Seinýrnd skip dverga: dynamics of memory and forgetting in Old Norse texts

Introduction: archive and canon – writing, remembering and forgetting

The first two quotations on your handout showcase two contrasting memory strategies. The first is from one of the miracle collections associated with Porláks saga helga:

‘And when a great profusion [of narratives] had accumulated around the miracles of the blessed Bishop Porlákr, so it was beyond people to keep them in memory, and there were [so] many that each was like the other, then people’s minds became numbed, and their organs of speech wearied with respect to utterances, but speech comes to nothing after writing...’

The second is from Sturlunga saga:

‘A tax was now exacted from the country, as many know, so we will not write more about this, albeit there is much material for a saga.¹

As these quotations suggest, medieval Icelandic textual culture was, to use a term of Ursula Schaefer’s, a culture of ‘vocality’ in which writing and the body intersected in complex ways. The quotation from Porláks saga describes writing as a supplement to embodied memory, stepping in where human bodies and memories are overwhelmed by the sheer mass of data and (it goes on to say) allowing Porlákr’s miracles to be collected as fully and disseminated as widely as possible. The quotation from Sturlunga saga, on the other hand, describes, in an oft-repeated formula, how writing prunes oral narrative, transmitting only that which is worthy of preservation, while omitting much other material which mórgum mönnum er kunnigt orðið. Every reader of the sagas is familiar with asides like this one, which gesture at the narrative road not taken, reminders that, as Aleida Assmann writes, ‘forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life [and] remembering is the exception, which – especially in the cultural sphere – requires special and costly precautions’ (2008, 98).

Forgetting was initially neglected in the ‘memory boom’ which catapulted its counterpart into the academic stratosphere in the early 1990s. There are scattered pioneer works such as Yosef

¹ I am indebted to Kevin Müller for drawing this passage in Sturlunga saga to my attention.
Yerushalmi’s conference volume *Usages de l’oubli* from 1988, and Edward Casey’s 1992 article entitled ‘Forgetting remembered’, which he intended to make up for the omission of this topic in his exhaustive phenomenology, *Remembering* (1987) – in the foreword to the second edition of this book he claims he did write a chapter on forgetting, but forgot it. In 1997 a wide-ranging cultural history was published by the German cultural critic Harald Weinrich, entitled *Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*, and translated into English in 2004. The Dutch historian of psychology Douwe Draaisma is another who, having published an important book on memory (*Metaphors of memory*, 1995), has remembered about forgetting (*Vergeetboek*, 2010, still to be translated into English). In fact, forgetting is presently experiencing a mini-boom of its own, with a number of recent collections on the topic (a few are listed on your handout).

This pattern of ‘remembering about forgetting’ in memory research suggests two things. One is that remembering and forgetting, memory and oblivion, are so intertwined that any treatment of the one also involves the other. Even Weinrich’s book, despite its title, is at least as much about remembering as it is about forgetting. But, as the sequence ‘first memory, then forgetting’ suggests, forgetting is rather elusive. Edward Casey notes, ‘the content of forgetting, its very mass, is at once indeterminate and non-narrational’ (1992, 287). We can see this already in the two quotations I began with: discursive reflections on memory, such as the quotation from the *Jartegnabók*, are reasonably common in our sources. The study of forgetting, on the other hand, tends to involve ‘interrogating gaps, omissions and absences in narratives’ as in the quotation from *Sturlunga*.

To return to those two quotations, I follow cultural memory theorists in describing the strategies represented by them as those of the *Archive* and the *Canon* respectively. They represent contrasting responses to the potentialities of writing. The archive makes use of writing as an in principle infinitely extendible artificial memory. It aims at maximal accumulation, preservation, and storage – in the *Jartegnabók*, the writing down of every miracle associated with Þorlákr. Archiving thus serves remembering – but it also results in forgetting, as an archive of material removed from circulation or ‘warehoused’ runs the risk of becoming ‘the grave, rather than the vessel, of meaning’ (Assmann 1992, 91).

