

“Opening the Doors of an Unexplored World”: Pioneering the Translation of Skaldic Poetry in Spanish

“Abriendo las puertas de un mundo inexplorado”: las primeras traducciones de la poesía escáldica en español

EDEL PORTER

Universidad de Castilla La Mancha, España

edelmaria.porter[at]uclm.es

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ABSTRACT: This paper contributes to a growing body of research investigating the role of translations in the post-medieval reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. In this case study, we analyse Enrique Bernárdez's Spanish translation of the skaldic verse in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* as a site of cultural encounter where the power relations between target and source cultures can be explored. By situating the translation within its historical-cultural context, we show how the translation reflects the trend of Europeanisation in post-Franco Spain, while simultaneously recalling its glorious past from the *Reconquista* to the Golden Age.

KEYWORDS: Skaldic poetry, postcolonial translation, translation in Spain, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Enrique Bernárdez

RESUMEN: Este artículo contribuye al creciente interés en la investigación del papel de la recepción de las traducciones de literatura nórdica medieval en la época postmedieval. Nuestro análisis se centra en la traducción de Enrique Bernárdez de la poesía escáldica de *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* como lugar de intercambio cultural en el que pueden estudiarse las relaciones de poder entre las culturas de referencia y de partida. Al situar la traducción en su contexto histórico-cultural mostraremos el modo en el que esta se corresponde tanto los impulsos europeizantes de la España posfranquista, como con el recuerdo de un pasado glorioso que va desde la Reconquista hasta la Edad de Oro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía escáldica, traducción postcolonial, traducción en España, *Saga de Egil Skallagrímsson*, Enrique Bernárdez



INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his short comparative analysis of the *Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson* and the medieval Spanish epic the *Poema de Mio Cid*, Carlos Messuti highlights the role that the work of Enrique Bernárdez has played in “opening the doors” of the “unexplored world” of Icelandic literature to Spanish speakers:

Hace sólo cuatro años que algunas de las sagas islandesas han sido traducidas al castellano, abriendo las puertas de un mundo inexplorado para los lectores de habla hispana que no podemos preciarnos de conocer el islandés. Todo lo cual debemos a la labor de Enrique Bernárdez, catedrático de la Universidad Complutense, que ha develado para nosotros no sólo muchos de los textos de los Edda, sino también los de varias de las más importantes sagas (Messuti, 1987: 119).¹

As we shall see below, while Messuti was not entirely accurate in his assertion that Enrique Bernárdez Sanchís (Madrid, 1949) was the first to translate Icelandic sagas into Spanish, his view of the pioneering nature of Bernárdez’s translations is one which is repeatedly emphasised by other prominent scholars and translators. Luis Alberto de Cuenca (1986: 122), for example, while also acknowledging Jorge Luis Borges’s work in the field, observes that Bernárdez was the first Spaniard to translate the poetry of the *Eddas* directly from their original language into verse in Snorri Sturluson’s *Textos mitológicos de las Eddas* (Sturluson, 1982), and expresses his gratitude for Bernárdez’s anthology *Sagas islandesas* (1984), as well as his “magnificent version” of Snorri’s *Saga de Egil Skallagrímsson* (Sturluson, 1984). A decade later, Javier Díaz Vera also stressed the extent to which Bernárdez’s

¹[It has only been four years since some of the Icelandic sagas have been translated into Castilian, opening the doors of an unexplored world to Spanish-speakers who cannot boast of knowing Icelandic. All this we owe to the work of Enrique Bernárdez, professor of Complutense University, who has revealed to us not only many of the texts of the Edda, but also several of the most important sagas] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are those of the author.

“important and pioneering” teaching and translating activity in the early 1980s not only furnished the general Spanish-speaking reader with access to a relatively high number of Icelandic works, but also provided a model for other translators to follow (*Saga de los Volsungos*, 1998: 22, note 36). Furthermore, in addition to being well received by literary and translation scholars, Bernárdez’s early publications, in particular his *Saga de Egil Skallagrimsson*, have also become works of reference for researchers in fields such as archeology (Corral Lafuente 1991: 40), historical linguistics (Ruiz-Gálvez Priego 1990: 88), and lexicography (Erlendsdóttir, 2008). Various poetic stanzas from this translation have even made their way into a historical novel about King Olaf Haraldsson’s reputed sacking of the town of Tui in Galicia in the tenth century (Sierra Ponce De León, 2000). Thus, while it is difficult to assess their precise impact, it is fair to say that to interested hispanophone readers and scholars, Bernárdez’s early translations of Old Norse literature opened up the doors of a medieval Nordic world which had previously been inaccessible to them and his work both as a philologist and translator signalled the beginning of new tradition of Old Norse studies in Spanish.

In the 1970s, when Bernárdez was initiating his academic career, such a tradition was virtually non-existent. With the exception of the works of Borges such as *Las kenningar* (1933) and *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, the vast majority of existing publications concerning Old Norse literature in Spanish were highly derivative, unscholarly works; translations of translations, or fictionalised retellings.² It was against this background, or rather lack of background, that Bernárdez completed his doctoral thesis on Modern Icelandic grammar, and produced his first academic article, “Acerca de la traducción de los kenningar y otros aspectos de la poesía escáldica” (1980), which centred on the question of translating

²For an survey of the reception of Old Norse literature and culture in the hispanophone world from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries see (Manrique Antón, 2020). For a briefer account in English see (Porter, 2021).

kennings and other aspects of skaldic poetry. The article was remarkable for a number of reasons, not least, as we have seen above, because as an academic publication on an Old Norse topic in Spanish it was almost unprecedented, but also because in the 1980s scholarship on skaldic poetry in any language was still quite rare, let alone scholarship which theorized the translation of skaldic poetry. While Bernárdez does not refer to Translation Studies in this paper, the degree to which his study coincides with many of the main ideas of what was then a newly emerging discipline is striking. His reduced concern for questions of equivalence, an awareness that in literary translations the translator should be first and foremost a reader, an understanding of the importance of the cultural context and literary system(s) in which the source text was produced, the realisation that poetic translations must be balanced and no one element should be prioritized at the expense of another, these are all fundamental tenets of literary translation theory as proposed by Susan Bassnett (1980), André Lefevere (1975), and others. This paper aims to analyse the evolution of Bernárdez's translation theory and practice with regard to skaldic poetry, loosely within the framework of Literary Translation Studies, and, following Bassnett and Lefevere's research, will also investigate the cultural and historical context of his translations of the poetry of *Egils saga*, with a view to examining the extent to which they reflect the dominating ideologies and poetics of the target culture. We also use Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1992: 6), as well as post-colonial translation theory to explore the translations as a site of cultural encounter, and to analyse the power-relations between the source and target texts.

