

Aesthetic Expressions of Nature in Skaldic Verse*

A good deal of attention has been paid, from several disciplinary approaches, to whether traces of a “modern”, non-utilitarian and purely aesthetic view’ of nature can be found in Old Norse literature.¹ A certain polarity has emerged between arguing for that possibility, and for a purely instrumental view. This divide originates in Kantian aesthetics, which emphasizes ‘disinterestedness’ as a requisite for aesthetic experience and judgement, and has also been important to ecocriticism broadly, which has been centrally concerned with taking nature ‘on its own terms, not homocentrically.’² The question is significant because of the perceived relationship between (disinterested) aesthetics and ethics, or, more concretely, whether past societies valued the natural world for itself or solely as a resource. It is also simply an interesting question because of the way in which we tend to experience (Nordic) nature ourselves today, and are encouraged to through tourist advertisements: the majesty of fjords, the beauty of snow-capped mountains, the loveliness of rolling fields, and so on. It is difficult to gaze at such landscapes (and I use the word ‘gaze’ advisedly here) and imagine not finding them beautiful.³ In this chapter I want to explore what skaldic poetry can contribute to the debate.

In terms of Old Norse literature, the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders) have been the main focus of critical attention, and the instrumental view has traditionally been emphasized, fitting into a broader trend of belief that ‘in Western civilization prior to the seventeenth century, nature was simply not a source of aesthetic experience.’⁴ This assessment may be technically true, given that the term ‘aesthetics’ was ‘not used

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1 Hennig, ‘Aesthetic Appreciation’, p. 47.

2 Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 177.

3 Cf. Callicott, ‘The Land Aesthetic’, p. 159.

4 Callicott, ‘The Land Aesthetic’, p. 159.

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to describe the philosophical study of art and natural beauty until 1735,⁵ but often represents an Othering of the Middle Ages, or at least a monolithic, simplistic view of the period that is typical (at least among non-medievalists) when considering human attitudes toward the natural world. Searching for a deliberate attempt to practise aesthetic appreciation in the ways advocated by the modern discipline of aesthetics would be anachronistic, as would privileging the picturesque without considering its artistic history and entanglement with ‘technological modernity’,⁶ but that is not to say that premodern peoples could not respond to, experience, and value their environments within their own cultural parameters.

Two topics have been particular loci of more recent debate, which I shall summarize only briefly here. The first is Gunnarr Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi’s famous decision in *Njáls saga* not to leave Iceland as was the condition of his outlawry, with the memorable words ‘Fögr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnzki, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi’ (‘The hillside is beautiful, such that it has never seemed more beautiful to me, the pale crop-fields and mown homefield, and I will ride back home and go nowhere’).⁷ The apparent untypicality of this sentiment has been highlighted,⁸ and it is usually judged not to be a response to the beauty of the landscape per se, which for Heather O’Donoghue would be ‘surely a romantic view’,⁹ but rather one of ‘land productively farmed’.¹⁰ The second much-debated topic concerns the semantics of the Old Norse word *landsleg*, to which several articles have been devoted over the past decade. In 2012 the geographer Edda R. H. Waage argued that Old Norse *landsleg* already had a meaning similar to the modern concept of landscape, and that where it is used in the *Íslendingasögur*, ‘aesthetic appreciation is involved’ and ‘none of the instances suggests an economic or a social connotation regarding the land under discussion’.¹¹ Her methodology was criticized by fellow geographer Kenneth Olwig in 2015,¹² and her readings of the passage re-examined and found lacking by philologist Reinhard Hennig in 2019, who was able to find possible utilitarian references to valuable natural resources in all of the instances Waage relies on, as well as in medieval Icelandic translations of texts that she does not mention.¹³

What is also under consideration in both instances, to some extent, is whether the Old Norse *fagr* (cognate with English ‘fair’ and usually rendered as ‘beautiful’, ‘lovely’, or another term associated with positive aesthetic judgement) really means ‘[disinterestedly] beautiful’ or whether its connotations are more ‘beautiful [because

5 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 8.

6 Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 136.

7 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 182 (my trans.).

8 Hartman and others, ‘“Viking” Ecologies’, p. 137.

9 O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 60.

10 Rudd, ‘Human Responses’, p. 144. See Lönnroth, ‘Hetjurnar lita bleika akra’, pp. 19–20, for an alternative view that the passage warns against the temptations of earthly delights.

11 Waage, ‘Landscape’, p. 187.

12 Olwig, ‘Nationalist Heritage’.

13 Hennig, ‘Aesthetic Appreciation’.

useful or beneficial in some way]'. Mats Widgren has recently advocated for more linguistic and semantic investigations along the lines of Waage's, and an examination of words (including *fagr*) in skaldic verse that potentially imply aesthetic judgement forms part of my essay.¹⁴ However, coming down on one side or the other is not my goal. As Hennig argues, 'the fact alone that certain elements of non-human nature are called "beautiful" does not per se provide evidence for a "modern", non-utilitarian, and purely aesthetic appreciation of "landscape" in these texts.'¹⁵ Waage equally validly points out that '[disinterestedness] does not entail that aesthetic judgements cannot be made of useful things, as some have wrongly presumed [...]. Describing grassy land as beautiful does not necessarily indicate a utilitarian point of view, even if one is a farmer.'¹⁶ Hennig concludes by highlighting that 'the assumption that an instrumental and an aesthetic view of nature are mutually exclusive is highly problematic when applied to medieval literary texts such as the Sagas of Icelanders.'¹⁷

It is perhaps necessary, then, to manage some expectations about what it is we are realistically likely to find in skaldic verse, and what its value consequently is. First, and to clarify, Hennig and Waage specifically focus on the word *landsleg* and the concept of landscape, but I am interested in any representation of non-human nature more broadly.¹⁸ The formal constraints of the medium make it an impractical one for detailed descriptions of the sort possible in prose; kennings, for example, might involve a tree or a horse or the sun, and I am interested in aesthetic representations of all of these. Second, as Hennig points out, 'images of nature based on literary traditions are [...] much more characteristic for medieval literature than representations of individual natural environments.'¹⁹ If Old Norse-Icelandic literature in general is notoriously not 'nature writing',²⁰ skaldic poetry has been seen as the very antithesis of 'nature poetry': not so much disinterested as uninterested. It is, above all, artificial, discordant — unnatural.²¹ One can almost hear the scepticism in the opening sentences of a recent article by Edith Marold: 'Landscapes in skaldic poetry? Everyone [...] know[s] that it does not contain realistic descriptions of landscapes.'²² It is undeniable that in skaldic verse one usually finds 'a seascape', generically, rather than a description of an individual view from a particular vantage point; 'a storm' rather than 'the storm witnessed at a specific place, date and time'. However, that does not mean it has nothing to tell us about genuine observations of or engagements with natural environments, or that it could not evoke memories of

14 Widgren, 'Sacred and Profane', p. 58.

15 Hennig, 'Aesthetic Appreciation', p. 58.

16 Waage, 'Landscape', p. 188.

17 Hennig, 'Aesthetic Appreciation', pp. 58–59.

18 The 'divide', or relationship, between the human and the non-human, the natural and the cultural is a fraught one but not my main focus of investigation here. For convenience, in this essay I refer to 'nature' and the 'natural world' in the commonly understood senses, without necessarily implying a similar understanding for the medieval period.

19 Hennig, 'Aesthetic Appreciation', p. 46.

20 For this view see e.g. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, p. 76; Falk, 'The Vanishing Volcanoes', p. 6.