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2 (Beiner 2008, 111)
The canon, on the other hand, mobilises forgetting in order to impose coherence on the ever-expanding space of possibilities brought by writing. According to Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory, outlined in his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, the site where key knowledge is produced and maintained shifts in early written cultures. From being located in ritual performance – in the Old Norse context we might think of the *erfi*, or funeral feast, at which memorial poetry was performed and the inheritance apportioned – the cultural centre of gravity shifts to the interpretation of founding texts. However, ‘the decisive change from ritual to textual coherence’, Assmann writes, ‘is not brought about by writing [itself], but rather by the freezing of the stream of tradition by the process of canon-formation… canonical texts demand interpretation and so become the point of departure for hermeneutic cultures’ (1992, 93, my translation).

Forgetting is essential because the canon is inherently selective, a ‘motivational structure’ which offers authoritative models, whose conformity to strict criteria makes them suitable for imitation. The forgetting of texts which do not make the cut is the condition of the canon’s existence. But the aim of the canon is of course memorial. It creates a ‘cultural working memory’ (Assmann 2008, 100) which makes the great works of the past available for imitation. Both canon and archive, then, display the inevitable imbrication of remembering and forgetting.

My remarks today will focus on the *Prose Edda*, a work which has often been considered under the sign of the archive, with its putative author Snorri as ‘antiquarian’ collector of myths. I instead read it as a self-conscious attempt at canon formation, and will examine the *Prose Edda*’s reflections on memory, forgetting, and cultural transmission in this context, asking the questions, What does the *Prose Edda* forget? and How does it stage forgetting?

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The address to young skalds preserved in all major manuscripts of the *Prose Edda* early in *Skáldskaparmál*, in the words of Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘situates the systematisation of mythic knowledge at a point of impending cultural loss’. The text itself speaks at this point of forgetting (*gleyma*) and loss of validity (*ósanna*). Many commentators have described Snorri, understandably enough, as an ‘antiquarian’ or ‘historian’, who included certain narratives.

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3 (Foote 1984, 90; Gylf ed. Faulkes, xxvi, xxvii; Kellogg 1991, 93; Clunies Ross 2005, 12)
“mainly for the sake of completeness”. Anthony Faulkes lists the instances where *Gylfgaginning* records contradictory versions of the same narrative and concludes, ‘it may be that [Snorri] did not want to reject any of his sources’. But, although it is true that the *Edda* includes alternate versions of some narratives – it even, in the story of Þórr’s fight with Miðgarðsormr, comments on their relative plausibility – the Snorri-as-completist perspective obscures the omissions which structure the *Prose Edda*.

One example of this is the mismatch between the verseforms named after particular poets in *Háttatal* and the citations in *Skáldskaparmál*. *Háttatal* includes a group of stanzas exhibiting certain metrical variations (the characteristics of which need not trouble us here) as part of a historical discourse about the origins of skaldic poetry. Stanzas are presented which are said to be composed after the models of Ragnarr lóðbrok, Torf-Einarr, Egill, Fleinn and Bragi. The commentary bookends them by remarking that the variations found in the poems of the early skalds (*fornskáld*) are associated with ‘metrical inconsistencies’ (*háttafollum*) which are acceptable in early poetry but should not be imitated. It is thus rather paradoxical that these poets are imitated in *Háttatal* but, with the exception of Egill and Bragi, not quoted in *Skáldskaparmál!* Neither is Starkaðr, whose *Starkaðar lausavísur* appears at the very end of *Háttatal*, grouped with the eddic metres. No verse at all by Fleinn is extant, though *Skáldatal* lists a ‘Fleinn skáld’ among the poets of Eysteinn beli. Despite this walk-on appearance in the canon, he has been completely forgotten. But some poetry is attributed to Ragnarr in his saga, and Torf-Einarr’s *lausavísur* are transmitted in *Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga saga*.

