The Storied Verse of Sturla Þórðarson

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Like beads strung out in a necklace, ninety-four stanzas by Sturla glint and glitter in his saga of Hákon Hákonarson. As that ruler lay dying, or so the story goes, he had the histories of all the kings of Norway read out to him, one after another, ending with that of Sverrir, his grandfather – a final glance at his competitors in the family business.1 Sturla’s stanzas about Hákon look back, too, forging continuities between the present and a multi-storied Norwegian past. They also provide a discreet authorial commentary.

No one not born into a language (in the case of Old Norse-Icelandic this includes all of us) can know how poetry sounded to those for whom it was first composed. Many of Sturla’s stanzas, taut and ironic, would fit with ease into today’s one-hundred-and-forty-character universe, our world of incredibly shrinking messages. Reticence, not explicitness, was prized. Poets like Sturla give clues when they are responding to something outside their texts, when they want hearers to know that they mean more than they say. If we do not listen, it is not good manners but laziness.

This essay was written in a villa near Genoa, an unexpectedly appropriate location. Reykjavík may have its Sturlugata, but the Italian seaport boasts an entire district called Sturla, with a Sturla river, bay, piazza, valley, beach, medieval bridge, train station, bakery, and cinema.2 Even the poetry of Genoa’s Nobel-prize-winning Eugenio Montale was good for thinking about Iceland’s skald. For what his contemporaries praised in the Italian author’s work – a richness of allusion, the echoing of a long poetic tradition, archaic and arcane vocabulary, chiseled lines, verbal economy, repeated images and themes, heavily veiled meaning – is precisely what two centuries and more of skaldic commentary have ignored or dispraised in Sturla’s art.

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Complaints about Sturla as poet seem always the same. He is without originality, without charisma, spontaneity, authenticity, personal feeling, or what Jan de Vries called ‘the warm tones of the heart’.\(^3\) Sturla is a late-comer, a hack, a propagandist, a bureaucrat, a hired-hand composing mechanically for the son of a ruler he never met and whom he had reason to fear and dislike. He never saw the ships or shores or battles he so gloriously describes. Sturla’s verses are mere embroidery (here substitute, according to taste, the adjectives ornamental, conventional, imitative, derivative, and bookish) and of no historical importance. In 1883 Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Frederick York Powell omitted Sturla’s verse from their *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* on the grounds that to do otherwise would have been to galvanize a corpse: the thing is dead, ‘like flies in amber’; Sturla and his learned relatives ‘were never really genuine court poets, but just would-be revivers of an old perished fashion’.\(^4\)

Guðbrandur’s 1887 edition of *Hákonar saga* was translated into English seven years later by George W. Dasent, whose long introduction never mentions Sturla’s poetry (unless I missed something: the pages of Yale’s copy of this translation are still uncut). Alexander Bugge’s 1914 Norwegian translation of the saga removes most of the stanzas.\(^5\) Finnur Jónsson in 1898 and in subsequent publications confirmed that Sturla was not a real poet: ‘At its core, his verse is but history in rhyme and meter, without the personal expression and the subjectivity that make older verse so fresh and attractive.’ Finnur accuses Sturla not just of plagiarism but of obtuse plagiarism: he borrows from earlier skalds ‘without even recognizing it.’\(^6\) Fredrik Paasche had harsh things to say about Sturla’s

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4 *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* 2: 260. Guðbrandur’s long ‘Prolegomena’ to his edition of *Stu* (1878) also struck a mortuary note: Sturla was “the ‘last minstrel’ of the Saga time, ... left alone, like Ossian, with the dead” (1: lxix). A *short practical and easy method of learning the Old Norsk tongue or Icelandic language* had already stressed the poet’s belatedness: ‘Sturla, the last skald’: 71.

5 Alexander Bugge, *Norges kongesagaer* 4/2. The tradition of ignoring the verse goes back to the sixteenth century, in the Danish abridgement of *Hákonar saga* by Mattis Størssøn (1594), incorporated in the 1653 compendium by Peders Claussen Friis (587–795).