the world's battlegrounds to muster an army to be fielded at the armageddon of Ragnarok. All-Father shall lead them against the hordes of Monsters that Doomsday—even though they all know perfectly well they march into certain defeat.

"We do not creep behind the hollow of the shield..."—Two sentences; 48 syllables, 6 per line, every one ending on an unstressed syllable; 12 alliterations; 8 internal slant-rhymes, 8 internal full-rhymes, and kennings Russian-dolled in kennings—such were the last words of King Harald Hardrade: a *dróttkvætt* stanza.

§VII. Versification.

Eddic and also Skaldic verse-forms started out somewhat less fixedly regular than they later became, whilst even *dróttkvætt* admitted of licenses and variations sanctioned and enumerated by Snorri.

Skating over details of finegrained tendencies and preferences observed in Old Norse, here is a short and simple outline of the basic rules for attempting *dróttkvætt* in English:

The stanza must have 8 lines.

Every line must have 6 syllables.
—A provision which may prove troublesome in English reception is that resolved syllables counted as 1.

Every line must have 3 main lifts (strongest-accented long syllables).

Every line must end on a falling, "feminine", cadence.
—Thus the last two syllables form the foot termed a trochee in Classical prosody.

In the odd lines, 2 of the lifts must alliterate with each other: and with the first lift of the next line.
—This pattern of headrhyme is familiar from Eddic and Old English metre: the alliterating first lift of the even lines answers to the headstave.

In the odd lines, 2 of the lifts must slant-rhyme with each other (*skothending*).

In the even lines, 2 of the lifts must full-rhyme with each other (*aðalhending*).

The second of these internal rhymes must be on the penultimate syllable (=third lift) of the line.

There is typically some sense of a structure of halves (*helmings*) (4 + 4 lines), not unlike the volta betwix octave and sestet in the sonnet.

Dróttkvætt can be offered as occasional lyric in a single freestanding "loose" stanza, a *lausavísa* (pl. *lausavísur*).

Though the original subject was praise for the ruler and patron, for his openhandedness (especially to poets) and above all his war-prowess, *dróttkvætt* was used for detailed allusive mythological works, and personal reflections even including love poetry, usually in *lausavísur*.

However, the classic full-scale presentation of *dróttkvætt* was as a *drápa*, a sequence of about 25 stanzas framed by interweaving refrains.

VI.i, *Dróttkvætt compared with other forms; & Sievers' Types.* As to the metre of lines as such, a trend can be descried in Norse practice beyond *fornyrðislag* to shift away from the units of the half-line of two main lifts (making up, coupled with a second half-line after a medial cæsura, the full-line of four main lifts). This is already seen in the internally-alliterating, 3-beat lines in the major variation on *fornyrðislag*, the verse-form of many important poems in the Edda, *ljóðaháttr*.

But Sievers' Types *pertain to* the half-line shape of 4 syllables and 2 main lifts: whereas in *dróttkvætt* the line has 6 syllables and 3 lifts. One can see that the line can be fitted to a Sievers half-line with an added disyllabic "foot"; the exigent practicality of meeting the pressing demands of the form in English, the very narrow choices imposed by *dróttkvætt* itself, tend to override adherence to the old patterns.

All Old Norse metre strongly favours trochaic rhythm, Sievers Type A (SwSw, / x / x), by definition the most frequent type fundamental to the whole prosodic tradition. This falling ending is the prevailing rhythmic signature in Eddic verse. Yet in *dróttkvætt* the trochaic cadence is actually *fixed*. Types B (the iambic wSwS, x / x /), and the clashing spondaic C (wSSw), are found more rarely in *dróttkvætt*. It may be helpful for the English revivalist to think of the underlying model of the *dróttkvætt*-line as three trochees.

In view of the problem of the usual slackness of Modern English, it is worth remarking that, just as *fornyrðislag* begets *málaháttr* by adding syllables, the roomier Skaldic form *hrynhent* is made by lengthening *dróttkvætt*'s lines to 8 syllables with another trochaic foot.

Strict syllable-count is a feature of the Skaldic verse-forms yet *dróttkvætt*, quintessentially Norse in so many respects, may be felt in prosodic character and principle an oddity, rather unlike the rest of alliterative verse: in view of its un-Germanically monotonous invariable cadence and fixed penultimate internal full-rhyme. Celtic influence is plausible. Certainly, the Norse tradition diverged widely from the old stock of her sibling branches: in the first place by becoming stanzaic, and indeed teeming with variations; then sprouting her lyrical Skaldic offshoot engrafted with newfangled rhyme.

That said, one can envisage how *dróttkvætt* could have sprung from the *fornyrðislag* stanza. Despite *fornyrðislag*'s striking family resemblances to Old German and Old English alliterative verse, not only is it stanzaic not stichic but a bent towards treating the half-lines as lines proper linked metrically by alliteration only may be perceived, with the outcome of a stanza of eight lines, structured more or less as halves.

