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HEARING VOICES: UNCANNY MOMENTS IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*[1]

1. Introduction

The troll-woman Hetta has been coming down to the farm at Hváll and killing Ingjaldr's livestock (*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, ch. 8). Ingjaldr chases her up into the mountains but cannot catch her, and in what seems an oddly propitiatory parting gesture, she tells him about a secret fishing bank, complete with a *dróttkvætt* verse giving directions. The verse is the oldest attested example of a *miðavísa*, a verse describing a fishing spot (Ólafur Lárusson 1944, 157):

> Róa skaltu fjall Firða
> fram á lög stirðan;
> þar mun gaurr glitta,
> ef þú villt Grímsmið hitta;
> þar skaltu þá liggja;
> – Þórr er víss til Friggjar –
> rói norpr inn nefskammi
> Nesit í Hrakhvammi.[2]
> (*ÍF* 13, 124–5; *Skj* AII, 450).

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[1] The present article is based on a paper given at the *Arbeitstagung der deutschsprachigen Skandinavistik* in Berlin in September 2007. I would like to thank the organisers of the workshop 'Rhythmen des Erzählens' and the other participants for their stimulating comments. I am also grateful to Margaret Clunies Ross and the anonymous reviewers for *Gripla* for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

[2] This verse varies considerably in the different manuscripts and is heavily emended in *Skj* B (II, 482). The textual cruces, which involve the placenames and are not relevant to my argument, are discussed in *ÍF* 13 (lxxiv–lxxv) and Ólafur Lárusson (1944, 157–61).

Gripla XIX (2008): 93–122.

> You shall row past the mountain of fjordmen
> out on the troubled sea,
> there the cod will glitter,
> if you will find Grímr's bank;
> there you shall then lie at anchor;
> – Þórr has love for Frigg –
> let the snub-nosed shiverer row
> along the headland in Hrakhvammr.
> (*Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, II, 246, slightly modified)[3]

As we might have expected, when Ingjaldr rows out to the spot, a fierce storm comes up. Not only that: a red-bearded man named Grímr is out fishing too and will not let Ingjaldr leave until he has filled his boat. Meanwhile back at the farm:

> Þat bar til um daginn heima at Ingjaldshváli um miðdegi, at komit var upp á skjá um máltíð á stofu ok kveðit þetta með dimmri raust:
>
> Út reri einn á báti
> Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi,
> týndi átján önglum
> Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi,
> ok fertugu færi
> Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi,
> aptr kom aldri síðan
> Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi.
>
> Mönnum brá mjök við þetta, en þat hafa menn fyrir satt, at Hetta tröllkona muni þetta kveðit hafa, því at hon ætlaði, sem hon vildi, at Ingjaldr skyldi aldri aptr hafa komit, sem hon hafdi ráð til sett (*ÍF* 13, 127; *Skj* AII, 450).
>
> That day at home in Ingjaldshváll it happened around midday that someone came to the window of the main room about mealtime and spoke these words in a deep voice:

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[3] Translations are mostly taken from the *Complete Sagas of Icelanders* volumes but where no published translation is cited, are my own.

> Out he rowed alone in his boat,
> skin-cloaked Ingjaldr,
> eighteen hooks he lost,
> skin-cloaked Ingjaldr,
> and a forty-yard line,
> skin-cloaked Ingjaldr,
> may he never return again,
> skin-cloaked Ingjaldr.
>
> People were startled by that, but it was held to be true that Hetta the troll-woman must have said these words, believing, just as she hoped, that Ingjaldr ought never to return, exactly as she had planned it. (*Complete Sagas of Icelanders* II, 247, slightly modified)

The source of this second verse is mysterious, not only due to the elision of the agent brought about by the passive constructions (*komit var ... kveðit þetta*), but also because the group of people sitting inside the farm house hear the verse come from outside and cannot see its speaker. The disembodied speaker at first has only sonic characteristics; that is, all we know about them is that they speak *með dimmri raust*. And the verse this voice speaks achieves its effect less by what it means than by *how it sounds*, via the musical repetition of the line *Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi*, a repetition apparently unique in the Old Norse verse corpus (Ólafur Lárusson 1944, 162).

Sound-patterning over and above *dróttkvætt* norms is a typical feature of prophetic and magical verse in the sagas. Common forms of this include repetition of the final line of the stanza[4] or unusual rhyme-patterns, such as the feminine end-rhyming couplets of Hetta's first stanza. Given the nature of our sources, it is impossible to know whether magical verses in the sagas are so because this is what magical verses in medieval Iceland were really like. However, these verses are (also) unmistakably a literary motif. The significance of sonority as a literary technique is that sound-patterns achieve their effect by non-semantic, performative means. The content of the repeated line *Ingjaldr í skinnfeldi* is relatively unimportant compared to how the repeated line beats upon its hearers' ears. Sonority in such verses represents the similarly performative, rather than communicative, character of magical and ritual speech (on which see Raudvere 2005), the claim of spells to 'do things with words'.

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[4] Examples include the troll-wife's verses in *Hemings þáttr* (*Skj* AI, 430), Gunnarr's verse from the *haugr* in *Njals saga* ch. 78 (*Skj* AI, 604) and the vision-verse in ch. 125 of the same saga (*Skj* AI, 431), the dream verses in *Draumr Þórsteins Siðu-Hallssonar* (*Skj* AII, 214), a number of verses in manuscripts of the *Sturlunga* compilation, especially grouped around the battle of Örlygsstaðir (*Skj* AII, 145–6), and Sneglu-Halli's dream verse (*Skj* AI, 389). This last is a typical instance of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*'s parodic way with convention, especially conventions of poetic performance: Halli performs a fake dream verse, complete with repetition of the final line *blakir mér þari of hnakka* 'kelp is flapping around my neck', to frighten other travellers off a ship he wishes to get a passage on (*ÍF* 9, 292). For further instances of final-line repetition see the lists in Faulkes (1991, 52), *Skj* (BII, 609), and Möbius (1879–81, II, 129).

What is somewhat harder to account for is why this verse is spoken by a 'voice from outside', or *acousmatic* voice. The adjective *acousmatique*, according to the *Grand Dictionnaire encyclopédique Larousse*, refers to *une situation d'écoute où, pour l'auditeur, la source sonore est invisible* ('a listening situation where the source of the sound is invisible to the hearer') (*GDEL*). Revived in the mid-twentieth century to describe the experience of listening to *musique concrète* (Schaeffer 1966, 91) this term originally denoted the esoteric teachings of Pythagoras, the *a 'kou'smata* ('things heard'). According to Iamblichus, writing in the fourth century AD, Pythagoras' junior students, the *acusmatici*, were only allowed to listen to the master from behind a curtain.[5] Mladen Dolar, following the film theorist Michel Chion (1982 [1999]), describes the acousmatic voice as 'a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body' (Dolar 2006, 60), and points out that such voices tend to be authoritative and charismatic: not only Pythagoras, but also God, frequently represented in the Old Testament as an acousmatic voice, and the Wizard of Oz.

