Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie

Band: 59 (2017)

Artikel: Skaði kennir mér minni minn : on the relationship between trauma, memory, revenge and the medium of poetry

Autor: Tulinius, Torfi H.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858071

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Skaði kennir mér minni minn
On the Relationship Between Trauma, Memory, Revenge and the Medium of Poetry

TORFI H. TULINIUS (REYKJAVÍK)

Language is a medium but also defines our existential situation as humans. Language permeates every aspect of our lives: our relationship to the world and the objects in it, to other humans, and to ourselves. It defines our humanity. If language is nevertheless a medium, i.e. a way to designate the idea of a thing (a signified) by using a sign (a signifier), this means that our existential predicament is to be forever caught up in a web of signs without ever being consciously exposed to unmediated reality. This is the meaning of Jacques Derrida's famous saying: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida, 1967: 227). There is nothing outside the web of meaning spun by language, or rather, language and its incessant weaving of meaningful texts, is the only access we have to reality.

The word 'consciously' in the preceding paragraph is of the utmost importance here. The role of our consciousness is indeed to protect us from the impact of reality, channelled towards us through the medium of our senses, by sifting out what requires our attention but also by enclosing the harsher aggressions of what can happen within a web of meaning. One could say that language tames the savage cruelty of the world, bringing it into the realm of culture.

Language is therefore not only our window on the world, it also protects us from it ... to the extent that it is able to. Another aspect of language is its complex role in social interaction. Through language we present ourselves to others: we perform our identities and the performance is not only aimed at others but also at ourselves. If language represents, it also gives us endless opportunities to misrepresent, to manipulate meaning in order to achieve our aims and ambitions.

Language can also help us deal with our own complexity, the ambiguous and often conflicting feelings we can harbour at different times in our lives. This is especially true of poetry which is not only a way to transform the medium of language into a work of art, but also a way to channel these feelings by the magic of poetic expression, which both distances us from our feelings and allows their power to be heard and felt by others. This is the lesson taught to us by the famous episode of *Egils saga* when Þorgerðr tricks her father Egill, who has decided to let himself succumb to grief over the loss of his sons, into composing an elegy in their memory, *Sonatorrek*, which restores Egill's desire to live (*Egils saga*, ch. 78).

Image 1: Ms. AM 122b fol. (Reykjafjarðarbók), 20r
(© Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir)

Image 2: Ms. AM 122b fol. (Reykjafjarðarbók), 20v
(© Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir)

One of the most compelling episodes of Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*, preserved as part of the *Sturlunga* compilation, illustrates this manifold aspect of language. It is his account of the attack and burning of Gissur Þorvaldsson's home in the Skagafjörður district in 1253. The attack takes place the night after a wedding celebration. Gissur escapes narrowly but his wife and three sons are killed leaving this middle-aged lord a widower without issue. Characteristic of saga style, Sturla's account is sober though he does ask God to forgive the assailants (*Sturlunga saga*, 642). Sturla had attended the wedding feast as it was his daughter who was marrying one of Gissur's sons, though he had left by the time of the attack. His daughter, Ingibjörg, was rescued from the burning farm by one of the assailants, a close relative of Sturla.

Sturla's description of Gissur's return to his farm, the morning after the attack, is deservedly famous in saga literature. Gissur witnesses the roasted trunk of his son, cooked in his armour, being carried out followed by what remains of his wife, i.e. only her breasts. He says to his cousin who accompanied him: "Look cousin, here you can see my son Ísleifr and my wife Gró." (My translation as in all the examples given in the article: *Páll frændi [...], hér máttu nú sjá Ísleif son minn og Gró konu mína.*) (*Sturlunga saga*, 642) Then he turns his head and tears seem to be flying from his eyes.

Already we see here the work of language in Sturla's account of Gissur's behaviour. Confronted with the horror of what has happened to his loved ones who have now been reduced to fragments of cooked flesh, Gissur protects himself from the impact of reality on his psyche by speaking and naming these pieces of meat. They remain the persons he loved, Ísleifr and Gró. The pain resulting from Gissur's trauma is still there and next finds its expression in a skaldic stanza (see image 3):

Enn mank bǫl þats brunnu
bauga-Hlín ok mínir,
skaði kennir mér minni
minn, þrír synir inni;
glaðr munat Gǫndlar rǫðla
gnýskerðandi verða,
brjótr lifir sjá við sútir
sverðs, nema hefndir verði.

