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“Svá sem naglar halda skipi saman”
Attitudes to Alliteration in Poetry and Lyrics in Iceland

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Attitudes to Alliteration in Poetry and Lyrics in Iceland

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Ágrip

Stuðlun er einkenni ljóðrænnar tjáningar margra tungumála, en hún var eitt mikilvægasta kennileiti forn germansks kveðskapar. Þó önnur germönsk tungumál hafi á miðöldum hætt notkun þeirra bragarháttanna sem felast í stuðlaðri formgerð þá hefur sú þriggja þátta stuðlun sem kennd er við stuðla og höfuðstafi verið hluti af ljóðhefð íslenskrar tungu frá upphafi. Þessa stuðlun má enn finna í nútímatextum.

„Svá sem naglar halda skipi saman“, er sú myndlíking sem Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld notar til þess að leggja áherslu á mikilvægi stuðlunar í norrænum kveðskap 13. aldar. Stuðlun má finna í nær öllum greinum íslenskrar ljóðlistar alveg fram á 20. öld með nokkrum undantekningum svo sem sagnadönsum og þulum - verk sem voru að mestu leyti flutt af konum og tilheyrðu þar með hópi samfélagsins sem ef til vill naut minni virðingar en aðrir. Mikilvægi stuðlunar hefur þó verið á niðurleið í nær öllum greinum íslensks kveðskapar frá upphafi 20. aldar og fram til nútímans.

Það er einmitt sú staðreynd sem þessi ritgerð miðast við að skoða nánar með greiningu á fræðimennsku, ljóðverkum sem nutu vinsælda á þessu tímasteiði sem og viðtölum við fjóra íslenska ljóða- og lagasmiði – Braga Valdimar Skúlason, Gerði Kristný, Kristínu Svövu Tómasdóttur og Guðrúnu Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttur (betur þekkt sem GDRN). Með þessum aðferðum verður það leitt í ljós að þekking á, sem og velþóknun gagnvart, þessari hefð fyrir stuðlun innan íslensk kveðskapar sé enn til staðar innan íslensks samfélags. Hins vegar séu skýr merki um að notkun stuðlunar sé að verða takmörkuð við ákveðinn hóp innan samfélagsins sem hefur miklar mætur á hefðbundinni ljóðlist. Samstiga þessu séu ljóðskáld og lagasmiðir farin að nota stuðlun á frjálslægri hátt sem eitt margra ljóðrænna stílbragða fremur en skilyrði sem þarf að uppfylla til þess að verk megi kallast ljóðlist.

Abstract

Alliteration is a feature of the poetic expression of many languages, but it was one of the most important ones within the ancient Germanic poetic tradition. While other Germanic languages no longer apply the poetic metrics that call for structural alliteration and stopped doing so during medieval times, Icelandic poetry continues to employ structural alliteration in accordance with the tripartite system that includes props and a head-stave (*stuðlar* and *hofuðstafr* in Old Icelandic). Even in modern poetry and lyrics, one can come across the traditional alliterative style.

“Svá sem naglar halda skipi saman,” as nails holding a ship together, so does Ólafur Þórðarson hvítaskáld deem the importance of alliteration in the 13th century for the Nordic poetic tradition. Given this importance of alliteration, it is no surprise that it can be found in all types of Icelandic poetry until well into the 20th century. Few exceptions exist, however, most notably poetry such as *sagnadansar* and *pulur* which were mostly performed by women and as such belonged to a less prestigious sphere in society.

Since the beginning of the 20th century until today, the importance of alliteration for nearly all types of Icelandic poetry seems to be in a decline, a fact which this thesis aims to explore in more detail through an analysis of scholarship, representative popular poetry and lyrics throughout that time, and the conduction of four interviews with modern Icelandic artists of the poetic and the songwriter’s sphere, namely Bragi Valdimar Skúlason, Gerður Kristný, Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir and Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir (better known as GDRN). Through these means, it shall come to light that although knowledge and appreciation of the Icelandic alliterative tradition is still alive among the Icelandic society, there is a clear indication that the usage of it is starting to be restricted to a certain community that values the traditional ways of poetry. Meanwhile, most mainstream poetry and lyrics are using alliteration more freely as one of several poetic devices as opposed to it functioning as a condition that requires fulfilment in order for a work to be considered poetry.

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Table of contents

Ágrip.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements	3
Table of contents	4
1 Introduction	6
2 Explaining Alliteration	10
2.1 Rules of alliteration in Germanic languages.....	11
2.2 Rules of alliteration in other languages	12
2.3 Loss in other Germanic languages.....	14
3 Adhering to Alliteration.....	18
3.1 Medieval literature.....	19
3.1.1 Eddic poetry.....	19
3.1.2 Skaldic poetry	21
3.1.3 <i>Rímur</i>	25
3.2 Modern literature	27
3.2.1 18 th – 19 th century	27
3.2.2 20 th century	28
3.2.3 Towards today	30
4 Avoiding Alliteration.....	34
4.1 Medieval literature.....	34
4.1.1 Traditional Icelandic ballads	35
4.1.2 <i>Pulur</i>	38
4.2 Modern literature	40
4.2.1 Form revolution	40
4.2.2 Popular lyrics.....	44
5 Attitudes to Alliteration – Interviews with modern artists	48

5.1	List of questions.....	48
5.2	The interviewees.....	49
5.2.1	Poets.....	49
5.2.1.1	Gerður Kristný.....	49
5.2.1.2	Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir	51
5.2.2	Lyricists	52
5.2.2.1	Bragi Valdimar Skúlason	52
5.2.2.2	Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir / GDRN	53
5.2.3	Conclusions from the interviews	54
6	Conclusion.....	56
	References	58
	Appendix: Full interviews	62

1 Introduction

The Icelandic poetic tradition holds a special place among the poetic traditions of the world. Just like the language itself has gone through comparatively few changes throughout the last 1000 years, many features of the poetic tradition that applied to medieval literature are still alive today. The following thesis shall give an insight in particular to the alliterative tradition and its importance in the context of Icelandic poetry. The relevance of this alliterative tradition to modern Icelandic poetry and lyrics, whose composition is known to be often inspired by medieval traditions, will be explored. Though alliteration is still considered a defining feature of the Icelandic arts, its prevalence in use by contemporary artists will be a main focal point. Four interviews have been conducted to this end, namely with poets Gerður Kristný and Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, as well as musicians and lyricists Bragi Valdimar Skúlason and Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir (better known as GDRN), in order to gain an insight into the Icelandic artists' attitudes towards the alliterative tradition today. The results of these interviews will be presented in chapter 5.

The very regular way in which alliteration was applied in Old Icelandic poems is called *structural alliteration*, as opposed to *free alliteration*, a feature which many poetic traditions of the world apply. Structural alliteration used to be a feature of the poetic traditions of all Germanic languages and can be found in Old High German and Old Saxon, as well as in Old and Middle English texts, such as *Beowulf*. Even some of the earliest runic inscriptions appear to make use of alliteration. There are certain rules for how alliteration in these traditions was supposed to be employed. There were always two succeeding half lines bound together by alliteration, with two alliterating syllables called *stuðlar* or props in the first, uneven line, and one in the second, even line. The alliteration was always on stressed syllables, and in the even lines, the so-called head-stave, *hofuðstafr* in Old Icelandic, was always on the first stressed syllable. There are more rules for how exactly alliteration was supposed to be employed in Old Icelandic, which shall be explored throughout chapter 1 and 2.

Chapter 1 will clarify the definition of alliteration. It will explain the basic rules of how it used to be applied in the poetry of the Germanic languages, which lays the groundwork for the rules practiced throughout Icelandic poetic history until today. These rules are chiefly defined by the categorization of this alliteration as a tripartite system

consisting of various equivalence classes, meaning that consonants and vowels both alliterate solely with each other. Some exceptions to these rules shall be explained as well, mainly the consonant clusters *sp*, *st* and *sk*, also named *gnýstuðlar*. Other languages that employ some sort of structural alliteration shall be presented, namely Irish, Finnish and Somalian, in order to gain a deeper understanding of alliteration's general function, and its importance to numerous poetic traditions. The fact that structural alliteration was, however, lost in all other Germanic languages apart from Icelandic will also be examined in conjunction with an attempt to find reasons for the loss in each particular language. Although, for example, the poet Ivar Aasen attempted to revive this tradition in Norwegian poetry, no other Germanic language retained the traditional alliterative conventions as Icelandic did.

Chapter 2 will subsequently explore which types of Icelandic poetry alliterated throughout the whole of the language's documented history, and according to which specific rules. Eddic poetry is a field which clearly includes alliteration within its metres called *fornyrðislag*, *ljóðaháttir* and *málaháttir*. This type of poetry portrays the stories of the mythological past of former Scandinavian cultures, and heroic tales which were most likely transmitted orally for many generations before being written down. Snorri Sturluson draws heavily on these stories in his *Snorra Edda*, a work that is crucial to examine for the other type of Old Icelandic poetry that included alliteration: Skaldic poetry. Written and performed by poets called *skáld*, their metres were even more sophisticated than those of eddic poetry and added assonance or *hendingar* as poetic features that had to be adhered to in order to please the recipients of the poems, often the Kings of Norway themselves. Snorri Sturluson explains the metrics and mythological history to a generation of new *skáld* so that they could attain the knowledge needed to write proper skaldic poetry, which features the metres *dróttkvætt* and *hrynhent*. Snorri's nephew Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld also wrote a poetic diction about Old Icelandic poetry called *The Third Grammatical Treatise*. In this work he uses the phrase quoted in the title of this thesis. "Svá sem naglar halda skipi saman" (Óláfr Þórðarson 1927, 70) ('just as nails hold a ship together'), he says, so does the alliterative tradition hold together Nordic poetry. This attitude towards the alliterative tradition kept on in Iceland for several centuries, as *rímur* became one of the most important types of poetry in Iceland from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, surviving in certain forms even until today. They are

written, among other ways, in metres called *ferskeytt*, *braghent* and *afhent*, all of them including structural alliteration, as well as end rhyme. *Rímur* were both performed orally and written down in manuscripts. In the beginning of the 20th century, the wars and cultural shifts brought new opportunities to poetry in Iceland which fanned out into the movements Lyricism, Realism and Modernism. All of them included explorations of free alliteration, but the importance of structural alliteration could not be denied. In the 21st century there is still structural alliteration to be found in poetry and lyrics, especially those that have a nationalistic touch.

To contrast the types of poetry that are explored in chapter 3, chapter 4 will take a closer look at those types of poetry found throughout the Icelandic history that did not use structural alliteration. There were very few of those recorded during the medieval times. Two of those types that did not include structural alliteration are called Icelandic ballads or *sagnadansar*, and the other ones are rigamaroles or *pulur*. The ballads were adapted from foreign dance ballads and therefore included free alliteration, if any at all. These ballads were mainly memorized and sung by women. *Pulur* also belong to the sphere of women, as they were often nursery rhymes sung for children. Furthermore, the term is used for other types of freely rhymed poems about trolls, animals, love, and dancing, for example. It could be said that both types of non-alliterative medieval poetry did not have a very high social standing, as they belonged to the female sphere and were most likely traditionally sung and performed at different occasions than the more prestigious types of poetry would have been. Modernists and poets called *atómskáld* began to experiment with the art form from the early days of the 20th century, abandoning parts of the rigid form that had dominated Icelandic poetry until then. Alliteration was done away with completely for a while but snuck back in in the form of free alliteration. Since then, it appears that Icelandic poetry has become more experimental, with the free form being found in the Icelandic poetry and lyrics of today.

Chapter 5 will focus on the interviews conducted with four Icelandic artists. All the artists and their work will be introduced briefly, along with the attitude and relationship to alliteration in their works communicated in their respective interviews. A divide between those who see the alliterative tradition as still very strong in Icelandic society and those who see its importance as fading away shall become apparent. The conclusion that unites them seems to be that there are two groups in the contemporary

Icelandic society: those who focus mainly on form and still value the traditional ways of composing poetry including alliteration; and those that can do without it or see it merely as one of several devices to express themselves in their poetry or lyrics. In general, the trend seems to be in decline when compared to former centuries. However, it is noteworthy that even young Icelanders still learn about the tradition in school and often seem to value it very highly.

2 Explaining Alliteration

In order to understand why alliteration bears such great importance in both medieval and modern Icelandic poetry, it is beneficial to examine its structure and function in several languages. The definition of alliteration is the repetition of sounds word-initially within words that occur in close proximity to one another, may that be in prose, poetry, occurring randomly or constructed (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 18). In most cases and languages, it seems to have an aesthetic function, alerting the ear of the listener to the text when recited, which marks the intention for oral recital of most of these texts. It also served as a mnemonic device for the performer of the poetry (Minkova 2003, 6). This explains why alliteration in some languages derives from medieval traditions, where poetry was a device to transmit stories, as written text was difficult to create and obtain. In ancient Germanic, for example, alliterative meter was applied in a clearly structured way, which can be called *structural alliteration*, as opposed to a merely decorative, unstructured use, which is called *free alliteration*.

Within this chapter, the concept which Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (2014) calls “regular alliteration” (18), but is otherwise often referred to as *structural alliteration*, shall be mainly considered. This occurs when alliteration is an important part of the metrical structure of a poem. It must be used in a certain way to be deemed successful. Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson connects this idea to the Norwegian and Swedish word *stavrim*, or the German cognate *Stabreim*, which, especially in the Scandinavian languages, are often opposed to the term *alliteration*. He calls this latter concept “free alliteration” (18). It is employed with no specific structure and is usually intended for decoration in both poetry and prose. Structural alliteration can be found in the traditional poetry of many languages, such as the ancestors of Germanic languages, notably Old High German and Old English. It can also be found in the poetry of Celtic languages such as Irish and Welsh (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 178), Finnish poetry (Frog and Eila Stepanova 2011), Mongol poetry (Kara 2011), Somali poetry (Orwin 2011) and even, by repetition of hand movements, in sign language (Kaneko 2011). In most of these languages the use of alliteration can be discerned from the intersection between specific traditional structures and linguistic features.

Generally, alliteration has played an important role and a greater one than end rhyme in almost all cultures where poetry is of major importance in artistic expression.

Preminger and Brogan (1993) name Israeli, Persian, and Arabic cultures as the main exceptions for not putting emphasis on alliteration within their respective poetic traditions (37). They also point out that the poetic traditions of Romance languages contain assonance more frequently than alliteration, that is, vowels re-occurring word-internally (37, 103). In the following chapter, some of the languages which apply alliteration shall be examined, along with the various structures that make up the regular alliteration of the respective languages, and possible reasons for which the regular alliterative tradition was lost over time in the Germanic languages, excluding Icelandic.

2.1 Rules of alliteration in Germanic languages

Germanic poetry containing regular alliteration has a consistent tradition dating back to very early forms of the Germanic languages. Alliteration can already be found in early runic inscriptions (even if a regular metrical structure cannot be established, see Schulte 2012). One of the most famous ones is the inscription on one of the golden horns of Gallehus from around 400 AD, which had Old Norse runes that read:

ek hlewagastiR holtijaR horna tawido
(‘I, Hlewagastiz, son of Holt, made the horn’)
(Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 19; Krause 1971, 148)

If this 1,600 year old inscription could be taken as an example for ancient Germanic alliteration, the following observations can be made: A line pair is linked by two alliterative staves, in Icelandic called *stuðlar*, ‘supports’, in this case *h*, in the first half-line, which is called the a-verse, and one *h*, the *hǫfuðstafr*, ‘head stave’, in the second half-line, called the b-verse (Kristján Árnason 2007, 80; Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 19). This type of alliteration is called ‘the tripartite way of alliterating’ (Jón Helgason 1965, 79), and it has been applied in a strikingly similar way throughout most of ancient Germanic poetry. It has been maintained in many types of Old Icelandic poetry and is still used in modern Icelandic poetry. It appears that the close connection of Icelandic culture to the country’s ancient history and language is in this case represented by applying alliterative structures similar to ones found in the oldest runic inscriptions. Old English and Old High German also featured poetry written in this form, very closely resembling the tripartite way of alliteration, although at times containing only one alliterating sound in the a-verse (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 20–2). This alternation between one or two alliterations in the a-verse can also be found in the Old Icelandic

eddic poetry, namely the poetic metre called *fornyrðislag*. The most well-known poem in Old English that contains this type of regular alliteration is *Beowulf*, a poem that has been estimated to have been composed in the 7th or 8th century (see Fulk 2014). In Old Germanic languages such as Old High German and Old Saxon, fewer poems written with the strict Germanic rules of alliteration have been preserved, but two notable ones are *Hildebrandslied* and *Heliand* (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 20-2). All other Germanic languages apart from Icelandic lost structural alliteration after some time, a phenomenon which shall be examined later in this chapter.

Other than being tripartite and binding two half-lines together, there are other linguistic prerequisites for the Germanic alliterative verse. Generally, as has been stated above, the rhythm of the poetry was underlined by applying alliteration in three out of four stressed positions. The linguistic units alliterating with each other are the word-initial sounds or phonemes within those stressed syllable positions. In Germanic poetry, the basic rules are as follows: consonants alliterate only with the same consonant respectively, and all vowels alliterate with one another. There are some complications to these rules, in particular when it comes to consonants. Consonant clusters beginning with *s* plus a stop phoneme (*sp*, *st*, *sk*) can only alliterate with one another, a rule retained to this day in Modern Icelandic. This dates back to the Old English tradition (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 37). These clusters are called *gnýstuðlar* in Icelandic and have been studied in detail by Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (2004), who also discusses certain changes in this category, namely the special cases of when *sm*, *sn* and *sl* are also considered part of the *gnýstuðlar*, especially in later Icelandic poetry from 1400 onwards. These changes can be related to changes in pronunciation, which mark the importance of alliteration being based on sound, not spelling.