21 See e.g. Lie, 'Natur' og 'unatur'.

22 Marold, 'Mythical and Metaphorical Landscapes', p. 218.

specific places and environments in their audiences. Since environments (especially seascapes and storms) are non-static, any painter (before the advent of photography) would not have been able to fully capture a scene like this without resorting to some form of improvisation and imagination, but would be unlikely to have similar charges of artificiality or cliché laid upon them. Moreover, Judith Jesch has shown convincingly that poets composing about the Scottish Isles ‘give voice to what is distinctive about this region’, including ‘its landscapes and seascapes’, so we should not rule out the possibility of realistic, experiential depictions within the boundaries of the skaldic form.²³

Third, skaldic poetry has been described as ‘a poetry of nouns’, with adjectives taking a distant second place.²⁴ Although I investigate markers (potentially) implying explicit aesthetic judgement, like *fagr* (commonly rendered as ‘beautiful’) and *ljótr* (commonly rendered as ‘ugly’), later in this piece, I do not think they are the only (or even the most significant) way of considering aesthetic engagement in skaldic poetry. What I have also looked for, then, is evidence of contemplative ‘engagement of [...] perceptual and affective capacities in relation to the object’s qualities.’²⁵ And finally, is a ‘purely aesthetic appreciation’ (or indeed its opposite) possible or necessary to find in skaldic verse in order to say something meaningful about an appreciation of nature?²⁶ Although I think the ethical implications to be deduced from whether an attitude is instrumental or otherwise are important, especially to that goal of historical ecocriticism that seeks to trace the roots and development of our treatment of the environment today,²⁷ or alternatively seeks reassurance ‘that things have been different in the past and so need not be the way that they are now’ and ‘will be different again in the future’,²⁸ I would argue for a more nuanced approach. The environmental philosopher Emily Brady acknowledges that ‘what it is to take nature on its own terms is not at all easy to answer.’²⁹ As Waage implies, in any environment of which humans are a part, there will arguably always be the potential to find an instrumental view. Nonetheless, we need not assume it is always at the forefront of experiences. Gunnar Harðarson points out that in descriptions of sea voyages, for example, often the journey is serving a useful purpose, ‘en tilfinningin sem lýst er virðist ekki beinast að nytseminni, heldur fjörinu, veðurofsinn er skemmtilegur, heillandi’ (but the sense described does not seem to focus on usefulness, rather the exhilaration, the violent weather is fun, fascinating).³⁰ Gunnar Harðarson’s short article is to my knowledge the only previous study to focus on the aesthetic appreciation of nature in skaldic verse and (as I do) he argues for the existence of such a view, in his case with a focus on light and storms.

23 Jesch, ‘The Threatening Wave’, p. 330.

24 Hollander, *The Skalds*, p. 20.

25 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 9.

26 Hennig, ‘Aesthetic Appreciation’, p. 46 (italics mine).

27 Estes, *Anglo-Saxon Literary Landscapes*, p. 2.

28 Phelpstead, ‘Ecocriticism and Eyrbyggja’, p. 2.

29 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 113.

30 Gunnar Harðarson, ‘Birtan og stormurinn’, p. 206 (my trans.).

With skaldic poetry, of course, we only see nature as mediated by art. The role of imagination, metaphor, and creativity are controversial among aestheticians: ‘The danger is that we project on to nature a whole set of properties that it does not have.’³¹ Skaldic poetry’s apparent lack of interest in depicting ‘real’ environments or natural phenomena, or only (at best) imagined ones would therefore seem to offer the ultimate example of not taking nature ‘on its own terms’, especially because skaldic verse has been considered to be, on the whole, the opposite of mimetic. But if we take this position too strongly we are unable to say much about how it does engage with nature — we risk not taking skaldic verse, and the society that produced it, on their own terms. Kant himself argues that the ‘free play of the imagination and the understanding’ in harmony are key to the aesthetic experience.³² That seems to me to be at least a provocative way to think about kennings, and one which I will return to below. Brady also argues that ‘the use of metaphor and the use of aesthetic conception are central in our aesthetic appreciation of nature,’³³ which accords with the literary scholar Gillian Rudd’s suggestion (drawing on the ecofeminist Val Plumwood) that ‘metaphorical habits may be the most effective ways humans have of attempting to apprehend and value the non-human world.’³⁴ Brady’s inclusive approach, what she calls the ‘integrated aesthetic’, allows for features beyond the purely visual (or sensual) — such as imagination, emotion, and cultural knowledge — to be accounted for as components of aesthetic experience, and I have found her *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (2003) particularly useful to think with (notwithstanding that it gives short and stereotypical shrift to the Middle Ages).³⁵ Nonetheless, she still places a high value on disinterestedness, which leads to a certain amount of blurriness and hair-splitting as to ‘what counts’ as aesthetic experience. Arnold Berleant’s conception of ‘aesthetic engagement’ argues that disinterestedness becomes irrelevant in the consideration of environments — which by definition surround us — as opposed to traditional artworks. He writes that aesthetic engagement:

involves active participation in the appreciative process, sometimes by overt physical action but always by creative perceptual involvement. Aesthetic engagement also returns aesthetics to its etymological origins by stressing the primacy of sense perception, of sensible experience. Perception itself is reconfigured to recognize the mutual activity of all the sense modalities, including kinesthetic and somatic sensibility more generally.³⁶

This essay will investigate, then, not so much *whether*, according to the narrow standards of certain branches of philosophical aesthetics today, but *how* nature was ‘appreciated’, experienced, and engaged with, as evidenced by the medium of skaldic verse, but also *through* that medium. For instance, I will argue that while kennings

31 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 111.

32 Kant, *Critique*, ed. by Guyer, trans. by Guyer and Matthews, p. 103.

33 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 213.

34 Rudd, *Greenery*, p. 6.

35 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 31.

36 Berleant, ‘What Is Aesthetic Engagement?’ (n.p.).

can often seem like intellectual conventions (and sometimes no doubt were), they can also both represent a condensing of real experience (experience informs the appropriateness of referring to a ship as a horse, for instance) and open up new types of experiencing (I perceive both ships and horses differently having had my attention drawn to the comparison). Hence I refer to ‘aesthetic expressions’ in the title, since they may or may not relate singular experiences but express aesthetic engagements through the particular cultural modality of skaldic poetry.

The Aesthetics and Ethics of Kennings

I mentioned above Kant’s paradigm of the harmonious ‘free play of the imagination and the understanding’ in contemplation of an aesthetic object as a way of thinking about kennings. It might be objected that (many) kennings involve neither free nor harmonious play of the cognitive faculties, in that 1) the construction of their component elements conforms to certain fixed patterns, famously tallied at just over one hundred by Rudolf Meissner,³⁷ and 2) in their striving to achieve what Bergsveinn Birgisson calls ‘contrast-tension’³⁸ they defy rational understanding of an object.

In response to the first objection: to address some discomfort about the role of the imagination in aesthetic appreciation, a distinction is often made between ‘imagining well’ and venturing into the realms of fantasy, whim, or sentiment.³⁹ Kant considers that an image should be ‘communicable’, or in Brady’s formulation ‘shareable’,⁴⁰ that is it could be quickly grasped or arrived at separately by others, in order to avoid triviality and thus contribute to aesthetic experience. The ‘kenning system’ was not only a tool for skalds, but an aid to listeners, who would be able to recognize variations on a known pattern and understand the referent. Kenning patterns, which are already part of shared cultural knowledge, could be argued, then, to keep imaginings on track. Moreover, the techniques of *nýgjörving* (lit. ‘new creation’, often translated as ‘extended metaphor’) and harmonization, which I explore further below, provoke the imagination but keep it within previously ‘authorized’ parameters.

To address the second objection, I quote Christopher Abram:

[Kenning] elements are primarily images that combine and recombine into new images, revealing, for those who are looking in the right direction, something of the ‘virtual proper being’ of objects that exists behind and beyond any appearance that they may give out to the world. Sometimes it is necessary to look at kenning-objects aslant, but the truth is in there. Objective reality, not subjective

37 Meissner, *Die Kenningar*.

38 Bergsveinn Birgisson, ‘Skaldic Blends’, p. 289.

39 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 160.