§VIII. *Dróttkvætt in Modern English.*

Attempts to recreate *dróttkvætt* in Modern English would likely struggle to be accepted as flawless by the Old Norse skalds or their critical poet-kings such as Harald Hardrade. The aim must be to get as close as Modern English allows; the problem lies in the interpenetration of inflectional syntax with the metre and syllable-count. There is also the difficulty common to all revival of alliterative verse in Modern English, the problems of Quantity (and Resolution).

We have a Modern English *dróttkvætt*-stanza from Tolkien:

> Winter's winds had hunted
> waves as dark as ravens,
> their leaden ship laden,
> lightless, sea-benighted.
> Forth now fared they mirthless
> far from mortal portals
> in caves coldly-builded
> kindled fires that dwindled.

This allusion to *dróttkvætt* may be sleuthed down within Auden's *Age of Anxiety*:

> Hushed is the lake of hawks
> bright with our excitement
> and all the sky of skulls
> glows with scarlet roses;
> the melter of men and salt
> admires the drinker of iron:
> bold banners of meaning
> blaze o'er the host of days.

The present author has published this *dróttkvætt*-stanza embedded in a longer battle-poem in Old English verse as the words spoken by a raven:

> **FL**ANged ARRows as **FL**INder-
> **FL**EDGes LEAPT from EDGes
> Of **SH**IELDS, the BOWS **SH**RILLing
> When **SH**ANK-DEEP was DANKness
> Of **G**ORE. Then, STEEL-**G**EARED, they
> **G**IRDed, AFTer MURDers,
> **BL**ADEs aMIDST the **BL**OODy
> **BL**END of that FOE-SPENDing.

I have have also published a short *drápa* of ten *dróttkvætt* stanzas with refrains titled *Gleipnir*, on the theme of the binding of Fenris-Wolf with that magical fetter. The poet should think how a form embodies and orchestrates a given theme; of verse-forms as symbolic structures extending from their language: versifications are of and in themselves meaningful.

§IX. Why?

How might the supreme prestige, the mystique, of *dróttkvætt* be accounted for?

Causes must include the extreme demands of its formal constraints; the sheer difficulty of achieving so virtuoso a performance. It is to harness the tempest and drive that storm through the eye of a needle.

As shown above, there are good grounds for taking the roots of *dróttkvætt* to lie deep in runic, and runic-*numerological*, magic, and the theology of the Odinic cult.

A striking design, which Hindus would recognize as a *yantra*, is attested on early Anglo-Saxon funeral-urns and on Scandinavian artefacts. It is a kind of triquetra, braided of three interlaced triangles: a form of what Knot Theory terms Borromean Rings or Brunnian Links. It is often seen on Viking-Age picture-stones next to images of Odin and is referred to in archaeological iconography as the *valknut*, "the knot of the slain": a convincing label in view of the amassed evidence. This emblem graphically portrays an interlocking, impossibly Endless Knot. It could very fittingly symbolize a divine, infinite, noose.

Tacitus records that the centre of Teutonic religion in ancient Germania was a sacred grove amidst the dark forests. It was hallowed by human sacrifice. But the holiness of the shrine was honoured by another strange custom: *nemo nisi vinculo ligatus ingreditur*—"none might step into that grove unless bound [ligatured] with a chain", in token of worship of the *regnator omnium deus cetera subiecta*, "the all-ruling god to whom others are subject". Astoundingly, readers of the *Elder Edda* will meet with mention of a place named in Old Norse *Fjǫturlundr*, "the fetter-grove", where moreover

a man is slain with a spear.

The Yggdrasill of wisdom springs and spreads from the ash-key of asking the right questions. Seldom asked is: *Why*?

Today's very theory of "explanation" is wrongheadedly fatuous, but it is instructive to pursue instead understanding of the true significance of this difficulty. Why the extreme difficulty of *dróttkvætt*?

—Because *Metre is a technique of ecstasy*, a yoga of trance, inducing a possessed state whereby the prosaic thisworldly mind is de-ranged and re-ordered, re-tuned from the sonics and syntax of mortal language so that it may echo the music spoken and understood by the gods: for they cannot hear prose.

Yeats declared his poems made of a mouthful of air. The noose asphyxiates. Verse recited imposes, as do mantras or the rosary, an alternative regulation upon the breath. Breath, *pneuma*, is Life, exerting immediate effect on heart's pulse. Control of the breath, of airflow to brain and blood, is the simplest technique for inducing meditation and other altered, and ecstatic, states.

Think then of the bondage and ligature of *dróttkvætt* as the passion of the noose: submission to constraint which liberates with transcendence. There can be no "hack" —to stoop to the degraded jargon and degenerate mechanistic mentality of our impoverished age of automatic convenience— whereby to shirk this discipline. No sidestep circumventing, nor shortcut to bypass, the unfashionable nuisance. No substitute or surrogacy, no dodge to cheat the sacrifice. It is no accidental discomfort but of the essence. For the magic to happen, you must undergo the ordeal of the rite. The only way to reach the experience of enlightenment is by suffering the agony. There comes no transfiguration save through rapture by divine violence. *None enters unless bound with a chain.*