Translations of skaldic poetry provide a particularly suitable basis for the investigation of translation as a place of cultural interface. The complexity and subtlety of this poetry make it notoriously difficult to render into other languages, leading to claims that this genre is "untranslatable". While this is patently untrue, as we shall see below, any attempt to maintain the form of skaldic poetry, communicate the content, and, at the same time, convey its metonymic implications in translation inevitably results in lacunae between source text

and translated text which are more marked than those which occur when rendering prose. It is in these liminal spaces that we can discover both the strategies employed by the translator and the extraneous (cultural, economic, ideological) factors, which may have influenced the production of the translation. Thus, while the central section of this paper comprises a detailed discussion of Bernárdez's translation practice, in order to fully appreciate the factors governing its production we will first examine the context in which it was produced.

CONTEXT OF THE TRANSLATED TEXT

As we have noted above, when Bernárdez's article on the translation of kennings and skaldic poetry first appeared in 1980, academic research on skaldic poetry in general was still relatively rare. Apart from a few key editions and reference works published in the early part of the twentieth century, this genre had been almost entirely ignored as a subject of scholarly interest.³ Publications dedicated to the question of translating skaldic verse were even rarer. Even in the English, German and Scandinavian-speaking countries where the practice of saga translation was becoming increasingly professional, by 1980 only a handful of other studies exclusively dedicated to the question had appeared (e.g. Hollander, 1945; Bolton, 1962), although, of course, some brief discussion of the topic could also usually be found in the introductions to saga translations.

In the hispanophone world in the early 1980s, as we have previously mentioned, there was virtually no tradition of Old Norse Studies, let alone skaldic scholarship. According to Bernárdez, this almost total ignorance of Old Norse literature was the reason behind the

³The most significant of these publications are Finnur Jónsson's four-volume edition of skaldic poetry (1912-1915) and his dictionary of poetic language (1913-16), both in Danish; Ernst Albin Kock's edition of skaldic poetry (1946-49) and his collected notes on eddic and skaldic poetry *Notationes norræne* (1923-41), both in Swedish; and Rudolph Meissner's treatise and systematic classification of kennings (1921). We should also mention here the research of Norwegian Hallvard Lie, see his collected works (1982).

“scandalous” inaccuracies of the handful of references to be found in Spanish encyclopaedias and literary histories, such as the definition of “saga” in the *Diccionario Enciclopédico Espasa*:

Cada una de las leyendas poéticas contenidas en su mayor parte en las dos colecciones de primitivas tradiciones heroicas y mitológicas de la antigua Escandinavia. Una de ellas es los *Eddas* [...], que trata de los dioses y de los héroes; a la otra, la de los *Skald*.⁴

A full and accurate depiction of the sagas in Spanish had actually been available as far back as the early 1950s in Borges’s *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Borges and Ingenieros, 1951), and to a lesser extent in his earlier essay on skaldic poetry *Las kenningar* (1933). However, as Bernárdez was to later point out, neither publication served to palliate the utter lack of knowledge of Old Norse literature in Spanish (1992: 361),⁵ a situation that Borges himself anticipated as is clear from his prologue to the revised 1953 edition of the *Historia de la eternidad*: “El improbable o acaso inexistente lector de *Las kenningar* puede interrogar el manual *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, que escribí con María Esther Vásquez” (Borges, 1989a: 351).⁶

Bernárdez attributes Spain’s neglect of medieval Scandinavian literature, which, he notes, is not paralleled among neighbouring European countries, to a number of factors. On

⁴[Each of the poetic legends mostly contained in the two collections of early heroic and mythological traditions of ancient Scandinavia. One of these is the *Eddas* [...], which deals with gods and heroes; and the other, that of the [pl.] *Skald*] In its latest edition, the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (DRAE)* offers a very similar definition for ‘saga’: “Cada una de las leyendas poéticas contenidas en su mayor parte en las colecciones de primitivas tradiciones heroicas y mitológicas de la antigua Escandinavia”. [“Each of the poetic legends mostly contained in primitive heroic and mythological traditions of ancient Scandinavia.”] For a discussion of rationale behind this definition see (Erlendsdóttir, 2008).

⁵Although it is worthy of note that by that time, *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* had been reprinted at least three times (1966, 1975, 1982), and Borges’s later reworking of this text in collaboration with María Esther Vásquez, *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, had been reprinted three times in Argentina (1965, 1978, 1986) and issued in Spain in 1978 where it had been reprinted twice.

⁶[The improbable or perhaps non-existent reader of *Las kenningar* can investigate the handbook *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, which I wrote with María Esther Vásquez]

a practical level, he cites the lack of Castilian (or Spanish) translations of medieval Icelandic texts and non-existence of any studies on the subject (with exception of Borges's work). However he also attributes this indifference to certain "sociological reasons": "En cuanto al desdén hacia las literaturas 'que no conocemos', se debe probablemente a causas varias, de tipo sociológico, que prefiero abstenerme de comentar" (Bernárdez, 1983: 3).⁷ Although he prefers not to elaborate, Bernárdez most likely refers here to a generalized snobbish attitude on the part of classical and Hispanic philologists at the time who were contemptuous of a literature they knew little or nothing about. By the 1980s, however, the cultural and political climate in Spain was already changing significantly. After the transition to democracy, and especially after becoming a member of the European Economic Community, Spain became more eager to imprint and enhance a sense of Europeanness onto its cultural fabric in an attempt to overcome the feeling of "lagging behind", that accompanied the Francoist period. As Parvati Nair notes:

An emphasis on Europeanisation has been a key feature of the cultural climate of post-Franco Spain. Although this was to some extent part of the spirit of *apertura* (openness) in the latter part of Francoist rule, the accelerated liberalisation that took place during and after the transition to democracy aimed to construct a strong sense of identification with the neighbouring, more advanced, nations of western Europe (2000: 29).

