

“DEEP THE RAVEN WADES IN GORE:” DEATH SONGS AND THE NORSE-GOTHIC SPECTACLE

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Abstract: The Norse skaldic poem *The Death Song of Ragnar Lodbrok*, a celebration of the military exploits and death of the legendary warrior-king Ragnar Lodbrok, was a popular text for translation in the eighteenth century. In the early part of the period, the barbaric ancient North was set in opposition to the refined Classical world, but by the late eighteenth century the Nordic landscape was recast as a place of Gothic liberty, and the Norseman as a familiar Other. Translations of *The Death Song* increasingly presented Ragnar’s violent exploits and fearless death in a snake pit as a spectacle of heroism, especially when the Norse-Gothic became integrated into England’s search for an ethnic literary past to counter the rising Celticism post-Ossian. However, despite revising the Nordic martial spirit into a symbol of resistance against tyranny, English translations of Norse narratives continued to present shocking visuals for the British public, where tales of terror and extraordinary courage were packaged in gory visions of Viking warmongering. This article compares three influential translations of *The Death Song*: by Thomas Percy (1763), Hugh Downman (1781), and James Johnstone (1782). The article examines how their presentation of gory spectacle reworks Viking death-defiance into a British, specifically English, trait, thus transforming Ragnar’s exploits into a prototype of resistance and “necropower.” Death is reimagined within modes of political sovereignty via the shocking aesthetics of Norse-Gothic terror.

Keywords: Ragnar Lodbrok, Gothic, Northern antiquarianism, translation, Norse reception, Romanticism

The Norse-Gothic Mode

In eighteenth-century Britain, martyrdom, self-immolation, and taking control of one’s death were believed to be characteristic of the Norseman. This death-defiance was one of many motifs adopted by British antiquaries, scholars, artists, poets, and translators, to negotiate a historical and ethnic root for the Four

Nations. The antiquarian Thomas Percy summarizes the typical view of the ancient Norsemen as tenacious warriors whose "valour, their ferocity, their contempt of death, and passion for liberty, form the outlines of the picture we commonly draw of them."¹ Over the course of the century, this stereotype of a savage and barbaric North versus a refined Classical world shifted into that of freedom-fighting warriors battling against Roman tyranny. Yet in both characterizations, the Norsemen remained figures of terror. In various English antiquarian essays and translations on Norse subjects, a politicized version of ancient Scandinavia foregrounded certain political values such as liberty and virtuous mettle.² These were then incorporated by the British nations – specifically England – into contemporary cultural politics. The movement gained traction after the emergence of James Macpherson's popular *Ossian* poems in the 1760s, before which there persisted a confusion of ethnicities under the umbrella term of the "Gothic" or, conversely, the "Celtic."³ Post-*Ossian*, the Norsemen were viewed as the antithesis to Scottish sentimentalism and Scotland's poetic past. They were integrated by English antiquarians into Gothic visions of an Anglo-Saxon past, and within this movement *The Death Song of Ragnar Lodbrok* in particular became a prominent substitute for Anglo-Saxon traditions.⁴

Hugh Blair opens his 1763 critical dissertation on *Ossian* with a comparison between the Celtic and Gothic nations via *The Death Song*, of which he provides his own full English translation in order to calibrate a defence of *Ossian's* sentimentality. Blair acknowledges the skalds – the Norse poets – and their songs that once existed, but then remarks that "the Goths, under which name we usually comprehend all the Scandinavian tribes, were a people altogether fierce and martial, and noted, to a proverb, for their ignorance of the liberal arts."⁵ In Blair's

¹ Thomas Percy, "Preface," in *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Islandic Language* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1763), A2.

² By Scandinavia, I refer to Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland (which is not part of Scandinavia but was under Danish rule at the time).

³ For more on the definitions of "Gothic" and "Celtic" see Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse 1750-1820* (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 1998); Marilyn Butler, *Mapping Mythologies: Countercurrents in Eighteenth-Century Poetry and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Joanne Parker, "Myths of Celtic and Gothic Origin: An Introduction," in *The Harp and the Constitution: Myths of Celtic and Gothic Origin*, ed. Joanne Parker (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1-10.