2.2 Rules of alliteration in other languages

Other languages that tend to feature regular alliteration in their traditional poetry are, for example, Finnish, Somali, and Celtic languages. The rules of the alliteration in these languages shall be summarized here briefly. In Old Irish, all vowels can alliterate with one another, consonants only with the same respective consonant. This is reminiscent of the Germanic tradition. Alliteration in Old Irish seems to have been called “*úaimm* ‘stitching’” (Watkins 1995, 120). This points to the fact that in Old Irish poetry, alliteration binds together not only words within a line, but often connects the last stressed

word of a stanza or line with the first word of the next one. This alliterative phenomenon has been described using the words “*fidrad freccomail* ‘staves of counter-joining’” (Watkins 1995, 120), and phrases like “*suainem filidechta*, the ‘seam of poetry’, ‘thread of poetry’” (Watkins 1995, 120) have also been used to denote the use of alliteration in Old Irish. A connection can be drawn to the description of the status of alliteration in Old Icelandic poetry by Óláfr hvítaskáld, who remarks that alliterative staves are the nails that hold the ship of the Nordic poetic tradition together (Ólafur Þórðarson 1927, 70). This description can be taken both figuratively and literally, as alliterative staves are used to bind lines or half-lines of poetry together in both Old Irish and Old Icelandic. The importance of alliteration on a poetic and metaphorical level for both languages is evident. Although the alliterative tradition in Old Irish dates to centuries ago, the opinion of modern Irish poets seems to be that it was imposed on them by the English during the centuries of English colonization in Ireland. This attitude can be perceived from a poem called *Traditions* by the Irish Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, who writes: “Our guttural muse / was bulled long ago / by the alliterative tradition” (Heaney 1993 [1972], 21). Due to the near loss of the Irish language itself and its replacement by English, the connection to the Old Irish poetic traditions seems to have been lost.

In the Finnish language, the most striking alliterative tradition can be found in the national epic poem *Kalevala*. Other than in the Germanic tradition, consonants which alliterated usually needed to be followed by the same vowel as well, which is called strong alliteration (Frog and Stepanova 2011, 197). Furthermore, the same vowels usually needed to alliterate with each other. There were rare exceptions in which consonants that alliterated were followed by different vowels, or in which different initial vowels also alliterated with each other (Kiparsky 1968, 139). This is called weak alliteration and appears less frequently than the strong one. Although the *Kalevala*-epic was compiled and published in the nineteenth century by Elias Lönnrot, parts of it are believed to date back to early oral traditions, when they were sung as episodic ballads by singers over the country, who likely recited them upon request (Magoun 1969, xiv–xv). The reason for which alliteration was prominent in both ancient Germanic and Finnish traditions, even though the languages are from entirely different families with Germanic being Indo-European and Finnish Finno-Ugric, could be that both feature word-initial stress. Thus,

the prosody of the languages was followed, and stressed syllables were even more prominently highlighted.

It is debated why all vowels could alliterate with each other in Germanic languages as opposed to most cases in Finnish. One theory is that there might have been a glottal stop in front of every word-initial vowel in Germanic which was seen as the alliterating letter. This theory has been widely criticized, however, among others by Roman Jakobson (1963). Kiparsky (1968, 139) deems this theory as being unlikely due to Finnish also featuring this type of vowel-alliteration, but never having featured any glottal stops.

The last alliterative tradition from other languages outside of Germanic ones that shall be discussed here is the one from the Somali language. Interestingly, Somali poetry is still mostly recited orally. Written documents exist, but that is not how poetry is usually featured – even if it is not always recited on the spot, it is preferred to listen to poetry via recordings, which are nowadays available on the Internet. When the first collection of Somali poetry was published, the poems were put into categories according to their most prevalent alliterative sound (Orwin 2011, 220). This proves the importance of alliteration in the Somali poetry. Also, it shows that there has to be a word beginning with the respective alliterative sound in every line throughout the entire poem. As in Germanic and Irish poetry, and sometimes Finnish poetry as well, consonants alliterate only with each other, while vowels can be mixed when alliterating. Here, the theory has also been suggested that a glottal stop may come before a word-initial vowel and thus makes alliteration between differently spelled vowels at the beginning of words possible, which seems to hold more value than in the Germanic tradition (Orwin 1994, 201). The Somali alliterative verse tradition is 150 years old and still used extensively today (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 30). The importance of alliterative verse as the root of many different poetry traditions from several language families can be discerned. The reasons for which some have kept the traditions and others have not can be of much interest.

2.3 Loss in other Germanic languages

Other Germanic languages than Icelandic abandoned the alliterative tradition over time. Possible reasons for this shall be explained here, which may give a contrasting argument to why Icelandic was the only Germanic language that kept the tradition alive. It has been explained earlier that especially Old English had a strong tradition of

alliterative verse, going back to the epic poem *Beowulf* dated between the 7th and 8th century. But that was not the only Old English poem that contained alliteration. The earliest Old English poem that has been recorded which contains structured alliteration is *Caedmon's Hymn* (ca. 657) which – possibly alongside runic inscriptions – might be one of the oldest surviving texts containing the typical Germanic alliterative tradition (Preminger & Brogan 1993, 333; Minkova 2003, 4).

The tradition was even continued into Middle English, as Minkova (2003, 239–40) relates, although it was subject to some changes. One of them is the broadening of the concept of consonant clusters as equivalent classes that only alliterate with each other, such as *st*, *sp* and *sc/sk*, which were already considered as such in Old English. In Middle English, other consonant clusters became their own equivalence classes. Minkova (2003, 239) describes this phenomenon as follows: “cluster onsets alliterate as groups (*zusammengesetzte Stäbe*)”. On the other hand, *st*, *sp* and *sc/sk* were alliterating with *s*- at times, which is curious. The development in Icelandic concerning these *gnýstuðlar*, in contrast, as has been mentioned above, was such that it considered more of the consonant clusters beginning with *s*- as equivalent classes. However, that is one of the very few changes in alliteration in Icelandic poetry from medieval times until today (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 143). More changes occurred in Old English and Middle English, which may be explained by the fact that the English language went through many more changes in general as opposed to Icelandic.

English seems to have lost the typical structured Germanic alliterative tradition, even in a modified form, after the fifteenth century. Minkova (2003, 68) explains that the loss might have come about by the change of stress in the language. While Old English and Middle English still mostly contained the Germanic word-initial stress, the language gradually underwent some changes of stress under French influence due to the Norman occupation of Anglo-Saxon territory, shifting to the second and third syllable with the introduction of French loan words. Thus, the importance of alliteration may have started to decline, as the stress was no longer on the alliterating syllable, which by definition is always on the onset, or first syllable. Thus, the importance of regular alliteration may have been lost in English due to the shift away from word-initial stress. Another theory proposed by Jón Helgason (1959) is that end rhyme overtook the importance of alliteration. This poetic phenomenon stemmed from religious poetry in Europe from the

fifth century and was gradually adopted by England and other northern European countries. However, Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (2014, 60) remarks that this logical argument cannot be the main factor for the the alliterative tradition's loss of importance in English, seeing as Icelandic also adopted end rhyme at some point, but kept alliteration.

In the case of German, the alliterative tradition never seemed as established as in English and the Scandinavian languages, and it disappears already in the second half of the ninth century. Few written records exist for the alliterated poems of Old High German, and after the first hundred years of those written texts, end rhyme completely takes over and replaces alliterative verse (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 462–3). As opposed to English where stress appears to be the main factor for the shift in the importance of word-initial rhyme, or alliteration, the end rhyme is clearly the dominating factor in the case of German. Preminger and Brogan (1993, 463) argue that this is because of the grand influence of Medieval Latin as a written vernacular language in Old High German-speaking areas.

Furthermore, authors of poems were identified for the first time with Otfried of Weissenburg as the first German poet known by name in 868, who did his work *Evangelienbuch* entirely in end rhyme. Thus, writing became the focal point for the transmission of poetry, and the predominantly oral culture came to an end. As has been mentioned before, alliteration seems to have been largely established alongside oral traditions. It is therefore logical that its importance was lost when orality was no longer the prerequisite for poetry being transmitted. Although more modern German and even English poets such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Edmund Spenser used alliteration for decoration in their poetry, among other stylistic devices, these languages have lost their regular, structured Germanic roots, and mostly feature free alliteration (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 37).

The Scandinavian languages other than Icelandic appear to have lost regular alliteration in the thirteenth century. Norwegian applied the Nordic alliterative verse until 1250. After that it was heavily influenced by the French romances and Occitan poetry of the southern Europe. Such influence was introduced via vernacular literature (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 840). This literature featured end rhyme rather than alliteration, and thus a similar process as in German seems to have taken place in Norwegian. Furthermore, in Norwegian folk ballads, which were also composed after that time,

alliterative verse was given up in favour of taking over the style of non-alliterative troubadour verse (Preminger and Brogan 1993, 840). In the other Scandinavian languages, Swedish and Danish, similar processes took place, and the southern European poetic style dominated over the Old Norse alliterative verse in the later Middle Ages (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 24).

It is worth noting that there was an attempt by a Norwegian poet, Ivar Aasen (1813-1896), to revive the alliterative tradition. He wrote poems in the Old Icelandic *fornyrðislag* and *málaháttur* metres (Lie 1967, 110). Although he applied them successfully, the tradition was not revived at a popular level in Norway. This is likely due to the fact that he was the only poet conducting such attempt in his time, and that a single poet does not have the power to revive an entire poetic tradition in most cultural contexts where many people are creating poetry contemporaneously (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 24). Heusler (1956, 93) writes about the alliterative verse, *Stabreim* in German: “wo er schwand, da ging auch seinem angestammten Versmaß der Atem aus” (‘where it disappeared, the respective metrical verse also ran out of breath). It seems thus that alliterative verse in Germanic languages apart from Icelandic was lost with the influence of other poetic traditions.

3 Adhering to Alliteration

The following chapter will examine Old Norse and modern Icelandic types of poetry which use regular alliteration. The surviving poetic corpus of Old Norse is one of the largest of all the medieval European languages, despite the relatively small population of Middle Age Scandinavia and Iceland (Clunies Ross 2005, 6). Poetry was held in very high esteem in Norse society. Although written down much later by Christian writers, most poetry links back thematically to the pagan past of the Old Norse society. In particular the genre known as eddic poetry dealt with the history of the pagan gods and the heroes of the past. Skaldic poetry was the other large medieval field of poetry, which was written mostly by professional poets, who bore the title *skáld*. They commonly resided at court and wrote their poetry under commission of the Norwegian kings. Structurally, there were differences between those two types of poetry, although the metres were based heavily on each other and often overlapped between genres (Clunies Ross 2005, 21–8). The main difference appears to be that eddic poetry does not have a clearly identified author, while skaldic poetry can be attributed to specific poets. Both types of poetry have very strict rules for applying alliteration, as shall be explained in the following chapter. Eddic poetry is seen as the oldest, most traditional type of Icelandic poetry. Skaldic poetry was practiced widely until the fifteenth century but continued to be composed in slightly modified forms afterwards (Craigie 1950, 6).

The evolution of alliteration in Icelandic shall be exemplified by identifying its use in more modern types of Icelandic poetry. A late medieval, nearly modern kind of poetry that started gaining prevalence in the fourteenth century is called *ríma*, plural *rímur*. Craigie (1950, 5) calls this type of poetry the “The romantic poetry of Iceland”, or “The popular poetry of Iceland”, popular in the sense that there were many of them composed for over five centuries in Iceland, not in any way indicating that they were simple in structure. On the contrary, they adapted skaldic and eddic metres and developed them even further. Among such developments was the alliterative verse. The reason for its continuance in *rímur*, which were often sung or chanted in a specific way, could explain why contemporary poetry and song lyrics still make use of alliterative verse, a phenomenon which shall be examined in this chapter as well.

3.1 Medieval literature

First, typical types of medieval Icelandic literature which applied alliteration shall be examined. As explained in the last chapter, alliterative verse dates back to the ancient Germanic language, and has even been found in runic inscriptions, which points to the fact that this particular wordplay was not a new invention at the time that these medieval verses were composed or written down. However, in both eddic and skaldic poetry, as well as in *rímur*, alliteration was a part of the clearly structured metres dictating how the poetry had to be composed. Certain sounds were only to be found in certain equivalent classes and could only alliterate with each other. They had to be positioned at a specific place within the lines and half-lines in order to connect the two together and structure them into units. There was also a clear indication for how many alliterating words were seen as correct in each line. Furthermore, alliteration had a clear connection to rhythm, as the position of the alliteration connected to the stressed syllables. Tied into this is the fact that some word categories are preferred for alliteration over others. These are the basic principles of Old Icelandic types of poetry, which shall be examined in detail here.

3.1.1 Eddic poetry

Eddic poetry somewhat artificially describes a collection of poems which have been brought together thematically and stylistically for a number of reasons. The term *Edda* stems from Snorri Sturluson's well-known work about Nordic mythology and poets. The Icelandic bishop and antiquarian Brynjólfur Sveinsson discovered a small manuscript in 1643 known today as the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, which contained poems that are quoted in Snorri's work, and therefore Brynjólfur assumed that this was also an eddic work compiled by the Icelandic scholar and historian Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133). This was later proven to be unlikely, however, seeing as there was no evidence for Sæmundr ever having compiled this manuscript. However, the names for the poems connected to the collection within this manuscript stuck around in scholarship and popular literature as *Sæmundar Edda*, *The Elder Edda*, or *The Poetic Edda* in order to set it apart from Snorri's *Edda*, also called *The Younger Edda* or *The Prose Edda* (Clunies Ross 2005, 7). The distinction between older and younger is made because it is believed that Snorri cited the collection of poems that he either knew from oral transmission or an older manuscript that has not come down to us (Clunies Ross 2005, 8).

As concerns the content, eddic poetry is divided into two parts, which is apparent from the Codex Regius manuscript. The first deals with the mythological past of the Old Norse pantheon of gods, the second one with heroic legends. The mythological poems consist not only of those found in the Codex Regius, but also of poems from other manuscripts such as the Codex Wormanius. Furthermore, Snorri is referencing poems that have not been preserved to this today. The poems that are said to be mythological tell stories about the world through the lens of the Old Norse peoples' beliefs, including the myths of the creation of the world, its destruction, and its rebirth, which are included in the poem *Völuspá* ('Prophecy of the Seeress'). Some of the gods such as Óðinn, Þórr and Týr are known to have been worshipped by early Germanic peoples long ago, although the Old Icelandic eddic poems are the only surviving direct source of the stories concerning these deities (Clunies Ross 2005, 8). The second part of the poems, the heroic ones, contains stories of heroes also known from other Germanic peoples' literature, such as the poems telling Sigurðr's story, who is for example known as Siegfried in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. Therefore, it can be concluded that not only the alliterative tradition connected ancient Germanic literary traditions, but the types of stories that were told did so as well.

The most common metres used in eddic verse are called *fornyrðislag* ('old story metre') and *ljóðaháttur* ('song-form') (Clunies Ross 2005, 22). *Málaháttur* ('speeches-form') is another one that occurred rather rarely, and only consistently in one poem, namely *Atlamál in grænlenzco* ('The Greenlandic Lay of Atli'), and it is often mixed with *fornyrðislag* (Suzuki 2013, 425). *Fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttur* contain very short lines, with no more than five or seven syllables. This means that there is often only one alliterating syllable in the a-line. This alliterating syllable is always one of the two which carry the main stress. Stressed syllables are called *lifts*, while the term *drop* is used for unstressed ones (Lehmann 1956, 37). Sometimes, both lifts in the a-line alliterate. These are called the *stuðlar* ('props' or 'supports'). In *fornyrðislag*, the *hofuðstafr*, or head stave, is the second or third alliterative sound of the line, which is made up out of the two half-lines. The rule is that it is placed on the first lift. With the first stanza of *Völuspá*, it is possible to showcase this:

H ljóðs bið ek allar	(‘Silence I plead of all
h elgar kindir,	holy races,
m eiri ok m inni	more and lesser

compiled from orally transmitted and widely known traditional poetry. Skaldic poetry differs in content, as it describes certain people and events that could be traced back to a specific time and place, giving them a certain historical value, whereas eddic poetry is rather mythological in character (Whaley 2005, 481). The golden age of skaldic poetry was from around the year 900 until well into the fifteenth century (Craigie 1950, 5–6). The art of making poetry was held in high esteem and connected to the craftsmanship of the gods, Óðinn in particular. The myth of Óðinn acquiring the mead of poetry, which was made from the blood of the wise god Kvasir, is frequently alluded to in poetic verses and told in prose in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998, vol. I, 3–5). Composing poetry was seen as a highly classified art form that needed to be learned carefully in order to create successful results. The metrical requirements had to be strictly adhered to, including where and how alliteration was used.

Along with the poetry itself, some writings are left to us that describe how skaldic poetry was supposed to be composed. The most extensive one is the compilation of Snorri Sturluson's works, consisting mainly of the *Snorra Edda*, including works entitled *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*. He most likely wrote these works in order to teach the next generations of *skáld* the metre and diction of skaldic poetry. In *Gylfaginning* ('deluding of Gylfi'), Snorri describes the mythological background of the Old Norse society, and summarizes the events also recounted in eddic poetry (Clunies Ross 2005, 12). It was important for poets to be knowledgeable about these myths in order to compose poetry properly. This is because the composition of skaldic poetry traditionally included certain synonyms and metaphors called *heiti* and *kenningar*, which helped the poets to adhere to their poetry's structural requirements (Whaley 2005, 486). These stylistic figures often related back to the mythological past, and the context needed to be well-known in order to understand and use them. In *Skáldskaparmál* ('the language of poetry'), Snorri teaches the meaning of these *heiti* and *kenningar* to "young poets" (Faulkes 1998, vol. I, xiii) as he writes. He compiles the figures used by several earlier poets and explains their origin and use. He presents skaldic poetry as the works of clearly named individual poets. *Háttatal* ('list of verse forms'), on the other hand, is a poem written by Snorri himself which serves to exemplify the use of various verse-forms. It is followed with explanations of the metrical devices used, which are seen as the correct way to create poetry (Faulkes 1998, vol. I, x). Another work describing how poetry had

to be devised was the aforementioned Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld's *The Third Grammatical Treatise*. It deals in particular with Old Icelandic grammar, but also includes rhetorical figures and poetic functions as a part of the language (Tranter 2000, 142).

Alliteration was an important part of skaldic poetry according to both Snorri and Óláfr hvítaskáld. In fact, it seems to have been so important and well-known that they did not write detailed explanations of it, while at the same time acknowledging its status (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 66). Snorri describes how alliteration was to be used in the *dróttkvætt* ('court poetry') metre (Faulkes 2007, 4), which was the most typical metre used in skaldic poetry, although many poems typically classified as skaldic were also composed in *fornyrðislag* (Clunies Ross 2005, 13). He calls the use of any other way to alliterate "rangt" ('wrong') (Faulkes 2007, 4). Óláfr hvítaskáld writes the following words about alliteration:

Paranomeon er þat, ef mǫrg orð hafa einn upphafs-staf sem hér:

75. Sterkum stilli
styrjar væni.

Þessi fígúra er mjök höfð í málssnildar-list, er rhetorica heitir, ok er hon upphaf til kveðandi þeirar, er saman heldr nórænum skáldskap svá sem naglar halda skipi saman, er smiðr gerir ok ferr sundrlaust ella borð frá borði, svá heldr ok þessi fígúra saman kveðandi í skáldskap með stǫfum þeim, er stuðlar heita ok höfuðstafir.