Part of this process included a wholesale importation of European literature usually through the medium of translation. Even before the end of the Franco dictatorship, the statistics regarding book publications indicate a fairly constant growth in translations from the 1960s onwards, but in post-1975 Spain the stream began a flood: "If the statistics can be believed, high levels of translation had for some time been preparing the Spain that, from

⁷[The disdain towards the literatures 'which we do not know', is probably due to various causes of a sociological kind, which I prefer not to comment on]

1985, would become one of the European Union's most enthusiastic members" (Pym, 1997: 558).

The translation work of Bernárdez certainly reflects this trend. By the early 1980s, if not before, he had embarked on an intense period of translation activity, which resulted in publications such as *Textos mitológicos de las Eddas* (Sturluson, 1982), a collection comprising Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* and *Skaldskaparmál*, as well as the mythological poems of the anonymous *Poetic Edda*; *Sagas islandesas* (1984), an anthology of sagas and shorter tales; *Saga de Egil Skallagrímsson* (Sturluson, 1984), a translation of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*; and *Saga de Niál* (1986), a translation of *Brennu-Njáls saga*. That Bernárdez saw himself as something of a pioneering translator, is clear from his statement in the introduction to *Sagas islandesas*:

Que sepamos, es la primera vez que se traducen sagas islandesas al castellano de la lengua original. Ello dificulta la traducción, al no poder contar con antecedentes en los cuáles puedan verse qué vías son las más adecuadas y cuáles deben rechazarse (*Sagas islandesas*, 1984: 38).⁸

In fact, by this time two sagas had already been directly translated into Spanish. The first was Álfrún Gunnlaugsdóttir's doctoral thesis *Sagan af Trístram ok Ísönd* (1970), which included a Spanish translation of *Trístrams saga ok Ísöndar*. A year later, Luis Lerate's *Saga de Hrafnkel Godi de Frey* (1971) was published. Significant as they were, however, these translations were not instrumental in the dissemination of saga literature in Spanish at the time,⁹ and Bernárdez was evidently unaware of them. Thus, when he began translating the

⁸[As far as we are aware, this is the first time that Icelandic sagas have been translated into Spanish from the original language. This complicates the translating process, the fact that one cannot count on predecessors in which one could see which approaches are the most appropriate and which ones should be rejected]

⁹Although Gunnlaugsdóttir's translation was published under the title *Tristán en el norte* (1978), it remained practically unknown outside of academic circles until recently, when it was republished in an accessible edition as *La saga de Tristán e Iseo* (2019); Lerate's *Hrafnkel Godi de Frey* was never reissued, perhaps because it had been superseded by Bernárdez's translation *La Saga de Hrafnkel* in *Sagas islandesas* (1984: 45-78).

Icelandic sagas, as he notes above, apart from some short examples from Borges there was no model in his native tongue to which he could look for guidance. Bernárdez did consult translations in other languages, but unlike English, German and Faroese, he saw much greater difficulty for Spanish with regard to reproducing the alliteration and accentuation so characteristic of Old Norse poetry, not to mention compound nouns and the genitive phrases of the kennings. In the following section we shall examine the source text which forms the basis of Bernárdez's translation study, in order to demonstrate the complex task of the translator of skaldic verse faces.

THE SOURCE TEXT

The source text Bernárdez used for his translation was Sigurður Nordal's 1933 edition of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, the first volume to be published in the prestigious "Íslenzk fornrit" series, of which Nordal was also general editor.¹⁰ One of Nordal's ambitions in the publication of this series was the advancement of the so-called "bookprose theory" in Old Norse philology, i.e., the belief that the Icelandic sagas were the literary products of a learned elite active in the "golden age" of the Icelandic Commonwealth, "rather than mere recorders who did little more than set down on vellum things that had been preserved in an oral tradition inherited from Norway" (Sigurðsson, 2004: 20). In the case of *Egils saga* Nordal believed that the author could be identified as Snorri Sturluson (Sturluson, 1933: lxx-xcv).

Bernárdez was equally convinced that Snorri had written *Egils saga*, to the extent that he included his name as author in the title of the translation. In his introduction he is eager to emphasise the "bookprose" perspective, i.e., that a saga should be understood as "the work

¹⁰Even though it was the first edition to be published in the Íslenzk fornrit series, *Egils saga* now occupies the second volume; the editions which comprise volumes 1.1 and 1.2, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* respectively, were published in 1968.

of ‘an author’”, as opposed to a simple reworking of traditional material as in Germanic epics such as *Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied* (Bernárdez, 1984: 11). For Bernárdez, Snorri is “la máxima figura de las letras islandesas”,¹¹ and that indeed, Icelandic literary history could be summed up in four names, Snorri Sturluson, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, Hallgrímur Péturson and Halldór Kiljan Laxness (1984: 57). The problem with Snorri, Bernárdez continues, is that his work (like all the Icelandic literature of his time) remained unknown on the European continent, and thus had no influence on medieval and post-medieval literatures (58). This perceived omission is obviously a driving force behind Bernárdez’s mission to make Snorri’s work known, and to establish a place for it in the Spanish foreign canon. The status of *Egils saga* as a “world classic” is reflected in the name of the series in which it was first published, the “Biblioteca de la literatura y el pensamiento universales” (“Library of Universal Literature and Philosophy”), alongside titles as diverse as *Poema de Gilgamesh* and *Dos grandes maestros del Taoismo*.¹² Coincidentally, a couple of years later, the saga’s canonical status was further confirmed with its inclusion in Borges’s “Biblioteca Personal” (Borges, 1989b: 529), and Bernárdez’s translation was published with Borges’s prologue as no. 18 in the series “Jorge Luis Borges: Biblioteca Personal” (Sturluson, 1987).¹³

Returning to the source text, like most editions, its purpose is not only to provide readers with an accessible text collated from all the medieval and post-medieval witnesses to the saga,¹⁴ but also to explain and interpret it. As we shall see below, the distorted syntax,

¹¹[The greatest figure in Icelandic letters]

¹²This is a common trend. Spanish translations of sagas and other Old Norse-Icelandic literature are very often published in collections of “world” or “classical” literature, e.g., “Biblioteca Universal”, “Clásicos Medievales”, “Biblioteca Medieval”, “Colección Pegasus”, and “Colección Gorgona”.