In *Bárðar saga*, the sonorous verse chanted by the acousmatic voice discomforts its auditors (*mönnum brá mjök við þetta*). The second constitutive element of this episode is then uncertainty as to *who is speaking*. The uncomfortable moment of uncertainty is immediately succeeded here by 'disacousmatisation', in which an origin is found and the voice from nowhere normalised. Once Hetta has been identified as the speaker, a narrative of intentions and results can be constructed (*Hetta tröllkona muni þetta kveðit hafa, því at hon ætlaði, sem hon vildi, at Ingjaldr skyldi aldri aptr*

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[5] Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, ch. 17: 'they shared his [Pythagoras'] discourses through mere hearing, being outside the curtain and never seeing him' (Dillon and Hershbell 1991, 99).

hafa komit, sem hon hafdi ráð til sett). These two features, *how it sounds* and *who is speaking*, are both features of verse as performed, as 'live' event rather than text. But in this episode they pull in opposite directions, as the highly-patterned sound of the verse evokes a speaking body, whose presence is deferred by the narrative's withholding of its identity. Dolar observes further that 'with the advent of the new media the acousmatic property of the voice became universal and hence trivial ...[but] in the early days of their introduction there was no shortage of stories about their uncanny effects' (63). The media he is talking about here are, of course, 'radio, gramophone, tape-recorder, telephone', but perhaps his insight can be taken further?

Medieval Iceland, of course, also experienced the advent of a new medium, namely, the manuscript codex. The relative importance of oral and literate practices in the production, reception, and dissemination of medieval Icelandic literature has long been debated. While the original emphasis on the implications of orality for the production of texts and, above all, for the origin of genres, exemplified in the *Freiprosa/Buchprosa* split, continues to be productive in Old Norse studies,[6] it has been supplemented by an interest in the reception, rather than production, of texts,[7] which has gone hand in hand with a 'weak' formulation (the term is Ruth Finnegan's (1988, 39)) of the relationship between orality and literacy. In the 'weak' formulation emphasis is placed on the 'coexistence and interaction' (Chinca and Young 2005, 1) of oral and literate media rather than, as in the 'strong' formulation associated with the heroic period of orality/literacy studies (Havelock 1963, Goody and Watt 1963), dichotomisation into oral and literate mentalities and postulation of a cultural or cognitive revolution as being brought about by the transition from the former to the latter. Judy Quinn's recent survey (2000), despite its title ('From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland'), is actually an example of this 'weak' approach, focusing as it does on the evidence that oral forms such as genealogies, lists, laws, and spells survived alongside the new medium of writing. Karl Johansson (2005) considers manuscript evidence both for *Verschriftlichung* ('literarization') of oral genres and for oral performance of written texts, and Jürg Glauser (1996) traces the 're-oralising' of saga narratives in early modern

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[6] See e.g. on the elegy Harris (1988, 2000a, 2000b); and on the *Íslendingasaga* Gísli Sigurðsson (2004 [2002]).

[7] Also noticeable in recent research in other medieval literatures, see e.g. Green 1994 on medieval Germany and Coleman 1996 on England and France.

Iceland. All three studies in their different ways explore the consequences in medieval and early modern Iceland of a phenomenon Janet Coleman (1996, 1, 27–32) calls 'aurality' and Ursula Schaefer (1992, 7), borrowing a term from Paul Zumthor (1984, 69), calls *Vokalität* ('vocality'). Vocality describes the embedding of medieval manuscripts in a matrix of embodied verbal performance:

> Es gibt in der Tat einen entscheidenden Grund, die ... für das Mittelalter charakteristische *oralité* ... mit dem Terminus *Vokalität* zu bezeichnen. Zwar schwingt in *Vokalität* noch ein grosser Anteil eines bestimmten medialen Bezugs – eben auf die menschliche Stimme – mit, was aber intendiert ist, weil es gerade die menschliche Stimme war, über die – wenn auch oft nur als vermittelnde Instanz – die Kommunikation auch des schriftlich Vorliegenden erfolgte. Indem man hier jedoch nicht von Mündlichkeit spricht, vermeidet man die Bezugnahme auf die kulturanthropologische Dichotomie Mündlichkeit/Schriftlichkeit. Man *muss* diese Dichotomie hier meiden, zum einen weil das Mittelalter keine primär mündliche Kultur ist, in der aber dennoch kulturell entscheidende Kommunikationsakte über die menschliche Stimme abliefen. (Schaefer 1992, 20).
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> There is in fact an important argument in favour of calling the characteristic *oralité* of the Middle Ages *vocality*. It is true that the term vocality is strongly coloured by a particular medial reference point, namely the human voice, but this is deliberate, as it was via the human voice – even if only as a mediating entity – that communication, including communication of written material, took place. Not speaking of 'orality' here enables us, on the other hand, to avoid the dichotomy, familiar from cultural anthropology, of orality vs. literacy. This dichotomy *must* be avoided here, for one thing because medieval culture was not a primary oral culture, but nonetheless one in which culturally crucial acts of communication were carried out by means of the human voice.

It is generally accepted that interference between written and oral media, in the form of oral performance from written manuscripts, characterised literary *reception* in medieval Iceland, as elsewhere in Europe.[8] Production nonetheless continues to fascinate us, even though the effects of medial interference at this point in the literary process are harder to map.[9] That literary production also fascinated medieval Icelanders is clear from the numerous scenes of oral composition and verse performance in the sagas. 'Voice', therefore, not only marks a modality of saga reception, but is also a key trope in the discourse of the sagas themselves, in the figure of the performing skald. The much-discussed issue of whether these verses are authentic witnesses to oral transmission, that is, the question of origins, will not be entered into here.[10] Rather, what is of interest is how saga stagings of oral performance, like the narratives described by Dolar, play on the 'uncanny effects' of the interference between a new medium, in this case writing, and an old one, here the voice.

Although the theme of voice has received some attention in recent work in medieval and cultural studies (see e.g. Dolar 2006, Kolesch and Krämer 2006, Straumann 2007, and the 2004 special issue of the journal *Exemplaria* on 'medieval noise'), it has until now been largely neglected in the Old Norse field (see however Glauser and Sabel forthcoming). The realia of poetic performance in the medieval North have, of course, long been a focus of intense interest.[11] But this discussion has concentrated on the sagas' descriptions of poetic performance as evidence for historical practices, rather than on voice as a literary topos. Tropes of voice are also common in the secondary literature on skaldic and eddic poetry. Guðrún Nordal writes in her fascinating study of verse in the late medieval manuscript tradition of *Njáls saga* that saga-writers 'attempt ... to give their characters a unique voice through their poetic utterances' (2005,

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[8] Cf. the studies listed in note 7; for Iceland, see Hermann Pálsson 1962 and Glauser 1985.