The absence of Torf-Einarr from *Skáldskaparmál* highlights another intriguing tendency in *Skáldskaparmál*: it quotes no stanzas by Orkney skalds. It does include citations from poems with Orkney subject-matter such as Arnór’s *Porfinnsdrápa* and *Røgnvaldsdrápa*, but poems by the Orkney residents and notable skalds Torf-Einarr, Røgnvaldr, Oddi inn lítli and Armóðr do not appear in *Skáldskaparmál*, despite their presence of their verses in *Orkneyinga saga* and, in the case of Torf-Einarr, *Heimskringla*. This is puzzling in the light of the close connections between Oddi and the Orkneys which have been proposed in the literature, and the likely dependence of *Háttatal* on Røgnvaldr and Hallr’s *Háttalykill*. Perhaps the inclusion of Bjarni býskup’s *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Málisháttakvæði* in the Codex Regius manuscript of the *Prose Edda* was intended to make up for this lack?

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4 (Beck passim)  
5 (*Gylf* ed. Faulkes, xx)  
6 (1983, 29-30)
These are only a couple of examples of the *Prose Edda’s* ‘gaps, omissions and absences’. At this early stage of my research into this question I would tentatively suggest that these omissions make the *Skáldskaparmál* canon seem rather cleaned-up. It includes very little poetry in *fornyrðislag*, nothing from the geographically marginal Orkneys, and the position of first skald is taken by the god Bragi rather than the monster Starkaðr (or, as Margaret Clunies Ross would put it, the court poet Bragi rather than the *þulr* Starkaðr). Further evidence for this hypothesis is Anthony Faulkes’ observation that the metaphorical kenning-types *nýgerving* and *nykrat* are not exemplified in *Skáldskaparmál*, despite the fact that the patterns of metaphoric extension they describe are quite common in the skaldic corpus.

*Skáldskaparmál’s* choice of citations also emphasises the early and the mythological – for instance the sidelining of Sigvatr, and preference of Hallfreðr’s exuberantly mythographic *Hákonardrápa* over his *Er fidrápa* – and so reinforces the orientation towards the deep past of the origins in *Gylfaginning*’s canon of myths. Exclusion from the canon in *Skáldskaparmál* need not mean that skalds are irrevocably forgotten, as the ‘rehabilitation’ of such skalds as Starkaðr, Þórleifr jarlsskáld, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and Sneglu-Halli in the more fault-tolerant environment of the *Third and/or Fourth grammatical treatises* shows. But the exclusion of more than half of the *fornskáld* named in *Háttatal* from *Skáldskaparmál*’s conspectus shows that omission is an important, if not immediately apparent, technique in the *Prose Edda*.

I therefore agree with Kevin Wanner that the ‘doxic assumption’ of Snorri’s antiquarianism (2008, 6) should be interrogated (although I part company with him on what should replace it). The address to young skalds in fact clearly states the canonical intention of the *Prose Edda*. It refers to *hofuðskáld* ‘chief skalds’, implying the exclusion of those not so categorised. Its orientation is retrospective, with both kennings and *heiti* referred to as *forn*. It emphasises imitation and new composition according to the rules laid down in the canon. And

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7 My third instance concerns the poetry associated with Magnús berfœttr, ruler of Norway from 1093 to 1103. The kings’ sagas transmit a substantial amount of poetry both by and for Magnús, none of which appears in *Skm*. Alongside Magnús’s own six *lausavísur* (transmitted in *Mork*, *H-Hr* and *Orkn*), preserved poetry for him comprises a 20-stanza *er fidrápa* in *fornyrðislag* by Gísl Illugason and two *dróttkvætt drápur*, which are also preserved in *Hkr*, by Bjorn krephendi (11 sts) and Þorkell hamarskáld (5 sts), the latter of whom is represented in *Skm* by a single stanza from another poem. When we compare Haraldr harðráði (r. 1046-66) and his skalds, almost all of whom (Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, Íllumi bryndelaskáld, Bolverkr Arnórsson, Grani skáld, Stúfr inn blindi, Valgarðr á Velli) feature in *Skáldskaparmál*, it is rather hard to see why Magnús and his skalds are absent. *Fornyrðislag* certainly seems to be avoided in *Skm*, with only one verse in that meter quoted there, but this does not explain the absence of the other poetry.