¹³In a personal communication (March 21, 2021) Bernárdez informed me that he was unaware that his translation was to be included in the Biblioteca personal series (the publishing rights to the original translation had previously been sold), and he only learned of its existence when the book was published.

¹⁴In order to reconstruct this putative original, Nordal collated the “best” manuscripts, namely the medieval codex *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.), the chief witness to the A-redaction; a copy (AM 461 4to) of *Wolfenbüttelbók* (Herzog August Bibliothek MS 9. 10. Aug. 4to), the chief witness to the B-redaction; AM 453 4to, one of the so-called *Ketilsbækir*, two nearly identical manuscripts of *Egils saga* written by the learned

complex kennings and cryptic allusions so characteristic of skaldic verse, make it almost impossible for the general reader to understand without assistance. Thus, in the footnotes to the skaldic stanzas, the editors of the “Íslenzk fornrit” series provide a prose version of the verse rearranged in a more natural word order, as well as extensive notes and a Modern Icelandic summary of the content. While the editors scrupulously note all manuscript variants and ambiguities in the texts, the tendency of this arrangement often results in the translator accepting the editor's interpretation rather uncritically. However, while Bernárdez usually follows Nordal's interpretations, he certainly consulted other sources also, such as Halldór Halldórsson's *Egluskýringar* (1973).

THE POETRY OF *EGILS SAGA*

As we have noted above, *Egils saga* is a thirteenth century narrative, possibly composed by Snorri Sturluson, which recounts the adventures of Egill, son of Skalla-Grímr, and his extended family. Beginning in Norway, Egill's grandfather's disputes with King Harald Fairhair result in his father's subsequent emigration to Iceland, where Egill is born and goes on to become a farmer, erstwhile Viking, but most famously a poet, or *skáld*. Like many of the *Sagas of Icelanders*, and particularly in the case of sagas about poets, the prose narrative is embedded with poetic stanzas which, for the most part, are presented as spontaneous speech, composed and uttered on the spot by Egill or another character. While the authenticity of some of these verses has been disputed, it is possible that at least some of the stanzas did originate in the way described in the saga, or at least represent genuine compositions by Egill, which were preserved and transmitted orally over few hundred years, until they were written down. Of the fifty-six “stand-alone” stanzas (*lausavísur*) which occur in the saga, forty-eight

clergyman, Ketill Jörundsson (d. 1670), and the chief witnesses to the C-redaction; and the fragments collectively known as AM 162 A fol., which include the oldest written evidence of the saga.

are attributed to Egill. He is also credited with three extended poems, namely *Höfuðlausn* (“Head-Ransom”), *Sonatorrek* (“Grievous Loss of Sons”), and *Arinbjarnarkviða* (“Arinbjörn’s Poem”), and of three other praise-poems (*drápur*), of which only the opening stanzas (and one refrain) remain.¹⁵

Egill’s poetry is part of a corpus of skaldic verse comprising twenty-five thousand lines, which are scattered throughout more than five hundred manuscripts, as well as runic inscriptions carved on wood, stone, bone and metal, and spanning a period of almost five hundred years. The exact origins of the skaldic art, although much debated, remain obscure, and the first skalds on record are semi-legendary figures whose existence is by no means certain. By the ninth century, however, a fully developed poetic genre had emerged, which continued to be practiced in Scandinavia well into the fourteenth century. The accounts that we have regarding the composition and performance of skaldic poetry coincide in that this was occasional verse, produced by known poets, in a specific situation, for a specific purpose, which most often meant the commemoration of kings and lords, but it could be used for a range of other functions such as insulting, cursing, or even making love. In prose texts of the thirteenth century, the functions of skaldic verse were extended, as it was used to corroborate the events of the past in the kings’ sagas, as a narratological device in the Sagas of Icelanders, and as a didactic tool in areas of secular and ecclesiastical learning.

The majority of skaldic poetry was composed in *dróttkvætt* (or *dróttkvæðr hátt*, “Court Metre”), a metre which has no known equivalent in European verse forms (although it has been compared with early Irish syllabic poetry). The strict rules of *dróttkvætt* can often result in the word order of the poetry being unnatural and this, coupled with its abundant

¹⁵While the *lausavísur* are preserved embedded in prose, the situation is quite different regarding the longer poems of *Egils saga*, i.e., *Höfuðlausn*, *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Sonatorrek*, none of which are to be found in their entirety in the earliest manuscripts. In his edition of the saga, Nordal presents these poems in their reconstructed form, and at their “rightful” place in the narrative, thus giving the impression that they have always been an integral part of the saga, despite evidence to the contrary

use of the poetic circumlocutions known as kennings, is what has given skaldic poetry the reputation of being complicated, obscure and difficult to understand. In the stanza below Egill presents an introspective reflection on the scene of a ship caught in a winter snowstorm. Here the poet envisions the storm as a giant artisan, who uses the snow-showers as a chisel to make a file out of the sea by cutting into and roughening its surface. This “file” is then used to rasp the prow of the ship. A mythological dimension is added by the references to two figures from the supernatural world, a giant and the sea-god Gestill, and the zoomorphic image of the ship, visualised first as bull and then a swan, emphasises the strength and elegance of the vessel as it navigates the rough sea. Thus, a multiplicity of allusions is achieved simultaneously, almost like a hologram effect, in which the perspective is constantly shifting. It is a unique work of artistic expression of the highest degree, and, bearing in mind the exacting metrical requirements with which the poet was obliged to comply, it is no wonder that Egill Skalla-Grímsson is so often ranked first among the skalds.

Þél høggr stórt fyr stáli
stafnkvígs á veg jafnan
út með éla meitli
andærr jötunn vandar,
en svalbúinn selju
sverfr eirar vanr þeiri
Gestils ölpt með gustum
gandr of stál fyr brandi (Sturluson, 1933: 172).¹⁶

¹⁶English word-for-word translation: [File carves hugely before prow/ prow-bull's on way smooth/ out with snowstorm's chisel/ adverse giant of tree,/ and coldly-clad willow's/ files mercy lacking with it/ Gestil's swan with gusts/ enemy around the prow in front of the ornament]

Prose word order

Andærr jötunn vandar høggr stórt þél með meitli éla á jafnan veg stafnkvígs fyr stáli, en svalbúinn gandr selju – vanr eirar – sverfr þeiri ölpt Gestils fyr brandi of stál með gustum.

