



Black Feathers and Poison Wine Decadent Aesthetics in Davíð Stefánsson's Poetry*

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Abstract

Davíð Stefánsson (1895-1964) is a poet whose work marks a turning point in early twentieth-century Icelandic literature. This essay offers five new English translations from his first collection *Black Feathers* (*Svartar Fjadrir*, 1919) and introduces a new decadent perspective. Decadence is widely regarded as flourishing in emergent modern societies, but, as this essay shows, its influence extended beyond western Europe. Written in a remote place, Stefánsson's decadence speaks to an aesthetic of emptiness and atemporality. These poems broaden our conception of decadence and evidence a rich cultural hybridity, showing the influence of various traditions including symbolism, the Gothic, folk-songs, and decadence.

Keywords: Davíð Stefánsson, Icelandic Literature, Nordic Decadence, Poetry, Translation

A remote island in the North Atlantic Ocean, with more sheep than people, is not an obvious place to find decadence. The influence of European literature found its way up north, and even though there was a "strong urge to participate in European trends" in Scandinavia as Pirjo Lyytikäinen notes, "decadence was problematic because Nordic countries, with few metropolitan cities and [a] mostly rural population, did not provide a suitable milieu for decadent culture" (2021, 209). These "younger" nations were not comparable with the declining "older" nations of western Europe with their corrupted metropolises and cultural degeneration. This is the view put forward by Jón Thoroddsen in the first full-length novel to be published in Iceland, *Boy and a Girl* (*Piltur og Stúlka*), a story about the tension between ur-

* All the quotations from Baudelaire and Nietzsche are from English translations.

ban and rural communities, that presents nature and the countryside with its pure and simple values as essentially Icelandic and the city as a place of transformation and change, corrupted by Danish influence (Rögnvaldsdóttir 2008, 5-6). Thoroddsen's "city" was not a city by European standards; it was nothing like Charles Baudelaire's Paris or Oscar Wilde's London with their gaslit streets and bustling crowds. In 1850, Iceland had a population of 59,580 people, scattered around the coastline, fighting short days and hunger in the winter, and living in a feudal system under Danish rule. Iceland was a Danish colony until 1918, and monopoly, remoteness, and hard living conditions rendered the population small as well as inaccessible to foreign influence and development for a long time. In an article about Reykjavík in the early 19th century, Agnes Siggerður Arnórsdóttir sums this up: "For ten centuries there were no villages or towns in Iceland – then the nineteenth century arrived. The inhabited areas started to change though extremely slowly".¹

By 1850, the same year *Boy and a Girl* was published, Reykjavík's population was 1,149 and about half were working class (Gunnarsdóttir 2018, 10). Around this time a middle class was forming, but as with other developments it was happening very slowly. Iceland was not expanding in the same way as other Nordic countries; there were "forty fully educated craftsmen" living in the city in 1850, and few of each profession (Ragnarsdóttir 2015, 6). By 1901, the population of Iceland was 78,000, of which 6,600 lived in Reykjavík. By contrast, the population of Denmark was 2,450,000, and in Copenhagen the population was more than 450,000 (Schrivver 2020).

This delay in development in comparison with other European countries had an impact on the emergence of literary movements in Iceland. Romanticism did not emerge in Iceland until about the 1830s and even then "some critics have even claimed that Icelandic romanticism barely deserve[d] its name" (Óskarsson 2006, 252). Critics have found it difficult to connect Icelandic authors writing between 1830-82 to European Romanticism and Icelandic poets did not apply the term to their own writing. The term "romanticism" first appeared in the context of literary history and was not usually applied to Icelandic literature (*ibidem*). Þórir Óskarsson explains that Icelandic culture was "ill-prepared" for changes and offers the example: "There was no literary infrastructure to speak of" in the early 19th century and practising writers did not have writing as their primary profession; they earned their living in other ways. There were few opportunities and "hardly any public forum for literary discussion, given the lack of media and educational institutions, not to mention the critics and teachers capable of generating debate" (254-255).

It was not until after the turn of the century, therefore, that the influence of decadent writers began to be felt in Iceland. Guðni Elísson locates decadence in Iceland in the 1910s, in "the final phase of Icelandic neoromanticism" with the emergence of the figure of the anti-hero, "Dionysian longings", "love of pain", and "fallen women" (2006, 351-52). These themes were uncommon or at least new to Icelandic poetry and where they met with traditional folklore and poetics, such as ghost stories and fairy-tales, they created a new realm of freedom for writers. "Nordic authors experimented with decadence and developed new varieties of it", Lyytikäinen argues, where they "investigated mythic and historical allegories of decay; and explored the connections between primitivism and decadence" (Lyytikäinen 2021, 209). Similarly in Iceland, the geographical and cultural contexts demanded that writers found decadent themes in wildness, nature, and rural life.