(‘Paranomeon (alliteration) is the phenomenon, when many words have the same initial letter, as in the following:

75. Sterkum stilli
styrjar væni.

This figure is very preferred in the art of eloquent speech, which is called rhetoric, and it is the origin of the rhythm that holds together the Nordic poetic tradition, just as nails hold a ship together, which is made by the carpenter, otherwise plank from plank would fall apart. In the same way, this figure holds together the metrical rhythm in poetry with those staves which are called *stuðlar* and *höfuðstafr*.)

(Óláfr Þórðarson 1927, 69–70)

The importance of alliteration in the eyes of medieval scholars summarizing the basic principles of Old Icelandic poetry is thus quite evident.

Dróttkvætt is a very standardized metre. It was deemed as the only acceptable style for poetry at the Norwegian court, and its complexity and difficulty to compose ensured that it would be recited correctly when passed on, as well as its composer's resulting fame (Carleton 1967, 9). In *dróttkvætt*, each line consists of exactly six metrical positions. Thus, each line was supposed to take the same amount of time to recite. Exactly two

alliterating staves must occur in the a-lines. As for the b-line, the head staff usually determines the alliteration, also according to Snorri (Faulkes 2007, 4), and it is usually always in the first position of the b-verse. In later post-medieval poetry, this was even more strictly adhered to, although sometimes a “monosyllabic initial element of a compound word” (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 42) could come before the head staff. In the a-line, the positioning of the two props varied, especially in older *dróttkvætt* poetry. It was always found on two of the lifts, or rises (as lifts were frequently called in *dróttkvætt* poetry, see Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 42). In the newer and more structured *dróttkvætt* poetry, rises were usually found on every second syllable. Snorri describes in his *Háttatal* that there may be no less or more alliterating staves than three in total in two half-lines belonging together. Groupings of more than three alliterating staves are called *ofstuðlun*, meaning ‘hyper-alliteration’ (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 52). Snorri also mentions that in the case of vowels alliterating, it is deemed “fegra” (‘more beautiful’) that each of them is a different vowel (Faulkes 2007, 4). Along with alliteration, other rhyme forms became important within skaldic poetry, such as the assonance-like *aðalhendingar* (‘full rhymes’) which were always placed in the even b-lines, and *skothendingar* (‘half rhymes’), which were always placed in the odd a-lines.

Bergr, höfum m inzk, hvé, m argan	(‘Bergr, we have remembered how, many
m orgin Rúðuborgar,	a morning,
börð létk í för fyrða	I caused the stem to be moored to
f est við arm enn vestra.	the western rampart of Rouen’s fortifications in the company of men.’)

(*Vestrfararvisur* 1, Sigvatr Þórðarson; Finnur Jónsson 1967, 241)

Another skaldic metre which exemplifies a number of rules on correctly applying alliteration is known as *hrynhent*. It is explained by Sievers (1879, 271) to be derived from *dróttkvætt* with an extra trochaic foot added to each line. Thus, this metre has eight metrical positions per line. Other than that, the rules for applying alliteration and the *hendingar* are the same. But with *hrynhent* presenting longer lines, there was a certain pressure to decide which of the four rises could contain alliteration. Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (2014, 43-4) explains the concept of high and low rises (*hákveða* and *lágkveða* in Icelandic, see Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2012, 50), namely that the odd-numbered feet (first and third etc) are called high, whereas the even-numbered ones

(second and fourth etc) are called low. If there is alliteration on both the second and the third rise, it is considered *low alliteration* (*lágstuðlun* in Icelandic, see Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2012, 50); this situation was usually avoided in *hrynhent* poetry before 1400. Generally, the third rise usually contained one of the props, and the other prop was then on either the first or the fourth rise.

3.1.3 *Rímur*

One of the most common types of poetry that emerged in Iceland in the late middle ages, when the popularity of skaldic poetry was in decline, was called *rímur* in plural and *ríma* in singular. The *rímur* were collections of poems which told the stories of old medieval sagas, mostly *riddarasögur* and *fornaldasögur* (Davíð Erlingsson 1989, 340), but also eddic poems and stories served as material (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 53). The *rímur* were often sung, or rather presented in a certain melodic recital, which in Icelandic is called *kveða* and which can be translated as ‘intoning’ (Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir 2008, 105). Their quadruple rhythm was most likely borrowed from foreign poetry, developed from Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian influences like the ballads, but the metres of *rímur* clearly descend from skaldic poetry. For example, the poetry includes the skaldic *kenningar* which relate to the mythological past of the Icelanders (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 56). The alliterative tradition was furthermore kept and adhered to as strictly as it used to be in skaldic poetry. Additionally, end rhyme became a feature of the metre in its own right. This is noteworthy, given that end rhyme overtook alliteration in certain languages as exemplified in the case of German poetry above. Within *rímur*, both concepts of rhyme coexisted.

The rigid structure of *rímur* allows them to be recited and memorized orally, but since they were often comprised of several parts, they were written down in manuscripts as well. The oldest preserved one is *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar* (‘The *ríma* of Ólafur Haraldsson’) by Einar Gilsson in the manuscript called *Flateyjarbók*, which was written down some years before 1400 (Davíð Erlingsson 1989, 335). It is one of the few medieval *rímur*-cycles which has a clearly designated author, as authorship only became important later on through humanism. Vésteinn Ólason (1982, 52) writes that most *rímur*-cycles can be found in manuscripts from the end of the 15th and the first half of the 16th centuries, however, these often appeared to be copies of older texts, implying that the tradition of writing down *rímur* must have dated back to well before the 15th century. It appears that

they were often written down as soon as they were composed, seeing as the stories they replicated from prose into poetry were very long and difficult to memorize. When transmitted orally, it was often done at events called *kvöldvaka*, in which all the members of a family would gather in the evening, which served as a literary platform for educative recitals of the sagas and the *rímur* (Davíð Erlingsson 1989, 343).

The *rímur* were composed in a number of different metres. The oldest one is *ferskeytt* ('square-metre'), and two other basic ones are *braghent* and *afhent*. Most other metres are based on these three with slight variations (Davíð Erlingsson 1989, 330–1). A *rímur*-cycle usually consisted of several individual *ríma*, and it became fashionable for two of a cycle's *rímur* in a row to be of different metres (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 57). *Ferskeytt* was by far the most common metre, with four and three stresses alternately in each line and an *abab* rhyme scheme.

<p>Ólafr kóngr örr ok fríðr Átti Noregi at ráða Gramr var ei við bragna blíðr</p>	<p>(‘King Óláfr, eager and fair was to govern Norway the king was not lenient with people born to victory and blessing.’)</p>
<p>Borinn til sigrs ok náða. Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar 1 (Finnur Jónsson 1905, 1; translation by Kristján Árnason 2011, 128)</p>	

Alliteration was applied in the same manner as in skaldic poetry, with two props in the a-line and the head-stave in the b-line. One of the props was always on the third rise, with the other prop varying between the first, second, or fourth rise. These rules manifested themselves in previous requirements for where to position props named in several poetic dictions, ensuring that they fulfilled the following rules stated by Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (2014, 44):

- a) There could not be too much distance between props
- b) There could not be too much distance between the later prop and the head stave
- c) Both props could not be placed in low rises [...].

These rules had been first been officially observed and written down by Schweitzer (1887), who felt it was necessary to describe what Icelanders appeared to do instinctively and simply described as “tilfinningin” (316–7), ‘the feeling’ to alliterate properly.

Other metres of *rímur* mostly differed in the amounts of stresses and the rhyme scheme, which could be *aabb*, *aaaa*, or *aabccb*. Alliteration, however, was always applied

consistently according to the rules outlined above. It is thus perhaps because of the vast and long-term popularity of *rímur* that the alliterative tradition continued to be favoured in Icelandic poetry. *Rímur* poetry flourished in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century, with different *rímur* metres still surviving until today, in particular the short, single stanza type called *lausavísa* (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 53).

3.2 Modern literature

3.2.1 18th – 19th century

Rímur dealt with ancient, pagan material, dressed prose in very straightforward poetic metres, and featured both alliteration and end rhyme. It seems that the continuous hardships of the 18th century – epidemics, famines, and volcanic eruptions such as Katla in 1755 and Hekla in 1766 – only served to increase people’s desires to continue appreciating and composing literature, and that they may in fact have clung to it in order to escape their harsh realities (Carleton 1967, 54–8). It may be that turning the stories of the glorious, mystical past into clearly structured verses that could be chanted during hard labour or sorrowful times was a favourable way of processing emotions.

As the situation started to improve, it was only natural that examining culture would seem even more desirable. Furthermore, it became possible to develop new tastes and thoughts alongside traditional ones. When Iceland became part of the Kingdom of Denmark in 1814, new ideas about poetry and literature made their way into the country via Danish and Icelandic government officials who received university education and by extension the chance to travel abroad through much of Europe (Carleton 1967, 59). But insofar as the influence on Icelandic poetry is concerned, it was mostly the content that was revised. In the 19th century, therefore, poetry started dealing with everyday life objects as well as abstract matters of philosophy. As the content of poetry broadened, it was also logical to reconsider the strict and complex metrical requirements that were an undisputed part of the most important forms of poetry. Since the Reformation, most Icelandic poetry contained both end rhyme and alliteration, and convention allowed only for highly rigid rhythmical requirements. Interestingly, with the Renaissance coming about by the country slowly opening up into the world, the focus of Icelandic poets did not shift outwards, but rather inwards, and nationalistic thinking led them to strive even more to revive ancient poetic metres, namely the eddic ones: *fornyrðislag*, *málháttur* and

ljóðaháttir (Carleton 1967, 66). Alliteration, of course, was an intrinsic part of those metres.

It appeared to be more natural to the Icelandic poets of the 19th century to continue the alliterative tradition and abolish end rhyme, as the former had been a much more important part of Old Norse and Icelandic poetry and could be traced back to even more ancient types of poetry. So much importance was given to the nationalistic viewpoint that when poetry started developing new forms and content, that alliteration simply had to be a part of it. Carleton (1967, 66–7) writes very accurately:

Alliterative poetry was so strongly instilled in their minds and ears when they were children that poetry simply did not occur to them without the proper alliterative letters. They could not conceive of alliteration as being a limit on poetic expression, it was poetic expression. They could not conceive of poetry without it. Rhyme, on the other hand, had always been considered ornamental, incidental to the real essence of poetry.

Thus, it becomes clear that the general attitudes concerning alliteration in Icelandic poetry stayed the same among Icelandic poets over the course of the 19th century as those of the ancient ones. It was deemed just as important as it was for Snorri Sturluson and his nephew Óláfr hvítaskáld. Alliterative staves were still the nails in a ship or the pillars in a building (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 45) when it came to Icelandic poetry.

3.2.2 20th century

In the 20th century, Icelandic poetry was greatly influenced by the two world wars, the Cold War, and industrialisation, and split into three movements, according to Carleton (1967). He calls them Lyrism, Realism and Modernism (85–6). All of them have a different relationship to content versus form of the poem. Lyrism, he says, is a return to focusing on the form, while Realism focuses mainly on the content and is rather functional. Modernism he sees as a “higher union of form and content” (86).

Lyrism was marked by shorter lines, which adhered strictly to proper rhythmic requirements. Alliteration was still an important part of this type of poetry. However, it started to be used more freely rather than in *rímur* or skaldic poetry. This is likely because of the development of an urban culture in Iceland that set out to have a different approach to literature by including authors’ experiences of travel and a faster lifestyle into their poetry (Carleton 1967, 107). Verses that were entirely free from any regular conventions

started entering usage, as for example in Jóhann Sigurjónsson's poem *Sorg*, of which the first stanza goes like this:

Vei, vei, yfir hinni föllnu borg!
Hvar eru þín stræti,
þínir turnar,
og ljóshafið, yndi næturinnar?

Eins og kórall í djúpum sjó
varst þú undir bláum himninum,
eins og sylgja úr drifnu silfri
hvíldir þú á brjóstum jarðarinnar.

(Jóhann Sigurjónsson 1940, 240)

(‘Woe, woe, over the fallen city!
Where are your streets,
your towers,
and the sea of light, the joy of the
night?’)

Like a coral in the deep sea
you were under the blue sky,
like a buckle made of silver
you rested on the breasts of the
earth.’)

But these were very rare occurrences. Even novelist Halldór Kiljan Laxness used alliteration in one of his poems named *Únglingurinn í skóginum*, although very freely (Carleton 1967, 126). Overall, alliteration stayed important for Icelandic poetry within Lyrism, but some poets started playing with it and breaking the formerly very strict rules of the exact application of the *stuðlar* and *hofuðstafr*.

In Carleton's view, Icelandic poetry alternated back and forth between focusing on form and focusing on content, for which he uses the metaphor of a swinging pendulum (1967, 81). He sees this reflected in the fact that Eddic poetry was mostly content-focused, while Skaldic poetry was based on form. After that came the mainly content-focused ballads, or *sagnadansar*, which are to be explored in the next chapter. Their influence on Icelandic culture was, however, not extensive. Thus, the focus on form regained prevalence and reached new heights with the *rímur*. The Reformation saw a focus on content as new cultural ideas reached Iceland. After the form-focused Lyrist movement was exhausted, a swing towards content took place within the Realist movement. It was started mainly by the proletariat, who felt that poetry had so far not represented their fields of interest, which could be deemed more “ordinary” (Carleton 1967, 142) than those of the bourgeoisie. The language in this type of poetry became more colloquial. Still, alliteration was very often the only poetic device that marked poetry as such, even when end rhyme was dismissed by some poets such as Jóhannes úr Kötlum to be restrictive for poetic expression (Carleton 1967, 151). Carleton reiterates that alliteration during this time still held its status as not being simply a part of poetic expression, but *being* poetic expression itself (152). He expands upon this further as follows:

The association of alliterative letters was the semi-psychoanalytic technique that the poet used to coax the deepest thoughts from his subconscious. A person that grew up in a poetic environment in Iceland had absorbed the alliterative instinct so thoroughly by the time that he came to compose verse that it was inevitable that poetry would occur to him in an alliterative context. Conversely, in order for verse to sound like poetry, to satisfy the ear, it had to have the proper alliterative pattern. This aural conditioning which made its requirements both on the poet and the listener was called brageyra, the poetic ear.

But the brageyra was after all not inborn, and it was subject to the same changing conditions that affected poetry as a whole.

Thus, although alliteration remained a crucial part of poetry, it started taking more free forms within Realism as well.

Modernist poetry was produced mostly in the late 40's, and it expressed, according to Carleton (1967, 86) a culmination of form and content. He explains that to many, its most defining feature is its obscurity, which reflects the fact that Modernist poetry is seen by its poets rather as "art for art's sake" (Carleton 1967, 197), and not to express anything in particular. Content and form were inextricably linked, more so than in any other types of poetry. Most Modernist poems retained alliteration, but as with the other poetic movements of this century, the very strict classical rules of structural alliteration were not always employed. Alliteration became freer, in a way that Carleton describes as "at once an echo of the past alliterative poetry and an affirmation of it" (1967, 265).

3.2.3 Towards today

The pendulum of Icelandic poetry-writing focusing alternatively on form and content continues on until today. In the late 20th century, influences from the outside became stronger with the rise of globalisation and the amalgamation of Western culture, which mainly follows the Anglo-American example. Iceland was especially subjected to this influence after being first occupied by the British and then the Americans during the Second World War. Jazz and Anglo-American pop culture began to exert great influence on the arts, especially on music (Kristján Árnason 2011, 135). It became fashionable to remake popular Anglo-American songs in Icelandic, and the newly composed Icelandic lyrics often alliterated, as Kristján Árnason exemplifies with an Icelandic version (both in form and content) of Elvis Presley's *Won't you wear my ring* from the 1950s:

Lóa litla á Brún, var laglegt fljóð

(*Little Lóa of Brún was a pretty girl

svo u ng og glöð og æskurjóð	so young and happy and flourishing with youth
Hún v ildi fá sér v ænan mann	she wanted to get herself a good man
og v era alltaf svo blíð og góð við hann	and be ever so kind to him')
(Kristján Árnason 2011, 135)	

The style of alliteration appears to be freer than classical diction would accept, but there are hints that the songwriter is aware of the rules of structural alliteration and is able to employ them, as he does in the couplet including *v*-alliteration with *vildi*, *vænan* and *vera*. Thus, this type of alliteration is deemed acceptable (Kristján Árnason 2011, 136).

Despite the numerous foreign influences, the traditional way of composing poetry with structural alliteration is still practiced by some Icelandic poets and even songwriters. An association called *Kvæðamannafélag Iðunn* was founded in the early 20th century and its members took it upon themselves to preserve the *rímur* tradition (see Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir and Dibben 2019). They still write *rímur* according to the rules of structural alliteration. Some of the most famous poets of the past decades who wrote poetry based on the medieval metres that have been explained above are Þorsteinn Jónsson frá Hamri and Þórarinn Eldjárn. Their poetry has been analysed in detail by Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (2014) in comparison to poetry from former centuries featuring structural alliteration, to see if there were any changes in particular regarding the different *gnýstuðlar*, *s*-alliteration, epenthetic alliteration, hyper-alliteration, and secondary alliteration. In this study, Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson features interviews with the two aforementioned poets in order to extrapolate their attitudes and expectations as regards modern use of alliteration. This has been used as inspiration for the following study, which includes four interviews that aim to show an insight into current Icelandic poets' and songwriters' attitudes towards the alliterative tradition as a part of Icelandic culture today. The results will be presented in chapter 5.

There are still many Icelandic songs written in the past few years which alliterate according to the rules found in Old Icelandic poetry. Most of Iceland's most famous and traditional songs are using *stuðlar* and *høfuðstafr* properly, as would please any Icelandic listener who has acquired the *brageyra*. This term is still known and used today, and Icelanders pride themselves on acquiring it. It is likely to have been coined by the poet Einar Benediktsson (1865–1940) who described it in a speech from 1916 as “einn gimsteinn, sem vér einir eigum fram yfir allar heimsþjóðir” (Einar Benediktsson 1952,

327) ('one jewel that we alone have over all other nations in the world'). This pride in the Icelandic traditions of language and form are prevalent in the fact that poems and lyrics written with structural alliteration are often used to further strengthen nationalistic pride. For example, the song *Ég er kominn heim* was sung by Icelandic fans watching football games to support the Icelandic team in the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship. It was written by Jón Sigurðsson to music by Emmerich Kálmán and originally performed and recorded by Óðinn Valdimarsson in 1960. It became one of Iceland's most famous traditional songs, and has been covered by many artists, like Bubbi Morthens, whose lyrics also usually alliterate according to the proper rules.