8 *(nýgerving* appears in one verse in *Háttatal* only)*
finally, in the Edda’s stress on the obscurity and complexity of the skaldic form, we see a cultural practice changing from being a taken-for-granted tradition to the epitome of the difficult and challenging, something which requires interpretation by specialists.

Forgetting, then, has an implicit, structural role in the Prose Edda text. Unusually, the Edda also explicitly reflects upon memory and forgetting. Like the sagas, the Prose Edda is a written text made up of materials in part taken from oral tradition. It differs from them, however, in that it also reflects on its own practices – selecting material, constructing narratives, and textual transmission – processes which in the sagas of Icelanders remain implicit and in other saga genres are only commented on in prologues. The Edda not only contains a large number of narratives, it is also, thanks to its frame dialogues, a text about narrating, as recent studies by Jürg Glauser have shown. How, then, does the Edda describe the remembering and forgetting of cultural materials? I will answer this question via two examples: the Prologue, and the story of Þjazi and Skaði in Skáldskaparmál.

Whenever and by whomever it may have been composed, the Prologue is part of the Prose Edda compilation in all complete medieval manuscripts, and may reasonably be interrogated for reflective statements about the enterprise it introduces. The Prologue recounts how after the flood, Noah’s descendants cease to use God’s name, and eventually forget it, rendering them unable to tell their sons of his deeds or to know anything about their creator.¹ No Latin parallel has been found for the topos of forgetting the name of God – it is not simply inherited from a source.¹° People’s God-given earthly wisdom, the Prologue continues, then enables them to make various observations about the natural world; and here follows the famous passage describing how these led them to deduce the existence of a creator. This description concludes ‘but so as to be better able to give an account of this (frá segja) and fix it in memory (í minni festa), then they gave a name among themselves to everything’.¹¹

The relationship of these passages and related ones later in the Prologue to the rest of the Edda has been the subject of vigorous debate. I propose a middle way between interpretations of these statements as referring specifically to skaldic diction, and so to Skáldskaparmál, and

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¹ Upsaliensis is shorter here, only saying that their forgetfulness of God’s name makes it impossible for them to recount his deeds.
¹° ‘Such a preoccupation with preserving and handing down the name of God correctly could be paralleled in certain Hellenistic Gnostic texts, but we know of nothing comparable in the mainstream of the Latin tradition’. Dronke and Dronke, 163.
¹¹ U again has a shorter text, attributing this naming only to the desire to remember (at þeir maett muna þú).
those which see them as referring to Language as such, or to the languages spoken in Scandinavia or elsewhere. Instead I read these statements as ‘mediological’, that is, as concerning the conditions of possibility for the encoding and transmitting of culture in concrete forms and practices. That their essential elements also appear in Upsaliensis, which Daniel Sävborg has recently shown is probably an abridgment of the common text, is additional evidence of their importance.

The Prologue, then, presents the name as a kernel which enhances memorability and enables narrative elaboration. Narrative in turn allows intergenerational transmission to take place. At first this transmission is oral, but at the end of the Prologue written name-lists are mentioned, as you can see in the last extract under item 4 on the handout. Forgetting, at least the forgetting of the name of God, is presented as the consequence of having neglected (afrektusk) God’s commandments. However, it is also productive. It opens a space for new namings which, eventually, give rise to new narratives, which can be remembered and passed on in their turn. The Prologue, then, stages cultural reproduction as an enterprise in which both remembering and forgetting are necessary: remembering, to enable transmission, and forgetting, to make an opening for new creative acts.

The second narrative I wish to explore here is one of the best-known in the Prose Edda, that of Þjazi. As the first story Bragi tells Ægir, it launches Skáldskaparmál, and has a special status in the Bragarœður as the only story unprompted by a question. Like the interestingly similar story of Þórr’s fight with Hrungnir, which I do not have time to discuss here, it ends in stellar fashion: Óðinn hurls Þjazi’s eyes into the heavens, where they become stars. The relationship of the star motif to the preceding narrative has been little studied and remains rather mysterious. Margaret Clunies Ross, for instance, points out that this final act of metamorphosis is a foreign body in the wondertale structure which patterns the rest of the Skaði story.