⁴ Robert W. Rix, "The Afterlife of a Death Song: Reception of Ragnar Lodbrok's Poem in Britain until the End of the Eighteenth Century," *Studia Neophilologica* 81, no. 1 (2009): 53.

⁵ Hugh Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London: T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1763), 4.

eyes, there is no competition between Ossian and Ragnar, because “when we turn from the poetry of Lodbrog to that of Ossian, it is like passing from a savage desert, into a fertile and cultivated country.”⁶ He draws a line of civility through the poetry, delineating the boundary between the Celtic heritages of Scotland and Ireland, and the English-Gothic. Views such as Blair’s led English antiquarians like Percy to defend Norse culture and insist that “all of [the Scandinavians] demonstrate that poetry was once held there in the highest estimation.”⁷ In his preface to *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry, Translated from the Islandic Language* (1763) – a collection intended as an overt counter to Macpherson’s *Ossian* – Percy develops this claim, arguing that the Gothic tribes “have more of their original compositions handed down to us, than of any other of the northern nations.”⁸ As part of the collection, Percy provides one of the first English translations of *The Death Song*, under the title “The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog.” The title adjusts the concept of a death song into that of an ode, a neoclassical genre more recognisable to his eighteenth-century audience – an approach to antique literatures typical of the period (Macpherson performs a similar mediation of his Ossianic material, presenting it as fragments of “Ancient Epic”).⁹ For Percy, the Norsemen were intellectual and worthy of recognition for their poetic prowess as well as their brave exploits. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement partook of a broader cultural strategy and English nationalist agenda in which the co-opting of Norse cultural artefacts sought to strengthen English ethnic claims. *Northern Antiquities* (1770) was Percy’s seminal translation of the 1763 edition of Paul-Henri Mallet’s *Introduction à l’histoire de Dannemarc* (1755), which included *Monumens de la Mythologie et de la Poësie des Celtes* (1756), and it sought to correct Mallet’s mistake of “confounding the antiquities of the Gothic and Celtic Nations.”¹⁰ By expanding on what the Norsemen could or did represent for England, Percy integrated elements of Norse cultural identity within an English past, thus further setting up the Norse-Gothic in opposition to Macpherson’s Celtic.

Gauti Kristmannsson argues that “translation as text production was seen differently after *Ossian* appeared on the scene,” and that imitations and translations “were an attempt to incorporate ancient poetry into an English

⁶ Blair, *A Critical Dissertation*, 11.

⁷ Percy, “Preface,” A3.

⁸ Percy, “Preface,” A3.

⁹ David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123-24.

¹⁰ Thomas Percy, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Northern Antiquities*, Vol. 1 (London: T. Carnan, 1770), A3, ii.

national context: they are cultural hybrids of content on a spectrum.”¹¹ Eighteenth-century British antiquarians mainly sourced their material already in translation, either from Latin sources, from other European translations, or from Icelandic natives such as Grímur Thorkelín.¹² Nevertheless, translated visions of Norse-Gothic terrors such as warfare, gore, and death still focused on their inherent Gothic strength, integrating this within an English, Anglo-Saxon past. Scholarly discussions of the Gothic predominantly centre on the European South, while research into Gothic terror as rooted in the North is relatively scarce.¹³ However, as Robert Rix has recently argued, “just like one can identify a certain regularity in the representation of Orientalism, what became a recognisable ‘Northernism’ was the focus on dark, visceral and gory images.”¹⁴ Many of the narratives concerning Nordic death-defiance and martial spirit come from Olaus Wormius’s *Runir, seu, Danica literatura antiquissima* (1636) or Thomas Bartholin’s *Antiquitatum Danicarum de Causis contempta a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis* (1689), with the former providing an Icelandic original and the latter including a Latin translation of *The Death Song of Ragnar Lodbrok*.

