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 Annwfyn*, which features a raid on an Otherworld cauldron. Other themes considered include the notion of inspirational confinement, the poet's transformations (displaced, in *Preideu Annwfyn*, onto the landscape), Annwfyn 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 Finnéces 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 Sopochin, 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