Er völlum grær og vetur flýr	(‘When the field grows and winter flees
Og vermir sólin grund.	and the sun warms the ground
Kem ég heim og hitti þig,	I’ll come home and meet you
Verð hjá þér alla stund.	I’ll be with you forever.
Við byggjum saman bæ í sveit	We’ll build together a farm in the country
Sem brosir móti sól.	that smiles towards the sun
Ljúfu lífi landið Vít	There my land will to young life
Mun ljá og veita skjól.	grant and provide shelter.
Sól slær silfri á voga,	The sun turns the bays into silver
Sjáið jökulinn loga.	See how the glacier is shining
Allt er bjart fyrir okkur tveim,	Everything's bright for the two of us
því ég er kominn heim.	Because I've come home
Að ferðalokum finn ég þig	At the journey's end I find you
Sem mér fagnar höndum tveim.	who welcomes me with two arms
Ég er kominn heim,	I've come home
Já, ég er kominn heim.	Yes, I've come home')

Interestingly, there is hyper-alliteration in the third line of the second stanza, with three *l*-props in the a-line, “ljúfu lífi landið”. It is questionable whether there is hyper-alliteration in the first line of the chorus, in “sól slær silfri á voga”, since the *sl*-sound is often used in later centuries of Icelandic poetry as an equivalence class of its own, alliterating only with *sn* and *st* due to the pronunciation as [stl], while *sn* is pronounced as [stn] (Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson 2014, 167).

From medieval times onwards until today, there appears to have been a small fraction of Icelandic poetry that did not adhere to alliteration in the traditional way. It could be said that there has always been a division between poetry with and without

structural alliteration. Over most of the centuries, the alliterating poetry was deemed more appropriate by the ruling class and the elite, which is supported by the fact that these types of poems are the most represented in records such as manuscripts, and in scholarship until today. Medieval poems like the eddic and skaldic poetry represent nationalistic pride in Icelandic culture and literature, and have been frequently drawn on alongside the *Íslendingasögur* or Family Sagas to create a national identity from the beginnings of the 20th century until today (Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir and Dibben, 43). For contrast, types of non-alliterating poetry from both medieval and modern times shall be explored in the next chapter. The status of alliteration in today's society shall be investigated in chapter 5 through the analysis of four interviews conducted within the modern artistic scene in Iceland.

4 Avoiding Alliteration

Few types of poetry avoided use of structural alliteration throughout the history of Icelandic poetry. These types had certain factors in common; for example, they were most likely deemed to be of low prestige, especially during medieval times, which is why few of them are preserved for contemporary study. But those that are left to the present show an interesting pre-history of this type of poetry, which was possibly too unbound to adhere to strict metrical rules, even including alliteration. Some medieval types of poetry that can be said to have no adherence to the alliterative tradition are Icelandic ballads or *sagnadansar* and a type of poetry called *pulur*, which included nursery rhymes. What they have in common is that they are said to have been mostly recited and passed on by women.

A modern movement challenging the strict rules of structural alliteration is the form revolution of the free verse, which arrived in the twentieth century and has been explored and expanded until today. Although Icelanders never appeared willing to let go of alliteration in their poetry entirely, it is worth examining the types of poetry that did away with it in order to properly understand the scope of its significance within Icelandic society.

4.1 Medieval literature

As has been described in the previous chapter, Icelandic poetry can be said to have fluctuated between being mainly based on form and mainly based on content since medieval times. In scholarship there is a clear distinction between what types of medieval Icelandic poetry have been researched most extensively. Eddic and skaldic poetry are among the most researched. Even *rímur* have been dealt with comparatively little. But types of medieval Icelandic poetry that abandoned the traditional Icelandic form altogether, including alliteration, have rarely been considered an important part of the Icelandic literary tradition, and thus there is little knowledge of them encapsulated in scholarship. Among those types of poetry are Icelandic ballads or *sagnadansar* and the so-called *pulur*. In the following chapter, it shall be examined what kind of status in medieval Iceland this non-alliterative poetry might have had.

4.1.1 Traditional Icelandic ballads

With skaldic poetry having passed its golden age and the pendulum having exhausted its swing towards form, space was created for a new type of poetry to represent an inclination towards content. From the thirteenth century onwards, Danish and other foreign ballads had made their way into Icelandic culture (Craigie 1950, 6). They were simple in form and stemmed from oral tradition. The general definition of a ballad has been generally accepted as defined by G. H. Gerould (1957, 11):

A ballad is a folk-song that tells a story with stress on the crucial situation, tells it by letting the action unfold itself in event and speech, and tells it objectively with little comment or intrusion of personal bias.

The focus on content rather than form is explicit. One additional feature that was perhaps alluring to the Icelandic audience and made them willing to overlook the initial lack of form was the fact that the ballads were sometimes accompanied by dance (Craigie 1950, 6). Their Icelandic name is *fornkvæði*, ‘old poem’, or *sagnadansar* (Vésteinn Ólason 1989, 372), ‘story dances’, alluding to the fact that they were always telling stories. They were usually anonymous and written down much later than they were originally composed (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 15). One of the most famous ballads known to Icelanders today is the story of *Ólafur liljurós*, which tells the story of a man called Ólafur who meets four elf-maidens while riding in a rocky landscape. They invite him for a drink and to come live with them, but he refuses and would rather believe in God. One of the elf-maidens stabs him in the heart with her sword, and he rides home to his mother and sister and dies in their arms (Vésteinn Ólason 1989, 372).

It is difficult for modern-day scholars to ascertain which of the poetry left to us in manuscripts are part of the sung ballad tradition. Jón Helgason collects the most likely members of the group in his edition *Íslensk fornkvæði* vol. 1–8 (1962–1981). They can often be classified by their metre, which has been adapted from Scandinavian ballads. They were couplets out of which both lines had four stresses and were rhymed in the *aa* rhyme scheme, with a refrain accompanying them, often split between the two lines of the couplet as follows:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Gauti og hún Magnhild frú, | (‘Gauti and his lady
Magnhild, |
| riddarinn herlegur og vel, | a fabulous and good knight, |
| þau lágu saman í lofti tvö. | they lay together in bed. |
| Hún dansar, | She dances, |

sú ber gull og klæðin brún, hún dansar vel. She is wearing gold and dark clothes, she dances well.

2. Gauti spurði Magnhildi sín:
“Hvað syrgir þig, sætan mín?”
(Vésteinn Ólason 1979, 99)

Gauti asked his Magnhild:
What bothers you, my dear?)

They could also be quatrains with differing amounts of stress and an *xaya* rhyme scheme, with a refrain after each strophe:

Kóngurinn og drottningin
á þann sunnudag
héldu sínum skipunum
á það myrkva haf.
Enginn veit til angurs fyrr en reynir.

(‘The King and the Queen
on that Sunday
kept their orders
on that dark ocean.
Nobody knows about anguish
until they try.’)

(Vésteinn Ólason 1979, 102)

These metres were only used in the ballads, apart from a few later imitations, which do not count as a part of the *traditional* ballads. Along with the *þulur*, the Icelandic traditional ballads are one of the only types of Icelandic poetry from before the 20th century without structural alliteration (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 15). Instead, they often use assonance, which was usually not a feature of Icelandic poetry (Hughes 2005, 214).

It becomes obvious that the knowledge and transmission of the ballads seems to have been carried mostly by women on account of comments made by manuscript-writers on the nature of their collection. The oldest fragment of a ballad which was later written down in full can be found in a 16th century manuscript containing several types of texts (Jón Helgason, vol. 4, 1963, 6). From some comments and correspondences of learned men from that time onwards, however, it becomes clear that the ballads had most likely been sung and passed on much earlier, with no chance to record and catalogue them all. A letter from a man called Snæbjörn Pálsson who wrote to one of the main collectors of Old Icelandic manuscripts, Árne Magnússon, gives an insight into this fact. He writes about his father-in-law Magnús Jónsson’s ballad book of the 17th century, which contained 183 poems of which most were either ballads or ballad translations:

Fornkvæða bokenn þiker mier ecke so rijk af fornkvæðumm sem hiórtu og briöst attræda kerlinga hef eg vitad nær jeg var barn, enn þær med þeim frödleik eru flestar i jórd grafnar nu.

(‘I do not think that the ballad-book is as rich in ballads as I have known the hearts and minds of eighty year old women to be when I was a child, but most of them have now been buried in the earth with their knowledge.’)

(Jón Helgason, vol. 1, 1962, xx; translation by Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 18)

As Vésteinn Ólason (1982, 18) notes, this statement implies that the tradition of ballads might already have been in decline in the early 18th century, if we are to believe Snæbjörn. This source additionally attributes the knowledge of the ballads to (old) women. Árni Magnússon himself collected quite a few such ballads. He occasionally mentions his sources, and they were always women. He sometimes notes their age and places where they lived. Only one of them is mentioned by name, Guðrún Hákonardóttir, who gave him five ballads. She came from a rather high societal position, being the mistress of a farm in southern Iceland and the daughter of a successful farmer from the west (Jón Helgason, vol. 4, 1963, xli–xlvi). Most of the other women he mentioned seem, however, to have been older women of a lower social status (Jón Helgason, vol. 4, 1963, xxxviii). Almost all collections of ballads of the following years that mention their sources claim them as having been women, and in the few cases where men are given as the source, these men learned them from women (Vésteinn Ólason 1982, 23). However, men were usually the ones writing the manuscripts, which was not unusual at the time.

Based on the fact that women are named as the main keepers of the traditional ballads and their metres were so different from the highly stylized popular metres – mostly because they did not include alliteration –, it can be said that the ballads were most likely deemed to be low in prestige. W. P. Ker (1931, 123) writes as a definition of the typical Scandinavian ballad:

Ballad, as the term is commonly used, describes a certain degree of simplicity, and an absence of high poetical ambition. Ballads are for the market-place and the “blind crowder”, or for the rustic chorus that sings the ballad burden.

Thus, it becomes obvious that ballads did not hold a very high-class position in society due to their simplistic style. Indeed, Vésteinn Ólason (1982, 23) writes that “during the centuries of collection not much prestige could have been attached to the knowledge of ballads as one might have expected if they had been sung publicly, e.g., at dance-gatherings.” He bases this on the fact that the ballads were mostly sung by women. In the Faroes, ballads were often sung to dances, and there it was mostly men who performed them (Thuren 1908, 8). Vésteinn Ólason (1982, 24) suggests the theory that in Iceland, the ballads were most likely rather sung by woman during their working hours or when they put children to sleep, for example. He also mentions that there is no evidence that the ballads were ever sung during *kvöldvaka* like the *rímur*. This shows that the ballads

seem to be part of one of the few Icelandic types of poetry that are confined to the female sphere. It could be taken therefore into consideration whether there is a correlation between poetry being simple in form and lacking alliteration, and such poetry being mostly known and performed by women.

4.1.2 *Pulur*

Several different types of poetry carry the name *pulur*, which can be translated as rigamaroles (Hughes 2005, 218). Originally, a *pula* was a poem in form of a list, which could be of names or the poetic *heiti* from skaldic poetry, or which included a repetition of words and phrases. Snorri Sturluson features lists of *heiti* in his *Snorra Edda*. These types of poetry are succinctly different from what later came to be known as *pulur*, in particular as they still adhered to strict metres that include alliteration (Ögmundur Helgason 1989, 401). Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir (2020, 12) calls them *fornpulur*. However, the types of *pulur* that shall be of interest here, which do not feature structural alliteration, have become a part of the Icelandic oral tradition from at least the 15th century onwards, and Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir (2020, 12) names them *pulur síðari alda*. They were of a very free form, which included end rhyme but not alliteration. They could be about a variety of topics: mythological folklore stories that deal with the troll mother Grýla and her children, the *jólasveinar* ('Yule lads'), *pulur* about love and dance called *ástapulur* and *danspulur*; these were quite often verses for children, some sort of nursery rhymes, as well as nonsense verses (Hughes 2005, 218). They were always anonymous, and most likely written down much later than they were composed (Ögmundur Helgason 1989, 402–3).

Like the ballads, *pulur* were most likely derived from foreign influences, as there are analogues to some of the Icelandic *pulur* in other countries, especially in Norway, Denmark, and the Faroe Islands (Ögmundur Helgason 1989, 402). This means that their free form most likely stems from foreign influence adopted from origin points where poetry had already lost alliteration. It could be that the *pulur* were not deemed prestigious enough to make the effort to incorporate them into the typical Icelandic metres. Instead, they were usually non-stanzaic and consisted of very short lines with two stresses each (Hughes 2005, 218). This could be because this kind of poetry appeals to children more than long, complex lines. End rhyme was commonly used, although it was kept rather simple and sometimes also left out altogether (Ögmundur Helgason 1989, 403). An

example of a *pula* that belong to the category of children’s nursery rhymes is named *Krummaþula* and is one of the typical *pulur* that deals with animals such as ravens or cows:

Krummi fló	(‘The raven flew
kátur um sjó,	happily by the sea,
kænlega sína vængi dró;	cunningly drew its wings;
setti í mó	sat in the heath
sultarkló;	the starving claw;
sá hann nú hvar skipin ró.	he now saw where the ships were.
Lakann eftir klakanum	The sheet beyond the ice
til vakarinnar dró,	to the vigil he dragged,
með tinbelti föður síns	with his father’s tin belt
og tvenna skó,	and two shoes,
stakk þeim undir stélið á sér,	he put them under his belt,
stökk svo upp og hló.	then jumped up and laughed.
Hann dansaði við	He danced
og sagði lulló.	and said lulló.’)
(Jón Árnason and Ólafur Davíðsson 1894, 249)	

Although some of the initial sounds are repeated in a way that recalls regular alliteration with *stuðlar* and *hofuðstafr*, such as the *st*-sound in the second-to-last line pair, it is applied very irregularly, and Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir (2020, 107) remarks that the regularity of alliteration went down in the *pulur* of the 19th and 20th century. She concludes that, in general, at least 75% of all the lines of the *pulur* alliterate, but very often do so irregularly and freely (108). Some groups of *pulur* use alliteration more often than others. Thus, the listener cannot reliably expect to hear alliteration (110), which, as has been established, usually classifies Icelandic poetry.

Interestingly, *pulur*, just as the ballads, seem to be a part of the sphere of feminine poetry, rather than masculine. They were often recited by members of older generations, very often women, to children (Ögmundur Helgason 1989, 406). They seem to have been performed just before bedtime to put the children to sleep (Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir 2020, 257). It is noteworthy that both types of medieval Icelandic poetry among the few that did not feature regular alliteration are said to have been passed on mostly by women. This could point to the fact that the alliterative tradition was considered a part of the higher class, learned tradition, consisting of mostly men, while simpler, more common poetry meant for enjoyment such as singing, dancing, or entertaining children was not deemed prestigious enough to adhere strictly to any type of common Icelandic metre.

4.2 Modern literature

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, there was some innovation when it came to the rigid Icelandic poetic metres during periods of the 20th century, namely in Lyricism, Realism, and Modernism. Poets like Steinn Steinarr, Jón úr Vör, Jóhannes úr Kötlum and Þorsteinn frá Hamri experimented with the so-called ‘form revolution’ (*formbylting*), with which they aspired to break with the conventions of regular rhythm, stanzaic structure, and rules of rhyme and alliteration (Kristján Árnason 2011, 133). This was supposed to grant the poets more freedom in expressing themselves, and give more room for creativity. According to Kristján Árnason (2011, 133), this gave rise to the opportunities in poetry that the other Germanic languages had reached 1000 years earlier, especially insofar as it allows alliteration to be one of several stylistic devices that can be used in freer ways if needed and left out if required.

This development has continued into modern times, and while the alliterative tradition is still preserved and used in some forms of poetry and lyrics, more poets and lyricists have started using freer forms of poetry than ever before. Although many contemporary poems, translations of foreign poems and even popular lyrics still apply structural alliteration (Willson 2008, 315), it seems that another group of poets and lyricists has formed that does not, which applies only free alliteration, if any. Such artists usually come from younger generations influenced by new, often foreign standards of poetry and song writing, especially the Anglo-American one, whose culture still dominates western society.

4.2.1 Form revolution

Especially with the advent of Modernism from 1940 on, the Icelandic poetic scene was ready to innovate and adapt different ways of writing poetry than what had been previously classified as the norm, including the use of alliteration. Along with the occupation during the war years, first by the British (1940) and then the Americans (1941), Icelandic culture was greatly influenced by the Anglo-American culture. The urban culture of Reykjavík was particularly shaped by it, as the city had not had much time to forge a culture of its own after becoming a capital and an urban hot spot (Carleton 1967, 178). The significant cultural shift between pre-war and post-war Iceland meant that people naturally looked to change their ways of expressing themselves, and poetry was no exception. Foreign culture was never as dominant as before in Iceland, especially

given improved opportunities for Icelanders to travel abroad, and thus new types of poetry clearly emerged. One path that was explored resulted in the so-called formal revolution (*formbylting*) with the use of free verse, and Modernist poets who were called *atómskáld* (see Ólafur Jónsson 1981) were mostly behind these changes.

The formal revolution was categorized within the overall development of Icelandic poetry by a shift in focus towards form in the form-content dichotomy, counteracting the focus on content brought about by the pre-war depression in Iceland (Carleton 1967, 183). As poets were presented with many new cultural opportunities, they focused on finding new ways to express their emotions and ideas. Each poet strove to challenge another part of the rigid Icelandic poetic tradition: rhyme, alliteration, regular rhythm, and stanzaic structure. Carleton (1967, 184) mentions the challenging of alliteration as a particularly interesting phenomenon, seeing as it had been a prominent and defining feature, even the embodiment, of the Icelandic poetic expression up until this point. With the development of urban environments, Icelanders grew up more frequently as migrant workers in towns, rather than on rural farms, where the oral tradition of reciting poetry had thrived until this point. Thus, Carleton (1967, 185) argues that, for the first time, a generation in Iceland grew up without necessarily instantly acquiring the *brageyra*.