¹ Orig. Arnórsdóttir 1984, 7: "Í tíu aldir voru engin þorp og bæir á Íslandi – svo kom níttjándi öldin. Byggðin fór að breytast en ofur hægt". Unless otherwise stated all translations are mine.

1. Black Feathers

Davíð Stefánsson was an Icelandic poet and writer, born in Fagriskógur, a farm in North Iceland in 1895.² He was a poet who borrowed from the traditions of folklore, Romanticism, symbolism, the Gothic, and decadence and his work is canonical in Icelandic literary history. At the beginning of his career, Davíð is a Neo-romantic poet, but later on he writes in a more social-realist vein, though he never completely abandons his connections to folklore, folk-songs, and fairy tales with their darker themes of death and physical love/lust. He makes his début with the collection *Black Feathers* (*Svartar Fjaðrir*, 1919) which although written in a traditional lyrical style, using rhyme and alliteration, brought many new perspectives to the general Icelandic reader.

The five poems translated into English for the first time here are from *Black Feathers* which was praised for its exciting and original style. It is a substantial volume of poetry, one hundred and fifty-eight pages long, and includes both very short poems of only a few lines and poems of up to six pages. The poems selected for this article are chosen specifically for their style and subject matter. They demonstrate tendencies we find in decadent poetry and are notably different from other poems in the collection. They are clustered together in the latter half of the collection, beginning with the poem "Portrait of a Woman" ("Kvenlýsing") which is facing a poem (not included here) called "Að skýjabaki" (Behind Clouds), which is short and statement-like, explaining that the sun is behind clouds only to mourn how darkness is loved amongst humans. This poem is followed by "Cut Wings" ("Klipptir vængir"), "Abba-labba-lá", and "Delirium" ("Óráð"). "Proud are the Maidens" ("Stoltar eru meyjarnar") concludes the collection.

The poems between "Delirium" and "Proud are the Maidens" deal with unobtainable desires and loss of innocence and childhood; they explore the temptation of physical desires and vanity and deploy various Christian motifs. "Bathsheba" ("Batseba"), for example, is about the biblical character of the same name, and the longer, denser poem called "Bartholomew's Night" ("Barthólómeusar nóttin") is about the troubles of the Huguenots in Paris, where love for the good and pure is lost to conflict and violence, ending with the image of the river Seine running red with blood. Though desire is a preoccupation throughout the collection, the cluster of poems in the latter half strikes a different tone. The first half of the collection opens hopefully with the figure of the mother, and poems are about the excitement for love as well as a belief in beauty and nature.³ This article focuses on selected poems in the latter half. Davíð's treatment of the themes of masochistic sexual fantasy, dark beauty, and death, mixed with religion and powerful descriptions of women that resemble the decadent femme fatale, constitute, as I aim to show, a new feature of Icelandic lyric poetry at the time.

The five poems under discussion here pose certain challenges in translation.⁴ Davíð played with sound very consciously, creating echoes with half-rhymes and repetitions, careful alliteration, and line breaks. In the translations presented here, the aim has been to retain repetitions, rhythm, and sound over the structure of the traditional end-rhymes. This focus emphasises the imagery of the poems and the way in which Davíð's vivid imagination is conveyed, and the tensions and energy that rise to a climax. In the translations there are, however, still half- and

² I have chosen to follow Icelandic convention in referring to the author by his first name, Davíð, in the text.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Icelandic sources and of Davíð's poetry are my own.

⁴ I would like to thank Maura Dooley and Richard Scott for all their advice, time, and generous support on the translations of these poems.

in-rhymes as well as line-breaks, which are retained as far as the syntax allows, with the exception of the poem “Portrait of a Woman” where “barren” is placed in the last line alongside “husk”. These translations aim to give insight into Davíð’s lyrical and imaginative talent and open a dialogue around his treatment of decadent themes and images.