[9] The following are especially relevant here: Christian Kiening's book-length study (2003) explores medieval textual culture *zwischen Körper und Schrift* ('between the body and writing') in Continental Europe; Simon Gaunt's article (2005) on 'fictions of orality' in troubadour poetry dicusses 'orality' as an effect self-consciously staged in the text; finally, Glauser 2007 analyses narrative episodes in Old Icelandic texts where reading, writing and oral performance are explicitly contrasted.

[10] Roberta Frank (1985, 172–77) gives a survey with references up until the early 1980s; important studies published after this date include Poole 1991, O'Donoghue 1991 and 2005, Finlay 1995, and the collection in Poole 2001.

[11] Gade (1994) summarises debates about Old Norse poetic performance stretching back to the eighteenth century; for recent discussions of skaldic and eddic performance respectively, see Würth (2007) and Harris (2000c).

217). This example – chosen at random – is an instance of the unexceptionable metonymy by which 'voice' stands for *die priviligierte Instanz der Authentifizierung eines pyschologisch gedachten Subjekts* ('the privileged manifestation of the authenticity of a psychologically conceived subject') (Kolesch 2006, 48). The prominence of the figure of the 'skald's voice' in discussions of the *lausavísur* thus bears witness to the continued indebtedness of even the most methodologically sophisticated skaldic scholarship to Romantic ideas of subjectivity and inspiration (Esterhammer 2004). What happens when we take the idea of hearing the skald's voice more literally, or better, more materially – as an auditory phenomenon; as a performed text – is the concern of the remainder of this article.

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The saga episodes at the centre of the following discussion are, like the little story about Hetta, uncanonical. They involve uncannny performances by supernatural performers – giants, revenants, animals – and have been passed over in most studies of skaldic verse in the *Íslendingasögur* in favour of verses more amenable to thematic, psychological or biographical interpretation; verses where what matters is *what it means*, not *how it sounds*. Rather than sharing a theme, the saga episodes discussed here stage a common formal tension, between the sonorous evocation of the presence of a speaking voice and the narrative deferral or problematisation of the body to which that voice belongs. One could perhaps assume that the acousmatic voice is merely a decorative motif used to enhance the aura of the uncanny which surrounds these episodes, but I would suggest that it in fact stages the issue of the voice as medium in the only way possible in *Íslendingasaga* narrative, eschewing as this genre does extradiegetic narratorial commentary, where such themes are commonly addressed in other contemporary literatures. In the second part of my discussion, I support this contention with reference to two other text genres whose conventions allowed mediation to be discussed more explicitly: the grammatical tradition, with its theories of *vox*; and the narratives associated with the being known as *Míms hǫfuð*, where medial moment becomes mythic narrative. What all these texts have in common, I will argue, is their engagement with the problematic of the medium.

2. Uncanny voices

> The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced...It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home... It can come in the fear of losing one's eyes or genitals, or in realizing that someone has a missing or prosthetic body-part, in the strange actuality of dismembered, supplementary or phantom limbs...The uncanny can be a matter of something gruesome or terrible, above all death and corpses, cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead...The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality...Above all, the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world, when uncanny strangeness is at issue. (Royle 2003, 2–3).

This 'strange conceptual shopping-list' (Royle 2003, 14) summarises the main locales of the uncanny in Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'Das Unheimliche'. Tzvetan Todorov's theory (1975), which has been rather more influential than Freud's in saga studies,[12] reserves the term 'uncanny' for experiences which definitely involve the supernatural. The moment of uncertainty, of hovering between explanations, which Freud places at the heart of the uncanny, Todorov instead calls 'the fantastic'. Todorov's model is problematic, not least because using it involves making assumptions about what medieval people would have experienced as supernatural or implausible; as the saga episodes which follow demonstrate, although the supernatural plays a part, it is uncertainty, the state of hovering between, which is key. As proposed above, the locus of this uncertainty can be summed up in the question *who is speaking?*

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[12] Cf. the Proceedings of the 13th Saga Conference (McKinnell et al. 2006), where all references to the concept of the uncanny are to Todorov's work.

Hallmundr í gný fjalla

Bergbúa þáttr tells how two men on their way to Mass are overtaken by a snowstorm in the early evening and shelter in a cave. During the night they hear something come out of the depths of the cave towards them:

> Þá signdu þeir sik ok báðu guð til hjálpar sér, því at þeim þótti lætin mikilfenglig innar í hellinum, ok varð þeim þá litit innar í myrkrit. Þeir sá þá þat, er þeim þótti því líkast sem væri tungl tvau full eðr törgur stórar, ok var á millum stund sú ekki svá lítil. Ekki ætluðu þeir annat heldr en þat væri augu tvau ok mundi sá ekki mjóleitr, er þau skriðljós bar. Því næst heyrðu þeir kveðandi harðla ógurliga með mikilli raust. Var þar hafit upp kvæði ok kveðinn tólf vísna flokkr, ok kvað sá ávallt tysvar niðrlagit. (*ÍF* 13, 442).
>
> Then they crossed themselves and prayed to God for help, because they thought that whatever was making the noise would be something to be reckoned with, and then they happened to glance into the darkness. They saw something that looked to them like two full moons or large round shields, and the space between them was none too small. They had to draw the conclusion that those were two eyes; whoever was carrying those "lamps" cannot have had a very narrow face. Suddenly they heard a frightening recitation in a loud voice. A poem began, a *flokkr* of twelve stanzas, and the speaker always repeated the last line. (*Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, II, 444.)

As in the Hetta episode the physical setting involves an inside/outside contrast: the nervous auditors sit *á steina tvá hjá hellisdyrum*, 'on two stones near the cave entrance', while the speaker *fór innan eptir hellinum ok utar at þeim*, 'moved inside along the cave and outwards towards them'. The voice is acousmatic despite the fact that the speaker approaches the two men, as they cannot see his mouth, or indeed any other part of his body other than his eyes. The invisible mouth is emphasised by the mention of the ominously large 'space' (*stund*) between his glowing eyes from which the loud and frightening voice issues. The voice recites a twelve stanza poem in *dróttkvætt*, repeating the final line of each stanza, as described in the prose. This happens three times in the course of the night, *[e]n þá er kvæðinu var lokit it þriðja sinn, þá leið frá þeim innar í hellinn allt saman*, '[b]ut when the poem ended the third time, everything disappeared from them deeper into the cave' (*ÍF* 13, 450; *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, II, 447).