Creating new types of poetry that do without structural alliteration was rather a reaction to older poetry than a slow and steady loss of the tradition. Since there was a desire to challenge the old ways of writing poetry, and alliteration was a feature of almost all of them, it was natural that this was rebelled against first and foremost (Carleton 1967, 185). However, the rebellion was never carried out to the extreme, and poets soon realized that the audience still demanded a certain adherence to alliteration to satisfy their *brageyra* – however, poets now played upon that as far as expectations for alliteration could be broken. Thus another goal could be achieved by withholding alliteration or placing it on another word than would normally be expected. Carleton (1967, 186) compares this to “the changing treatment of the tonic in modern music.”

Reactions to these non-alliterative poems were strict, and many expressed their disdain. Dr. Björn Sigfússon (1951, 307) writes in an epithet:

Stuðlar, með eða án höfuðstafs, og einhver háttbundin hrynjandi, sem þeir bera uppi, verða nauðsyn íslenzku brageyra næstu aldir. Óstuðluð ljóð kann enginn degi lengur nema söngtexta, og fæst eru þau sönghaf. Ljóð, sem enginn ljóðvinur

nennir að rifja upp fyrir sér og njóta með brageyranu, eru andvana fædd og engu síður fyrir það, þótt þau kunni að vera eins hlaðin “sýmbólík” og fyrirtaks myndlist á úrkynjunarskeiði.

(‘Props, with or without alliteration, and some bound rhythms that they carry, will be necessary for the Icelandic *brageyra* of the coming centuries. Non-alliterated poetry can no longer last a day apart from lyrics, and they are rarely sung. Poems which no friend of poetry bothers to recall and enjoy with the *brageyra*, are stillborn and nobody sides with them, although they may be as loaded with “symbolics” as fine art in its degeneration.’)

Sigfús Daðason, one of the representatives of the post-war poets, refutes most of these statements in an article called “Til varnar skáldskapnum” (1952) (‘In defense of the poetic arts’). He finds faults in the fact that only poetry that alliterates is memorable, that alliteration will continue to be relevant in Icelandic poetry for the next few hundred years, and that the main purpose of poetry is to be enjoyed by the *brageyra*. One statement he cannot, however, argue against is the fact that the new type of non-alliterating poetry is not as popular as the alliterating one. He sees a problematic development within Icelandic poetry, which he summarizes as follows:

Kannski hefur ástandið að þessu leyti sjaldan verið eins slæmt og nú. Eitt af hlutverkum ungra íslenzkra skálda og listamanna verður að vera að komast í beinna, nánara samband við almenning. Ég held að reglan stórar bókmenntir þurfa stórt públíkum hafi við mikið að styðjast, þar með er ekki sagt að listamaðurinn eigi að láta undan smekk almennings ef hann er lélegur. Listamenn með miljónaþjóðum geta ef til vill sér að skaðlausu látið þetta málefni afskipalaust, við getum það ekki, við erum of fáir. Til þess að bókmenntir og listir geti þrífzt á Íslandi verða Íslendingar að vera bókmennta- og listaþjóðin þar excellence. Þjóðin þarf helzt öll að vera áhorfendur og áheyrndur listamanna sinna.

(‘Perhaps the situation in this regard has seldom been as bad as it is now. One of the roles of young Icelandic poets and artists must be to get in direct, closer contact with the public. I think the rule of big literature needing a large audience has a lot to be said for itself, but with that it is not said that the artist should indulge in the taste of the public if he is marginal. Artists who are part of a million-sized nation may be able to leave this issue untouched, we cannot, we are too few. In order for literature and the arts to thrive in Iceland, Icelanders must be the nation of literature and the arts par excellence. The nation needs to be the audience of its artists.’)

(Sigfús Daðason 1952, 271)

It becomes obvious that there were already two camps forming at around that time – those who believed that Icelandic poetry would be based on alliteration for the next coming years, and that it would not lose its importance, and those who advocate for a new, free

form of poetry. However, the members of the latter seem to fear that the Icelandic audience will not be willing to receive such poetry.

The fact that the audience was still so critical of non-alliterating poetry was evident in that one of the poets experimenting with the non-alliterative way of composing poetry did so under a pen name. This poet was Jóhannes úr Kötlum and his pen name was Anonymus. In almost all of the poems that he published under this name from 1945 onwards, there was no alliteration (Carleton 1967, 188). The fact that he hid behind his pen name and eventually even wrote an apologetic end note to these poems once they were published all together in a book called *Sjödægra* (1955, 162) points to the fact that he felt anxious about taking such a step. He appears to see himself in a middle ground between mourning the loss of the poetic tradition, and feeling the necessity to take steps to part with former boundaries (Carleton 1967, 189). The result is, for example, a poem of his attributed to the Lyrist movement, which is composed adhering to the traditional *ferskeytt* metre of the *rímur*, at least as regards rhythm and stress count – alliteration and end rhyme, however, is not featured:

Ferskeytlur

Rennur gegnum hjarta mitt
blóðsins heita elfur;
upp í strauminn bylta sér
kaldir sorgarfiskar.

(‘Flowing through my heart
the blood is called an elf;
up into the stream overturning
cold fish of sorrow.

Út um tálknin japla þeir
þungum, svörtum kvörnum,
þar til eins og kolabotn
undir niðri veður.

They yawned at the gills
heavy, black grinders,
until like a coal bottom
under downy weather.

Sit ég við hið rauða fljót,
stari niðrí djúpið,
þar sem Gleði dóttir mín
liggur nár í myrkri.
(Jóhannes úr Kötlum 1955, 239)

I sit by the red river,
staring down into the depths,
where Gleði my daughter
lies near in the dark.’)

For someone well-versed in Icelandic metrics who has acquired the *brageyra*, it is glaringly obvious that alliteration is purposefully withheld here. This is a stylistic device in and of itself, leading the reader to expect alliteration in the very traditional rhythmic scheme, but disappointing them with every line. Carleton (1967, 190) writes very accurately:

The comfortable traditional form becomes a mockery, the poem is a vicious, cacophonous disappointment. Whether seen as a personal or a cultural sorrow, “Ferskeytlur” is a monumental lamentation.

It seems that poets of this time were torn in determining whether the abandonment of old poetic metres upheld in the Icelandic poetic tradition would be fruitful or not. Interestingly, though attempts to eliminate alliteration were made in all the three poetic movements of the early 20th century, all of them eventually turned back to it. Even Jóhannes úr Kötlum became more relaxed over time in his attempts to leave alliteration out of his poetry altogether, and to otherwise employ a rigid old poetic metre. Instead, he appeared to focus on the content of his poetry, and constructed images with his words (Carleton 1967, 191) which could be considered a return to content rather than form. He mentions rhyme in a poem of his centered on his choice to break free from the constraints of form, but not alliteration, and indeed uses alliteration in these lines:

Eins og ljóð vort er einfalt og auðskilið	(‘Like our poem is simple and easy to understand
og hirðir ekki um rósfjötra rímsins	and does not care about the rosy fetters of rhyme
né fjölblá faguryrði ...	nor the violet sweet talk ...’)
(Jóhannes úr Kötlum 1949, 278; translation by Kristján Árnason 2011, 133–4)	

Icelandic poetry has still featured alliteration to a great extent in the latter half of the 20th century and in the early 21st century, albeit in a much freer form. The formal revolution could be said to have briefly moved in the direction of abolishing alliteration altogether, but subsequently came around to accepting it as one of the most important stylistic devices to compose Icelandic poetry, even if poets are now granting themselves more freedom in its application. This led to the development of two different camps by modern times: one which still tries to strictly adhere to the expectations of the *brageyra* and the Old Icelandic poetic metres, and one which deviates from it and uses alliteration merely as one possible stylistic device alongside others.

4.2.2 Popular lyrics

One area of poetry which more overtly took to the abandonment of poetic rules such as alliteration is the lyrics of modern popular music. There appear to be two camps here as well: those still alliterating their lyrics in the old, common way with *stuðlar* and *høfuðstafr*, and those using alliteration rather freely or not at all. Apart from this

dichotomy, many modern Icelandic musicians do not sing in Icelandic anymore at all, but instead compose in English. This is most likely done in order to reach an international market, where English is the lingua franca. Even the famous Björk (Björk Guðmundsdóttir), who has become one of the most well-known Icelandic musicians internationally, sings mostly in English. But when she first performed lyrics in Icelandic with her band *The Sugarcubes*, they were not truly alliterating, as in the lyrics of the song *Ammæli* ('Birthday'):

Hún á heima í húsinu þarna	(‘She lives in the house there
Þar heim fyrir utan	Out of this home there
Grabblar í mold með fingrunum	Grabs in the dirt with her fingers
Og munninum, hún er fimm ára	And with the mouth, she’s five years old
Þræðir orma upp á bönd	Threads of worms on tapes
Geymir köngulær í vasanum	Stores spides in her pockets
Safnar fluguvængjum í krús	Collects fly wings in a jar
Skrúbbar hrossaflugur	Scrubs horseflies
Og klemmir þær á snúru ...	And clamps them on the cable ...’

In the first stanza, there appears to be a wish to alliterate, although the first line contains hyper-alliteration with the three *hs*, namely three instead of maximum two *stuðlar*. The third line also does not adhere properly to the rules of structural alliteration, with the second *stuðull*, the *m* in *með*, not in the proper position or word category that a *stuðull* would normally require. The rest of the lyrics do not seem to feature alliteration at all.

In the lyrics of most modern Icelandic music, structural alliteration appears to have become a possible stylistic device among many, rather than a strict rule to adhere to. Often, it is no longer structural alliteration that is applied, but rather free alliteration. It has become one of several options to make the lyrics appealing to the ear, alongside end rhyme and assonance.

Baker (2019) describes that the Eurovision Song Contest has become of great importance for the Icelandic popular music scene. Although entries to the final competition are usually in English, there is always a pre-selection competition called *Söngvakeppnin* in Icelandic TV to have the audience select via televoting which song should be sent into the final round (Baker 2019, 95), and here, songs are always performed with Icelandic lyrics. There seems to have still been structural alliteration in these lyrics up until a certain point in history, especially when the entries were still entirely in

Icelandic, even in the final, which shifted from 1999 onwards. The style in which the Icelandic versions of the newer lyrics are written is often very free, with free alliteration, as Kristján Árnason (2011, 136) remarks. And indeed, the Icelandic version of the song *Think About Things* by Daði og Gagnamagnið that would have competed for Iceland in the Eurovision Song Contest 2020, if it had not been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is only sparsely alliterated. The Icelandic title of the song is *Gagnamagnið* and differs greatly in content from the English version.

Hæ, við erum komin	(‘Hey, we have arrived
Úr framtíðinni og líka utan úr geim	From the future and also from outer space
Því eitthvað þarf að breytast	Because something needs to change
Ef þið viljið halda í þennan heim	If you want to stay in this world’)

Although some lines appear to feature at least two words which alliterate, there is no link between two lines with *stuðlar* and *høfuðstafr* as would be appropriate for structural alliteration. End rhyme seems to be more important here. The reason for this could be the fact that the lyrics are primarily intended to be in English, and providing an Icelandic version is seen mainly an afterthought in order to adhere to the requirements of *Söngvakeppnin*. Indeed, Þórunn Erna Clausen, the composer for the 2018 Icelandic entry for Eurovision performed by Ari Ólafsson, known as *Heim* in Icelandic and *Our Choice* in English, says in an interview that she originally wrote the song with English lyrics and had to come up with Icelandic lyrics afterwards (Björg Magnúsdóttir 2018).

The case of Eurovision perhaps serves to exemplify the factors leading to structural alliteration generally fading away in modern popular Icelandic music. Icelanders are growing used to new trends coming into the country from abroad, and they are adjusting their music to the mainstream taste of the international market accordingly, which does not easily allow for lyrics composed within the confines of the traditional metres. Still, traditional Icelandic poetry has always served as an inspiration for the composition of songs in new styles, as Mitchell (2019, 168) remarks in regard to hip hop and rap music:

Icelandic hip hop’s indigenization comes largely from its perceived connection with chanted forms of Icelandic oral poetry such as *rímur* and *þula*, which some view as an ancient precedent to rap that is still practiced today.

This is an interesting observation, reminiscent of the fact that foreign metres were very often adapted to the Icelandic style when they became popular in Iceland. However, in

modern times, the adaptations are less strict, and structural alliteration is no longer the main device that Icelanders find missing in their poetry and lyrics. Kristján Árnason (2011, 136) puts forth the following theory concerning alliteration in modern Icelandic artistry:

We can thus say that in modern free verse and the popular lyrics, both the rhythmic and the constituent function has disappeared, leaving only the symbolic function, namely that poetic texts should have alliteration regardless of constituency or rhythm.

Whether this statement still holds true ten years later and what predictions could be made as to its future status shall be explored in the next chapter via interviews with Icelanders active in the current artist scene.

5 Attitudes to Alliteration – Interviews with modern artists

I conducted four interviews for the sake of analysing how Icelandic artists of today view the status of alliteration in both poetry and music. For that, I selected two Icelandic poets, Gerður Kristný and Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, and two musicians who write lyrics in Icelandic, Bragi Valdimar Skúlason and Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir, known by her stage name of GDRN. I felt that it was important that, in analysing both artistic and expressive mediums, I would talk to one representative of a generation of artists who have turned towards medieval forms of Icelandic art either in form or content, and that others would in turn represent a younger generation's approach to poetry and lyrics. Each interview yielded highly interesting results, and a general overview of the most valuable points regarding alliteration in all four interviews shall be presented in the following chapter.

5.1 List of questions

The following questions were asked to the poets:

1. What is your view on the alliterative tradition in the Icelandic language? What do you think about its history?
2. Why do you think it is still so important in modern Icelandic poetry? What do you think its function is?
3. Can you immediately perceive whether lines of poetry have a correct/standard alliteration pattern, or would you need to consciously reason it out?
4. Did you write any poetry as a child? Did it have alliteration?
5. When and how did you learn to use alliteration?
6. Do you find it easy or difficult to find the correct words to alliterate properly, and to put them in the right position?
7. Is alliteration restraining when it comes to poetic expression, or is it an aid?
8. When your poetry is read aloud, does the reciter emphasize the alliterating syllables?
9. Do you think it is important to your audience that your poetry has alliteration?
10. Do you think alliteration will continue to be important in modern Icelandic poetry?
11. Do you feel that alliteration is still important in modern Icelandic music as well, and will it keep on being a part of song writing?

The following questions were asked to the lyricists:

1. What is your view on the alliterative tradition in the Icelandic language? What do you think about its history?
2. Why do you think it is still so important in some modern Icelandic poetry? What do you think its function is?

3. Can you immediately perceive whether lines of poetry have a correct/standard alliteration pattern, or would you need to consciously reason it out?
4. Did you write any poetry/lyrics as a child? Did it have alliteration?
5. When and how did you learn to use alliteration?
6. Do you find it easy or difficult to find the correct words to alliterate properly, and to put them in the right position?
7. Is alliteration restraining when it comes to poetic expression, or is it an aid?
8. How would you describe your song writing process? What is your inspiration for writing them the way they are?
9. When you perform alliterating lyrics, do you emphasize the alliterating words?
10. Do you think it is important to your audience that your lyrics have alliteration?
11. Do you think alliteration will continue to be important in modern Icelandic poetry?
12. Do you think alliteration will continue to be important in modern Icelandic music?

Inspired by these questions, the interviewees often took to telling me about aspects in modern poetry and music that they found worth noting, and added a great deal of valuable information for my research, which I then inquired into further. Transcriptions of the interviews are to be found in the appendix.

5.2 The interviewees

First of all, each of the interviewees shall be introduced, as well as an outline of their most important works, their connection to the alliterative tradition, and the view they presented to me individually about alliteration.

5.2.1 Poets

5.2.1.1 *Gerður Kristný*

Gerður Kristný was born in 1970 and graduated with a degree in French and Comparative Literature at the University of Iceland in 1992. She is a full-time writer and has written and published poetry, short stories, novels, and books for children, plus a biographical work called *Myndin af pabba – Saga Thelmu* ('A Portrait of Dad – Thelma's Story'). Her poetic works include *Höggstaður* ('Soft Spot') and *Blóðhófnir* ('Bloodhoof').

The latter shall be of particular interest, as it draws directly from eddic poetry. In *Blóðhófnir*, she re-interprets the eddic poem *Skírnismál* ('The Lay of Skírnir'), in both content and form. She tells the story from the point of view of Gerður, the *jötunn* ('giantess') seduced, or rather forced, by Freyr's servant Skírnir to marry Freyr. The poem

has been translated into many other languages, alongside which is a translation by Rory McTurk into English in an issue that features both the Icelandic and the English version. In his introduction to the book, McTurk (2012, 9) points out how Gerður’s poem was styled after the *ljóðaháttur* of the original eddic poem, and it “echoes this metre without following it slavishly: there are frequent instances of alliteration in her poem, and also in the translation.” Gerður told me that McTurk is the only one out of all the translators who mimics her use of alliteration in her poem, and who mentions it in his introduction. He accurately mentions that Gerður uses free alliteration in her work, that is reminiscent of the structural alliteration, as can be seen, for example, in these lines:

Ástin reikaði ráðvillt um	His love had gone reeling in mad career
soltin, þögun þyldi hvergi við	not eating, not speaking he would find no rest

(Gerður Kristný 2012, 38; translation by McTurk)

In her interview, Gerður Kristný mentioned to me that she has had a strong interest in the Icelandic traditional ways of writing poetry since learning them in childhood, with the help of the book *Skólaljóð* (‘School poems’) (ed. Kristján J. Gunnarsson, 1970), which features classical Icelandic poetry by a variety of poets from the 17th to the 20th century, out of which all students had to learn a few poems by heart. She was also taught to write verses in the style of *ferskeytla*, which is the modern Icelander’s rendition of the *rímur* metre *ferskeytt*. To her, it used to feel like a crossword puzzle which she enjoyed solving. She clarified that she had learned end rhyme earlier than alliteration, but since she acquired it, it has always come naturally to her. However, since she started writing her more modern poetry, she is not so strict in always including structural alliteration, and lets it flow more freely, inspired by modern rap and R’n’B songs in English. Only when she writes music for the church, as she has been commissioned to do at times, does she feel the need to use the traditional style. She said that it can become irritating when she hears that someone has used a word merely to adhere to alliteration. According to her, it is not always easy to make it sound natural, and one needs to have a large vocabulary to alliterate in a way that pleases the *brageyra*. But in her opinion, the tradition is still going strong, as her youngest son has just learned it in school at the age of 13. Additionally, she feels that as she started touring different countries and reading her poetry out loud to an audience, the focus on form has become even more important to her, including

alliterations. This is reminiscent of the fact that alliteration most likely began as a mnemonic device to aid in the oral transmission of medieval poetry.