40 Kant, *Critique*, ed. by Guyer, trans. by Guyer and Matthews, p. 133; Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 165.

fantasy, lies behind the kenning. But this reality is withdrawn from our access. We see it only in glimpses.⁴¹

I have also argued elsewhere that kennings, especially metaphorical kennings, can, like riddles, be said to reveal a ‘hidden similarity of things’: a similarity that is already there, that is ‘true’, but is not necessarily obvious.⁴² They provide, however, a genuine avenue for understanding the object they describe. Recognizing and exploring such points of similarity — and how far it extends — provoke deeper contemplation of the qualities of an object, and quite possibly, wonder. Kennings have the potential to allow not only for an ‘aesthetics of the unspectacular’ — to find new meanings and values in the familiar, the everyday, and the ‘unscenic’; rain as *grátr skýja* ‘the weeping of clouds’ (Anon *Ragn* 10, Anon *RunI* 2), perhaps — but also an aesthetic of ‘enchantment’.⁴³

In turn, such contemplation may lead to new sorts of attitudes towards the thing described. Given the prominence awarded to the principle of disinterestedness (and detachment), the relationship between the philosophical branches of aesthetics and ethics has been a complicated one, with an extreme position claiming that they are unrelated and should not encroach on one another’s spheres. The aesthetic enjoyment of nature may, in fact, conflict with moral attitudes towards it: Brady gives the example of the introduction (to Britain) of the aesthetically pleasing but toxic species *rhododendron ponticum*, which changes the ecology of the area in which it is planted.⁴⁴ (Perhaps comparable is the mixed reaction to the resplendent but rampant *lupinus nootkatensis* in Iceland, although it was initially introduced not for aesthetic reasons but in the hope of resolving another environmental problem: the binding of topsoil.)⁴⁵ Yet the discourse around ‘native’, ‘non-native’, and ‘invasive’ wildlife — itself often making recourse to aesthetic considerations — is often too simplistic and morally problematic.⁴⁶ On the other hand, aesthetic valuation can be a powerful tool in motivating moral attitudes to the natural world, with frequent entreaties to protect it for our children and grandchildren to enjoy (a strategy which itself takes advantage of a utilitarian, or anthropocentric attitude: that nature provides pleasure and other benefits to humans).⁴⁷ Holmes Rolston III writes, ‘psychologically, one does not wish to destroy beauty’:⁴⁸ this is perhaps not an explicitly ethical stance, but may lead to one or have a similar effect on behaviour.

41 Abram, ‘Kennings and Things’, p. 168. Abram illustrates the point with a dazzling unpacking of Sturla Þórðarson’s gold-kenning *eldr digla* ‘fire of crucibles’, which is too long to quote in full here but which is well worth reading.

42 Burrows, ‘Riddles and Kennings’. See also Schulte, ‘Kenning, metafor og metonymi’.

43 Karl Benediktsson, “‘Scenophobia’”, p. 208. I use the abbreviations of the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages series (<<http://skaldic.org>> [accessed 22 March 2023]) for references and examples but write out references in full when part of the main discussion.

44 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 247.

45 Borgþór Magnússon, ‘Case Study’.

46 See e.g. Peretti, ‘Nativism and Nature’.

47 See also Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, pp. 132, 138.

48 Rolston, ‘From Beauty to Duty’, p. 140.

Moral attitudes or dilemmas such as these cannot be found in skaldic verse, and the fact that something is valued or seen as precious because it is beautiful does not necessarily lead to thoughts of conservation, at a time when sustainability was perhaps at most experienced as a local rather than a global problem.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the kenning's ability to reveal hidden dimensions of a thing — and similarities between things — has the potential to open up new avenues for empathy. Are such kennings merely poetic convention, or do they encode attitudes that are lived by?

Following Hallvard Lie's *fossil-teori* (fossil theory),⁵⁰ Bjarne Fidjestøl suggested that the kenning system could have led to a loss of 'motivation',⁵¹ so when listeners heard a variation of, for example, 'the horse of the ocean' [SHIP] for the *n*th time they would no longer conjure vivid mental images of horses crashing through waves or consider the ways sailors are like (and not like) horse-riders, or even think about the comparability of living creature and man-made object, different means of transportation, or relationships with them. However, the environmental philosopher Kaia Lehari contends (of metaphor in general) that:

Both latent (dead) and active metaphors operate in environmental experience. In a paradoxical way, metaphors that are linguistically dead or are not perceived are nonetheless lived metaphors, establishing a basis for the sense of place and experience. If we can find suitable wording for it, a dead metaphor can revive verbally.⁵²

Any kenning, no matter how commonly occurring, has the potential to provoke aesthetic reflection of the sort explored by Abram, should a listener choose to dwell on it. They also, even subconsciously, have the potential to affect attitudes and, ultimately, behaviour (the 'metaphors we live by', as Lakoff and Johnson memorably term their argument that our 'conceptual system [...] plays a central role in defining our everyday realities').⁵³ The comparison of people to trees, whether by the use of tree-names as basewords in kennings for humans or by other devices, is a trope that has garnered some excitement in ecocritical writing about Old Norse literature,⁵⁴ despite Gerd Wolfgang Weber's earlier rather flatly stated claim that 'in kennings for "humans", words for "trees" are reduced to their basic qualities of "standing upright" and "conveying the notion of male or female gender"'.⁵⁵ Rather than supposing that the comparison really suggests a great deal of empathy for trees (which may provoke moral feeling and behaviour) or elevated them to human-like status, I find more convincing Abram's suggestion that the rhetorical affinity worked to a greater extent

49 See e.g. Hartman and others, '“Viking” Ecologies.'

50 Lie, 'Natur' og 'unatur', pp. 45–55.

51 Fidjestøl, 'The Kenning System', pp. 48–50.

52 Lehari, 'Embodied Metaphors', p. 86.

53 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by*, p. 3.

54 See e.g. Bintley, 'Plant Life', Abram, *Evergreen Ash*.

55 Weber, 'Of Trees and Men', p. 431.

in the other direction, flattening out human exceptionalism in the grand scheme of fate; that ‘kennings level the ontological playing field’.⁵⁶

Although it is easy to privilege examples of *nýgjörvingar* and other types of extended metaphor for harmony that skaldic verse need not strive towards,⁵⁷ such devices could (and have been) seen as ‘suitable wording’ that revives dead metaphors. Edith Marold explains *nýgjörving* as ‘creative expansion of the imagery of a kenning: the originally selected field of imagery is maintained throughout, and new kennings are created along those lines’.⁵⁸ Although Snorri Sturluson’s definition of *nýgjörving* in his *Edda* does not seem to encompass additional harmony with the kenning’s syntactic environment, as Einar Ól. Sveinsson understood it,⁵⁹ in fact other sentence elements, particularly adjectives and verbs, are often also harmonized with the field of imagery, creating extended metaphors across whole stanzas or parts of them.⁶⁰ There are in fact rather few instances, in comparison to the frequency with which tree-basewords stand in for humans, where such kennings are extended, perhaps making it more likely it was not a comparison that provoked much reflection. Abram highlights an example by Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson, ‘who is clearly having tremendous fun’ and did make use of reviving the metaphor;⁶¹ another stanza by the same poet dispassionately strips away any notion of human distinctiveness or pre-eminence:

Herskerðir klauf harðan
— hann gekk reiðr of skeiðar —
svarðar stofn með sverði
sunnr eldviðum kunnum.
Kunni gramr at gunni
— gunnþinga jarnmunnum
margr lá heggr of hoggvinn —
holdbarkar rjú sarka.

(The army-diminisher [RULER] split the hard stump of the scalp [HEAD] of famous sword-trees [WARRIORS] with a sword in the south; he went angry through the warships. The prince knew how to redden the yard-arm of flesh-bark [MAIL-SHIRT > SWORD] in battle; many a cherry-tree of meetings of Gunnr <valkyrie> [BATTLES > WARRIOR] lay chopped down by iron mouths.)⁶²

56 Abram, ‘Kennings and Things’, p. 182.

57 See e.g. Lie, ‘Natur’ og ‘unatur’, Bergsveinn Birgisson, ‘Skaldic Blends’.

58 Marold, ‘The Diction of Skaldic Verse’, p. lxxxi.

59 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Dróttkvæða háttur’.