Disacousmatisation thus does not take place in the prose, where the impersonal *leið frá þeim* is as circumspect as *Bárðar saga*'s passive constructions. But the first of the repeated final lines in the poem contains the name Hallmundr (*Hallmundr í gný fjalla*, 'Hallmundr in the din of the mountains'), and it seems reasonable to identify this being with the first-person speaker in the rest of the poem, a *bjargálfr* 'rock-elf' (st. 11) who *einn á ... hús í hrauni* 'has a house alone in the lavafield' (st. 12). Furthermore, the parallel between the flames and terrifying noises described at length in the first half of the poem (which probably represents a volcanic eruption, see Guðmundur Finnbogason 1935; *ÍF* 13, cciii-ccxii) and the glowing eyes and fearsome voice of its speaker also suggests the same body is the origin of both, and that his performance is a multimedia re-enactment of the eruption. Within the poem, Hallmundr's step makes the rocks resound (*gnýr, þás gengr enn hári / gramr um bratta hamra*, 'it roars when the hoary prince goes round the steep crags', st. 1), and in the frame narrative, his dreadful voice terrifies his hearers, not least thanks to the repeated last line.

Stefán Einarsson observed that *þessi ógnum þrungna endurtekning* ('this terror-steeped repetition') is common in medieval and post-medieval dream- and ghost-verses (1951, 114), and wondered why the poem in *Bergbúa þáttr* exhibits this feature, as it belongs to neither of these genres. He suggested it may be because of the occult learning in the poem – its second half describes Þórr's battles with giants – or because the speaker is himself a half-giant (*blendingur*). But it seems more reasonable to see in repeated last lines one of a number of strategies to foreground the aural, than to insist as Stefán did that final-line repetition is a special case, with its ultimate origins in (Finnish) *seiðr*. Other sound effects such as repetition of every second line or rhymed couplet patterns (as in the examples from *Bárðar saga* above), or *iðurmælt*-like effects (for example the dream-verse Gunnlaugr addresses to Illugi in *Gunnlaugs saga* ch. 13) are also characteristic of dream-, ghost- and prophetic verses; final-line repetition is perhaps just better-known because the instances of it have been indexed several times,[13] whereas no comprehensive survey of dream and prophetic verses exists. The examples of final-line repetition are also strikingly various, encompassing *dróttkvætt*, *fornyrðislag*, repetition of entire lines and of only certain words, and near-, rather than exact, repetition. It is thus probably wisest to regard final-line repetition as part of a continuum of sound effects, systematised by Snorri in his usual way into a fixed form, *galdralag* (and possibly *drag*, see the commentary in Faulkes 1991, 52). The reason for the repeated final lines in the verses in *Bergbúa þáttr* is the move that their sonority facilitates beyond mere communication into magical efficacy and affective power. Just as Hallmundr's tread makes the earth roar, as Stefán aptly observes *slík endurtekning [hefur] verið nóg til þess að láta Íslendingum renna kalt vatn milli skins og hörunds* ('such a repetition has been enough to cause a shiver to run down the spines of Icelanders') (1951, 113–14).

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[13] See the studies referenced in note 4.

Talking heads

Svarfdæla saga exists in a single vellum fragment dated to the late fifteenth century (AM 445c II 4to) and a number of post-medieval manuscripts. Chapter 19 of the saga begins with Karl inn rauði and eight companions sitting at home by the fire:

> [Þ]eir heyra, at nǫkkut gnauðar á húsinu, ok kom kviðlingr:
>
> Sitk á húsi
> sék til þess
> heðan munu vér
> oss hefnda vænta.
>
> Karl mælti: "Alllíkt er þetta róm þeim, er Klaufi, frændi várr, hafði, þá er vér heyrðum til hans, ok má vera, at hann þykkist nǫkkurs mikils við þurfa. Fellr mér svá[14] í hug kveðskapr sjá, at víst er þetta fyrir stórtíðendum, hvárt sem þau eru fram komin eða eigi." Ok fara þeir út eptir þetta alvápnaðir ok ætla at snúa yfir til Hofs. Þá sá þeir ekki lítinn grepp suðr við garðinn, ok var þat Klaufi ok hafði hǫfuðit í hendi sér ok mælti:

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[14] The vellum fragment of *Svarfdæla saga* begins at this point; from here on Íslenzk fornrit's text is taken from AM 445c II 4to, rather than the seventeenth-century paper manuscript AM 161 fol.

Suðr er, ok suðr er
eða hví skulum lengra?[15]

Þeir snúa nú þangat eptir Klaufa ok fara til þess, er þeir koma til Steindyra, ok nam Klaufi þar staðar ok laust hǫfðinu á dyrrnar ok mælti:

Hér er, ok hér er
hví skulum lengra?
(*ÍF* 9, 175–6; *Svarfd* 1966, 38–39).

They hear something making a noise on the roof, and a verse came:

I sit on the house
I look for this
hence shall we
expect for our revenge.

Karl spoke: "The voice is very much like the one that our kinsman Klaufi had, when we used to hear him, and it can be that he has something important in mind. It occurs to me that this poem signifies some great event, whether it has happened or will soon do so'. Afterwards they went out fully armed intending to go over to Hof. Then they saw a strange being, by no means little, south of the hayfield, and it was Klaufi, holding his head in his hand. He spoke:

It is southwards, and southwards
But why shall we further?

Then Karl and his men hastened after Klaufi and kept going until they came to Steindyrr, where Klaufi stopped and knocked on the door with his head and said:

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[15] The post-medieval manuscripts introduce elegant variation, and arguably improve the sense, by reading *svá skulum stefna* 'hence we shall go' in the second line of this verse. They are followed by Íslenzk fornrit and *Skj* B (II, 220). The reading of the medieval manuscript, in which the two *kviðlingar* share the same second line, is followed here.

It is here, it is here
Why shall we further?
(*Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, IV, 174, slightly modified).

Once again the auditors are inside a building and the voice comes from outside, and the prose introducing the verse is vague, saying only *kom kviðlingr*, 'a verse came'. The verses, especially the latter two, are once again repetitive and incantatory. The phenomenal quality of the voice – as opposed to the semantic content of what it says – is also again emphasised, as Karl inn rauði's first response to the voice is to recognise it as Klaufi's. Recognising a voice is a matter of non-semantic, embodied cues: it depends on the physical characteristics of a person's lips, tongue, and voicebox, rather than anything the voice says. As Mireille Schnyder observes, the indexical quality of the voice as natural sign of the person is a widespread motif in medieval literature (forthcoming, 30–31); an obvious instance in Old Norse literature is Þorsteinn drómundr singing from his cell in *Spesar þáttr*.