The Norse monologue itself centres on a series of stanzas, also known as strophes, where Ragnar reflects on his war campaigns, adventures, and expeditions with his companions, while he himself is on the verge of death inside a pit of vipers in Northumbria. The original appears in the skaldic lay *Krákumál*, named after one of Ragnar’s wives. To explain the popularity of Ragnar, Rix points out that many eighteenth-century English translators were attracted to the introspection of Ragnar’s final moments. As a result, *The Death Song* was “brought in as an exhibit lending support to the theory of an early northern origin of the

¹¹ Gauti Kristmannsson, “Ossian and the State of Translation in the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian*, ed. Dafydd Moore (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2017), 43–44.

¹² For example: Olaus Wormius, *Runir, seu, Danica literature antiquissima* (1636); Paul-Henri Mallet, *Introduction à l’histoire de Dannemarc* (1755); the collaboration between James Johnstone and Grímur Thorkelín. For more on the latter, see: M.J. Driscoll, “The Rev. James Johnstone, Septentrionalist and Man of Mystery,” in *Scripta Minora: Selected Essays on Icelandic Manuscripts and Texts* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2024), 387–406.

¹³ Though in one of the earliest major studies of eighteenth-century translations of *The Death Song*, Paul Van Tieghem writes that “tout le poème, d’ailleurs, était bien fait pour donner des guerriers et de la poésie du Nord une impression grandiose et terrible.” Paul Van Tieghem, *Le Prérromantisme: Études d’Histoire Littéraire Européenne*, Vol. 1 (Paris: F. Rieder, 1924), 81.

¹⁴ Robert W. Rix, *Nordic Terrors: Scandinavian Superstition in British Gothic Literature* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2025), 30.

romance genre.”¹⁵ By transforming the Norsemen into models of romance and chivalry, Rix argues, British antiquarians revised them from savage barbarians into examples of a pre-existing romance tradition from the Germanic nations.¹⁶ However, the Norsemen’s appeal as objects of terror and gory spectacle continued.

Terror and Necropolitics

By the late eighteenth century, the Norsemen were reimagined as liberators, and figures like Ragnar and Odin were used to visualize resistance against corruption. In this guise, the imagery remains violent, and the deaths of these warriors become politicized moments of liberation, resistance, and failure. Like other Romantic poets curious about Norse artefacts, Robert Southey imagines Odin as a chieftain fighting against the tyranny of Rome, and his poem “The Death of Odin” (1795) opens with Odin declaring, “I rush to meet [Freya] by a self-will’d doom [...] For Odin shall avenge his ASGARD’S fall.”¹⁷ With the battle raging and defeat imminent, the narrator highlights Odin’s willing acceptance of death:

Fate-fraught falchions widely gleaming;
When MISTA marks her destin’d prey,
When dread and death deform the day;
Happy he amid the strife,
Who pours the current of his life [...]¹⁸

The rhyming couplet of “strife / life” is accentuated by the intense rapid-fire alliteration, while the word “Happy” juxtaposes the devastation described a moment earlier. Death-defiance here is not a bloodthirsty rampage but a mark of resistance against “proud Rome” which is sustained until the poem ends: “So spake the dauntless chief, and pierc’d his breast, / Then rush’d to seize the seat of endless rest.”¹⁹ The violence of “seize” coupled with the bookending of the final line with “rush’d / rest” creates a sense of urgency that transcends death. This is a warrior who remains loyal to his cause even in the face of defeat.

Southey’s rhetoric of martial fury promotes the idea of freedom, but it does not lessen the spectacle of the Norse warrior as an object of terror. The two concepts

¹⁵ Rix, “The Afterlife of a Death Song,” 58.

¹⁶ Rix, “The Afterlife of a Death Song,” 58.

¹⁷ Robert Southey, “The Death of Odin,” in *Poems: Containing The Retrospect, Odes, Elegies, Sonnets, &c. By Robert Lovell, and Robert Southey* (Bath and London: C. Dilly, 1795), 103.

¹⁸ Southey, “The Death of Odin,” 105.