60 Males suggests that Snorri’s restricted definition is ‘probably a consequence of his focus on kennings, rather than of an active exclusion of other elements of the stanzas’ (*The Poetic Genesis*, p. 46 n. 27). See also Patria, ‘Kenning Variation’, pp. 95–98; 104, who calls the broader harmonization ‘sentence metaphor’.

61 Abram, ‘Kennings and Things’, p. 181.

62 Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson, *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, 6, ed. and trans. by Heslop, p. 400.

With the exception of the first, designating King Óláfr Tryggvason, all of the kennings relating to humans make use of a linked arboreal conceit, with other sentence elements also harmonized with the imagery of the kennings to depict the action of tree-chopping and deforestation. Alongside the conventional tree-name-stands-in-for-person pattern in the final kenning (cherry-tree of battle = warrior), the human head is likened to a *stofn* ‘stump’, something which is already cut, and which is then further *klofinn* ‘split’, evoking the violent force required to split the hard base. The embedded kenning *holdbörkr* ‘flesh-bark’ highlights that both humans and trees seek to protect their vulnerability with a tough exterior (armour/bark) but one which is by no means impervious to weapons. The result seems to encourage less fellow-feeling for trees chopped down in service of people and more a cold reminder that human flesh is just as susceptible to iron blades as are tree trunks; ethical concerns for either plant-life or fellow humans are not in the picture.

A second pattern of interest is that for ‘generous man’, a skaldic commonplace in describing rulers who appropriately reward their followers (and skalds). In skaldic poetry, generous men hate gold, so much that they want to get rid of it as fast as possible, preferably having destroyed it first. Underlying this pattern, breaker of gold or hater of gold, is the action of breaking up arm-rings or other objects made of precious metal and/or distributing them. So, generous men, in kennings, break gold, destroy it, diminish it, harm it, bend it.⁶³ They fling it, sling it, and launch it.⁶⁴ They are its enemy and oppressor.⁶⁵ Nothing says ‘generous man’ like a bit of gold-murder.

Gold is, of course, ultimately a natural object, though it is usually referred to in skaldic verse in human-worked form and probably more often considered in terms of its monetary value and status symbolism than as a product of the earth. However, generous men-kennings are very often *rekit* or extended kennings, with a gold-kenning embedded within the man-kenning. One such common gold-kenning pattern is ‘land of the serpent’. The embedding of such a gold-kenning within a generous man-kenning can give the impression that being generous to one’s supporters seems to involve being decidedly ungenerous to other creatures, and causing some serious damage to the natural world: the generous man is *brjótr lað linns* ‘breaker of the land of the snake’,⁶⁶ and *hatr ormsetrs* ‘hater of the reptile’s home’.⁶⁷ One might speculate that such action is seen as acceptable, heroic even, because of the blurred lines between snakes and dragons in Old Norse poetry and the association with hoarding and greed reflected in the kenning pattern. Interestingly, however, ordinary men may (more rarely) tend, or even defend, the snake’s yard.⁶⁸ Overall, the pattern suggests a fossilization that no longer gave much consideration to its component parts. Still more jarring is when the embedded gold-kenning follows the ‘fire of the water’ pattern. Here we find encoded violence towards the sun itself: *inn dýri sólrýrandi*

63 See e.g. Anon *Brúðkv* 22, Sigv *Lv* 4, Þórðh *Lv* 2, Steinn *Nizv* 2.

64 See e.g. Þorm *Þorgdr* 13, ESK *Geisl* 38, Kálf *Káttr* 6.

65 See e.g. Arn *Harðr* 12, Sigv *Poem* 1.

66 Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Lausavísur*, 3/4, ed. and trans. by Whaley, p. 167.

67 Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Magnússdrápa*, 1/6, ed. and trans. by Whaley, pp. 207–08.

68 See e.g. EGils *Gudkv* 1, Anon *Gyðv* 3.

svanfoldar ‘the excellent sun-diminisher of the swan-land.’⁶⁹ As I will show later, the sun is a constant standard for beauty in skaldic diction: apparently there are few qualms over figuratively destroying something of beauty in these kennings at least. If kennings can encode ‘metaphors to live by’ then the care or custodianship of the natural world would not seem a high priority, or at least not a significant enough concept to revive dead metaphors. Nonetheless, to follow Lehari’s argument, they may still lie in the background of what Berleant would call a ‘cultural aesthetic’, and may still be a point of contemplation for individual audiences.⁷⁰

Kenning-scapes and Other Scenes

Although we may not find whole poems about daffodils or pastoral scenes, it is possible to overstate skaldic poets’ apparent lack of interest in depicting the natural world. There are in fact plenty of stanzas devoted to seascapes, to give a notable example, and even if they are often — though not always — in service of a different ‘point’ or purpose of a poem (to praise the bravery of a ruler traversing difficult seas, for instance), it does not mean they have nothing to tell us about genuine engagements with natural environments. This point is true, I would argue, whether the language used in the description is literal or metaphorical.

For example, three stanzas by the twelfth-century Icelandic poet and priest Einarr Skúlason (who makes extensive use of natural world imagery throughout his oeuvre), each consist of eight lines, each containing a different kenning for ‘sea’ which takes an encircling object as the baseword and an island-name as determinant. The stanzas are preserved in the *Laufás Edda*, an early seventeenth-century redaction of the prose *Edda*, and their most recent editor, Kari Ellen Gade, considers them likely to be part of a poetic exercise or challenge.⁷¹ In any case, it is clear that Einarr was not standing in front of an actual seascape and recording exactly what he saw. (For one thing, the islands in question do not share geographical proximity that would allow them to be viewed at the same time.) Nonetheless, when the kennings are resolved they depict a coherent image. I quote the first of the three stanzas by way of example:

Bratrs baldrekr Þjóttu;
 berr vindr Raðar linda;
 viðgyrðill þýtr Vörðu;
 veltr Fenhringar belti.
 Yglsk umbgerð Huglar;
 olmsr grásili Stolmar;
 fleygir Bóknar baugi;
 brakar Lygru men nokkvat.

69 Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, *Magnússflokkur*, 13/1–2, ed. and trans. by Whaley, p. 80.

70 Berleant, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

71 Einarr Skúlason, *Lausavísur*, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 170.

(Steep is the baldric of Tjötta <island> [SEA]; the wind lifts the band of Radøy <island> [SEA]; the wide girdle of Varða <island> [SEA] roars; the belt of Askøy <island> [SEA] rolls. The sheath of Huglo <island> [SEA] becomes fierce; grim is the grey harness-strap of Stolmen <island> [SEA]; the ring of Bokn <island> [SEA] is flung out; the necklace of Lygra <island> [SEA] thunders somewhat.)⁷²

Once the kennings are resolved we have an impressive — and realistic — seascape, full of contemplative sensory perceptions.

For those to whom it matters, in this case the visual and auditory description surely should fulfil the criterion of disinterest; the sea is in focus and the human observer is absent from the scene, albeit that the basewords provide ‘contrast-tension’ by conceptualizing the sea in terms of man-made objects. To describe the ocean as fierce or grim is not simply to anthropomorphize it but to recognize that there are resemblances between human moods and the sounds, appearances, and movement of natural phenomena.⁷³ It does not make nature human but brings the human and the non-human closer together. J. M. Howarth argues that such a connection ‘is important for an understanding of aspects of ourselves and of nature’ — and that rather than seeing such a motive as somehow invalidating an aesthetic appreciation of nature (because there is a human ‘benefit’), ‘it makes aesthetic appreciation of nature something serious.’⁷⁴

It should be remembered too both that aesthetic engagements do not always have to be pleasant ones, and that just because a storm is being described in this stanza does not mean that it is in fact describing a negative aesthetic effect: as Gunnar Harðarson reminds us, the skald might feel awe rather than awful in the face of such a scene. Indeed, Sigvatr Þórðarson, in his *Austrfararvísur*, claims:

Kátr vask opt, þás úti
 ǫrðigt veðr á fjörðum
 vísa segl í vási
 vindblásit skóf Strinda.
 Hestr óð kafs at kostum;
 kilir ristu men Lista,
 út þás eisa létum
 undan skeiðr at sundi.