There were controversies about certain poems in the collection dealing with the themes of betrayal, vanity and lust, such as “Proud are the Maidens”, “The Nun” (“Nunnan”), and “Delirium”, the latter which was the most criticised of them.⁵ Even so, the collection as a whole received great praise and one review which appeared in *Morgunblaðið* in December 1919 even described Davíð as “one of the few, that is born a poet”.⁶ The book quickly sold out and within a few weeks the poet became nationally renowned. Although Davíð had published some poems in magazines prior to this publication, he now reached a wider audience than his contemporaries, and he reached them in new ways.⁷ His readers were able to explore new areas, some of them which were considered too private or a taboo, including sexual fantasies, exciting dreamscapes, and melancholy, alongside lust, and female fury as well as female passion. Literary scholars have noted especially that the principal innovation of Davíð’s collection is “the treatment of the erotic”.⁸ Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson emphasises that “sensuality, delight and lust of physical, temporal love had never been glorified in a similar way”.⁹

Although it was later praised, the eroticism of Davíð’s verse appalled many readers when the collection was first published. On the poet’s sixtieth birthday, Jóhannes Jónasson úr Köt-lum, an acclaimed writer and parliamentary member, described how Davíð’s “flight on ‘black feathers’ ” and the flame that Davíð brought to Icelandic poetry was “exactly the tone that our life-thirsty young Iceland needed”.¹⁰ Jóhannes’ comment had political resonance. A year before the publication of *Black Feathers*, in 1918, Iceland had gained sovereignty from Denmark, marking an end to its period of being a colony, province, and dependent country since the 14th century (Hálfdanarson 2015). This was a milestone for the island which would only see complete independence in 1944. The fight for independence and change was a prominent

⁵ “The Nun” is another interesting poem for this context, in which a nun, described as small, beautiful and stupid, is tempted by the life outside the convent and tries to climb out when the abbess is sleeping. The poem begins and ends with the statement “Meyjum aðeins mátt þú unna, / menn átt þú að hata. / Boðorðin átt þú öll að kunna / en eðli þínu glata. / – Veslings nunna” which translated without the rhyme reads: “Maidens you are only allowed to care for / men you should hate. / The commandments you shall know by heart / but lose your nature. / – Poor nun”.

⁶ Orig. *Morgunblaðið* 1919, 3: “einn af þeim fáu, sem er fæddur skáld”.

⁷ Davíð’s first attempt to get poems published was met with some reluctance. In the beginning of the year 1916 Davíð’s friend Sigurður Nordal reached out to the magazines *Eimreiðin* and *Iðunn*, which he had published in before, in order to get Davíð’s poetry in print but was met with the response that it was “hardly poetry” and could be “composed better” (Olgeirsson 2007, 68-91). In September 1916 someone did however change their mind and Davíð published five poems in the magazine *Eimreiðin*, then as an unknown author. They were grouped together over three pages of the issue with the header, “A Few Poems” (*Nokkur kvæði*) which would all later be included in *Black Feathers* in a slightly changed form. In October the same year he published two more poems in the magazine *Iðunn*, which were also republished in the collection, one of which is *Mamma etlar að sofna*, the first poem in the book. In 1917 his poems were included in both the January and the April issue of *Iðunn* which would also be included in his first collection. Three more poems from the collection were published in the 1919 January issue of *Iðun*, including also the poem “Abba-labba-lá”. After this steady exposure there was quite some anticipation in the literary scene to see what he would do next (Olgeirsson 2007, 68-91).

⁸ Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 112: “meðferð hins erótíska”.

⁹ Orig. Höskuldsson 1995, 39: “munúð, unaður og losti líkamlegra, stundlegra ásta höfðu aldrei verið lofsunging með áþekkkum hætti”.

¹⁰ Orig. Jónasson 1955, 6: “flugíð á sínum ‘svörtu fjöðrum’”. The word used for “flame” in the original is “eldtungu” meaning both flame and “fire-tongue”; Orig. *ibidem*: “einmitt tónninn sem okkar lífsþyrsta Ísland vantaði”.

theme in Icelandic Romanticism, where nationalism and idealism met in a new hope for a better way of living. The “life-thirst” to which Jóhannes refers was not only political. It signalled a welcome new energy and a shift away from the pessimism of “the generation of Icelanders growing up during the latter half of the nineteenth century” that felt or believed that “Iceland was a doomed country – doomed to huddle outside European culture” (Elísson 2006, 309). Davíð’s intensity and strong voice were undoubtedly a reaction to the zeitgeist but the “life-thirst” of youth and his decadent aesthetics were also the result of his personal situation, that is experiencing often extreme conditions while serving his great passion for poetry and art such as dealing with illness which resulted in a delirium and a near-death experience at a young age, moving between different environments, the farm in the north, the capitol Reykjavík in the south, and city life in Copenhagen.