¹⁹ Southey, “The Death of Odin,” 103, 109.

had become associated during the “Reign of Terror” in revolutionary France, when the word terror “changed its meaning and came to be used to describe a style of government, rather than just violence;”²⁰ virtue and terror became explicitly linked in the theory of revolutionary government. Prior to this, terror signified simply a feeling of dread or a reaction to a terrifying moment or object. This feeling, though, could also be accompanied by pleasure, a paradox central to eighteenth-century aesthetics, where it underpins both the theory of the sublime and the emergent aesthetic of the Gothic, which involved “the excitation of pleasurable feelings of fear by the depiction of violence, the supernatural, etc., as a literary genre.”²¹ John Aikin and Anna Letitia Barbauld (writing under her maiden name of Aikin) examine this terror-pleasure duality in their short tract “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror” (1773), where they hypothesize that “the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror [...] is a paradox of the heart.”²² Nathan Drake later categorizes objects of terror in *Literary Hours* (1798), distinguishing between “those which owe their origin to the agency of superhuman beings” and “those which depend upon natural causes and events for their production.”²³ Tracing the development of Nordic terror literature, Rix suggests that it is usually charged with the supernatural which “in both English translation and new composition can be understood as a result of writers seeking an alternative to the overused neoclassical conventions.”²⁴ In this way, the aesthetics of Norse terror could be used to rediscover vernacular modes of composition.²⁵

In the extended notes to his translation, *Lodbrokar-Quida, or, The Death Song of Lodbroc* (1782), James Johnstone states that “during the rude periods of society, the safety, both of nations and individuals, depends upon making themselves objects of terror.”²⁶ Within this framework, terror is not something supernatural but is a real prospect. Resistance is symbiotic with violence, where the function of terror is to survive; it is a life-or-death situation. Even though Johnstone directs readers to recall that “many of the *Scandinavian* heroes were votaries of the muse,” thus

²⁰ Hugh Gough, *The Terror of the French Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 2.

²¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “Terror (n.), sense 2.a,” March 2025, accessed 4 June 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/terror_n?tab=meaning_and_use#18690423.

²² John Aikin and Anna Letitia Aikin, “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror,” in *Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose* (London: J. Johnson, 1773), 120.

²³ Nathan Drake, “Number XV,” in *Literary Hours: Or, Sketches Critical and Narrative* (London: T. Cadell, 1798), 245.

²⁴ Rix, *Nordic Terrors*, 24.

²⁵ Rix, *Nordic Terrors*, 26.

²⁶ James Johnstone, *Lodbrokar-Quida, or, The Death Song of Lodbroc* (Copenhagen: Printed for the Author, 1782), 94.

softening Ragnar's exploits like Percy, his translation foregrounds the violent ethos of Norse literature and provides "Notes for the English reader" which further situate *The Death Song* within Icelandic history. Norse-Gothic terror in this presentation can be read as a prototype of cultural political resistance that fed into late eighteenth-century discourses of revolution and systematic change.

Modern political theories can offer new perspectives on the ambiguous position of the Norsemen as both objects of terror and liberators. Within biopolitics, terror, death, and the "gothic longevity" of the body politic – to borrow from Eugene Thacker – can be conceptualized through the idea of necropolitics, a term first coined by Achille Mbembe in 2003 which develops from the Foucauldian definition of biopower and sovereignty.²⁷ Necropolitics re-theorizes the function of sociopolitical power when determining life and death within nation states. Within the framework for normative theories of democracy, where "the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the *demos*) comprising free and equal individuals," sovereignty is the capacity to define who does matter and who does not, who is disposable and who is not.²⁸ With this in mind, "terror thus became a way of marking aberration in the body politic."²⁹ It is not only a tool of biopolitical experimentation and control, but it also carries the potential to resist such necropowers. As Mbembe postulates, acts of martyrdom, resistance to death, and self-immolation all become conduits for a new semiosis of killing, especially when the body is a uniform where it "in itself has neither power nor value. Rather its power and value result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity."³⁰ In other words, the subject overcomes their own mortality by labouring under the signs of the future, and in doing so, any spatio-temporal understanding of the future becomes subsumed into the present moment. The body then reclaims its power through death; its mortality becomes an act of transgression that breaks down state powers.