I pick up the story as Skaði arrives in Ásgardr seeking redress for the death of her father Þjazi, who has been killed by the Æsir for kidnapping the goddess Iðunn.

‘But Skaði, daughter of giant Thiassi, took helmet and mail-coat and all weapons of war and went to Asgard to avenge her father. But the Æsir offered her atonement and compensation…"
It was also in her **terms of settlement** that the Æsir were to do something that she thought they would not be able to, that was to make her laugh…

Then the **atonement** with her on the part of the Æsir was complete. It is said that Odin, as **compensation** for her, did this: he took Thiassi’s eyes and threw them up into the sky and out of them made two stars.’

The scene of Skaði making peace with the Æsir is one of amnesty, ‘an ur-scene for deliberate forgetting’, as Sybille Krämer observes. By accepting compensation and marriage into the group which has wronged her, rather than putting into effect the vengeful remembering she signals by arriving with her weapons, Skaði agrees to forget the ‘harm’ which is one of the meanings of her name. The final move from the Æsir, the conversion of Þjazi’s eyes into stars, then appears oddly like, as John Lindow says, ‘additional, unrequired, extracontractual compensation’ (1996, 18) – although its place as third item in the series of compensations would suggest it is in fact the most important.

Key to the star transformation is its commemorative function. A fragment attributed to Bragi Boddason, in which Þjazi’s eyes are said to be of sjot margra manna ‘above the dwellings of many men’, visible to all, also implies that the founding of a famous memory is the goal of the gods’ act. (A modern counterpart is the International Star Registry, where for US$54, you can have a star named after yourself). It ensures that Þjazi’s memory lives on after his daughter has accepted compensation for him, and so, forgotten him. Given that the commemoration of the dead in the erfiørði seems to have been a key social role of the skalds, it seems reasonable to view this narrative as an aetiological story about skaldic poetry. The culmination of the Þjazi narrative is thus not Skaði’s marriage, or her laughter, but rather Óðinn’s creation of a symbolic memorial for the deceased; and one of the functions of the narrative in the context of *Skáldskaparmál* is to provide an origin-story for skaldic poetry in an act of commemoration.12

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12 Also relevant in this context is the ‘epilogue’ to this story. Ægir asks about Þjazi’s ancestry and is told the story of how he and his brothers apportioned out their inheritance by mouth, the origin of the kenning-type ‘speech or words or talk of giants’ – here the aetiological nature of the narrative is more clear and it is again connected with commemoration and the erfi (via its other main function, the apportioning of inheritance).
Memory is a key trope in skaldic poetry, as I and others have discussed elsewhere. The skalds laud memorable acts and their commemoration, and take a dim view of forgetting. The skaldic corpus does not appear to include the word óminni, the usual term in prose for ‘forgetfulness’. And the commonest Old Norse verb for ‘forget’, gleyma, is rare in skaldic verse, attested only in a couple of places in Christian and homiletic poetry. Instead most references to forgetting in skaldic verse use the verb fyrna(sk) -- like minna ‘remember’, most often encountered in the middle voice form. As its derivation from forn ‘old’ suggests, the basic idea is one of decay over time. Fyrnask is used, for example, of built objects such as churches and boats, where the usual gloss is ‘decay, become delapidated’; and in legal contexts, to denote the ‘lapsing’ of a grounds for legal action with time. Fyrnask ‘forget’ pictures forgetting as a slow diminishment as events move over the horizon into the past.

A typical skaldic instance of fyrnask is this anonymous half-stanza transmitted in Skáldskaparmál:

Bæði ák til brúðar
bergjarls ok skip dverga
sollinn vind at senda
seinfyrnd götu eina.
(Skj BI, 173)

I have both, the swollen wind of the bride of the mountain-earl [THOUGHT] and the hardly-decayed ship of dwarves [POETRY], to send on the same way.