Translation

The giant of the tree [giant (i.e., enemy) of the tree > wind, which is adverse > storm] massively carves a file with the chisel of snowstorms onto the smooth-path of the prow-bull [prow-bull > ship, whose smooth path > sea] in front of the prow, and the coldly clad wolf of the willow [wolf (i.e., enemy) of the tree > wind/storm], lacking in mercy, files with it (i.e., with the file) the swan of Gestill [Gestill (a mythological sea-god) whose swan > ship] in front of the ornament around the prow with gusts.

Like all *dróttkvætt* stanzas, the example above consists of eight lines or, more correctly, half-lines. The stanzas are divided into two half-stanzas which are metrically independent and often syntactically so, and which in the sagas are sometimes preserved as separate entities called *helmingar*. Another fundamental requirement of *dróttkvætt* poetry is that it is syllable-counting, with the number of syllables is usually limited to six per line, as is the case here.

In common with other skaldic and Germanic verse forms, in *dróttkvætt* lines are linked in pairs by alliteration. There are two alliterating sounds (*stuðlar*) in each odd line and one (the *höfuðstafr*, “chief stave/post”) in the first stressed syllable of each even line. Any vowel or diphthong alliterates with any other (or with /j/ and a following vowel), though preferably an unlike one. In the verses above the alliterating letters are indicated in bold font. Thus, for example, in the first two lines the alliterating sound is /st/, in the following pair of lines we can see an instance of the (unlike) vowels /u:/ and /e:/, and /a/ alliterating, in lines 3-4 the alliterating sound is /s/, and in the last two lines, /g/.

Individual lines also contain pairs of internal rhymes, called *hendingar*, which link the sounds in stressed syllables. The second stress is always on the penultimate syllable. There are two types of internal rhyme: odd lines normally have *skothending* (half-rhyme) in which the vowels/diphthongs are different, but the postvocalic consonants or consonant groups are identical. Even-numbered lines (and sometimes also odd lines) have *adalhending* (“full” or “chief” rhyme) in which vowels/diphthongs and the postvocalic consonant(s) are identical. In the above examples internal rhyme is indicated by underlining. In line 1 for instance, the penultimate syllable is stál-, which therefore carries a primary stress (in this case it is also the alliterating syllable), which rhymes with another stressed syllable in the line, Þél. The following line has full internal rhyme in that the vowel and consonant group jafn in the penultimate syllable, rhymes with stafn in the first syllable. It is the adherence to these strict constraints in the composition of a skaldic stanza which results in an unnatural word order and clause-arrangement, or at least a word order very unlike that of prose.

We have so far mostly looked at the form and structure of the *dróttkvætt* stanza, but the poetic diction of the stanzas quoted above is another distinguishing factor. The most prominent devices are *heiti* and kennings. A *heiti* is a common device used in poetry in many cultures, in which an unusual or “poetic” appellation is used to replace a common noun, such as saying “steed” or “mount”, for “horse”. In the stanza above, *gandr* (l. 6) is an example of a *heiti*, being a poetic term for “wolf”. The kenning is a kind of metaphorical periphrasis, which in its simplest forms consists either of two nouns, one of them in the genitive case, or of two nouns combined to form a compound word. These two elements are called the “base-word” and the “determinant”. In the case of a two-noun kenning it is the noun in its genitive case that constitutes the determinant; in the case of a compound-word kenning, it is the first element in the compound that does so. In this stanza, for example, *jötunn vandar*, a kenning for “storm”, consists of two substantives: *jötunn* means “giant”, and by extension, as the giants were traditionally enemies of the gods, it can mean “enemy” in general. *Vöndr*, or

vandar as it appears here in its genitive form, means a “wand” or “post”. *Jötunn*, as the base-word of the kenning, takes the place of the “sense-word” or kenning referent (indicated in small caps, i.e., storm) in the sentence, and consequently the case as required by the clause (in this example, nominative). *Vandar* (“of wand/ pole”), as the determinant, qualifies what type of enemy is being referred to. The enemy of an upright post, possibly a mast in this context, is the wind or storm because the wind could cause a mast or tree to be knocked down or uprooted.

Bernárdez classes this last example as a “cultural kenning”, one which would have been understood by a contemporaneous audience at least in a well-defined cultural context, but for modern-day reader who does not possess the necessary cultural knowledge “the giant of the post” does not mean “wind” (1980: 230). Similarly, the mythological kenning *Gestils ölpt* can only be deciphered by one who understands that Gestill is a mythological king of the sea, and that his “swan” is a ship. As Bernárdez observes, even for the thirteenth-century saga audience, the *lausavísur* were probably only comprehensible due to their prose contexts, where they were often preceded with short preludes summarising their content. As Sturluson himself acknowledged in his poetical handbook *Skaldskaparmál*, by the thirteenth century certain aspects of the skaldic art, especially the knowledge associated with mythological kennings, was going into decline and had to be explained to young poets. Nevertheless, despite their less-than-perfect understanding of the poetry, it is clear that certain saga writers took great pains to preserve skaldic stanzas, both as historic corroborations of the content and as literary devices to display the interior emotional and psychological life of the characters, which is otherwise unexpressed in the terse objective style of the prose. As regards form and content, therefore, the juxtaposition between prose and verse could hardly be greater and is unmistakable for any reader or listener familiar with Old Norse-Icelandic. For Bernárdez, it is imperative to maintain this sharp distinction between prose and verse in his translation, in order to recreate for his contemporary Spanish readership something of the

experience of the original saga audience, and he outlines a number of strategies for achieving this, as we shall see in the following section.