So far, then, the narrative schema is that of the acousmatic voice. But Karl's disacousmatising move does not make the voice from the roof any less uncanny. As his cautious phrasing suggests (*róm þeim, er Klaufi ... hafði, þá er vér heyrðum til hans*), Klaufi is dead and has been so for some time, and when the men go outside, they see Klaufi carrying his head in his hand. Seeing its origin does nothing here to rob the voice of its uncanny effectiveness, rather, it heightens it. Paradoxically, given the chain of intimate associations of voice with body and of the speaking body with the individual person that the trope of 'recognising someone's voice' evokes, the body in question turns out to be deceased and dismembered, and anything but natural: Klaufi uses his head as an instrument, first a door-knocker, then later in ch. 19 as a weapon. The aural affect of the 'live' performing body, evoked by the sonorous repetitiveness of the verses, is set into a prose narrative of grotesque fictionality, which makes a joke of the communicative potential of the body by letting Klaufi use his own head as a door-knocker.

For the sake of completeness it should be noted that two more talking heads appear in the sagas: in chapter 43 of *Eyrbyggja saga* (*ÍF* 4, 116; *Eb* 2003, 194–5) a *mannshǫfuð laust óhulit* 'human head, loose [from its body] and uncovered [i.e. presumably unburied]' speaks a verse (*staka*); and the verses heard before the battle of Örlygsstaðir in *Sturlunga saga* include one performed by a headless man (the verse 'Þornar heimr ok hrørnar', *Skj* AII, 145; BII, 154). But as these episodes lack the markers of the acousmatic voice trope (the barrier between speaker and listeners, distinctive vocal quality, sonorous aural effects), and probably belong more in the category of prophetic dream- or vision-verses, they will not be further discussed here.

Vox animalia in grammatica and saga

Such liminal vocal phenomena as animal noises and wordless singing, where meaningful utterance borders on meaningless sonority, presented a challenge to the classificatory schemes of medieval grammars. Animal noises feature in the discussions of *vox* 'voice' which conventionally open medieval grammatical works, and the *Second* and *Third Grammatical Treatises* are no exception (*SGT* 1982, 50–55, *TGT* 1884, 1–2). *Vox animalia* is opposed to *vox humana*, the human voice, as animals' voices lack the human potential to become *vox articulata*, 'articulate voice' or meaningful utterance (Schnyder forthcoming, 25); the question of what distinguished human and animal voice when the former was *inarticulata*, as in wordless singing, was accordingly much discussed in the grammatical tradition. As the word *articulata* suggests, the grammarians conceived of meaningful utterances as referring to a system of differentiated signs. They also drew a distinction between *vox literata* and *illiterata* 'writeable' and 'unwriteable' voice.[16] Although animal sounds such as the crow's *cra* or frog's *coax* can be written down, and are so assigned by Priscian to the category *vox literata* 'writeable voice', they do not belong to any such system of signs and are *inarticulata*. *Vox articulata illiterata*, vocal sounds which are meaningful but cannot be written down such as *sibili* 'hisses' and *gemitus* 'moans', could potentially be made by animals (Allen 2004, 308–9; see Wäckerlin 2006, 1007, on the meaningful roaring of Sigurðr þǫgli's companion lion), but Priscian specifies that only human hisses and groans count, and his glossators explained that 'no irrational animal utters a *vox* from the discerning power of the mind so that the utterance may have the intention of signifying, but nature gives the animal the ability to produce a sound when it perceives pain or some other feeling' (Irvine 1985, 860). The canonical animal utterance for the grammarians is thus *cra* or *coax*: a non-semantic noise (*sonus*), not a voice (*vox*), nonetheless susceptible, as *litterata*, to representation, estrangement from embodied presence. As the Second Grammarian writes:

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[16] Schnyder argues (forthcoming, 23) that the use of *articulata* as the criterion of meaningfulness demonstrates that the grammarians' conception of meaning is writing-dependent: the categories of *vox literata* and *vox articulata* tend to fall together. This conception is taken to an extreme by Remigius of Auxerre, who claims that *vox articulata* is named after 'the small joints, with which the quill or reed is held, when the voice is formed into writing'.

> Önnur hljóðsgrein er sú, sem fuglarnir gera eða dýrin ok sækvikindin; þat heitir rödd, en þær raddir heita á marga lund. Fuglarnir syngja ok gjalla ok klaka, ok þó með ýmsum háttum; ok með mörgum nöfnum er greind dýraröddin, ok kunnu menn skyn, hvat kvikindin þykkjast benda með mörgum sínum látum. Sækvikindin blása eða gella. Allar þessar raddir eru mjök skynlausar at viti flestra manna.
>
> Another kind of sound is the one birds, beasts and sea-animals produce; this is called voice, but these voices are named in many ways. Birds sing, shriek and twitter, and even (that) in different ways, and by many names is differentiated the voice of the animals, and men understand what animals intend to signify with many of their sounds. Sea-animals blow or yell. All of these voices appear quite senseless to the minds of most men. (*SGT* 1982, 52–3)

Glæsir the bull in chapter 63 of *Eyrbyggja saga* (*ÍF* 4, 169–76; *Eb* 2003, 296–304)) is to my knowledge the sole animal in the *Íslendingasögur* that 'speaks'.[17] Does Glæsir have a *vox*, and if so, what does it say?

The story goes as follows.[18] Þórólfr bægifótr's ghost has been causing trouble, so the local farmer Þóroddr exhumes Þórólfr's body (which is described as uncorrupted, black as hell, fat as an ox and, not surprisingly, trollish) and burns it on the beach. A cow of Þóroddr's licks some rocks which Þórólfr's ashes have drifted onto, and some time later dies giving birth to two calves, a female and a large and sinisterly dapple-grey male calf. Whether the male calf is Þórólfr's progeny or Þórólfr himself reborn remains unclear (Vésteinn Ólason 2003, 166), especially as the densely imbricated narrative also suggests an alternative method of impregnation: *[þ]at er sumra manna sǫgn, at þá er eyjamenn fóru útan eptir firði með skreiðarfarma, at þá sæi þeir kúna upp í hlíðinni ok naut annat apalgrátt at lit, en þess átti engi maðr ván*, 'it's the story of some people, that when islanders sailed out along the fjord with cargoes of stockfish, they saw the cow up on the slope and another cattlebeast, dapple-grey in colour, and nobody had expected this'. The involvement of a bull points to a more natural means of impregnation than licking ashy rocks, and the fact that both bull and calf are *apalgrár* also suggests sexual reproduction. But it is obviously no normal bull, and seems most likely to be Þórólfr (whose corpse is, we remember, *blár sem hel ok digr sem naut*) in another form. The saga juxtaposes these inconsistent alternative explanations and gives no indication of which is correct, increasing, as Klaus Böldl observes (2005, 123), the audience's unease.

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[17] Talking ships (*Flóamanna saga* ch. 26; see Lindow 2004), a versifying cloak (*Laxdæla saga* ch. 67) and a versifying stone (*Harðar saga* ch. 38) do appear, but there seem to be no talking animals in the *Íslendingasögur*.