(I was often cheerful when a harsh wind out in the fjords raked the wind-blown sail of the ruler of the Strindir [NORWEGIAN KING = Óláfr] in a drenching storm. The horse of the deep [SHIP] advanced at a fine pace; the keels cleft the necklace of Lista [SEA] when we let the warships dash away out at sea.)⁷⁵

72 Einarr Skúlason, *Lausavísur*, 8, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 171.

73 Howarth, ‘Nature’s Moods’.

74 Howarth, ‘Nature’s Moods’, pp. 115, 117.

75 Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur*, 9, ed. and trans. by Fulk, p. 596.

This half-stanza provides a good example of the inseparability of ‘usefulness’ and aesthetic experience. Sigvatr is in part happy because the wind is aiding their journey, but the stanza is still deeply aesthetically engaged in all senses: we can picture the visual scene but the focus is on movement and sensation and the tone is one of exhilaration in the elements.

The sea is not infrequently described in negative terms, to which I will return later, but it also provides the subject matter for some of the most aesthetically engaged and dynamic descriptions in skaldic verse.⁷⁶ Even when humans or human activity are implicitly or explicitly present in a scene the sea need not be merely a backdrop for that activity. In another fragment of Einarr’s poetry, preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*, the immersiveness is heightened by the use of the present tense:

Viknar ramr í Rakna
reksaumr flugastraumi;
dúks hrindr bǫl, þars bleikir
bifgrund, á stag rifjum.

(The strong seam of driven nails flexes in the cascade of Rakni <sea-king> [SEA]; the harm of the sail [WIND] forces the reefs against the stay, where the trembling ground [SEA] goes white.)⁷⁷

In this instance we almost do not need to resolve the kennings to ‘see’ and sense the image; indeed, it is more effective in terms of engagement if we do not. The ship does not merely flex in the sea but in a preternaturally driven cascade; we do not think abstractly of the wind but become aware of its power, witnessing the battering and tearing of the sail; we do not simply see the sea-foam but become aware of its destabilizing movement under the feet of sailors; the water’s visible paling corresponds with its sensory trembling, perhaps through its own fear of harm. Moreover, the disjointed word order characteristic of skaldic poetry adds to and recreates the dynamic, ever-changing and disorienting experience of a storm at sea. Audiences made up of seafarers of various kinds, or for those whom the sea played a major role in everyday life, may well have appreciated such representations of familiar experiences, even if the medium of poetry provides a safer contemplative distance than the ‘real thing’.

***Nýgjörvingar*: Hidden Nature Poems?**

Another place to look for depictions of scene in skaldic verse is in the aforementioned techniques of *nýgjörving* and harmonization, which create a sort of two-poems-in-one effect.⁷⁸ Elsewhere I have shown that this effect was particularly productive of weatherscapes (and particularly in the tenth century), thanks to the number of kennings relating to the semantic sphere of battle whose component parts draw on

⁷⁶ See also e.g. Bjbp *Jóms* 16, Hst *Rst* 15, ÞGisl *Búdr* 2.

⁷⁷ Einarr Skúlason, ‘Fragments’, 14, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 151. See also ESk *Frag* 16.

⁷⁸ Lie, ‘*Natur’ og ‘unatur’*, p. 49; Patria, ‘*Kenning Variation*’, pp. 90–91, 108.

weather terms.⁷⁹ The thirteenth-century poet Sturla Þórðarson was also particularly enamoured of such effects and drew inspiration from the work of several earlier poets in constructing his own kaleidoscopic stanzas, in which praise of his subjects jostles for focus and attention with depictions of the natural world.⁸⁰ As well as the often harsh weatherscapes appropriate for battle imagery, Sturla also paints radiant and majestic scenes:⁸¹

En elding
ifla foldar
langa leið
lýsa knátti,
lofanlig
þá er litum skipti
himna sól
við hafröðul.

(And the lightning of the land of the hawks [ARM > GOLD] shone for a long distance when the commendable sun of the heavens exchanged colours with the ocean-radiance [GOLD].)⁸²

Here resolving the kennings ('Poem 1') destroys much of the scene: the gold on King Hákon's ships shone in the sunlight. Paying attention to the language in which they are expressed, however ('Poem 2'), reveals a fascination with the play of different types of natural light effects: spectacular lightning, the *lofanlig* 'commendable' sun itself, and the dazzling reflections that make water look like it possesses its own sun (*röðull*, in the compound *hafröðull*, is itself a poetic word for the sun). These are staples of gold-kennings patterns, here vividly revived.

Despite highlighting earlier in this essay the comparative rarity of *nýgjörvingar* deriving from the people-as-trees kenning pattern, here I put forward two *lausavísur* attributed to Óláfr inn helgi Haraldsson in Flateyjarbók, to show that it is not only large-scale scenes but individual natural features that can be depicted and contemplated in this way. In each case, 'Poem 1', the ostensible 'meaning' of the poem once the kennings are resolved, refers to a different woman that Óláfr (or his poetic persona) has had a romantic interest in, but who is now married to someone else. However, taking literally the language used to construct this conceit, rather than resolving the kennings, reveals 'Poem 2', in each case a coherent description of a tree which has lost its bright foliage, which is bolded for clarity in the translation:

Bøls, þats lind í landi
landrifs fyr ver handan
golli merkð við galla

79 Burrows, 'Showered with Praise'; see also Patria, 'Kenning Variation', pp. 174–76.

80 See also Burrows, 'In his Element'.

81 See also e.g. Sturl *Hakkv* 17, 19, 31–32.

82 Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða*, 36, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 725.

grjótǫlnis skal fǫlna.
 Þann myndak við vilja
 valklifs, meðan lifðak,
 — alin erumk björk at bǫlvi
 bands — algrœnan standa.

(**It is a misery that the linden-tree of the land-rib** [STONE (*steinn* 'jewel') > WOMAN = Steinvǫr], distinguished with gold, **must grow pale in a land across the sea** with the affliction of the stone-mackerel [SNAKE > WINTER].⁸³ **I would wish that tree of the falcon-cliff** [ARM > WOMAN] **to stand fully green as long as I lived; the birch** of the headband [WOMAN] is born to bring me misery.)⁸⁴

Ár stóð eik in dýra
 jarladóms með blómi
 harðla grœn, sem Hǫrðar
 hvert misseri vissu.
 Nú hefr bekkjar tré bliknat
 brátt Mardallar gráti
 (lind hefr) laufi bundit
 (línu jörð í Gørðum).

(**Formerly the precious oak** of the jarldom [WOMAN] **stood intensely green with blossom, as the Hǫrðar knew each season. Now the tree** of the bench [WOMAN], **wreathed with foliage, has grown pale fast** with the weeping of Mardǫll <= Freyja> [GOLD]; the **linden-tree** of the headdress [WOMAN] has land in Russia.)⁸⁵

The word order and therefore coherence of each image is more fragmented in the original than in the reordered prose translation; arguably, however, the kind of contemplation of the poetic form needed to appreciate the stanzas themselves contributes to a deeper contemplation of what it is they describe, reflecting that nature is not something that can be known on first glance. Unlike the stanza by Hallfreðr quoted earlier, where the consistent arboreal imagery focused on depicting violence and destruction, these two *lausavísur* allow for a more aesthetic engagement. There are no explicit expressions of aesthetic judgement here, but comparison to a woman Óláfr presumably found beautiful points up the beauty of the trees. More specifically, since the paling of the tree makes the speaker miserable, and he would wish it to be 'fully green', and since those are primarily visually descriptive qualities (if also indicating fertility, especially as seasonality is mentioned), we can assume that those qualities are considered aesthetically pleasing in trees by the speaker and that he in turn assumes the audience will share that assessment. Clearly Óláfr is not describing a specific, real

83 The resolved kenning is also congruent, but less so the unresolved pattern.

84 Óláfr inn helgi Haraldsson, *Lausavísur*, 2, ed. and trans. by Poole, p. 518.