I still remember the misery when my wife and three sons were burned inside. My loss teaches me to remember. The warrior will not be glad unless revenge is done. He lives in sorrow.

Gissur is a member of the Icelandic aristocratic class which has made a point of cultivating the ancient art of skaldic poetry (Guðrún Nordal, 1998: 48-51; Guðrún Nordal, 2001: 162-163). This is a well-crafted stanza which can be paraphrased in the following way, though it does no justice to the power of the rhythm, repetitions and graphic language of the *dróttkvætt* medium: "I still remember the evil when my wife

and three sons were burned to death. My loss teaches me to remember. I will not be glad again, I will live in pain, unless there is revenge."

It is noteworthy that Gissur seems to be referring to a well-known aphorism attributed to Cicero: *Qui doluit, meminit*, in the line *skaði kennir mér minni minn* ("my loss teaches me to remember") (Hermann Pálsson, 1983: 49). The idea of a relationship between mental pain and memory is present in medieval Icelandic literature, for example in a verse reproduced later in the saga where Gissur is said to remember that "painful morning" (*morgun sáran*) (*Sturlunga saga*, 675; Hermann Pálsson, 47-48). Despite its literary origins, the relationship between mental anguish and memory is well understood by Sturla Þórðarson who shows great interest in the way Gissur handles his pain. Indeed, he seems fascinated by Gissur's resilience. Even during the night of the attack, after he has attained safety he is said to deport himself in a manly way despite his ordeal (*Sturlunga saga*, 642). Later he is quoted as saying that whatever happened to him it never affected his sleep. Sturla uses an interesting expression to describe him on this occasion, stating that he is *mikill borði* ("with high gunwales") (*Sturlunga saga*, 645). This is a metaphorical expression used about people of high bearing. It is derived from navigation and evokes the idea of a ship which floats high on the sea and therefore provides protection to those on board from dangerous waves or enemy attacks (Cleasby and Vigfússon, 1874: 72). Gissur's strong self enables him to withstand the outrages of fortune.

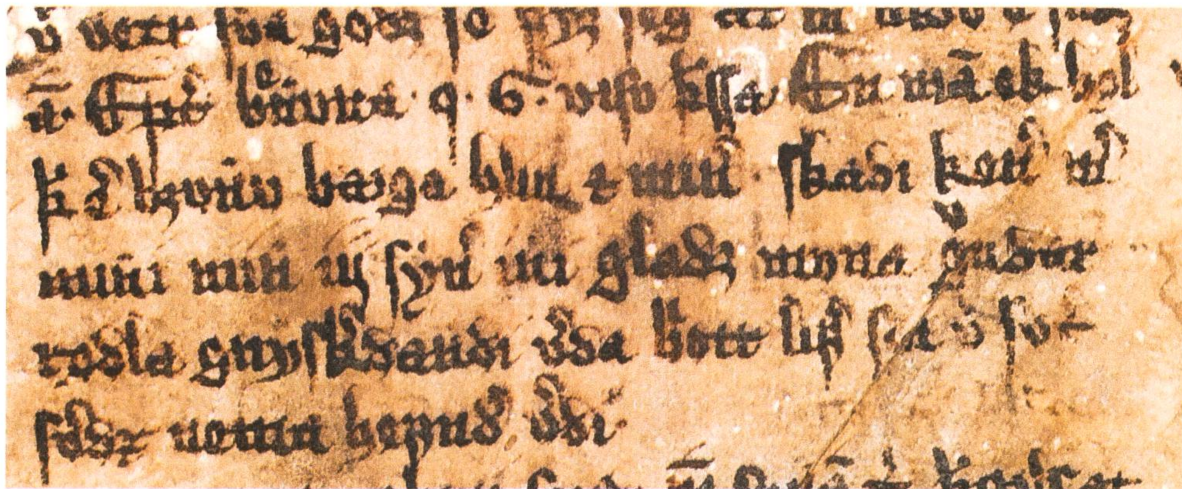

Image 3: Gissur's first stanza, Ms. AM 122b fol. (Reykjafjarðarbók), 20r (© Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir)

But Sturla is also sensitive to signs that the terrible events had nevertheless affected his behaviour. Gissur flies into a rage when he feels that his efforts to seek revenge are not successful enough (*Sturlunga saga*, 647), though the rage is immediately quenched when he learns that one of the highest born of his assailants, Kolbeinn Dufgusson, is within reach. His temper remains volatile for a period after he has exacted revenge (*Sturlunga saga*, 651). It is Gissur himself who discloses in a second

stanza another effect of the trauma which he has been subjected to: depression (see image 4).