[18] The only extant medieval manuscript for this part of the saga is W (Wolfenbüttel 9.10. Aug. 4to, c. 1330–70). AM 448 4to, the basis of the text printed in *ÍF* 4, is a copy made for Árni Magnússon of the lost vellum Vatnshyrna. Marginal variants in the seventeenth-century ms. AM 447 4to are likely to have been copied from AM 445b 4to (c. 1380–1420) when it was in a more complete state (*Eb* 2003, 123*-130*); the 11 leaves of AM 445b which now survive do not include any of the text discussed here. In the following discussion, the *ÍF* 4 text is taken as a basis, but variants from W and 447 are cited from *Eb* 2003 where these are significant.

The calf, along with his apparently normal sister, is brought into the house, where Þóroddr's old, blind foster-mother is sitting. She was second-sighted in her youth but the odd remarks she makes suggest she is now in her dotage. The calf bellows while being tied up (*kvað hann við hátt*), and the old woman declares *[þ]etta eru trolls læti, en eigi annars kvikendis*, 'those are the sounds of a troll, and no other living being',[19] and pleads with Þóroddr to slaughter it, but Þóroddr is infatuated with the *allæligr* (*vænligr*, W) calf. Þóroddr pretends to kill the calf to placate his foster-mother, but slaughters the heifer instead and hides the male calf in the barn over the winter, where it grows extremely fast. When it is let out in the spring, it runs wild in the home-field, *ok beljaði hátt … svá at gǫrla heyrði í hús inn*, 'and bellowed loudly … so it could clearly be heard in the house'. Þóroddr's foster-mother hears this from inside and repeats her request that the ill-starred *troll* be killed, but is again ignored. The calf, now grown into a bull and named Glæsir, is as gentle as a lamb but *jafnan, er hann beljaði, lét hann stórum afskræmiliga; en er kerling heyrði hann, brá henni jafnan mjǫk við*, 'whenever he bellowed, it sounded really hideous, and every time the old woman heard it, she became very distressed'.

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[19] W reads: *þetta eru trollslig læti ok kosti ok skeri sem skjótast troll þetta*, 'those are trollish sounds, try to kill that troll as quickly as possible'.

The third and final time we hear from Glæsir, *hann gall ákafliga hátt, at svá gǫrla heyrði inn í húsin, sem hjá væri*, 'he roared very loudly, so that he was heard as clearly inside the house as if he were inside'; we note that Glæsir's voice is consistently heard from outside, in accordance with the familiar acousmatic schema. The old lady recites two verses (*Skj* AI, 425; BI, 394). In the first she describes Glæsir's voice as violently and physically forceful, beating upon the bodies of its hearers: *Haus knýr hjarðar vísi ... blóðvita rǫddu*, 'the prince of the herd [BULL] bangs on the skull with a blood-knowing voice'.[20] She alone is able to interpret Glæsir's wordless speech, which she mediates for her audience: *sá kennir þér sinna / svarðristit ben jarðar*, 'he [Glæsir] teaches you [Þóroddr] to find the swardless wound of earth [GRAVE]', or more directly, *fé fjǫtrar / fjǫr þitt*, 'the animal fetters your life'. But despite her ability to interpret Glæsir's bellowing, her own voice, in contrast to his, lacks force: *Opt es auðar þopta / œr, es tungu hrœrir ... es ér látið*, 'Often the prop of riches [WOMAN, i.e. the foster-mother] is mad when she moves her tongue, so you people say'.[21] The old woman's voice can be ignored and – what will come as no surprise to the seasoned saga-reader – it is. Þóroddr insists on keeping Glæsir, and the following summer, to the accompaniment of *beljan* 'bellowing' and *skræk mikinn* 'great shrieks', the bull gores him to death and disappears into the sea.

The emphasis in both verse and prose on Glæsir's vocal violence is striking and at first glance surprising. Bellowing, no matter how hideously, is not the worst thing a bull can do. But the stress on vocalisation expands on the idea, introduced by the ingestion of Þórólfr's ashes, that Glæsir is an animal/human hybrid: the voice the foster-mother hears is Þórólfr's, coming up from Glæsir's entrails. As Glæsir is partly human, he is endowed with *vox*, rather than merely *sonus*, but only the second-sighted foster-mother can hear and mediate it, while all the others hear is animal noises, which they fail to interpret correctly. Þórólfr's commandeering of Glæsir's voice is in accordance with medieval ideas of demonic possession, in which the devil replaces the voice of the possessed with his own (Schnyder forthcoming, 28), though suspicions on this front were usually directed at the seductive beauty of wordless song rather than the cries of animals. The *materiality* of this mediation, in contrast to demonic possession, is stressed to the point of overdetermination in the route by which Þórólfr's body has become part of Glæsir's: shapeshifting followed by sexual reproduction, or burning followed by ingestion, in both cases with the body of Glæsir's mother as intermediary.

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[20] AM 448 has *raddar* gen. in place of *rǫddu* dat. The reading of AM 448 provides the *aðalhending* missing from the line in the vellum mss but is syntactically and semantically difficult.

[21] *Látið* is the reading of the vellum mss; AM 448 4to has *litit* (i.e. *litið*), which seems to mean something similar ('as you see it').

The sequence of the cow licking up the ashes, transforming them in her body into Glæsir, and Glæsir 'speaking' is reminiscent of the myth of the mead of poetry, another cycle of ingestion, transmutation and regurgitation. Like the drunken evening at Bárðr's in chapter 44 of *Egils saga* (*ÍF* 2, 107–11), in which verses are interspersed with torrents of vomit, the Glæsir episode restages a mythic pattern in an unsettlingly literal way, and insists upon the material conditions of poetic (and, indeed, any) speech, namely its origins in the depths of the body, and egress from the same orifice used for eating, drinking, and vomiting. Glæsir's bellowing conforms to the category of *vox illiterata*: his utterances cannot be written down, but must be described, whether as *læti* 'sounds' or *skrækur* 'shrieks', or by verbs such as *kveða*, *belja* or *gjalla*. Despite not being writeable, his voice is nonetheless *articulata*, meaningful, to his interpreter, Þóroddr's foster-mother, who performs a final unlikely transformation by translating Glæsir's yells into *dróttkvætt* verse.

Míms hǫfuð

Finally, in the figure of *Míms hǫfuð* the medial moment becomes the kernel of a mythic narrative, with the relationship between voice, body and text and the mechanics of textual production and dissemination as its theme.