5.2.1.2 *Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir*

Kristín Svava was born in 1985 and is a historian and a poet. She has published many books of poetry, among them *Blótgællur* (roughly translated as poetry that can be read as both a compliment and an insult) in 2007, *Stormviðvörðun* (‘Storm warning’) in 2015, and *Hetjusögur* (‘Stories of heroines’) in 2020. For the latter, she drew on biographies about Icelandic midwives from the late 19th and early 20th century, a collection of books called *Íslenskar ljósmæður I–III* edited by Sveinn Víkingur. Her style of poetry is very unbound and experimental, and seemingly not connected to the medieval, traditional way of writing Icelandic poetry at all.

This is why I deemed an interview with her to be worthwhile, in order to have a contrasting opinion from someone not obviously drawing from the alliterative tradition. She uses free alliteration as one possible device among others, as becomes evident in these lines from *Hetjusögur* (2020, 58):

byggðin að vísu fögur í sólskini og sumardýrð	(‘built, albeit beautiful in sunshine and summer glory
fagur flóinn er sólin glitrar sund og eyjar	picturesque bay as the sun sparkles in channels and islands’)

In fact, Kristín Svava views the romanticization of using traditional poetic metres as slightly problematic, or “tricky”, as she put it, as it is so closely linked to a nationalistic idea of Icelandic history, which is worth looking at through a critical lens. Although she is a historian herself, she looks rather at texts from the 19th century onwards, as that is more so her field of interest. As concerns modern poetry, her opinion is that there are two distinct communities, one which she referred to as *hagyrðingar*, a term that describes a group of people who write *ferskeytlur* in a way that she described to me as a sport. She herself belongs to a group she calls *ljóðskáld*, which write poetry in their own way, publish books, and do readings. In her opinion, structural alliteration does not fit modern poetry, and she finds that very few modern poets or lyricists have successfully been able to take it and use it for making modern poetry in ways that are both stimulating and new. She named the musician Megas as someone who she thinks successfully merged the traditional style with modern content in his lyrics. This is also explored in an interview

with Megas in Sullivan (2003, 164), where he explains that he had a good understanding of the traditional writings in Icelandic and a large vocabulary, which was needed in order to modernise it while still honouring the traditions.

5.2.2 Lyricists

5.2.2.1 Bragi Valdimar Skúlason

Another musician honouring the Old Icelandic tradition while still making it sound modern is Bragi Valdimar. He is a musician and lyricist, and also works in advertising and television. He graduated in Icelandic at the University of Iceland. He writes lyrics for and plays with the country band *Baggalútur*, who also perform annual Christmas and New Years' songs. Most of their lyrics alliterate according to structural alliteration, such as the song *Við tvö*:

Við tvö tollum sjálfsagt saman.	(‘Of course, the two of us are together.
Tíminn græðir öll sár.	Time heals all wounds.
Við tvö fögnum framtíðinni	We both celebrate the future
og fellum eitt, tvö tár.	and we shed one, two tears.
Gleðilegt nýtt ár.	Happy New Year.’)

Furthermore, a song written by him and performed by Sigurður Guðmundsson og Memfismafían, *Orðin mín*, features alliteration within a metre reminiscent of the *ferskeytt* metre in the stanzas, and the eddic *ljóðaháttur* in its chorus, with two half-lines including two props and one head-stave, and one line following them within which two alliterative staves are found:

E inhvern tímann, ef til vill og ó ralangt frá þessum stað mun ástin h örfa h eim til þín og h jartans dyrum knýja að.	(‘Sometime, perhaps And very far from this place love will retreat to your home and knock on the heart’s door.
Og e inmitt þá og e inmitt þar mun á stin krefja þig um svar.	And exactly then, and exactly there love will demand an answer from you.
Þá er r étt að r ifja upp — orðin mín.	Then it is correct to recall – my words.
Þ au eru stírð. Þ au eru fá. Þ au sjálfsagt aldrei flugi ná. Þ au munu engu að síður a lltaf b íða þín.	They are sturdy. They are few. They probably never get to fly But they will nevertheless always be waiting for you.’)

In the interview, Bragi Valdimar told me that he has written lyrics in this style since he was fifteen years old, although he struggled to do so properly in the beginning. He learned it in school like any other Icelandic child, but his interest and knowledge was deepened mostly when he studied Icelandic at the University later. He let me know that he became deeply fascinated by the traditional Icelandic way of writing poetry when he studied it, but has since found it very important to apply it correctly. Although he also pointed out that it is sometimes difficult to match the alliteration with the music, as the rhythm must fit the melody. But he still deems it as important to try. His general outlook on the situation of alliteration in Icelandic poetry is a pessimistic one, as he sees its importance as fading away.

According to him, young people learn the rules at school, but they never become proficient in them, and they are no longer perceived and used naturally as they used to be by almost all Icelanders about a hundred years ago. He feels that Icelanders let go of their poetic tradition in the beginning of the 20th century, and that it has never fully returned since. In modern music such as rap, he sees a focus on assonance rather than alliteration, and even end rhyme seems not to be the main rhyme scheme that is used. Although the knowledge of the rules will likely be kept around for a long time to come, he fears that their usage will become limited to a small number of people in the future. He names the fact that people no longer need such devices to memorize poetry or words, as we can record everything easily nowadays, as possible contributing factors. Furthermore, poetry is no longer regularly read aloud and enjoyed in a shared environment as it used to be with the *rímur* during *kvöldvaka*.

5.2.2.2 *Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir / GDRN*

In my last interview, I talked to the singer and lyricist Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir, who goes by the stage name GDRN. Born in 1996, she represents a young generation's view on the Icelandic tradition. Her music could be described as jazz-influenced pop with R'n'B elements. Her lyrics include free alliteration within the lines, alongside numerous repetitions, as the following lines from her song *Lætur mig* shows:

Ætti að vita betur, eða	(‘I should know better, or
Hvað það nú var, held við	What was this now, I think we
Held við sjáum hvar situr, held við	I think we’ll see where it’s at, I think
	we
Held við stöndum í stað	I think we are standing still’)

During the interview, it became obvious that her relationship with the Icelandic language and culture is very strong, having read numerous books as a young child, and being very fascinated by the literature, language, and the traditional music, and how they fit together. She says that, still to this day, she reads Halldór Laxness' books to gain inspiration - a writer who is mentioned by Megas in the abovementioned interview in Sullivan (2003, 164) to have been an artist who merged traditional Icelandic styles and contents with a modern approach very well. Guðrún mentioned to me how she finds it possible to use the old rules such as alliteration as inspiration for song writing, but that they can also be broken and turned into something new. This can be done by changing the pronunciation or emphasis on a word. She elaborated that alliteration can be an aid for this process, to highlight certain words, and to make them flow differently. For her personally, much of the performance of her songs is connected to emotions, which she tries to convey to the audience with her singing, of which the usage of the words is an important part. To her, alliteration is a device that makes the words sound beautiful, and "posh". End rhyme, on the other hand, is also very important to her, as it makes the melodies that go along with the lyrics easier to grasp for the audience. When I asked her what she considers the future of the traditional ways of Icelandic poetry, she brought up the fact that much of modern Icelandic poetry is written in a very free form at the moment. But the awareness about alliteration is still intact, in her opinion, and she said that it may come back in style, though she also admitted that she sees the generation of her younger brothers much more well-versed in English than in Icelandic, with the rise of the Internet and the decline of reading books in their native language.

5.2.3 Conclusions from the interviews

Generally, it is interesting to point out that all interviewees knew much about the Icelandic traditional poetic history, including structural alliteration. It still is an important part of school education, and this will probably not change in the near future. However, as Bragi Valdimar pointed out and Kristín Svava confirmed, it is becoming less fashionable to use these strict alliterative rules in poetry and lyrics, and hence, younger generations are no longer as exposed to them as the previous ones were. Kristín Svava puts it quite concisely that there are two communities in Icelandic culture that write poetry, the *hagyrdingar* who still write *ferskeytlur*, and *ljóðskáld* who use freer forms.

This could be linked to what Bragi Valdimar mentioned: the fact that he sees the knowledge and usage of the traditional poetic metres fading away to a small, specific part of the population. However, the interviews with Gerður Kristný and Guðrún paint a more optimistic picture, with both of them very aware of the importance of Icelandic traditions and how to integrate them into modern ways of writing poetry and lyrics.

Kristján Árnason's (2011, 136) statement seems to hold true, that alliteration is less bound to the concise structure of the *stuðlar* and *höfuðstafr* of old, and has rather become one of several poetic devices differently valued by poets and lyricists. When considering Carleton's image of the pendulum swing in Icelandic poetic history between form and content, the observations made by the interviewees seem to indicate that the current trend is towards the content end of the spectrum, with the form being kept around only in certain areas such as church music, choir songs, the *ferskeytlur* of the *hagyrdingar* and other, more traditional types poetry and music. Guðrún described the developments in Icelandic poetry and song writing as a circle, which always comes back towards the traditional ways, an image reminiscent of the pendulum metaphor.

Which observation will hold true – whether Icelandic poetry and song writing will one day circle or swing back towards form and the traditional ways of writing poetry, including structural alliteration, or whether it will fade away and be replaced by new innovations, confining the knowledge of former ways of writing poetry to the shelves and a few learned people – could be explored further in the future. However, one personal observation of mine is that a remarkable number Icelanders know and cherish the ancient ways of traditional poetry, and alliteration in particular, as became evident when I talked about the topic of my thesis to Icelandic friends who are mostly within their mid-twenties. Compared to the knowledge about ancient German poetry by German young adults, this amount of knowledge and appreciation stands out.

6 Conclusion

The alliterative tradition in Icelandic poetry has been studied intensely as regards medieval literature, in particular within eddic and skaldic poetry. Its importance and the attitudes of contemporary scholars such as Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr hvítaskáld are obvious – Icelandic poetry could not do without it. Like nails on a ship or the pillars of a building, structural alliteration is needed in order to keep the poetic lines together. With *stuðlar* and *høfuðstafr*, Icelanders are given a skeleton, as Guðrún put it in our interview, to build upon when composing poetry. The tradition has been kept alive and strictly adhered to for many centuries, including in vastly important types of poetry such as eddic poetry, skaldic poetry and *rímur*. In the 20th century, poets still found themselves drawn to the tradition. However, they began experimenting and sometimes left alliteration out on purpose or used free alliteration instead. In medieval times, this was only found in types of poetry not often considered in scholarship and probably not deemed very prestigious, such as *sagnadansar* and *pulur*.

According to Carleton (1967), however, it can be said that the focus in poetry has always swung back and forth between form and content like a pendulum throughout Icelandic history. Eddic poetry was based on content, skaldic poetry was characterized by form, the ballads represented a brief period of freedom with content, and *rímur* were clearly based on form again. Lyricism represented form, Realism content, and Modernism sought to bring both together. It could be said that the art's current state appears to be swinging towards content, as the interviews with four Icelandic artists have brought to light. However, as opportunities for nearly anyone to get published in the modern age are extensive, it is possible to find both sides represented in Icelandic society, with *hagyrðingar* who still compose with the main focus on form, especially by using the *ferskeytla* metre stemming from the *rímur*, and the *ljóðskáld* whose poetry is of a freer form and who mainly use free alliteration.

The trend appears to be similar in music lyrics. Traditional songs can still be found that alliterate according to the ancient rules. Artists who hold the tradition dear to their hearts, such as Bragi Valdimar Skúlason, compose their lyrics in the style of structural alliteration. However, the trend appears to be in decline, and young modern artists try to use the old rules as a means for inspiration without adhering to them too strictly, and create something new in the process. Music has become a part of almost

every western culture heavily influenced by the Anglo-American model, and songs by Icelandic artists are very often written in English. However, there does seem to be an appreciation for using the Icelandic language by keeping its traditional poetic metres in mind and re-inventing them for a young audience. These new ways for using the Icelandic language to create appealing sounds and structures within modern music styles could be explored in future papers.

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Appendix: Full interviews

The following interviews were conducted for this thesis throughout March 2021 in Reykjavík. They will be recorded verbatim, with only slight alterations to eradicate the most striking, natural colloquialisms. They will be recorded in the order that they were conducted, which is: Bragi Valdimar Skúlason, Gerður Kristný, Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir and Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir/GDRN.

Interview with Bragi Valdimar Skúlason – 18th of March 2021

- *What is your relationship to the Icelandic language, in particular to poetry, and lyrics in Icelandic?*
- I have been writing song lyrics for most of my life, since I was about 15 years old. I wrote a lot of lyrics by now, not all of them in the alliterative style, but some of them are written in this style. I became really fond of this old system. I studied Icelandic at university and was introduced to it then. I began writing in this style and enjoyed finding out what I could do with it, and one led to the other. As a child I wasn't writing *ferskeytlur* or poetry. It was self-learned at a later stage of my life. But of course, you hear it in your surroundings all the time. So, I applied it mainly in lyrics. And I do advertising, also.
- *In advertising there is a lot of alliteration as well, right?*
- Yes, you can use it as a tool there, also.
- *What do you think its function is in advertising?*
- It is quirky and in advertising, that's a good thing. If you are always working with different styles, then you can use this as one of them. I find it very irritating when I see advertisements that are supposed to rhyme and alliterate, but they do it wrong. That's really annoying.
- *What would you consider wrong?*
- There are certain rules that, at least in the beginning, you need to apply, so that it sounds about right. Most of the time, people get it wrong nowadays, I am sad to say. People are making up *ferskeytlar* etc, and they think they are doing it right, but they are not.
- *So, you have studied the history of alliteration and you know how it used to be used...*
- Yes. As I say, I have been very fascinated by it and, in my opinion, this is one of the few things that is really a part of the Icelandic tradition, and of course it got out of hand in the complexity of it, in the Middle Ages, but I think that's fascinating and absolutely brilliant.
- *You mean like in skaldic poetry and rímur?*
- Yes, when the content just went away, but they kept the rules, and kept making them more and more complex. You can't understand a word, but they're nicely put together.

- *When you write lyrics that alliterate, you are really aware of how it should be done?*
- Yes, I am really aware when I do it wrong. But when I am writing lyrics to a pop song or something like that, most of the time I have to bend the rules. It is seldom that you can apply the rules to that, but I try.
- *Why do you think alliteration is still so important in Icelandic poetry?*
- Of course, there is the isolation, and that's just what we did, we kept sheep and we wrote *rímur*. Mostly tradition and isolation, and we just didn't know better to get other styles in, and when we took another form in, we applied the rules on it – that's also interesting... But in the last 100 years, it's breaking away. In the beginning of the last century, they said that every Icelander can create a *ferskeytla* fluently, and when they talk, they could talk poetry, but nowadays, children don't have it in their system anymore. But there is always a group of people who will keep it going, just for the heritage and the fun of it, but, as a “built in” feature of an Icelander to rhyme and to use it properly, that has gone away.
- *It is called brageyra, I believe.*
- Yes, the *brageyra*, that's basically gone for the new generations, I think. Maybe some have it, they learn it from their parents and so on, but as a general rule, we lost it.
- *Do you have it?*
- I would like to say I have it, but it's learned.
- *So, you learned it in school?*
- Mostly myself, and in school and at the university. But it's not taught in schools anymore, at least not the complexity of it, so you basically have to learn it yourself, and some do. And I think that's really sad, because this is such a large part of our heritage, and it basically went out of style. We basically pushed it away, and never took it back in... I hope I'm not too cynical on it. But I have this fondness for it and I would like to see it much more used, and properly.
- *Where do you think you see it going away?*
- People are just not doing it. That's the practice side of it.
- *Do you read modern poetry, and listen to music in Icelandic? Do you hear it there?*
- Some do it, some know how to do it, maybe more in pop lyrics than in poetry. Some are quite good. But it's the last 20-30 years, it's been slowly fading away. But then again, there's always this question if you're singing in English or Icelandic. With hip hop and rap music of young Icelanders, Icelandic is now the norm, I would say. 20 years ago, the norm was singing in English. So that's a good development. But it always goes with what's in fashion.
- *Do they use alliteration when they rap?*
- No...
- *Are they rather using end rhyme?*
- The end rhyme is also going away, that's another story. It seems like if it's the *sérhlóðin*, that's enough for them.
- *So, it's like an assonance?*

- Yes, the sounds. If the sounds are similar, it's good. I hear more and more of that. It's rhyme-ish.
- *When you listen to music, or read poetry, do you always have to focus on the alliteration to consider if it's right or wrong, or is it just natural?*
- No, you can kind of feel it. You always see it right away.
- *So you have really acquired the brageyra.*
- Yes... Of course, you see it with many poets, they use it as markers in their poetry, but they don't take the styles of the old *rímur*, you see less and less of that. Unless you are in the *Iðunn Kvæðamannafélagið* or something like that, where they actually practice the old ways.
- *When you wrote lyrics when you were fifteen, did you alliterate already?*
- I tried, but it was awful. I sometimes look at my oldest lyrics, and they are not good. They are good as they are, but not properly done.
- *Do you find it difficult to try to find the right words to alliterate, and put them in the right position?*
- That's just practice... Just at least try to do it. But like I said, when you are working with the song and the melody, you basically can't apply the rules straightaway on it. But my feeling is that it sounds better when you do it right. But when you're not Icelandic, it probably sounds horrible. I find it very important at least to try.
- *Do you think it is restraining you to write with alliteration, or is it an aid?*
- Yes, I think it is an aid, more than a restraint. You would think it is the other way around... But I think when you are used to something, it becomes natural, and of course with every practice, it becomes a part of you and how you work, so I think it's an aid. And that's part of why it fell out of style at the time. It was maybe not just that you had to use all these rules, the other thing is that everybody was doing it, and there was this mindset of: we all know how to do this, everybody can do it, we don't have to do it anymore, we're doing something else. The 20th century happened with all the good and bad of it, but we never went back. We pushed the old styles away and never took them back again. That I think is really sad.
- *Do you think it is the influence from the English/American culture, or what are the new styles that Icelanders are trying now? Or are they making their own?*
- There always come new styles, and you're following something that you hear, it can be English or Icelandic or whatever. But the problem is that you don't go back to the roots and work with what you have there. That's the sad part of it. They basically changed the toolkit altogether. They took a new toolkit and forgot the old one. I think that's what I'm trying to say.
- *I see. But do you think your audience, when they listen to your music, do they find it important to hear the alliteration?*
- I think they are used to it with my lyrics. There is a kind of respect for it, also. Just to know the trade. There have been a few new lyricists that are taking up this style now, it's always less and less, and basically it's besides the point if they're good or bad lyrics, they're just not using the know-how. But I think Icelanders still can feel the rhythm, the *hrynjandi*, it's still there, in our blood

somewhere. But as I say, it is slowly fading away and new generations, they just don't grow up hearing it. And that's basically it: If you don't hear it, you don't use it.