Mbembe refers to the ideology of modern terrorism here, but it is also applicable to eighteenth-century conceptions of "terror" as found in British translations of the legendary Norseman. In this context, an application of necropolitics to historical texts sheds light on the way antique societies viewed

²⁷ Eugene Thacker, "Necrologies, or, Death of the Body Politic," in *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 159; Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

²⁸ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 67, 80.

²⁹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 73.

³⁰ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 89.

death and the body as part of state governance. In a discussion of necropolitics and necropolitical violence in Ancient Greece, Alexandros Velaoras astutely observes that there is value in Mbembe’s theory as an interpretative tool when studying premodern states.³¹ For Velaoras, recognising necropolitical violence in ancient societies “invite[s] us to re-evaluate the relevance of ancient thought for our understanding of necropolitics in the 21st century.”³² When reading Norse texts in translation, the perspective of necropolitics permits a better understanding of how legendary Norsemen were perceived as both actors of violence and mediators of liberation during the eighteenth century. As a modern necropower, the body at the moment of death contributes to the blurring of lines between resistance, sacrifice, redemption, and freedom.³³ In the hands of eighteenth-century antiquarians, the violence of *The Death Song* is repackaged in such a way that Ragnar’s death and his terrorizing of communities is conditioned by his ability to address his own mortality through song, resulting in resistance and freedom being amplified through death.

Comparison of Translations of Ragnar Lodrok

In Hugh Downman’s translation, *The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrach, or Lodbrog, King of Denmark* (1781), unique translation decisions result in a version of *The Death Song* that differs from those of his contemporaries. Downman was a physician, poet, and founder of the Society of Gentlemen at Exeter, whose members included Richard Polwhele and Isaac d’Israeli.³⁴ He contributed to and assisted Polwhele with the collection *Poems, Chiefly by Gentlemen of Devonshire and Cornwall* (1792). This included reprints of antiquarian poetry by Richard Hole such as “Ode to Terror” and “The Tomb of Gunnar,” which showcased how “a warrior code from the heroes of the past could be recontextualised for an age when Britain was at war with France.”³⁵ Downman’s investment in Norse subjects is clear, especially when he leans into the Norse-Gothic spectacle of *The Death Song* by embellishing

³¹ Alexandros Velaoras, “Introduction: From Necropolitics to Ancient Necropolitics,” in *Maltreating the Living, Abusing the Dead in Greek Antiquity*, ed. Efimia D. Karakantza, Alexandros Velaoras, and Marion Meyer (Boston: Brill, 2025), 3–20.

³² Velaoras, “Introduction,” 11.

³³ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.

³⁴ Alick Cameron, “Downman, Hugh (1740–1809), physician and poet,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed 16 June 2025, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-7983>.

³⁵ Rix, *Nordic Terrors*, 20.

the gory adventures and de-centring the narrative from its historical situation and the longstanding arguments surrounding the ancient North from prior decades.

Downman uses Olaus Wormius's Latin and follows his contemporaries in interspersing the Latin between his translation, which he calls his "English Version."³⁶ This, though, is almost the full extent of the paratext provided. Instead of accoutrements of footnotes to supplement the narrative with glossaries and comments for readers, there is only a short preface titled "The Fable," and a single compressed footnote after the first strophe. He states that despite the repetitive nature of the translation revealing the Norseman's rude poetics, the poem nevertheless still "exhibits a species of savage greatness, a fierce and wild kind of sublimity, and a noble contempt of danger and death" (vi). This traditional stereotype of the Norseman is accentuated when he focuses our attention on the action by removing any expected paratext. In strophe nine, for example, the violence of the battle is compounded by the lack of notes:

Drench'd in blood our shields we rear,
The oil of blood anoints our spear.
In the Boringholmian bay
Making its quick tempestuous way,
The cloud of darts was onward borne,
Our targets were in sunder torn.
The bows their iron shower expel,
In the fierce conflict Volnir fell.
No king on earth could him exceed,
In valour and heroic deed.
Wide o'er the land the slaughter'd lay,
The howling beasts embrac'd their prey.