Óðinn's advisor *Míms hǫfuð* 'Mímr's head' has been treated, albeit usually briefly, in a number of studies (Simpson 1962; Turville-Petre 1964, 142–3; Clunies Ross 1994, 212–15; Dronke 1997, 136–7; Bragg 2004, 65–7). *Vǫluspá* and *Sigrdrífumál*, the poetic sources which depict this being communicating with Óðinn, refer to it only as (the possessor of) a head: *mælir Óðinn við Míms hǫfuð* 'Óðinn speaks with Mímr's head'

(*Vǫluspá* 46); the *Sigrdrífumál* instance will be discussed further below. In other contexts, where communication is not at issue, the name Mímr/Mímir/Mími occurs without the *hǫfuð* element, for example *Mímameiðr* 'Mími's tree', *Fjǫlsvinnsmál* 19–22; *Hoddmímis holt* 'Hoard-Mímir's wood', *Vafþrúðnismál* 45; *Mímis brunni* 'Mímir's well', *Vǫluspá* 28. It is not, however, certain that all these references are to the same being, and in some further instances the context makes it clear that Mímir/Mímr is a giant (*Sǫkkmímir* 'Mímir of the deep', *Grímnismál* 50; *Míms synir* 'sons of Mímr', *Vǫluspá* 46; *hrekk-Mímis ekkjur* 'widows of crafty Mímir' (i. e. giantesses), *Þórsdrápa* 9).

The sole account of *Míms hǫfuð* attached to a body is in *Ynglinga saga*. Chapter 4 recounts the hostage exchange that ends the Æsir-Vanir war. The Æsir send their handsomest member, Hœnir, and their cleverest, Mímir, in exchange respectively for Njǫrðr and Freyr, and Kvasir:

> En er Hœnir kom í Vanaheim, þá var hann þegar hǫfðingi gǫrr. Mímir kenndi honum ráð ǫll. En er Hœnir var staddr á þingum eða stefnum, svá at Mímir var eigi nær, ok kœmi nǫkkur vandamál fyrir hann, þá svaraði hann æ inu sama: 'ráði aðra', kvað hann. Þá grunaði Vani, at Æsir myndi hafa falsat þá í mannaskiptinu. Þá tóku þeir Mími ok hálshjoggu ok sendu hǫfuðit Ásum. Óðinn tók hǫfuðit ok smurði urtum þeim, er eigi mátti fúna, ok kvað þá yfir galdra ok magnaði svá, at þat mælti við hann ok sagði honum marga leynda hluti. (*ÍF* 26, 13).
>
> And when Hœnir arrived in Vanaheimr, he was immediately made a chieftain. He took all his counsel from Mímir. But when Hœnir was so placed at a *þing* or meeting that Mímir wasn't nearby, and some difficulty was presented to him, then he always answered alike: 'let others decide', he said. Then the Vanir suspected that the Æsir might have defrauded them in the hostage exchange. Then they took Mímir and chopped off and sent the head to the Æsir. Óðinn took the head and smeared it with certain herbs, so that it wouldn't decay, and spoke charms over it and gave it such magical powers that it spoke to him and told him many hidden things.

Dronke questions the logic of this: why do the Vanir decapitate Mímir, when it is Hœnir who they find wanting? Clunies Ross argues that Mímir represents memory (as suggested by the etymology of his name), 'conceptualised as alienable from the bod[y] in which [it] normally resided' and that 'once freed from his body, his head (the concentration of his mental powers) is returned to the Æsir and specifically to Óðinn, who embalms it (thus freeing it from its corporeal origins)' (1994, 213). True though this may be of *Míms hǫfuð* in *Vǫluspá* and *Sigrdrífumál*, it is inadequate as a description of the situation in *Ynglinga saga*, where Mímir's body certainly matters; where mediation, rather than memory, is the ability at issue; and where the Æsir's behaviour is, from the viewpoint of the Vanir at least, trickery. How Mímir communicates with Hœnir is not made clear. The requirement that they be near to one another indicates their communication has a physical basis: it is not a matter of mind reading. The communication between *Míms hǫfuð* and its interlocutors is always verbal (*þat mælti við hann ok sagði honum marga leynda hluti, Ynglinga saga* ch. 4; *mælir Óðinn / við Míms hǫfuð, Vsp* 46); then again a severed head, however magical, does not have many other options (cf. Jǫrmunrekkr's roaring after his arms and legs have been cut off, *Hamðismál* 25). Assuming this is also true of Mímir pre-decapitation, he would then be communicating 'ventriloquist-like' (Bragg 2004, 66) to Hœnir the words which come from the latter's mouth. This is the acousmatism trope again, here figured as trickery and deception (*myndi hafa falsat þá*). The Vanir's beheading of Mímir and silencing of his uncanny voice, at least until Óðinn's herbs and magic come on the scene, is then an extreme example of disacousmatisation.

The emphasis on *Míms hǫfuð* as a speaking being in *Ynglinga saga* and *Vǫluspá* makes it all the odder that when *Míms hǫfuð* appears in *Sigrdrífumál* it is in the context of runic, that is, written, wisdom:

> Á biargi stóð með Brimis eggiar,
> hafði sér á hǫfði hiálm.
>
> Þá mælti Míms hǫfuð
> fróðlict iþ fyrsta orð,
> oc sagði sanna stafi.
> (*Sigrdr*. v. 14, *Edda* 1962, 192).

On the cliff he stood with Brimir's sword,
a helmet he had on his head;

then Mim's head spoke
wisely the first word
and told the true letters.
(Larrington 1996, 169)

As usual in Old Norse mythology, the acquisition of knowledge is associated with violence, symbolised here by the armed and helmeted figure. This figure is almost certainly Óðinn, mentioned in the previous stanza. The narrator is the valkyrie Sigrdrífa, who goes on to 'ventriloquise' *Míms hǫfuð* in sts. 15–17, a list of where the runes should be carved.[22] To resolve the oddity of *Míms hǫfuð* speaking *sanna stafi* 'true staves', the plural *stafir* is usually taken as meaning 'words' rather than 'letters, runes' (von See et al. 2006, 579; Kuhn 1968, 190–91), but as Clunies Ross appositely comments, this passage 'associates runic writing with operative magic of various kinds and the physical location of these messages ... the association between verbal utterance and operative magic realised in writing is very strong' (1994, 214 n. 22). In st. 5, Sigurðr is given beer *fullr ... lióða oc lícnstafa, / góðra galdra oc gamanrúna*, 'full ... of spells and favourable letters, / good charms and joyful runes', while in st. 18 the process of mixing such a drink is described: *Allar vóro af scafnar, þær er vóro á ristnar, / oc hverfðar við inn helga miǫð*, 'All [the runes] were shaved off, those which were carved on, / and scattered with the sacred mead'.