- *I see.*
- And then reading poetry out loud, you don't do that at all. But in the old days, in the *baðstofa* and all that, when people were constantly reading poetry, every night, every year, in the old farmhouses, when the family was all together, and one was reading for the other ones, like you could hear it 100 years ago... Not so long ago, it was still practiced. And you could always have the rhythm, the *hrynjandi*, in your ears, listening to it... and then that basically stopped. If you are just reading it, it is not the same. So, I think that might be an aspect of it, also.
- *Maybe that's why it would be nice to transfer it to music, because people are still listening to music.*
- Most of the 20th century, from 1950s to 1970s, or maybe older, 30s to 70s, it was basically traditional lyrics, most of it. Not all very good, but at least they were in this style. And then they started to slip away from it. So we still have a lot of songs that everybody knows, you have it represented there still.
- *I'm also in the choir, and you were also in the choir, right?*
- Yes, absolutely.
- *And there we still sing a lot of those traditional songs that are all alliterated.*
- I mean, sounds, and a lot of choir music, is just all very old lyrics... *Heyr himna smiður*... they keep up the good work.
- *Do you think when people perform your lyrics or lyrics that have alliteration, do they emphasize those alliterated words more, in the rhythm or in the singing, for example?*
- No... If the lyrics and the music go well together, most of the time, they should have an emphasis there, but I don't think people do it consciously. At least, I don't think they are thinking about it. Most people don't think about it at all.
- *But do you notice it most of the time when it's wrong and it bothers you?*
- It bothers me if they're trying to make it right and they don't get it, but it doesn't bother me if it's not there, not at all. Poems which are not trying to use it, they are just nice poems. I like them just as much.
- *What do you think about free alliteration?*
- If it has some meaning or rule in it, I think it's good. I'm all for making experiments with the language. All the time. And you can overuse it and underuse it and do what you want... Basically, when you know the rules, you can break them. It's not so good not knowing it at all and still using it.
- *Do you prefer end rhyme or alliteration in music? Do they always have to go together?*
- In music, rhyming is really natural, a part of the structure, often. But I have made lyrics that have no rhyme at all, and they can work just as well. It's just all based on the occasion, for each song or each poem. Mainly I would like more people to know how to do it, even if we will never have it all over the place and

I wouldn't want everybody to *have* to do it. But I think the know-how is basically going away. And that's quite sad.

- *That brings me to my last questions: What do you think, is alliteration going to keep being important in Icelandic music and lyrics and poetry?*
- I think it's slowly going away. Maybe not so slowly anymore... But we will always have it. It is very well documented. We know the rules, we can always go back there and start over, if we want. But you would always have to weigh the interest in it in schools etc. Because it always starts with the children and what you hear around you, do you find it natural to do it or is it just something old and strange for your ears? I think it has to survive all those tests; I am not so sure that will happen. If I'm right, with this old way just of memorizing texts, it was always better to use alliteration, because you couldn't write it down, so you would remember it better with this tool. And we have phones now and you don't have to use this as a memory tactic. Maybe when all the electricity goes away, we will use it again. At least have the know-how for it.
- *How do you think young Icelandic artists' attitudes to alliteration are nowadays?*
- I don't remember many of the young musicians using it, unless they're singing for an older audience. I don't think they have the need or interest in doing it, I haven't felt it at least. As I said, many lyrics now, they float very natural, they just say what comes to mind, and it's basically another style, that might feel like that alliteration and rhyme is too constraining... There are not a lot of new lyrics in this style anymore, I have to say. I haven't thought so much about this. ... It always comes in styles and fashions.
It is still relevant. You can do a pop song with this and it wouldn't sound strange or old if it's done properly. So this is an art that is living, still, it is not really relevant or big, but it is still there.
I think it will survive, like most old things will survive, because we know everything about it, we have documented it. But maybe it will be locked in a box somewhere... It still has some kick left in it, I think.

Interview with Gerður Kristný – 22nd of March 2021

- *How did you start your relationship with Icelandic poetry?*
- In school, we had to learn poems by heart, and they were all old-fashioned, *vísur* and *kvæði*, with alliterations and end rhyme. And I felt, as a child, that it was very interesting to learn poetry. I liked learning them by heart, and we got to write them down in our notebooks, and then we were supposed to draw pictures of what was happening in the poetry. And that really helped out. And sometimes when I don't know what's supposed to happen next in my poems, I get out my pencils and I draw pictures and doodle around them. I am not an artist, this is nothing fancy, but it helps, it's just to get more ideas and have more fun while you're writing. So, I'm still a 10-year-old, admiring good poetry. And this is how I felt poetry should be. I remember when I was a teenager and the teacher

showed us some modern poems, I did not like them. Anyone could write these sorts of poems, without any rules. I was obviously a very old-fashioned and very strict child. But I soon changed my opinion when I started reading more of the modern poetry.

- *How did you view the alliterative tradition, what do you think about its history?*
- I think it's very interesting how we have kept those alliterations, for like what, 1000 years? Since the Vikings from Norway came sailing over to Iceland and they had all memorized the eddic poetry, so that they could teach the next generation, until it was written down in Iceland on a white calf skin. I find it very interesting. Of course, it must have been used in the beginning so that people could memorize these texts. To me, it's still necessary to have alliterations in my poetry, even though it's to decorate, and to make the words sound more serious, so that people will feel the weight of them. That's how it works. Words matter.
- *That sort of answers my next question... why do you think it's still so important in modern Icelandic poetry? Is it still connected to the rhythm, or not anymore?*
- Yes, the rhythm is very important, and I use music when I write poetry. I snap my fingers, and I read my poems out loud many times before getting them right, because of the alliteration, and they have to sound good.
- *When you listen to poetry or read poetry, can you instantly tell whether it uses alliteration, and whether it uses it correctly or incorrectly?*
- It doesn't really happen anymore that you hear a poet read these old-fashioned verses, when you really have to hear if the *stuðlar* and *höfuðstafir* are used correctly, and *lágkveður* and *hákveður*... It's easy to see that, when you are reading poems on paper, but it really doesn't happen that I'm listening to a reading and somebody's reading that sort of old *kvæði*, so it doesn't really happen anymore. But yes, it's easy to hear.
- *Do you hear it in music, in lyrics?*
- Yes, I do. And I always listen to the lyrics, when I hear a new Icelandic song... And even in American rap music, they use alliterations! They use words that sound the same, even though sometimes they don't hit the right letters... Like *home* and *drone* might be a rhyme, but that is obviously not quite correct... It is funny to just listen to Eminem, and classic rap music, and they are using the same rules as in the eddic poetry! It has to sound particularly well, if they are going to learn it by heart themselves, and the audience. There was a band called 'Placebo', do you remember Placebo? "My sister had a blister where I kissed her". "A friend in need is a friend indeed, a friend with weed is better." And they have a Swedish bass player, he must have learned the eddic poetry. No, it's more often the singer who writes the lyrics, but they all come from the UK... Because I listen to a lot of music, I just like music... And this is the same as the eddic poetry are made of. "A friend in need is a friend indeed..."
- *Yes, I love that song, I think in particular because they make the words sound so good.*
- And why do I remember it? This was around the year 2000, I was a magazine editor, eating pizza and listening to Placebo, obviously. Yes, they were

- particularly good. They knew how to use this. And all sorts of rap music that I can hear on the radio, you can hear that they are choosing the words that sound good.
- *To come back to your poetry writing. Did you write any poetry as a child, and did it alliterate?*
 - Yes I did. And I always wrote it in this old style, *vísur*, with end rhyme, and four lines...
 - *And alliteration?*
 - Alliteration... I tried. That was the last I learned properly. And about *hágvæður* and *lágkvæður*... It is a real sport in high school, to be able to write *vísur*. And I remember a friend of mine had written the first two lines and he asked me to finish it, the *fyrripartur*. Have you heard about this? *Fyrripartur*, the first two lines, *seinniþartur*, the second two. *Að botna vísur*, to finish a *vísa*. So, I said, "Okay, I'll do it." It's like a crossword, actually. There are certain rules and repetitions, and you can use this sort of rhyme again and again. *Á, má, sá, fá...* It's not considered a very rich rhyme, *mig, sig, þig...* *Mín, þín...* that's not good, but you can use it, if you have to. So, I remember, that's what we did as teenagers in the mid-80s, writing verses together. I guess we were nerds.
 - *When and how did you learn to use alliteration?*
 - Just by reading. And it's on the curriculum of every school. I have a son that is 16 and another one that is 13, and the 13-year-old has just learned this in school. They just take these old poems, written mainly by poets from the 19th century, and that's the assignment, that's what they have to do on tests. To find the *stuðlar, höfuðstafur, ríma...* How is the rhyme, abab? Or aabb? You flunk if you don't know this.
 - *But you say you learned alliteration after the end rhyme?*
 - It was easier, to write verses and just think about the rhyme in the beginning. And then after that, I started thinking about alliterations, when I was a child.
 - *How is it with alliteration, do you find it easy or difficult? How are you finding it now?*
 - It comes very naturally. That's just how the lines have to be written. And when I don't get them in, that's alright too, because it's not a rap text. I'm not supposed to have the same lengths when I'm writing those lines, it can be flowing a little more freely.
 - *So, you mean, when you write your own kind of poetry, like Blóðhófnir, but what about when you write a ferskeytla, for example? Do you find it difficult to alliterate?*
 - It can be. Because then it's so dangerous that you start choosing the difficult and weird words, just to get the alliterations, instead of being able to use the right words, or the most beautiful ones. And that's what you hear also, when you have the *brageyra...* Oh, what a weird word, he needed an alliteration there. So, when this flows, when this goes brilliantly, that's it. You have to have a very good vocabulary, to be able to write *kvæði*, and *vísur*.
 - *Do you feel like it's restraining to have to use alliteration when you write that kind of poetry, or is it an aid? Is it a part of the poetic expression?*

- It's just a part of the poetic expression. And I am not writing these kinds of verses that much. It's just when somebody that I know needs some lyrics or when I write a song for the church. And I realized that other people who are writing these songs, they are not using this old technique. But I insist, when people have to sing something, that there has to be some rhyme and alliterations. And I thought, to write a modern text for the church? But yes, sometimes it is brilliantly done. So, I may be a little bit too strict.
- *How is it that you use free alliteration in Blóðhófnir? To express yourself more freely?*
- The story is very important there. It's not just to show that I can use alliterations. So, that's just modern poetry, with roots in the eddic world. There have been two composers who have composed music for *Bloodhoof*. One Icelandic and one in Sweden, and I was in Sweden last year to hear the concert and it was a great honour. It was in the Swedish Music Academy in Stockholm, and I was invited. And the next day, there was a little conference, and the composer was there, and the translator, and we were supposed to answer a few questions, and explain why we had chosen this mythology. And I was asked, "Gerður, what kind of music did you listen to while you were writing *Bloodhoof*?" And that was in 2008, 2009, when I was mainly writing it. And I knew the answer would be expected to be Arvo Pärt, or Shostakovich, but I decided to tell the truth and I decided to say, "Rihanna". And the whole audience laughed. Rihanna... I could have said Placebo, or System of a Down, or something with metal, but no... It was just what was on the radio at the time. Eddic poetry and Rihanna. We are made of all sorts of culture, we are made of so many things, and all the things we have read, I mean in magazines, and newspapers, and books... And I wrote about Baudelaire when I studied French at the University... and I know some of the eddic poetry, *Völuspá*, *Skírnismál* is a brilliant one... But then there are always just all sorts of things, what you heard from your friends, etc. It takes a village to raise a child, and I was just raised by Madonna and Courtney Love as well. Even though I can see that when I'm translated and at festivals, it's always the influences of the eddic poetry that is highlighted.
- *It's the most obvious one, but it's interesting to hear that it's not the only one. So, if you read your poetry out loud, or if someone reads it out loud, do you emphasize the alliterating syllables?*
- Yes. When I studied writing poetry, I was publishing poetry books, I was 24 years old, it was in 1994. I always pictured people just sitting with my poetry and reading them, in a book, on a page, that's how it would be done. But in 2010 I got the Icelandic Literature Prize for this one (*Bloodhoof*) and I started travelling the world. I have been to festivals, three times in India and in Indonesia and all over the world, in China and America a few times. Since then, I have had to stand on a stage and read my poems and often I read a few pages at least in Icelandic before I read the translations, or somebody that comes with me on stage, and I realized that it's a performance. And I think these travels changed my poetry. They became longer, and the alliteration became even more important. And not only that, but also the *innrím*.

- *Do you think it is important to your audience that your poetry has some alliteration, even if it is very free?*
- It is always important that poetry sounds good. That's just what they are about.
- *But you could just use the innrím, for example. But then, would people maybe say, the alliteration is more important than that?*
- No, no, they are not that strict. And in a collection like this (points to her poetry book), I always use it. It's like a tick, I can't get away from it. That's the conclusion. I have an alliteration sickness.
- *You and most of Icelandic poets, I think.*
- Apart from the younger ones, maybe.
- *That is the question. What do you think is the modern approach to alliteration? Will it continue to be a big part of Icelandic poetry, or do you see it fading?*
- No. It's still important, when people are singing, and these poems here (in *Skólaljóð*) are still important to us. Like Jónas Hallgrímsson... So it's not fading or anything. We are still using them.
- *But could it be restricted to a small circle of people in the future, perhaps?*
- My 13-year-old has just learned it, and if it's in school, you can't get away from it. We learn it. It would be interesting to talk about Placebo and those rappers, why are they using it? I am always afraid that Snorri Sturluson will be after me if I make mistakes. That's what I fear the most, that's how it is being an Icelandic poet.
- *What about modern music?*
- But why do we memorize these texts? Because it is well written, because of these alliterations.
- *Yes, exactly. Maybe it will get less strict? Like with your poetry, where you use very free alliteration.*
- That's what the modernists started to do. Hannes Sigfússon, Sigfús Daðason... Everything sounded very well, but they were not rhyming in this sort of way. But reciting my poetry on stage has changed the way I write. I know it's going back to that sort of way, of standing and reciting for other people who are watching you and you have to keep their attention, and there might be six poets before you, and 30 afterwards, there could be so many... So, you have to stand out, and at least don't make people fall asleep when you're reciting. And you might get two to three minutes. I flew all the way to Nicaragua, and I think I got six minutes, twice, during that festival. Six minutes, not more. And at festivals I listen to all sorts of poets. And I like languages, and listening to poems it can be so nice, and so inspirational, even though you don't understand a word. Because of the rhythm, because of the flow, in Russian and in Italian etc.
- *But you said earlier (before recording the interview) that you feel like they have no poetic rules in other languages...?*
- Yes... Sometimes, because people use poetry in different ways, it can be used in a very political way. I have been at festivals, and there was a Palestinian, and somebody from Israel, and that did not go very well.
- *So, would you say that their focus is more on the content, not so much on the style?*

- Yes, maybe it comes from the anger. Immigrants, the second generation of immigrants in Scandinavia, they have things to say. So, it's like being at a political meeting. But this (*Bloodhoof*) is political as well, it's about the trafficking of women. About this giantess who is stolen from her world and brought into the world of the gods, even though she says no all the time. And before I wrote that one, I had already written a biography of a woman that was prostituted by her dad in the 70s when she was a child, and he has been accused for it in the 70s and he was acquitted.
- *In Iceland?*
- Yes, because in Iceland in the 70s we did not believe that such things could happen, in Iceland. It's called *Myndin af pabba*, picture of dad. I was a journalist, we were brought up by all sorts of stories that we hear. So there is a straight line from that biography of Thelma Ásdísardóttir is her name, to *Bloodhoof*, so...
- *That's interesting, I didn't know about that connection, but that makes sense. With that, I believe you have answered all my questions, thank you very much!*

Interview with Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir – 25th of March 2021

- *How did you start your relationship with alliteration in Icelandic poetry?*
- We learn all the rules in school. It's a part of Icelandic classes. And once or twice I've tried something like that out. I've rarely written traditional, formal poetry. But I think alliteration is something that comes quite naturally, because it is linked to rhythm. So, I would say that I use it sometimes intentionally, but not systematically. If it so fits, you might maybe choose one word rather than the other, because it lends this sort of rhythm. And I'm pretty sure that you could find similar things even in rap texts etc. I don't know how conscious it is, but it comes quite naturally, when you think about rhythm. I'm very into the rhythmic side of it. It just sneaks in that way.
- *Are you aware of the history of alliteration?*
- I'm really not very well informed about that, the skaldic poetry, and *dróttkvæði* and so on... It's very much a part of just something that I learned in school. I'm not very interested in medieval literature. I like some of it, when I hear it, but a lot of it just doesn't really connect to me. There are a lot of historical connotations in my poetry, I am a historian as well, but of more modern history. But they rarely go beyond maybe 18th century. Gerður is using that of course, references to the sagas etc. But it's not something that I'm that interested in, and I also find it a bit tricky. Because it's very much a part of the great national image, this really washed-out image of Icelanders, the great literary tradition, very much a question of identity and problematic national images etc. It's something I don't touch a lot.
- *Would you say you have a modern approach to poetry, then?*
- Yes, as I say, there are definitely historical connotations, but usually that's more 19th, 20th century, because that's the era that I'm interested in. My most recent

book is actually written using texts from the 19th, 20th century, so both when I am using it as material it is in a more modern way, and when I've written texts for example about national identity, that's very connected to the 19th, 20th century. It's history as well, but more modern history.