85 Óláfr inn helgi Haraldsson, *Lausavísur*, 9, ed. and trans. by Poole, p. 528.

linden or oak but, as Gunnar Harðarson points out, ‘Náttúran og tilfinningar tengdar henni eru forsendan fyrir því að dróttskáld geti beitt náttúruleysingum í þessu skyni í orustu og kvenlýsingum. Ef áheyrendur skynjuðu ekki fegurð í náttúrunni missti þetta marks’ (Nature and the emotions associated with it are the premise for the poet to use descriptions of nature for this purpose in descriptions of battle and women. If the audience did not perceive the beauty of nature, it would miss the mark).⁸⁶

Of course Óláfr, or his poetic persona, is ‘really’ articulating feelings of loss and regret about past relationships. If a real tree were the motivation for this nostalgic departure, aestheticians would disqualify the description:

if I bring to the experience [of a butterfly in free flight] the knowledge that one of my siblings is not so free, but trapped in a painful relationship, I have used the butterfly to articulate my thoughts and feelings around something oriented to my own needs or desires. In this way I have become preoccupied not with the beauty of the butterfly, but with concern for my sibling.⁸⁷

Interestingly, however, Óláfr’s reaction is rather the other way around: his personal concerns are the point of departure for his deeper contemplation of nature. The stanzas are arguably steps towards disinterestedness, and a focus on the natural object, rather than away from it, as described by Iris Murdoch:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind [...] Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared [...] And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.⁸⁸

In Óláfr’s case, the symbolism may be somewhat stereotypical and its affective impact lessened by his application of the same trope to two different women, but to quote Lehari again, ‘Archetypal metaphors change in the course of history into cultural stereotypes that [may] remain unconscious but nevertheless affect our environmental experience.’⁸⁹ Even as an intellectual exercise, the poet’s notion is influenced by, and in turn influences, the ‘cultural aesthetic.’⁹⁰

The Beautiful and the Ugly: Aesthetic Judgements

Finally, in the following section I examine words in skaldic verse that (potentially) convey an aesthetic judgement: for reasons of space, chiefly *fagr* and *ljótr*.⁹¹ This

86 Gunnar Harðarson, ‘Birtan og stormurinn’, p. 210 (my trans.).

87 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 138.

88 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty*, p. 84.

89 Lehari, ‘Embodied Metaphors’, p. 86.

90 Berleant, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

91 I have based my corpus on the editions and online database of the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages project, which is at the time of writing 93 per cent complete in terms of data entry, with 75 per cent having been editorially reviewed and published to date. As this essay focuses on skaldic poetry,

investigation is not intended to be comprehensive, since descriptors do not in themselves always tell the full story, without examination of individual stanzas. For example, adjectives like ‘broad’, ‘deep’, or ‘cold’ are not themselves aesthetic value-judgements, but they may contribute to the aesthetic experience of an object or environment. There is not room here to systematically survey all such descriptions.

A variety of things may be described as *fagr* in skaldic verse, many of which are not features of the natural world: often women (e.g. ÞjóðA *Magn* 7/5; *Mberf* Lv 4/4; Valg *Har* 9/4) or weapons (e.g. Steinn *Óldr* 9/7; *Bkrepp Magnr* 4/4; *ESk Sigdr* I 5/7), but also alcohol (e.g. SnSt *Ht* 91/4), ships (e.g. Þfagr *Sveinn* 5/2), men (*Ólhelg* Lv 8/1), abstract concepts such as promises (e.g. Egill Lv 45/6), Mary and the saints (e.g. Kálf *Kátr* 18/3) and other religious notions such as faith (*Gamlkan Has* 43/6), prayer (e.g. Kálf *Kátr* 7/6), and repentance (e.g. Kálf *Kátr* 15/7; 50/5). Clearly, especially in religious poetry, the adjective has a semantic range not restricted to the purely visual or even sensory.

In fact, the adjective appears more often in explicitly Christian religious poetry than anywhere else. In such poetry, the natural world occasionally features via typical Christian imagery, for example depicting Mary as *fagrt blóm* ‘beautiful flower’,⁹² the sky as *fagrtjaldar frón* ‘fair tents of the earth’,⁹³ or the sun as *fagrgim hás hreggranns* ‘fair jewel of the high storm-house’.⁹⁴ Indeed, the sun sets a standard of beauty in Hallar-Steinn’s *Rekstefja*, where a praying King Óláfr appears to be arrayed *sólu fegri* ‘more beautifully than the sun’,⁹⁵ and in the anonymous *Heilagra meyja drápa*, where St Cécília is also *sólu fegri* ‘more beautiful than the sun’.⁹⁶ In a more secular context, Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson’s *Hrynhenda* does not use the adjective *fagr* but explicitly admires the gold-adorned ships of King Magnús in terms of the sun:

Hlunna es, sem røðull renni,
reiðar búningr, upp í heiði,
— hrósak því, es herskip glæsir
hlenna dolgr — eða vitar brenni.

(The array of the chariot of rollers [SHIP] is as though the sun were racing up in the bright sky, or beacons flaring; I praise the way that the foe of thieves [JUST RULER] adorns his warships.)⁹⁷

Stanza 10 of the anonymous *Lilja*, a devotional poem very likely to date from the first half of the fourteenth century, is worth fuller discussion in light of the aesthetic/instrumental debate:

and takes into account particular conventions of that form, I exclude poetry from *fornaldarsögur* in eddic metres, while recognizing that the distinctions between ‘skaldic’ and ‘eddic’ are not clear-cut.

92 *Máriudrápa*, 19/2, ed. and trans. by Attwood, p. 494.

93 Gamli kanóki, *Harmsól*, 44/5–6, ed. and trans. by Attwood, p. 112.

94 *Leiðarvísan*, 2/2–4, ed. and trans. by Attwood, p. 142.

95 Hallar-Steinn, *Rekstefja*, 31/6, ed. and trans. by Stavnem, p. 893.

96 *Heilagra meyja drápa*, 21/3, ed. and trans. by Wolf, p. 905.

97 Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Hrynhenda, Magnússdrápa*, 17/5–8, ed. and trans. by Whaley, p. 203.

Dagarnir sex að vísu vuxu
 veltiligir um sjávarbelti,
 áðr en feingi alla þrýði
 jörð og loft, það er drottinn gjörði:
 pressað vatn í himininn hvassa,
 hjörn og eld sem merkistjörnur,
 hagl og dýr sem fiska og fugla,
 fagran plóg sem aldinskóga.

(Truly, the six rolling days spread across the sea-belt, before earth and air received all the glory that the Lord made: the water compressed into the stormy sky, ice and fire as well as fixed stars, hail and animals along with fish and birds, fair crop and fruit-bearing woods.)⁹⁸

Here the whole *jörð og loft* is glorious, because it is created by God. (This trope may be conventional, but should not be devalued for that reason, because it provides a frame of reference that would have shaped thought as well as literary motifs.) The feature to be judged *fagr*, however, is *plóg* ‘crop’ (lit. ‘plough’), a typical metonymy,⁹⁹ with emphasis on its destiny to be harvested rather than its appearance while growing. Metrical considerations should always be taken into consideration in the analysis of skaldic verse, and *fagran* alliterates with *fiska og fugla* in the previous line, while *plóg* provides *aðalhendring* (internal rhyme) with *aldinskóga*. That said, *Lilja* is a technically accomplished poem and we should not assume metrical concerns forced its poet (or any other poet) into saying something they did not mean — or, even more so, that the message would not have had an impact on the audience.

In secular poetry rather few natural features are designated to be *fagr* (with the exception of gold, which I discuss in more depth below), and even fewer are straightforward in connoting a sense of aesthetic admiration for the natural world. The depiction of a solar eclipse in Sigvatr Þórðarson’s *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* reveals aesthetic appreciation felt not in the presence of a natural phenomenon but in its lack:

Undr láta þat ýtar
 eigi smátt, es máttit
 skæ-Njörðungum skorðu
 skýlauss roðull hlýja.
 Drjúg varð á því dægri
 — dagr náðit lit fögurum —
 — orrostu fráak austan
 atburð — konungs furða.