In *Sigrdrífumál* magical effectiveness is embodied in writing as material object, something which can be carved, shaved and scattered, later to be ingested in the form of a drink (Quinn 1992, 114). Exchanges, transfers and transformations from one physical form to another, conceptualised as a busy traffic in and out of the mouth, characterise the process of acquiring runic knowledge. *Míms hǫfuð* speaking runic letters, like the gods, elves and men ingesting the runes as a mixture of mead and wood-shavings, enacts a transfer of magical effects across medial boundaries, from numinous to material, from embodied presence to writing, and back again. In

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[22] The corresponding section of *Vǫlsunga saga* simplifies this process by omitting st. 14: sts. 15–17 then become the valkyrie's directly imparted runic wisdom; see von See et al. (2006, 577).

Ynglinga saga, on the other hand, mediation is an occasion for trickery, not teaching. Hœnir's beautiful body turns out to be an empty shell, reverberating with words which are not his own: he is merely a medium for the wisdom of Mímir. The Vanir seek to deprive the author of the trick, Mímir, of his ability to communicate by cutting off his head (cf. *Hamðismál* 28: *Af væri nú haufuð, ef Erpr lifði*), thus returning the voice-body-subject relation to normality. Hœnir then has (only) his own voice, and Mímir none, as he is silenced by death. Only temporarily so, however, as Óðinn's magic reanimation restores voice to *Míms hǫfuð*, albeit a voice without a body, an inversion of Hœnir's body without a voice.

Klaufi and *Míms hǫfuð* both trouble the relationship between voice, body and subject (the talking head Freysteinn finds on Geirvǫrskriða in *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 43 serves different narrative ends, a reminder that not all severed heads say the same thing). In *Svarfdæla saga* and *Ynglinga saga*, the question *who is speaking?* is thematised in the narrative itself, in the former by Karl's hesitant recognition of Klaufi's voice, and in the latter by the Vanir's growing suspicion that they are the victims of a trick. When the physically imposing Hœnir turns out to be incapable of correspondingly authoritative speech acts, managing only the comically inadequate *ráði aðrar*, his legitimacy is destroyed. And in both cases the 'disacousmatising' move of ascribing a source to the voice ('It's Klaufi!' 'It's Mímir!'), which should put everything back in its proper place and guarantee that utterances have their origins in a particular subject, is disturbed by the literal severing of the link between voice and body. It is the very unnaturalness of *Míms hǫfuð* as a speaking being which suits it for the role of 'speaker of true letters' in *Sigrdrífumál*. The magical effectiveness which is repeatedly granted to acousmatic voices, and modelled within the saga text by the excessive aural effects in their stanzas – the noise of the verse beating on the listeners' ears – is in *Sigrdrífumál* ascribed to the intersection between writing and the body, as the runes issue from the mouth of *Míms hǫfuð*, are inscribed, shaved off, mixed with mead, and ingested.

3. Conclusion

The uncanny voices of the *Íslendingasögur* dramatise the shifting ground between embodied performance and disembodied text, the old and the new medium, in medieval Iceland. It is no coincidence that they tend to issue from supernatural beings, whether troll-wives, as in *Bárðar saga*, revenants, as in *Svarfdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, or cave-dwelling giants, as in *Bergbúa þáttr*, as the supernatural and fantastical are key elements in the sagas' cultural work of demarcating the present from the past (Clunies Ross 2002). But the acousmatic voice trope is also used in at least one instance to dramatise the clash between *forneskja* versus *inn nýi sið* in a non-supernatural context, in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*'s description of Þorvaldr and the pagan woman Friðgerðr performing their religious observances: *Þorvalldr taldi þar tru fyrir mǫnnum. en Friðgerðr blotaði meþan inni. ok heyrði huart þeira aNars orð* ('Þorvaldr preached the faith there before the people, and Friðgerðr sacrificed inside at the same time, and each of them heard the words of the other') (*ÓT* I, 290).[23] And as I hope to have shown, the charisma of these voices is not merely due to their being placed in the mouths of supernatural speakers. Rather, the poetic effect of sonority and the narrative strategy of acousmatism jointly establish these voices as uncanny, and keep the audience hovering in a state of uncertainty as to their origins, suspended between the *mana* of performance and the absence of the performer.

Uncertainty over authorship and authority and the play of presence and absence also characterise the written text in the environment of vocality. Thanks to their copious quotation of skaldic verse, the *Íslendingasögur* include many depictions of performance. However, they have a blind spot, as Stefanie Würth (2007, 267) has pointed out: if the idea of oral transmission is to have any credibility, 'rhapsodic' performances must have taken place in medieval Iceland. But depictions of skalds performing other people's verses are absent from the sagas. Some evidence indicates that this kind of activity was frowned upon. Eyvindr's nickname *skáldaspillir* is usually taken as meaning 'plagiarist', and an anecdote is told in *Skáldasaga* of Auðunn's theft of a *stef* from another poet's work, resulting in him being given the nickname *illskælda* 'bad poet' and his poem the title *Stolinstefja* 'Stolen *Stef*' (*Hb* 445).[24] Perhaps the blind spot of the sagas where rhapsodic performance is concerned came about because the activities both of the saga-writer, who like the rhapsode, 'does not properly produce anything, but only reforms, combines, gathers and presents' (Bernstein 1998, 97), and of the readers who took part in *sagnaskemmtun*, could also very well be described in these not altogether favourable terms.

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[23] In this context it is interesting to note that both the Hetta episode in *Bárðar saga* and Klaufi's appearance carrying his own severed head appear to be repurposings of hagiographic motifs: Bárðr Snæfellsáss rescues Ingjaldr from the storm conjured up by Hetta in a manner reminiscent of a miracle of St Þórlakr (cf. Ólafur Lárusson 1944, 176), while decapitated saints carrying their heads, such as St Denis (*Heilagra manna drápa* st. 13; *SkP* 7, 881–2), are common in medieval Christian iconography.

Uncertainty as to who is really responsible for the words the audience hears, coupled paradoxically with the authoritative presence of live performance, is constitutive of the rhapsodic performance situation, and these tensions are played upon in artistically self-conscious late medieval texts – it should be noted that the instances of the acousmatic voice cluster in so-called 'post-classical' sagas. But the theme also occurs elsewhere. *Ynglinga saga* relocates the acousmatism trope into the mythic sphere and lays bare the potential for deception in the split between text and originating body. And in *Sigrdrífumál* the cyclical process by which text and body are separated and reunited is a reservoir of magical power, and the intoxicating drink of knowledge gets a textual twist. The drink in *Sigrdrífumál* is made not of ingested and regurgitated bodily fluids, as is the mead of poetry, but of *stafir* which are spewed out, carved on wood, shaved off and mixed with liquor, and drunk again, in a compelling metaphor for the mediation of knowledge not through the embodied storage of memory, but rather (like Mímir's embalmed head) externally, through the new storage technology of writing.

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[24] I am grateful to Margaret Clunies Ross for drawing the example in *Skáldasaga* to my attention.

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