THE STRATEGY OF THE TRANSLATOR

Bernárdez's principal approach to translating the poetry of *Egils saga* corresponds to what James Holmes has categorised as the "analogical form", where the translator determines what the function of the original form is, and then seeks an equivalent in the target language (Holmes, 1970). To this end, the translator insists on a strong contrast between contemporaneous and comprehensible language in the prose, and archaic, complex, highly metaphorical language in the poetry: "De esta manera nos acercáramos a lo que oía, por ejemplo, el campesino islandés del siglo XVIII (o incluso el noble noruego en el siglo XIII cuando se le leía en voz alta una saga)" (Bernárdez, 1980: 238).¹⁷ Something of the unnatural word order of the original form should be also preserved, as should the greatest number of kennings possible. However, to illustrate the futility of attempting to reproduce all of these elements exactly, Bernárdez shows what that would look like in an absolutely literal translation (see below). While "faithful", the result is utterly incomprehensible, and almost certainly does not recreate the effect of the original on its intended target audience. In this version everything is lost in translation; nothing of the aesthetic effects of form, nor imagery is preserved. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in the final line, the translator retains the Old Norse term *brandr*, which, as he explains in a footnote, refers to a decorated piece of wood located on the prow of the ship (1980: 235).

lima golpea fuertemente ante quilla
del-ternero-proa en camino llano

¹⁷[In this way we can get close to what an Icelandic peasant of the eighteenth century heard, for example, (or even a Norwegian noble in the thirteenth century when a saga was read aloud to him)]

fuera con de-gotas limaduras
sopla gigante de-leño
y helador del-sauce
lima, parece inofensivo, con ellas
de-Gestill cisne con torbellinos
lobo desde quilla ante *brandr* (1980: 234-235).¹⁸

His second attempt produces a much more comprehensible text:

una lima golpea fuertemente la quilla
del barco en la mar,
sacando gotas de agua;
sopla la tormenta,
y la tempestad heladora,
aunque parece inofensiva
saca en torbellino limaduras
del barco,
de la quilla y el *brandr* (1980: 236).¹⁹

In this version, although the word order is not entirely natural, it is relatively logical and easy to follow. Furthermore, all the kennings of the original as identified by Bérnardez (235), have been substituted with their referents. Thus *stafn-kvígr*, the “ternero de proa” (“prow-bull”), is reduced to “barco” (“ship”); *jötunn vandar*, the “gigante del leño” (“giant of

¹⁸[A file beats strongly before keel/ of the-calf-prow on path flat/ out with of-drops filings/ blows giant of-wood/ and freezer of-willow /files, seems harmless, with-them /of-Gestill swan with whirlwinds/ wolf from keel before *brandr*]

¹⁹[A file beats strongly the keel/ of the ship on the sea,/ producing drops of water;/ the storm blows,/ and the freezing tempest,/ although it seems harmless/ produces in whirlwind filings/ of the ship, /of the keel and the *brandr*]

the log”), becomes “tormenta” (“storm”); *selju gandr*, the “lobo del sauce” (“wolf of the willow”), is also substituted by “tormenta” (“storm”), or rather its synonym, “tempestad” (“tempest”); and *Gestils ölp*, the “cisne de Gestill” (“Gestill’s swan”), is rendered “barco” (“ship”). The translator has also achieved some alliteration (highlighted in bold) and has limited the syllables to six in lines 2 and 4. However, this rendition is immediately dismissed as being “too literal” and “stylistically contemptible” (236), in particular with regard to the removal of the kennings, which ultimately defeats the whole purpose of skaldic poetry as Bernárdez explains:

En muchos casos lo que importa no es *qué* se dice, sino solamente el *cómo* se expresa. En cierto modo, eliminar totalmente los *kenningar*, incluso si se utilizan muchos sinónimos en la traducción, sería como dejar una pieza de jazz limitada exclusivamente a su tema fundamental, eliminando las variaciones e improvisaciones de los miembros de la banda, que es lo que proporciona a esta música su principal característica (239).²⁰

In sum, Bernárdez’s principal theory regarding the translation of skaldic poetry is that the target text must strike a balance between form and content. In this he coincides with Susan Bassnett’s statement that: “a poem is a text in which content and form are inseparable. Because they are inseparable, it ill behoves any translator to try and argue that one or the other is less significant” (1998: 69). He also advocates for preserving the metaphorical schema behind the kennings, if not the exact kennings themselves, as well as the characteristic lexical variation of the poetic diction, but at the same time ensuring that the poem is intelligible.

²⁰[In many cases what is important is not what is said, but how it is expressed. In a way, completely eliminating the kennings, even if many synonyms are used in the translation would be like limiting a piece of jazz music to its main theme, eliminating the variations and improvisations of the band members which give this music its principal character]

In the final version of this stanza as published in his *Saga de Egil Skallagrímsson* below (Sturluson, 1988), we can see that Bernárdez has managed to retain the formal features of skaldic poetry to a surprising extent. The strophe follows the eight-line format, and although it has proved impossible to restrict the number of syllables to six per line, very few contain more than eight. There is also some alliteration (indicated in bold) and internal rhyme, such as the *skothending* in lines 1, 2, 3 and 7 (underlined). While the syntax does not push the limits of comprehensibility, there are a few examples of unnatural word order such as in ll. 1-2, which in ordinary prose would read: “el destructor del mástil, como lima, alza raeduras [...]”.

Raeduras, como lima
alza el destructor del mástil
en la proa, agita la onda,
el enemigo helador
del leño lima del cisne
del mar en torbellinos
la roda aderezada,
saltan de agua las gotas (1988: 210).²¹

As regards the poetic diction, he has kept three of the original four kennings, although in simplified form, which are explained in their respective footnotes as: “Destructor del mástil: tormenta” (“Destroyer of the mast: storm”), “Enemigo helador: tormenta” (“Freezing enemy: storm”) and “Cisne del mar: barco” (“Swan of the sea: ship”). Thus, while not entirely maintaining the multiple allusions of the source text, he successfully preserves the

²¹[Shavings, like file/ raises the destroyer of the mast/ on the prow, the wave agitates,/ the freezing/chiller enemy/ of the log files the swan/ of the sea in whirlwinds/ the decorated stem,/ the drops of water leap]

metaphorical framework which underlies the kennings of the original, conjuring up the image of a storm personified as a destructive carpenter who “files” the ship with the sea.