(16)

The repetition and alliteration of "blood / blood / Boringholmian bay / borne / bows / beasts," draws readers through the bloodbath from beginning to end. It is gory and visceral, presenting Ragnar as a relentless but efficient warrior. Although the battle takes place "In the Boringholmian bay," there is no indication as to where this is in the English or Latin, which reads "Ante Boringholmum" (16), whereas Johnstone's notes provide the Icelandic "Fyrir BORG-UNDAR-HÓLMI"

³⁶ Hugh Downman, *The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrach, or Lodbrog, King of Denmark. Translation from the Latin of Olaus Wormius* (London: Fielding and Walker, 1781), v. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

to help readers recognise that "*Borgundar-holm*, now *Bornholm*, [is] an island in the *Baltic*."³⁷ Downman's description pulls us through the devastation to where "the slaughter'd lay," and the lack of geographical anchoring, combined with the defeat of Volnir whom "no king on earth could [...] exceed" (16), elevates the otherworldliness of Ragnar's battle prowess.

Downman also removes and relegates the chorus to the brief initial note where he acknowledges that "According to Olaus Wormius, every stanza began with the words[,] *Pugnavimus ensibus*[,] We have fought with swords." (9) He offers no explanation as to why he does not include either the English or the Latin in the body of the poem. In the Johnstone version, the refrain "*We hew'd with our Swords!*" is set above each strophe on a distinct independent line, while in Percy's "*The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog*," the chorus "we fought with swords" is integrated into the strophes themselves.³⁸ This line is sung by Ragnar's companions, thus underlining the camaraderie and companionship between Ragnar and his men at this moment of death. It contributes to that introspection that made *The Death Song* appealing to many English antiquarians, and yet it is conspicuously missing here. Any sentimentality provided by the chorus is removed entirely, and instead of a song that showcases a man recounting his life lived with his companions, Downman spotlights the bloody exploits of a single great warrior, and the strength with which Ragnar encountered enemies and faced death.

In the second strophe of *The Death Song*, Downman's continued investment in amplifying the violence becomes clearer. There is a battle in the Straits of Eyra – the Øresund – or as Johnstone identifies it, "*the Sound, near Elsinore*."³⁹

Still a youth, we steer our course,
T'ward the morning's distant source;
Through the vast Oreonic flood
Torrents run of crimson blood.
The yellow-footed bird we feast,
Plenty fills the ravenous beast.
Our steel-struck helms sublime resound,
The sea is all one bleeding wound.
Our foes lie weltering on the shore,
Deep the raven wades in gore.

(9)

³⁷ Johnstone, *Lodbrokar-Quida*, 12, 98.

³⁸ Johnstone, *Lodbrokar-Quida*, 4-33; Percy, "The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog," in *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, 22-42.

³⁹ Johnstone, *Lodbrokar-Quida*, 96.

When compared to Percy and Johnstone, Downman's alternative translation choices are subtle but nevertheless important in how they elevate Ragnar's death defiance and warlike ethos. What Percy translates as "in the straights of Eirar, we gained rivers of blood for the ravenous wolf," Downman translates as "Through the vast Oreonic flood / Torrents run of crimson blood."⁴⁰ Downman's version is more jarring since he accents the imagery with a euphonic flow that follows a loose consonance, "Through / Oreonic / Torrents / run / crimson," which eventually elides into "ravenous / resound / shore / gore." The resonance of the strong R stresses the brutality of this bloody scene, but it is the relentless end-stops that heighten the dissonance. Each line is a separate action and introduces different motifs that seem initially disconnected; but the end-stops, rather than structurally decelerating the movement, accelerate through the drama. They enact the chaotic speed and nature of battle, and readers are propelled through the euphonic flow towards the final image: "Deep the raven wades in gore."