2. Reading and Translating Davíð: Themes and Context

Though Davíð’s decadent tendencies and aesthetics were noticed at the time, readers had no language to describe them or examples to draw on for comparison. Older generations of writers and readers criticised his poems as “ugly and dark”.¹¹ The poet Herdís Andrésdóttir (1858-1939) was one of the people who spoke against Davíð in verse. In a long poem that she wrote on “new poetry and verse”, she claimed that in Davíð’s poems there was “just betrayal and swindle”, “a pitch-black winter night”, “women on vice-roads”, and “Satan doing soul hunting”.¹² Herdís ended her poem-critique with three dramatic lines as advice to the young poet. Translated (without rhyme), her lines read: “If you desire to have a warm place in our hearts / throw off you the feathers black, / fly on swan wings bright”.¹³ Since the collection was popular among readers on the whole, most of them did not pay much attention to the “darker” poems and simply read on. Höskuldsson claims the reason for Davíð’s popularity was the fact that even the lascivious and pessimistic tendencies were written “in simple and easily understood language using the tone from folk songs and dance music”.¹⁴ He further adds that these subjects must have been refreshing for a generation that had been in “intellectual shackles and moral chastity belts” (Höskuldsson 1995, 39-40) of the more traditional and heavily pastoral romantic poetry of the early 1800s in Iceland.¹⁵

Davíð’s passion for life and fascination with dreams and lust derived from personal experience. He entered into a delirium through a near-death experience as a young teenager. At the end of 1911, when only sixteen years old, Davíð developed and suffered from pleuritis, became weak and was intermittently bed-bound for two years. In Friðrik G. Olgeirsson’s biography, Davíð’s condition is described as being so severe in the early months of 1913 that he would not have been able to survive had it not been for the love and attention of his family who carried him outside in good weather so he could breathe in “the clean and pure air of Eyjafjord which he holds in higher esteem than other air”.¹⁶ As Davíð could neither attend school nor meet his

¹¹ Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 112: “ljót og myrk”.

¹² Orig. Birgisdóttir 2017, n.p.: “Hjer sjerðu svik og pretti”, “kolsvarta vetrarnótt”, “konur á lastaleiðum”, “satan á sálnaveiðum”.

¹³ Orig. Birgisdóttir 2017, n.p.: “Viljirðu eiga ítök hlý í okkar hjörtum, / fleygðu af þjer fjöðrum svörtum / fljúgðu á svanavængjum björtum.”

¹⁴ Orig. Höskuldsson 1995, 39: “á einföldu og auðskiljanlegu máli með tón frá þjóðvísu og danslagi”.

¹⁵ Orig. Höskuldsson 1995, 40: “vitsmunalegum herfjötrum og siðferilegri skírlífsbrynju”.

¹⁶ Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 55: “hreina og tæra lofti Eyjafjarðar sem honum þykir taka öðru lofti fram”.

peers, he did little else than read, mostly poetry, and dream of a future and freedom. He did not think he would survive his illness, and because of this he turned to writing, though his poems were not published until later. Olgeirsson comments that Davíð's illness shaped his poetics greatly and refers to a speech that Þórarinn Björnsson, a headmaster and educator, delivered in 1955, in which he describes Davíð's entrance into the world of poetry through sickness: "A teen so intelligent and sensitive can find it a fruitful occurrence, when the spitfire of youth and the cold breeze of death collide" ¹⁷.

Death, beauty, and desire are frequently juxtaposed in Davíð's work, together with illness, both physical and mental. "The force of desire is always seen as an accomplice of death and suffering", Lyytikäinen notes, because there is always the desire to do the impossible and escape "the lethal entanglement" of illness and death (2014, 94). In Davíð's poems, beauty plays a part in this process, and is frequently described as the victim of disorder or disease. "[B]eauty does not provide freedom from suffering", Lyytikäinen maintains; beauty both suffers at the hands of mundane reality and is the cause of suffering (91). In his poem "Cut Wings", the suffering of natural beauty is due to human material desire, while in "Proud are the Maidens" man suffers from woman's desire for artificial beauty. Lyytikäinen describes "nature contaminated by decadent forces" as an idea found in decadent literature of other Nordic countries (92). This is particularly fitting in relation to Icelandic literature, as Iceland is a place shaped by, and constantly interacting with, monumental natural forces.