> *Borg lét brennuvarga*
> *bjórstofnandi klofna*
> *Sónar sex ok einum*
> *(sák deili þess) heila;*
> *bergstjóra gleðr báru*
> *blikstríðanda síðan*
> *hregg, en hafnak muggu*
> *heldr, síst Kolbein feldum.*

> The poet had the skulls of the burners cleft open. I saw it. Poetry cheers up the warrior, since Kolbeinn was slain. I refuse sadness (snowfall).

Here Gissur expresses satisfaction over the slaying of seven of those who participated in the attack and burning down of his farm. After the death of Kolbeinn, he can now leave depression behind, or that is how most scholars have interpreted the phrase *hafnak muggu*, literally "I refuse snowfall", which is a weather metaphor for low spirits. It is no coincidence that, after having composed and performed this stanza, Sturla says that Gissur takes a mistress, "whom he soon loved very much" (*unni henni brátt mikið*) (*Sturlunga saga*, 650). Through revenge, this resilient man has conquered his mental pain and renewed his appetite for life.

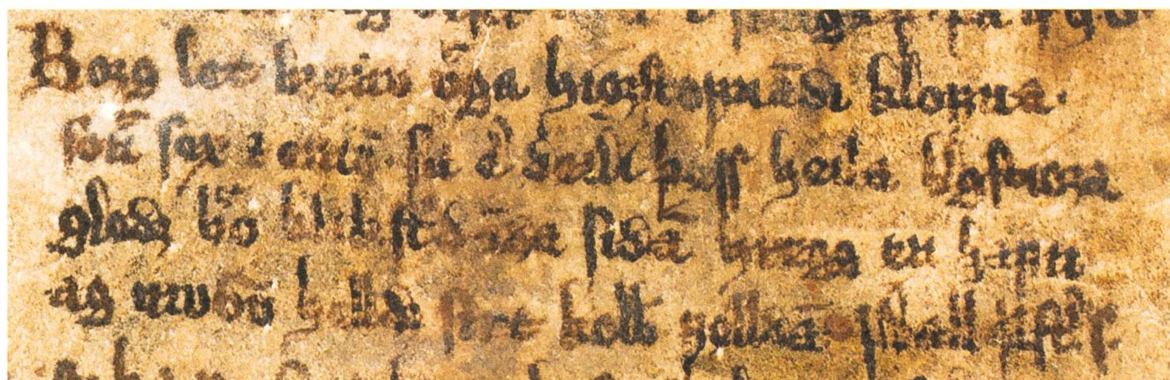

Image 4: Gissur's second stanza, Ms. AM 122b fol. (Reykjafjarðarbók), 20v (© Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir)

The practice of poetry allows him to deal with his private pain. But the trauma is also public. He is a chieftain and his enemies have proven to be more efficient and ruthless than he. Revenge is necessary to restore his position as one of the most powerful men in Iceland. This meant breaching a truce that had been made at the initiative of the local bishop. The latter is so angry at Gissur for this that he excommunicates him (*Sturlunga saga*, 650). Indeed, there were different opinions on how legitimate Gissur's revenge was, since his assailants were themselves avenging close kinsmen and friends that had been killed by Gissur. Having obtained vengeance, they had been willing to make a settlement with Gissur (*Sturlunga saga*, 644). Mak-

ing his private pain publicly known would have been to his advantage in his dealings with the bishop and garnering general sympathy for his cause.

Skaldic poetry was a means to do that as stanzas such as Gissur's were relatively easy to understand and learn and would have circulated widely in Iceland at the time. An example of this are stanzas also preserved in Sturla's *Íslendinga saga* and which were composed after the attack on the farm of Sauðafell in 1229 (*Sturlunga saga*, 310-319). Jonathan Grove has analysed this episode in great detail and shown the "perceived congruence and continuity" in 13th-century Iceland "between the discourse of skaldic poetry and the reciprocal violence of feud". Both are, in Grove's terms, "modes of performance" in the honour-based society of Commonwealth Iceland (Grove, 2008: 125).

The beauty of Sturla's account is to show the interpenetration of the public and the private in the story of these dramatic events and the accompanying poetry. In a period when both church and monarchy are trying to curb the violence of the armed lay elite, Gissur not only performs his determination to exact revenge, but also the personal grief he must have genuinely felt on that "painful morning" when he was exposed to a sight that must have, despite his strong defences, been burnt into his soul.

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