(People declare that no small wonder, that the cloudless sun was not able to warm the Njörðungar <gods> of the steed of the prop [(lit. ‘steed-Njörðungar of the prop’)] SHIP > MEN]. Great was the portent con-

98 *Lilja*, ed. and trans. by Chase, p. 572.

99 Schulte, ‘Kenning, metafor og metonymi’.

cerning the king during that daytime; the day did not achieve its beautiful colour; I heard of the event at the battle from the east.)¹⁰⁰

Colour in nature is also seen as an aesthetic quality in Gunnlaugr Leifsson's translation *Merlínussþá II* (st. 60) as well as implied, for example, in the stanzas by Sturla and Óláfr discussed earlier.

kennings provide fleeting opportunities for the admiration of natural phenomena, before they are resolved and it becomes clear that *fagrgota hlýrs* 'the fair steed of the stem' refers to a beautiful ship rather than a beautiful horse,¹⁰¹ and *fagrt hlýrtungl* 'the beautiful prow-moon' praises a shield rather than the celestial body.¹⁰² Nonetheless, the natural is provocatively evoked here, perhaps inspiring explicit comparison between the aesthetic qualities of each object. As with the *nýgjörvingar* considered earlier, the explicit language of the kenning pattern offers the opportunity for reflection on the beauty of the natural world even without depicting it for its own sake.

Across both secular and religious contexts, gold (or objects adorned with it) is second only to women as recipient of the description *fagr*, generally via kennings with gold as a referent (e.g. Anon *Óldr* 1; GunnHám Lv 12; GunnHám Lv 13; EGils *Gudkv* 35; Þmáhl *Máv* 17). As noted earlier, gold is generally a cultural status symbol, although the devotional poem *Líknarbraut* highlights that gold and gems are natural products of the earth, if only to demonstrate the superiority of the heavenly realm to things of earthly value: in stanza 7 the words of God are *bjartari ok fegri gulli ok gimsteinum ór völlum* 'brighter and fairer than gold and gems from the fields'.¹⁰³ Clearly any potential aesthetic qualities of precious stones are referred to only figuratively, since words are abstract and intangible: the implication is that God's word is 'more precious' than gold, in a way that surpasses wealth. Nonetheless, it is notable that the positive qualities of the natural world are somewhat taken for granted in these instances, not to be praised for their own sake, but still thought of positively enough to be an appropriate comparator to demonstrate the excellence of God.

Fríðr is used to describe a similar range of referents, although it occurs about half as often as *fagr* in the corpus. Again, it is difficult to discern any purely aesthetic judgement from the use of the word: it has a broader range. Take, for example, a fragment by the eleventh-century poet Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson, which is now preserved in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* to exemplify a shield-kenning:

Dagr vas fríðr, sás fǫgru
fleygjendr alinleygjar
í hangferil hringa
hlýrtungli mér þrungu.

100 Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga*, 15, ed. and trans. by Jesch, p. 682.

101 Hallr Snorrason, *Lausavísur*, 2/2, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 637; cf. *fagrdrasill lögstíga* 'the fair steed of sea-paths', Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, 22/3–4, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 1128.

102 Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson, 'Fragments', 3/1, 4, ed. and trans. by Marold and others, p. 262.

103 *Líknarbraut*, 8/6–8, ed. and trans. by Tate, p. 237.

(The day was fair on which the flingers of the forearm-flame [GOLD > GENEROUS MEN] pushed the beautiful prow-moon [SHIELD] onto my hanging-track of rings [ARM/HAND].)¹⁰⁴

In relating *dagr vas fríðr* Refr is not reminiscing about an aesthetically pleasing environment in which the event took place — or even commenting on the weather — rather, it was a good moment for him personally, when he received a precious shield, the *fagrt hlýrtungl* discussed above, from a patron.

The term *vænn* only occurs in relation to the natural world to describe the sky — *væn stíett bjartrar sólar* ‘the splendid path of the bright sun’,¹⁰⁵ and a forest — *væn mörk* — which then turns out to be a woman (*væn mörk ǫlstafna* ‘beautiful forest of ale-prows [DRINKING HORNS > WOMAN]’).¹⁰⁶

Ljótr (‘ugly’) is the most obvious marker of apparently negative aesthetic judgement. It is, however, like *fagr* and the other ‘positive’ descriptors, also used of abstract, non-sensory entities like anger (e.g. Egill Lv 29/1), sin (e.g. Gamllan Has 56/1; Anon Mdr 8/4; Anon Brúðv 30/3), and death (e.g. Rv Lv 25/7), or of battle (ESK Ingdr 4). Describing natural features, however, accounts for around a third of the instances of *ljótr*. The sea is most likely to be considered *ljótr* (e.g. Arn Hryn 2/2; 10/1; Anon Leið 18/7; SnSt Ht 22/4; 93/5; StjOdd Geirdr 2/2; as a kenning referent Anon (Mberf) 7), as well as the weather (ÞjóðA Har 6/8; Anon Mhkv 19/6; as a kenning referent Sveinn Norðrdr 2), and occasionally (as kenning referents) serpents (Anon Óldr 11; Kári Lv 5) and wolves (Hfr Óldr 3; RvHbreiðm Hl 64).

As with the positive descriptors, unresolved kennings appear to offer momentary judgements: a battle is *ljótr drífa boga* ‘the hideous storm of bows’,¹⁰⁷ and while a horse might be beautiful when it represents a ship, an ugly horse (*ljótvaxinn hestr Leiknar* ‘the ugly-grown horse of Leikn <troll-woman>’) signifies a wolf.¹⁰⁸

In most cases, an instrumental (or reverse-instrumental) aspect can be perceived: the sea (and the weather) are ugly when they are causing problems for human sailors and/or when a ruler’s heroism and mastery of the elements is being emphasized. For example, take Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson’s *Hrynhenda, Magnússdrápa* 2:

Seinkun varð, þás hlébarðs hanka
hnikaði ǫr in ljóta bára.

(Delay came about, as the foul breaker drove against the oar of the bear of the cleat [SHIP].)¹⁰⁹

Of course, the sea is not just a cause of difficult work for sailors, but a site of grief. Although not using the word *ljótr*, in *Víglundar saga* Ketilríðr appears to express a similar negative aesthetic judgement in a *lausavísa*: ‘Leiðr er mér sjóvar sorti | ok

104 Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson, ‘Fragments’, 3, ed. and trans. by Marold and others, p. 262.

105 *Drápa af Máriugrát*, 37/1, 4, ed. and trans. by Gade, pp. 784–85.

106 Hallar-Steinn, ‘Fragments’, 5/1, 3, ed. and trans. by Marold and others, p. 206.

107 Einarr Skúlason, *Ingadrápa*, 4/3, 4, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 565.

108 Hallfréðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson, *Óláfsdrápa*, 3/3–4, ed. and trans. by Whaley, p. 394.