Another difference is the presentation of the animals. Percy translates "we gained rivers of blood for the ravenous wolf: ample for the yellow-footed fowl," whereas Downman translates "ample" as "plenty" and uses it to exaggerate the fatality caused when "Plenty fills the ravenous beast."⁴¹ By shifting the adjective into a pronoun and attaching it to the wolf, or beast, he increases the sublime terror of this scene. The wolf becomes unrecognisable, and so to imagine it eating its fill in the aftermath – feasting on human flesh – is now unquantifiable. Johnstone translates this section as "at EYRA's straits opposing bands we gash'd for the insulting wolves, and golden-footed king of birds," which feels more sedate since he does not lean into the shock of the sublime. Johnstone, though, does not entirely sanitize the scene either. Unlike Percy, who ends the strophe with "The whole ocean was one wound. The raven waded in the blood of the slain," Johnstone translates this as, "Gore distain'd the deep. The raven waded through the blood of the slain," from Thorkelín's Latin, "Totum mare sanie livescebat. Corvus per emortuorum sanguinem vadavit," where "sanie" (bloody matter, gore) in the ablative case conveys movement within "mare [...] livescebat" (the sea [...] was alive).⁴² Downman translates Olaus Wormius in a similar fashion, "Deep the raven wades in gore," but he takes poetic licence in translating "in sanguine cæsurum" (in the blood of the slaughter) to "in gore." Downman would not have known Thorkelín's Latin, and so this explicit reference to gore cannot be ascribed to a desire for accuracy like Johnstone's. Instead, it once more highlights the aggression of *The Death Song*.

⁴⁰ Percy, "The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog," 27-28.

⁴¹ Percy, "The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog," 27-28.

⁴² Percy, "The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog," 28; Johnstone, *Lodbrokar-Quida*, 7, 36; Latin translation my own.

Not only this, but Downman inserts an extra line, "Our foes lie weltering on the shore," seemingly for the sake of the rhyme of "shore / gore." With this slight change, he expands the grandeur of battle. "Weltering" suggests action, but the foes lie down in a graphic description of death. The juxtaposition between animation and static bodies – perhaps the foes writhe before or as they die – foreshadows Ragnar's own demise in the pit of vipers. It is a complex image that both demonstrates Ragnar's prowess and resistance to death on the battlefield, and his lack of fear in his present condition. The line is demonstrative of necropower and the strophe is terror in action, where Ragnar's past death defiance in battle – but simultaneous acceptance of death in the present moment – contributes to a future immortality in Valhalla. Ragnar has overpowered his foes, but this violence is superimposed onto the present reality: his imminent death. It transforms him into a model of Gothic courage that more firmly embeds him within an English model of resistance, with a kind of fearlessness similar to what we later find in Southey's Odin, who rushes towards "a self-will'd doom."⁴³ Although Ragnar does not die from self-inflicted wounds, when he famously dies laughing, or as Downman translates it, "With joy I yield my vital breath, / And laugh in the last pangs of death," there is an element of Mbembe's idea that power in death comes from the process of abstraction where eternity transmutes the spatio-temporality of present and future.⁴⁴ Ragnar's power is in this liminal threshold between life and death; past, present, and future.

The gore and terror imagery in translations of *The Death Song of Ragnar Lodbrok* reflects the broader conversation about the ethnic, linguistic, and literary boundaries between the Gothic and Celtic heritages across Britain. Despite his violence, Ragnar consolidates the late eighteenth-century ideas of the Norsemen as pioneers of resistance and resilience. For Percy, he provides the perfect counter to Macpherson's Scottish *Ossian* and Blair's adamant declaration of Celtic superiority; for Johnstone, Ragnar is a conduit to showcase Icelandic history and translation. For Downman, the spectacle of this adventure further probes into the effects of a terror centred around a Norse-Gothic sublime. His version of *The Death Song* does not deny the Norsemen's previous status as warmongering barbarians. Instead, terror is preservation. Resistance and survival become intertwined, and when one nation state breaks down, another persists. In this way, the necropower presented here showcases how the appropriated, mediated, and supposedly inherited Northern past is transformed into a source of political strength for England. And with his final breath, Ragnar's death is the ultimate act of resistance.

⁴³ Southey, "The Death of Odin," 103.

⁴⁴ Downman, *The Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrach*, 36; Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 89.

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