Seinfyrnd ‘hardly-decayed’ attributes to the poetic utterance an obstinate refusal to go out of date, decay, or lose its timely force – in other words, to be forgotten. Other skaldic instances of fyrnask are also couched in the negative. St Óláfr’s miracles, the suffering of the king’s enemies, or his deeds in battle fyrnask eigi or aldri ‘will not or will never be forgotten’.13

Skip dverga in this stanza is of course a reference to the myth of the mead of poetry, the ‘master narrative’ of oral poetic mediality. Like the Poetic Edda’s drinks of memory and forgetting, the mead of poetry hovers between alcoholic and magical, and is an instance of the metaphorical construct Judy Quinn recently labeled ‘liquid knowledge’. While the image of

13 Geisli 24, Darraðarljóð 8, Skáld-Helgi Lv, Þórðr Kolbeinsson Eiríksdrápa 5 respectively.
memory as a bird, like Óðinn’s ravens Huginn and Muninn, emphasises the contingency and fragility of memory, the drink metaphor associates remembering with the ecstatic, inspired, memorious performance of the poet. Forgetting, by contrast, is presented as involuntary, something which **happens to** the subject, and is negatively valued, as loss, decay, or even, in Hávamál’s passage about óminnis hegri, theft and fettering. There is no sign in the drinking party at Fjalarr’s of the ‘blissful ecstasy of oblivion’ (Weinrich, 14) experienced by Homer’s Lotus-Eaters, and skaldic claims that their dedicatees’ fame will ‘never decay’ seem like protesting too much, against a backdrop of forgetting as the natural course of things.

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In conclusion I would like to revisit the two questions with which I launched my discussion today, namely, what does the *Prose Edda* forget, and how does it talk about forgetting?

Asking what the *Edda* forgets implies a certain methodological position. Rather than taking the *Edda* as an ‘uninterested’ antiquarian archive of Old Norse myth and poetics, I read it as an attempt at canon formation. Among other things, this shifts attention to the gaps between Edda’s account of the skaldic corpus and what we know of it from other sources. I have only had time today to scratch the surface of such an approach. Further possible areas of investigation could include such topics as comparison between the corpus of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál* and that in the kings’ sagas; differences between Háttatal and *Skálískaparmál* – for example in the treatment of the forn绝缘; the complicated question of what is forgotten in *Gylfaginning*; and attitudes to ‘deviance’ in metrics or diction in the grammatical treatises as compared to the *Prose Edda*.

The point of departure of my second question, how the *Edda* stages memory and forgetting, was a view of the *Edda* as a text which reflects on the encoding and transmitting of culture in concrete forms and practices – as a mediology, if you will. In the *Prologue*, remembering, especially of names, is what allows culture to be transmitted, but forgetting also has a positive value, insofar as it makes space for the new. This account of forgetting as cultural technique reveals an awareness of the necessity of forgetting, lest one, like Kvasir, choke on accumulated knowledge. And the story of Skaði’s compensation places a historically plausible origin story for skaldic poetry, in the commemoration of the dead, into a narrative context whose memorial dynamics are extremely complex. Þjazi’s eyes, as metonymic sign,
memorialise actively chosen forgetting – a remembering which is also a kind of forgetting, and a highly suggestive image in relation to the skaldic poetic and the kenning in particular.

My final point is that these dynamics seem to be medially conditioned, that is to say, they have to do with the *Edda*’s material form as written text. In contrast to the *Edda*’s account of the uses of forgetting, the metaphors for memory and forgetting in poetry – particularly skaldic poetry – describe forgetting as involuntary, inevitable and undesirable. Forgetting haunts skaldic claims to found lasting memories with the awful prospect of *falling out of living memory*. In this we see a reflection of skaldic poetry’s origins in the setting of ‘ritual coherence’: its commemorative power depends on bodily presence and the shared experience of performance.