109 Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Hrynhenda, Magnússdrápa*, 2, ed. and trans. by Whaley, p. 184.

súgandi bára' (the darkness of the sea and the sucking billow are hateful to me), but again it is clear that it is the reminder of the loss of her loved ones that make it impossible for her to *líta ógrátandi á ægi* 'look at the ocean without weeping'.¹¹⁰

Describing the sea as ugly may also have instrumental benefit for the poet, for instance in Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal* 22. As is well known, *Háttatal* is a poem of 102 stanzas, each of which exemplifies a different verse form, as well as being composed in praise of King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway and his regent jarl Skúli Bárðarson. In stanza 22 Snorri demonstrates the figure *refhvörf in minnsta* 'the least fox-turns',¹¹¹ in which antithetical words are paired: *ljótr lægir vill brjóta fagrðrasil lögstíga* 'the hideous sea wants to break the fair steed of sea-paths [SHIP]'.¹¹² The convention is a convenient one in this case, then; but nonetheless the stanza typifies a skaldic dichotomy: ships are beautiful — perhaps all the more so when they are animated as loyal horses; the sea is ugly, and the two are most often in conflict.¹¹³

This apparent negative value-judgement again interacts interestingly with Rolston's suggestion that 'psychologically, one does not wish to destroy beauty'.¹¹⁴ It is common in skaldic verse to depict the sea as being 'cut' or 'torn' by ships and their crews, as in the seafarer-kenning *brjótr hranna* 'breaker of waves',¹¹⁵ or the descriptions of warriors who *skóru sund þar órum* 'cut the sea there with their oars',¹¹⁶ or *slíta sæ bløðum ára* 'tore the sea with the blades of oars'.¹¹⁷ The violent language of course is fitting for the warrior context and foregrounds the subject's conquest of enemies and natural forces alike, but does the cultural habit of viewing the sea as 'ugly' prompt or legitimize this brutal depiction of the actions of rowing and sailing? Although it is tempting to connect them, the generous men-kennings examined earlier shed doubt on any conscious decision to enact such an attitude, or perhaps even on the very existence of a cultural view that would accord with Rolston's. It must be remembered too, however, that despite the perhaps stereotypical application of the descriptor *ljótr*, as shown earlier aesthetic engagements with the sea need not always have had a negative value.

A similar case is perhaps true of the weather. The anonymous, likely twelfth-century proverb poem *Málsháttakvæði* seems to provide insight into a common view: *élin þykkja mörögum ljót* 'snowstorms seem ugly to many'.¹¹⁸ As the translation suggests, *él* refers to blizzards rather than the gentle snowfall we might be inclined to consider pretty. Certainly, an aesthetic judgement may be present here, but it is unlikely to be *all* that is present. Compare Sturla Þórðarson's *Hrynhenda*, of the early 1260s, which describes a *ljótr leiðangr* 'menacing fleet'.¹¹⁹ Here the poet's assessment of

110 Ketilríðr, *Lausavísur*, 1/5–6; 1–2, ed. and trans. by Myrvoll, p. 488.

111 Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 1128.

112 Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, 22/3–4, ed. and trans. by Gade, p. 1128.

113 See also e.g. Arn *Hryn* 10, *Bölv Hardr* 8, *SnSt Ht* 93.

114 Rolston, 'From Beauty to Duty', p. 140.

115 Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, 13/6, ed. and trans. by Lethbridge, p. 969.

116 Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Nesjavísur*, 1/6–8, ed. and trans. by Poole, p. 558.

117 Þórðr Kolbeinsson, *Eiríksdrápa*, 3/7–8, ed. and trans. by Carroll, p. 493.

118 *Málsháttakvæði*, 19/6, ed. and trans. by Frank, p. 1233.

119 Sturla Þórðarson, *Hrynhenda*, 6/3, ed. and trans. by Valgerður Erna Þorvaldsdóttir, pp. 682–83.

the *leiðangr* is still based on his perception of it, but it is motivated by the *leiðangr*'s potential for harmful action rather than because it is simply visually unpleasant: likely something also bound up in *Málsháttakvæði*'s assessment of storms.¹²⁰ I have already discussed Sturla Þórðarson's aesthetically engaged depiction of lightning, and Egill Skallagrímsson relates that his patrons 'hauks [...] | háfjöll digulsnávi | [...] mér heglðu' (hail-showered my high mountains of the hawk [ARMS] with crucible-snow [SILVER]).¹²¹ Aesthetic judgements are shared and shareable across the skaldic corpus, but they are not so clichéd that beauty cannot be found even in unexpected places.

From even this brief investigation it can be seen that terms that might be assumed to express aesthetic judgement have a broader range than merely referring to the visually appealing or unappealing. Likely there is often a connection, given the common pre- and early modern belief that inner qualities reflect or affect outward appearances. However, while they can indicate some common cultural values, *fagr*, *ljótr*, and related terms cannot be straightforwardly taken as markers of aesthetic experience.

Conclusions

Aesthetics, including environmental aesthetics, has tended to privilege the 'scenic', the picture-esque: that which resembles or is worthy of a landscape painting (i.e. visually pleasing and static).¹²² The Old Norse skaldic aesthetics of the natural world is different. It is capable of creating natural scenes we can vividly 'see' with the mind's eye, but to consider only that aspect is to forget our situatedness within our own 'cultural aesthetic', its history, and conventions. Skaldic poetry captures visual images of the natural world, but equally encapsulates the sensory, the wondrous, the strange, the culturally meaningful. It appreciates what is beautiful but also what is noteworthy, what is contradictory, and what sparks reflection about the 'nature' of the world. Concepts like Brady's 'integrated aesthetic' and Berleant's 'engaged aesthetic' allow for a broader investigation of ways in which skalds and their audiences experienced, represented, and re-experienced the natural world through their particular cultural modalities.

Notwithstanding the heavily regulated nature of skaldic diction and metre, the form's interest in representing the natural world in various ways has been underestimated, while the anthropocentric nature of such engagement has been overstated. In fact there are many dynamic depictions of natural features, environments, and phenomena that engage with the range of sensory perceptions and cultural priorities. This perspective is possible through skalds' negotiation and exploitation of the conventions of the skaldic medium. Kennings, and their high variability within fixed

120 On weather as 'the enemy' see McCreesh, *Weather*.

121 Egill Skallagrímsson, *Lausavísur*, 43/5–6, 8, ed. and trans. by Clunies Ross, p. 369.

122 See Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, pp. 132–33.

patterns, allow momentary glimpses into superficially hidden qualities of natural (and other) phenomena, offering in themselves opportunities for ‘engagement of [...] perceptual and affective capacities in relation to the object’s qualities’, in Brady’s formulation.¹²³ Techniques such as *nýgjörving* and harmonization revivify latent ways of conceptualizing the world, allowing for the development of more detailed descriptions of and nuanced perspectives on the phenomenon in focus. In turn, kenning patterns and other common collocations contribute to a set of cultural tropes that influence later poets, and perhaps audiences’ interactions with their own environments. Although I have focused on resolved kennings and unscrambled stanzas in this essay, it is important to remember that for audiences, getting to this point takes contemplative work. Disjointed word order, with images and meanings coming into and out of focus, can itself powerfully evoke a dynamic and strange world that must be engaged with, rather than gazed at, to appreciate.

It is unsurprising that Hennig found references to the usefulness of natural resources in the sagas’ depiction of the attractiveness of settlement locations. Sagas famously shun extraneous detail; the descriptions they provide serve to explain a choice of one location over others. Likewise, sagas which preserve skaldic verse tend not to quote poetry for the sake of it; rather, they select stanzas which provide biographical evidence for the life of their subject or otherwise move the plot along in some way. It is notable that many of the stanzas which describe natural features or environments most closely are preserved in poetic treatises, where such plot-driving content is of lesser importance than poetic form and achievement. It is precisely in such treatises that aesthetic qualities — of the poetry and of the things it describes — can be brought to the forefront.

The sea emerges as a particular locus for a skaldic ‘cultural aesthetic’, and highlights the influence of competing cultural tropes. On the one hand the sea is ugly; on the other, it is a stimulus for an integrated aesthetic that recalls exhilarating journeys, shared meanings, and infinitely changeable mysteries. As Gunnar Harðarson summarized, the sun in particular, and light in general are also popular phenomena for poetic exploration, and in that case generally coded positive. As has been found for saga prose, though, straightforward expressions of aesthetic value or judgement are generally difficult to find: descriptions like *fagr* and *ljótr* tend to carry deeper connotations than reflecting on the purely visual. Nonetheless, examining any patterns of implied value in apparently neutral descriptors (like ‘green’ as a positive quality in trees) would be an interesting subject for further study, as would the role of Christian tropes (and ethics), often overlooked as unoriginal or imported, in an Old Norse aesthetics of the natural world. What is clear is that skaldic verse has much to contribute to the debate about aesthetic experiences of the natural world in Old Norse literature, and to (medieval) ecocritical studies more broadly. The study of this most artificial of art forms surely also points to the rewards in moving beyond the strictly mimetic or picturesque to find valid and intriguing engagement with the natural world.

123 Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, p. 9.

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