The term *brandr*, which appeared in the previous versions above, has been replaced here with “roda aderezada” (“decorated prow-piece”). However, the use of Old Norse borrowings for cultural-specific concepts, usually in a form adapted to Spanish orthography and morphology, is a device we see repeatedly in the translations of other stanzas in the saga. Examples include *nornas* for *nornir* in stanza 1 (Sturluson, 1988: 80-81), referring to the three old women who were said to ordain the fates of men. In a footnote Bernárdez compares the *nornir* to the “Greek Parcae”, presumably in the expectation that the reader may be more familiar with classical mythology, but perhaps also to underline the common Indo-European ancestry of Norse and Greek/Roman heritage. In the same stanza we also find *thing*, a term that occurs frequently throughout the prose, to refer to ON *þing* (/θiŋg/, “assembly”). In stanza 8 the *dísablót* (“sacrificial festival to the *dísir*”, or minor female deities) becomes *la fiesta de las dísas* (1988: 141); the word *Hel* is retained as the name for the land of the dead in stanza 11 (146); and in stanza 28, the hybrid phrase *thing sagrado* (201-02), seems to be a bilingual calque of *þinghelgr* (“sanctuary of the assembly”), Nordal’s explanation for the term *vé* (“temple”) in the original text (Sturluson, 1933: 163). Bernárdez could quite easily have used Spanish equivalents for these concepts, such as *parcas*, *asamblea* (“assembly”), *diosas* (“goddesses”), *infierno* (“Hell” in the Christian sense), *templo/santuario* (“temple/sanctuary”), etc., but these evoke associations foreign to the source culture, and presumably for that reason they have been avoided.

As we have noted above, Bernárdez recommends recreating the contrast between the contemporaneous language (of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) of the saga prose, and the archaic language of the poetry, a distinction which he claims is not generally respected in translations (Bernárdez, 1980: 228). It is obviously with this objective in mind that he works into his translation a number of terms which are strongly reminiscent of Spanish medieval

literature, particularly with the *cantares de gesta* as epitomized by the *Cantar de Mio Cid*. Some examples from the praise-poem “Rescate de la Cabeza” (“Ransom of the Head”/ *Höfuðlausn*) include (Sturluson, 1988: 224-228): *estar presto a* (“to be disposed to”), *erranza* (“error”), *dardo* (“dart”, but here in the sense of “arrow”), *broquel* (“buckler”), *tahali* (“scabbard”), *por cierto* (“by the way”, but here in the sense of “certainly”); *las gestas* (“the deeds”), *doquiera* (“everywhere”), and *bien sé cantar loores* (“I well know how to sing eulogies”).

Another of Bernárdez’s translation strategies is to introduce innovative metaphors in order to render complex kennings, such as: *el jinete de las olas* (“the jockey of the waves”) for “the knowing-tree (man) of the horses of the gunwale (ship)-field” > sailor in stanza 5 (1988, 106). Similarly, two kennings for poetry in *Sonatorrek* (292), *Viðurs þýfi* (“Viðurr’s, i.e., Óðinn’s theft”) and *fagnafundur Friggja niðja* (“joyful find of Frigg’s kinsmen, i.e., the gods”) which, for the source culture, allude to the myth of the magical poetic mead stolen by Óðinn from the land of the giants and brought back to the gods, are rendered *el néctar de Odín* (“Odin’s nectar”) and *licor de poesía* (“liqueur of poetry”). While these kennings never specifically occur in the skaldic corpus, they are obviously modelled on those which refer to poetry as “Odin’s drink” as mead, ale or other types of alcohol. A final illustration of the translator’s creativity can be seen in stanza 7 of the same poem where the phrase *emk ofsnauðr at ástvinum* (“I am greatly deprived/bereft with respect to dear friends”) becomes *huérfano estoy de amigos amados* (“orphaned am I of beloved friends”).

Thus, although Bernárdez is not always able to obey the letter of *dróttkvætt* verse, he is certainly true to its spirit, and through his various strategies manages to achieve a translation which is representative of the formal characteristics of this kind of poetry, without sacrificing the aesthetic aspects. What is somewhat strange, however, is that although he describes skaldic diction as “refined”, “artificial”, “baroque” and “recherché” (1980: 225), he does not explicitly recognize the great similarity between skaldic verse and that of the baroque poets

of the Spanish Golden Age. Borges, on the contrary, was quick to make the analogy, as early as *Las kenningar* (1933), and later again in his editions of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* and *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, where he compares the kennings to the *conceptismo* style practiced by poets such as Francisco de Quevedo (whom he admired) and Baltasar Gracián y Morales (whom he did not). As we can see in Gracián's definition of *conceptismo* the correspondence to which Borges alludes is very clear:

Consiste, pues, este artificio conceptuoso, en una primorosa concordancia, en una armónica correlación entre dos o tres cognoscibles extremos, expresada por un acto del entendimiento [...] Es un acto del entendimiento, que exprime la correspondencia que se halla entre los objetos (Gracián y Morales, 1969: 55).²²

Another poet of the Golden Age whose style also bears a strong resemblance to that of *dróttkvætt* poetry is Luis de Góngora y Argote. Widely acknowledged as the exponent *par excellence* of the Spanish literary baroque style, he was a master of *conceptismo* and also *culteranismo*, a technique characterised by an “abundance of ‘cultisms’ and neologisms, as well as a metaphorical language and complex syntax”. Góngora developed a method of fusing *conceptismo* and *culteranismo* (later known as ‘Gongorismo’), in part, to confer on Spanish poetry the perfection and prestige that Latin possessed for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. He did this by pushing the limits of the *culto* tradition, approximating Spanish to Latin in vocabulary and syntax far beyond the limits permissible in normal literary style, and infusing his verse with a profusion of Latinisms and classical allusions as we can see in the example below, in *Soledad Primera* ll. 1-6, the poem generally considered to be the quintessence of Góngora.