- *Which texts did you use?*
- So, the whole book is written using texts from this work, *Íslenskar ljósmæður*, Icelandic midwives. They are three books with short biographies of midwives who were working in the late 19th century, early 20th century. So, it's kind of an experimental poetic work. You could call these works *æviþættir*. That's a tradition that I'm much more interested in... these *þættir*, *þjóðlegur fróðleikur*... Folk-history, I guess you could call it. But that is also more like 19th, 20th century stuff.
- *And you put it into poetic form, right? Why did you choose to do so?*
- Yes, I took the text and edited it and put it together into a new book. It's very fascinating stuff, both the actual stories of the midwives and also the romantic images of the midwives. And actually, formally and poetically as well, I really like doing this a little bit more experimental work.
- *Do you think structural alliteration is still important in modern Icelandic poetry?*
- No, definitely not. No, I mean, I don't think so. Not if we're talking about the very typical thing. Elements of it are still something that you can see in very many places today. But if we are looking at for example, Gerður Kristný... I wouldn't define her in that tradition.
- *No, not when she is writing her own poetry, like Blóðhófnir. But she says that she writes this kind of poetry when she writes music for churches, for example.*
- Okay, then that's quite a specific field. I have never written for music, but my father is a musician, he has actually written music for my poetry, which works just fine, with or without alliteration. But he is a jazz musician so it's a little bit freer in the form, probably, than the church music. Obviously, Gerður is using elements of the alliterative tradition. And I would definitely say that elements of it still run through in a lot of places, and I think that's great, and hopefully something that stays alive. But I don't think this tradition is very relevant in Icelandic poetry today. Did you actually find a lot of people who are writing like that?
- *If so, then more the older generation. I also talked to Bragi Valdimar, because I am also looking at lyrics, and music. And he still uses it, sometimes.*
- Definitely. And he is a great lyricist. But personally, I would not look at him as a part of the poetry community, for example. Because, I mean, he is doing this in a very specific field. He is a musician. I would always think of him as a musician. That's something that he is doing in that department. There are of course... Maybe I am forgetting something... Like Sölvi Björn Sigurðsson, he is a translator as well, and otherwise mostly a novelist. But he has also written poetry, and actually a great part of that is more traditional in form. He is experimenting as well with sonnets, for example... So yes, there have been a few experiments like that... But I've never felt that... I don't think I've ever

seen something and thought, that this is really something that should be picked up, and I really think that this is the future, you know? I don't think I've ever seen someone make it new. Except for Megas. I think he does. I think in his work, you have the meeting of the modern and the old, that it really becomes something new. Personally, I don't think there is anyone else... Maybe Þórarinn Eldjárn? But he's not been very active as a poet in the last few decades. And his sister, Sigrún Eldjárn, actually ... That was a field when it really worked, they made these children's books together, which were rhymed and everything, really great stuff. So, it's like these singular things that people are doing, like their children's books, Megas's songs, but on the whole I don't think this is something that will be prominent at all in the future.

- *I think that's what I'm discovering too. Because the scholarly literature that I have read so far always stresses how important alliteration still is for Icelandic poetry, even if it is now used more freely. And that it seems to have retained the symbolic function. It is like a way to say, I am writing poetry now, it is different from normal speech.*
- I don't think I agree with that. I would always look at it as just one of many devices that you can use. You're writing in Icelandic, this is a thing that you can do. It always sounds very good... I would always take care not to *ofstuðla*... You wouldn't put too many in a line, because then it goes overboard... I would always take care to scale back, unless this was the effect that I was going for... I think it's one thing that you can use. For me the most important part would be to create this rhythm, maybe... add some musicality to it, definitely. As something that puts poetry apart from daily language or something... I always go for the daily language more. I don't like texts to be too formal. I think some people definitely do that, they aim for the more formal style. Maybe this is part of it, I'm not sure.
- *I see, that could lead to some interesting conclusions, different points of view.*
- What I'm describing is also just a question of attitude towards poetry. Because there is a lot of poetry that is being put on a pedestal, you know, people always say, "No, I like literature, but I don't understand poetry." And I don't really like that, I think it should rather be taken down, rather than glorify it. But of course you have to do your best, you want to make something that's worth something, but I don't like glorifying it too much.
- *Do you feel like this attitude is the general one of the younger generation? Because you said I might find it hard to find someone who still uses this tradition...*
- Yes, maybe I am forgetting someone. When I started thinking about it, I for example remembered Sölvi Björn. And there is another guy, Kristján Þórður Hrafnsson, who writes a lot in the more formal style, but... No. I think the majority of people don't really do this anymore. If I'm thinking about the younger generation in the 20s and 30s, I don't remember anyone who uses it. Outside of music, that is.
- *You think they do use it in music?*

- I don't know... I was just thinking of Bragi Valdimar now... But not even so much in music, maybe... I haven't really thought about that... I mean, they are rhyming, probably, but I don't know so much about the alliteration and formal it is... There are some very good people who write very good lyrics, like Prins Póló, Moses Hightower... And then there is rap... But I don't remember anyone who would go all the way like Bragi Valdimar does, for example.
- *When you hear this old style poetry, can you tell if it's done correctly? Like for example with ofstuðlun?*
- I think I would always notice if there was something glaringly wrong. Like if there was something missing, because you have the two emphases and then the one... I would notice if it was very badly done. But maybe not the nuances, you know, because I am not a specialist.
- *Did you write poetry as a child already?*
- More when I was a teenager.
- *Did you use alliteration then?*
- I tried it out, I think it was just when we were studying this in school. And that was also just a question of rhyming etc. But to me, it always was more like a puzzle than a poem. It never came very naturally.
- *So about what age did you learn it in school?*
- Maybe 10, 12?
- *Did you have this book, Skólaljóð?*
- No, I did not, I am too young for that. I mean, obviously I know what it is, because people talk about it a lot. People of the generation above me and older, they reference it a lot. "Oh, it's like in *Skólaljóð*..." No, but there was a new book when I was a kid.
- *Did you have to learn anything by heart?*
- Yes, we sometimes had to... We did not have to learn *Gunnarshólmur*, for example, which is something that all older people say, "Oh, I remember when I had to learn *Gunnarshólmur*, which is extremely long... But yes, there were some poems that we had to learn by heart. And I was quite good at it, I liked it.
- *If you tried to write in this alliterative style, you said it didn't come naturally to you, does that mean you found it rather difficult or was it just unnatural?*
- I think it's a question of meeting of content and form, you know. What it often, I feel, turns out like, is pure form. Not that I dislike the form, I mean, poets like Jóhannes úr Kötlum, Steinn Steinarr, I mean, are totally amazing... And modern poets, really... But they were more closely linked to this tradition. And both of them of course also wrote in free verse, and the more traditional one. They somehow had a closer connection to that tradition. So they managed to write, like 20, mid-20th century-poetry that doesn't feel forced. But I think like in the last decade, the stuff that I've read, very often feels forced. And the emphasis becomes on the form. When I was making experiences with this as a teenager or as a kid, it was just the form, I wasn't really putting any thought of mine into it. As I say, it reminded me of doing a crossword puzzle. Because you're just trying to put the words together in the right way. But I never managed this meeting of form and content. Except for one... I wrote one *ferskeytla* when I was in

Menntaskóli, high school/college. It's a bit crude, and that's the only time I actually made something from myself with this. It's called "The 14 names of woman", and it's... *Mella, hóra, tík og tussa, tæva, kerling skersla*, (recites more) So it's basically fourteen horrible names for a woman, and it's supposed to be this feminist critical piece. And I think the reason that I felt this worked is because I am working with singular words, so I'm not putting together a sentence structure, and that's why it works for me, at least. So, this is the one I've done.

- *So would you say that alliteration is restraining when it comes to poetic expression, or is it an aid?*
- I would find it restraining. I managed to make that one poem because it was just singular words. It's the sentence structure that is really tricky. And especially when you want to emphasize non-formal language. And it's really difficult to emphasize non-formal language with that, I mean you have to be really good at it. And this is something that Megas does really well. It's also based on a really deep knowledge of the form. It was really fresh when he came out with this in the 70s. He somehow managed to put modern Reykjavík and modern Reykjavík life into that form. It would never be an aid to me, I think. I would always find it restrictive. And I don't know a lot of modern poets who I think do this in a creative way. That's also I think what I'm thinking about... It's the meeting of form and content, it's managing to make something new of it, and do it creatively. That's what I rarely see, I think.
- *Did you consciously decide to leave the free style poetry and leave alliteration out?*
- I mean, you could say that in some sense. But it's such a non-central thing in modern poetry in Iceland. You don't really have to make a decision. It just comes very naturally. It would rather be a conscious decision to use this. I think that's pretty safe to say.
- *But one can find poetry in that kind of style, no?*
- I mean, there is a community, a very lively community of *hagyrðingar*. They are people who write in the traditional style. For them, it's more a sport. And I don't know if this is done, still, but it used to be that people would send *ferskeytlur* into the newspaper, very often writing some jokes about politicians etc... They are part of another community though, and it's very divided. What I'm thinking of, the community that I belong to, are the poets that have readings... And we publish books of poetry... But there is a division there.
- *Yes, and you have different audiences as well, I would guess.*
- Yes, definitely. Yes, I know of the *hagyrðingar* community, and that's very lively, but that is something that I have no connection with.
- *So your audience does not look for the alliteration?*
- No, I mean, probably some of them read both, you know, but not that I know of.
- *So, you have answered my last questions already, whether you think that the alliterative tradition will keep on being important in Icelandic poetry. But probably, as you say, only within this very specific community?*

- Yes. And what unites the *hagyrðingar* community is the form. So, there is a lot of emphasis on that. And that will probably keep on. But I feel like it has very little connection with what I do. There are maybe always some meeting points. I think it's quite traditional to think of these as two concepts, *ljóðskáld* and *hagyrðingur*. So, the free form is reigning on one side, but on the other side there is a lot of emphasis on the traditional form.
- *Do you think now it is more possible for everyone to write poetry at this time, and get it published, and more means of distributing a larger amount of poetry, so maybe both are just co-existing because of that?*
- Maybe... And you had the *atómskáld* around the 20th century who rejected the old form. Or maybe we are just in a long period of content... I don't know. I like form! That's what I was trying out with the midwives project... It's fun to work with it. I can get why people find it fun. This Old Icelandic form is just not something that I connect to a lot. But then people have experimented with a lot of sonnets and a lot of haikus... People just use all the influences they can.
- *That's really interesting. Thank you so much!*

Interview with Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir – 26th of March 2021

- *What do you know about the history of alliteration, stuðlar and höfuðstafur, in Icelandic?*
- We learned about it in school when I was around 10. I have always had an interest in Icelandic poetry and literature, and everything in between, and of course in music, and they hold hands. I just think that Icelandic is so powerful. We can actually read the old Nordic texts. This is something that I try to keep in my music and in my lyrics when I do my music. I do look into a lot of Icelandic historical writings. For example, when I'm hitting a writer's block, I often go and read Halldór Laxness' books. It opens up so many new ideas. Icelandic is so powerful. So inspiring.
- *It has kept many of the rules of Old Icelandic poetry for so long and it has kept being so strong and people still value it so much. So, do you think this alliterative tradition is still important in Icelandic poetry?*
- Definitely. And it's a strong part of our culture. Compared to others, like the Spanish culture, for example, you know exactly that they have this colour combination, and the singing and everything, but our strongest culture element is our language, and how we use it, and how we use it in poetry, and lyrics, and everything else.
- *What do you think its function is, these very strict rules for poetry?*
- At first, you would think it would hold you back... When I started writing my own lyrics, I thought this was a bit hard, I'm not gonna lie. But at the same time, at the times we live now, we can live by the rules, but we can also bend the rules, we can go against the rules, and that opens up so many doors for you. I think that if we would not have this, and we would only have end rhyme and so

- on, we wouldn't quite get the same result... There's a beauty in this, in *stuðlar* and *höfuðstafur*.
- *I think it started out as a way of remembering poetry better, because people weren't able to write it down. But still, it kept this function in today's poetry, that it sounds so beautiful to Icelanders. So, when you listen to Icelandic poetry or lyrics that alliterate, can you feel if it's wrongly done or very well done or if there are some mistakes?*
 - Yes, definitely. And you can hear it, as soon as you have the *höfuðstafur* and *stuðlar*, and it's done right, something clicks, and you listen to it very closely. And then it really stings when it's wrongly done. But at the same time, it is a lot of fun with musicians today, and people who are writing poetry. They are doing a lot of what you would call errors or faults on purpose. You listen, because you think it's wrong, but at the same time it gets this new idea across... Oh, this is a new concept, a new idea for the Icelandic language! If you look at the lyrics of Auður, for example. He is really good with this. Making something new that you would think is wrong, you wouldn't say it this way, you wouldn't pronounce it this way, but at the same time you feel like, this is right! And it's kind of cool.
 - *So, would you say that you have acquired the brageyra?*
 - Yes and no. When you're a musician, you always have this feeling of faking it... You think, when will people realize that I don't know anything at all... You are just trying your best. But at the same time this is something that, in lyrics, flows naturally with me...
 - *Did you write poetry as a child? Or lyrics?*
 - I wrote a lot of short stories as a child. And I read a lot of books. I read and read and read... and that is something that is interesting, because I have two younger brothers, and we have six and eight years between us... And I read a lot, I read like a book a week, I was really into reading. But they weren't, and when they were younger, YouTube became a big deal, and phones became accessible. And they are really good in English, but they know nothing of the Icelandic language. I think, when you are reading, it does so much for you, and as a musician, as a poet, you have to read to have inspiration and to know where the lines are in the Icelandic language. But they don't have that, because they didn't read Icelandic. But they have really good control over English.
 - *Yes, it is an interesting development to see. Icelandic has stayed so strong and so much the same for so many years, but now... English is coming, it's taking over.*
 - It's changing very quickly.
 - *But I think Icelanders have a strong sense of keeping the traditional parts of their language alive.*
 - Yes, because we also realize that this is such a big part of our culture and our community. And being Icelandic is knowing there is such a strong bond between the language and the culture.
 - *To come back to alliteration. So, you said you had to learn about it in school when you were about 10. Did you have to write poetry in ferskeytla verse?*

- Yes, we had to do that, and it was really funny, because at first you felt like it was weird. But it is so much fun, and it's also interesting to connect it to the old traditions.
- *Did you find it difficult when you had to write poetry with alliteration?*
- At first, but then not so much. When you get used to this kind of set-up, it goes naturally.
- *I think you mentioned this a bit earlier, that you found it inspiring to use it, like it could be an aid, right? Or can it be restraining as well?*
- Yes, it can be restraining as well. When you are making something new, you have this skeleton, and you have to build on it. But sometimes you just don't want the skeleton to be there, and you try to go against it. But at the same time, it can be so helpful to have both. To use it... But maybe not fully. You can change it. When you have the *höfuðstafur* and *stuðlar*, and often you have three, that's the common way, but then you just use two. And the same ones in the next paragraph. It doesn't have to be stuck. You can use it, you can not use it, and then you can use it wrong. But at the same time, it does help you to do something that sounds beautiful and that gets this meaning behind it.
- *How would you describe your song writing process? Do you start with the form or with the content?*
- I start often with one sentence. I often get my ideas when I'm driving. Because I'm not doing anything, it's like a little bit of a break from everything, you are just driving from A to B, and then often the ideas just flow in. Also, when I'm reading something. That's the two ways that my ideas come. And then I just get one sentence, or one idea, one concept. I would describe it as a puzzle. You start it up, you build it somehow, and suddenly you have a whole concept, you have sentences, and you have these feelings that you're trying to awaken through your lyrics. And I often write my lyrics first and music afterwards. I put a lot of work in the lyrics.
- *And do you focus more on what you are writing about, the content, or do you also think about how it is going to sound like, like what sounds to use?*
- I try to do sentences that sound beautiful, but at the same time, have some message behind them. That is what I like to do the most.
- *Do you often use alliteration as one of those devices to make it sound beautiful?*
- Yes. It comes naturally as you go, to have words with the same letter in the beginning. It makes them sound more posh.
- *But you also use end rhyme a lot, right?*
- That's something that's really helpful when you're singing, and when you're doing melodies. When it rhymes, the ending, it flows more. When you don't have rhymes in the ending, it sounds different. The melody is much harder to catch when you are listening to it for the first time. It doesn't stick as well. So, you also have to look at it just as a musician. That's something that I learned... it's easy listening with end rhymes.
- *So, how do you think the alliteration is linked to the performance of the song? Do you think you emphasize the words that are alliterated when you perform them?*

- Yes, definitely. And what I try to do ... and this is not the same for everybody, but this is something that I do... When you're going on stage, and you're performing it in front of other people, you're trying to get the feeling that you have across, and words are really good with that. But also, emphasis on certain words, and certain sentences, can be really powerful in getting the message across to someone who's listening.
- *Do you think your audience can tell most of the time when there is alliteration in your lyrics?*
- I don't know. I know that I think a lot of it. But I think, you don't really realize unless you go and dig into that song, and you get the feeling like, "Oh, this is beautiful!" Then if you dig into it, you would realize that, oh yeah, it's because of the whole mix of literary styles, and sounds, and how you pronounce the words. You can often change the emphasis, for example when you have a compound word. It usually sounds one way, but if you put the emphasis on the ending rather than the first part, then it changes the whole concept of that word, and it creates a whole different meaning. Because you're emphasizing it differently.
- *Sometimes you have parts in your songs that are sung very fast, almost like rap, especially when male artists sing in your songs. Do you write these parts yourself?*
- Some parts, and some I don't. Most of the lyrics on my new album are written by me. I think the only one that I didn't write, which was with Birnir in the last song, *Áður en dagur rís...* He has one sentence in the ending, and he came up with that idea. I sat with him and I said to him, this is the kind of mood that I want, this is the story... I often try to have a story, and then to build up the lyrics on that. So, every song has a hidden story underneath, something that's happening.
- *What do you think, is alliteration going to stay as important in Icelandic poetry and/or lyrics as it used to be?*
- Maybe not as important as it used to be. Because you couldn't write anything, unless it was like this, nowadays we are looser about this. But I think it goes in a circle. You see poetry nowadays, that go something like this: "You called me. I didn't answer. Two missed calls." It's a really loose style. But I think we are on the top of the circle here and it's going to go all the way back to really strict ... And you can see it with a lot of the rappers, they use it too. At least they did, a couple of years ago. You can see it in the lyrics... And right now, they are using a lot of words that are English. I have a feeling that it will go back in style.
- *Interesting. [explains Carleton's pendulum theory] Do you think we are currently swinging towards content?*
- I think we are here (points to about three-quarters towards one side, meaning the content one). And we're going right here (to the end of the pendulum swing towards content), and then it's going to go back.
- *On our way to content. I can see that. Maybe, during the pandemic, people will feel the need to mainly express feelings and not stay so strict with form.*

- Definitely. I can hear it in most of the songs that are released right now, that are done in the first wave, or second wave, they're a lot about feelings, concept, mood, etc. Maybe when this pandemic will be done, which is hopefully soon, then we will go back to really strict lyrics and *stuðlar* and *höfuðstafir*, rhymes and everything...
- *Perhaps.*
- It wouldn't surprise me.