²²[It consists, then, this conceptual device, in an exquisite concordance, in a harmonious correlation between two or three perceptible extremes, expressed by an act of understanding [...] It is an act of understanding which extracts the correspondence which is to be found between things]

Era del año la estación florida
en que el mentido robador de Europa
—media luna las armas de su frente,
y el Sol todos los rayos de su pelo—
luciente honor del cielo,
en campos de zafiro pace estrellas (Jones, 1966: 40).²³

The similarities to skaldic poetry are undeniable. Particularly striking are the periphrases so reminiscent of kennings: *el mentido robador de Europa* (“the deceitful robber of Europa” > jupiter); *las armas de su frente* (“the weapons of his forehead” > horns); and *en campos de zafiro pace estrellas*, where the sky is envisioned as a blue meadow in which Taurus grazes upon stellar pastures. Another characteristic feature of Góngora’s verse, is the constant use of hyperbaton; the word order of his poetry is frequently inverted, sometimes so much so as to obscure meaning, as is often the case with Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s verse. Indeed, Góngora’s poetry is so complex that many editions provide the reader with comprehension aids in the form of notes, prose paraphrases of his poems, and reordering of the word order into more natural prose syntax (much in the manner of Nordal’s treatment of the skaldic verses in *Egils saga*).

Despite its seemingly strange and disaffecting form and content, therefore, skaldic poetry did have a remarkably similar literary equivalent in the poetry of Quevedo, Gracián, and Góngora, which was apparent to Borges, and, although he did not expressly recognise the resemblance here, to Bernárdez also.²⁴ Consequently, although his principal objective was to try to reproduce something of the original function of skaldic verse in the saga narrative

²³[It was of the year the flowery season/ in which the deceitful robber of Europa /— a half-moon the weapons of his forehead,/ and the sun all the sunbeams of his hair —/ brilliant honour of the sky, / in fields of sapphire grazes on stars.]

²⁴Confirmed in a private communication (March 21, 2021).

by retaining essential aspects form and diction, for a Spanish reader in the twentieth century, it would surely have recalled the florid and baroque style of the Golden Age poets.

CONCLUSION: TRANSLATION AS A SITE OF CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

Almost one hundred years before the emergence of postcolonial theory or Literary Translation Studies, Friedrich Nietzsche had observed that “the degree of the historical sense of any age may be inferred from the manner in which this age makes *translations* and tries to absorb former ages and books” (2002: 262), citing as the example of the manner in which the Roman poets (such as Horace or Propertius) translated Greek antiquities into the “Roman present”:

Indeed translation was a form of conquest. Not only did one omit what was historical: one also added allusions to the present and, above all, struck out the name of the poet and replaced it with one’s own—not with any sense of theft but with the very best conscience of the *imperium Romanum* (Nietzsche, 2002: 262).

The metaphor of translation as conquest is an apt one. Any act of translation implies a taking over, and subsequent colonization of a “source text”, and several postcolonial scholars have shown how translations can be investigated as sites to examine and question the unequal power relations between colonizing and colonized cultures. In *The Poetics of Imperialism* (1991), for example, Eric Cheyfitz repeatedly demonstrates how in narratives of colonialism in the “New World”, the languages of the coloniser and colonised is always portrayed in an unequal relation whereby the former is “superior” to the latter. However, while in the case of

Bernárdez’s translation, Spanish is obviously the dominant one in the equation, the question of a privileged language is more complex, and unlike the “Horace Model” of translation above, in which the source culture is effaced to meet the demands of the receiving

Latin culture (Bassnett, 1998: 4), it is clear that the translator views his source text as very high status indeed. This can be seen in his determination to preserve both form and content in the poetry, and to be faithful to the saga author's intention. It is also represented in the idiosyncratic idiom resulting from the contact between the two cultures, based on Modern Spanish but also including elements from Old Norse, Medieval Spanish as well as some hybrid words and neologisms. While obviously not a creole, this idiom is reminiscent of the concept of "contact" languages, those "improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other" (Pratt, 1992: 6), and while the relationship between a translator and his source text is clearly quite different to that of two speakers of different languages, in our discussion of the processes involved in developing his definitive version of a skaldic stanza, we have seen how the translator has engaged in an ongoing negotiation and exchange between the two literary systems. Thus, while the first literal translation slavishly followed the source text word-for-word, and the second "conquering" version erased the essence of skaldic poetry, the final version found a middle ground, one that respected the source culture but which was accessible and appealing to the receiving culture at the same time.

Nevertheless, it is clear that to an extent Bernárdez viewed his source text with "imperial eyes". Anaya Kabir and Deanne Williams have described the phenomenon by which "the medieval past can be colonized, like a distant continent, to further the interests of modernity" (2005:1), and although they focus primarily on periods of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the same analogy could also be applied to a pioneering translator, working in the Spain in the early 1980s, as that country emerged from a period of isolation and marginalization, anxious to forge stronger links with the rest of Europe. As we have seen above, this aspiration was reflected in an increase in the importation and translation of works from Europe and the rest of the outside world, and Bernárdez's early translation activity reflected this trend. As he set out to explore the "uncharted territory" of

Old Norse-Icelandic literature, his self-appointed mission was to “recover” this cultural capital to enrich and aggrandize his native culture, so that Spain would no longer “lag behind” France, Italy, Germany and England with regard to an appreciation and knowledge of Old Norse literature. In order to entice his compatriots to explore this “new world” a certain level of mystery and exoticism has to be maintained, but at the same time the translator must avoid alienating the reader with too much foreignness. Therefore, it is not surprising that consciously or unconsciously, Bernárdez has included semiotic markers that call up modes or texts from the familiar target literary system, in this case, the *Cantar de Mio Cid* and the work of the baroque poets, both of which incidentally recall the former glories of the Reconquista and the Golden Age, when Spain was at the height of its imperial strength.

That Bernárdez’s early publications were well received and played a pioneering role in introducing the Icelandic sagas and skaldic poetry to the hispanophone world is beyond a doubt. Not only as a translator, but as a professional philologist, his work was instrumental in paving the way for the emergence of a professional and academic tradition of scholarship on Old Norse literature in Spanish. From the 1980s onwards, a steady flow of saga translations appeared in Spanish, as well as anthologies of poetry and historical works, so that to date many of the Sagas of Icelanders have now been translated, as well as some of the Kings’ sagas, and the legendary sagas, although there still remains much work to be done (Bernárdez, 2020). A considerable body of research on medieval Scandinavian topics is also now available in Spanish, reflecting the ever-increasing number of dedicated scholars in the field (see Barreiro & Birro, 2017). We can safely claim that although Old Norse Studies in Spain and South America is still relatively underdeveloped compared with other countries and cultures, the doors to the world of the sagas and skaldic poetry are now wide open to the Spanish-speaking reader.

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