After recovering from his illness in the autumn of 1915 Davíð left for Copenhagen. There, his dreams and desires for life began to materialise. He drank wine and spirits, learned Latin, saw *Hamlet* in the Royal Theatre, and joined an exclusive Icelandic poetry collective named *Boðn*, through which he quickly began gaining confidence in his writing (Guðmundsson 1965).¹⁸ During a year spent in Denmark, Davíð developed a new lifestyle and seems to have written a great deal as he shared work regularly with the members of *Boðn*. They had meetings where, as one of its members attests, through "over drinking [they] performed a great swarm of poems".¹⁹ At one meeting, Davíð provided most of the poems which were "mostly poems about love [...] so hot everything seemed to be about to burn" (*ibidem*).²⁰

When Davíð returned to Iceland in the spring of 1916, he was a changed man, in poetic style as well as manners and appearance. He purchased "goldbrace glasses, snuff boxes made of walrus-tusk and all of Gustaf Fröding's poetry books" before returning home to the rural north.²¹ Upon his arrival, the news of his new look and demeanour spread through the fjord quickly. This shift from the exciting and vibrant world of Copenhagen to the quiet countryside was not easy for the poet. While living at his parents' farm that summer, he wrote to his friend Björn "to have no company with amusing girls for a whole summer... that is killing for both poets and versifiers".²² Other letters demonstrate further frustration with his surroundings in Iceland. Three hours of sunlight in the high winter resulted in quiet indoor

¹⁷ Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 59: "Gáfuðum unglíngi og næmgeðja getur reynst það frjótt, er saman lýstur funa æskunnar og kuldagusti dauðans".

¹⁸ *Boðn* is a vessel. It is the name of the pot that carries the poetic-mead, the well of inspiration, in Norse mythology.

¹⁹ Orig. Björnsson 1965, 23: "yfir drykkju var fluttur hinn mesti sægur af kvæðum".

²⁰ Orig. *ibidem*: "flest kvæðin um ástir og svo heit, að allt ætlaði að brenna".

²¹ Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 77: "gullspangargleraugu, neftóbaksdósir úr rostungstönn og allar ljóðabækur Gustafs Frödings".

²² Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 73: "að hafa ekkert samneyti við skemmtilegar stúlkur í heilt sumar...það er drepanði bæði fyrir skáld og hagröðinga".

days “where some think of money, some about something else – but some think nothing at all”, Davíð complained in a letter to a friend in 1917.²³

Having experienced the exciting life of Copenhagen and then Reykjavík in 1916, Davíð found his rural return difficult. There is no doubt that this experience created the great contrasts in his work and person. He became known for his contradictory behaviour, passionate or dramatic at one moment and then completely serene or reasonable the next. He began to focus on the theme of restricted freedom. His poem “Cut Wings” illustrates the feeling of being robbed of flight:

“Cut Wings”

I flew towards sun and summer.
I sang for the cygnets and foals.
My song echoed off the cliffs.
The lake and the reeds smiled back.
– My wings were white.

I hovered out to the deep ocean,
sang a poem no one understood.
The cliffs stood silent and shrouded.
Nobody wanted to listen to me
but I heard them cry out:
White wings!
White wings!
The hut floor needs sweeping. –

One spring night a hunter
caught me in his trap,
kissed me on my white breast,
sliced my wings off.

When he got home that night
he gave his wife the wings;
with swan blood still on his hands
he slept fitfully on her breast.
– My wings were cut.

Down by the water no one listens
to the bloodied swan crying out,
and a woman alone with white wings
is still, and always, sweeping.

“Klipptir vængir”

Flaug ég móti sól og sumri.
Söng ég fyrir dalabörnin,
Söng minn björgin bergmáluðu.
Brosti við mér sefið, tjörninn.
– Vængir mínir voru hvítir.

Sveif ég út að sænum djúpa,
söng þar ljóð, sem enginn skildi.
Björgin voru hljóð og horfin.
Hlusta á mig enginn vildi.
En ég heyrðu ýmsa hrópa:
Hvítir vængir!
Hvítir vængir!
Kofagólfíð þarf að sópa. –

Vorkvöld nokkurt veiðimaður
veiddi mig í snöru sína,
kyssti mig á hvíta brjóstið,
klippti af mér vængi mína.

Þegar heim hann kom að kvöldi
konu sinni vængi gaf hann;
með svanablóð á bringu og höndum
á brjóstum hennar illa svaf hann.
– Vængir mínir voru klipptir.

Enginn út við sæ því sinnir,
þó svanur blóði drifinn hrópi,
og kona ein með hvítum vængjum
kofagólfíð alltaf sópi.

“Cut Wings” is written from the perspective of a swan and portrays great beauty being met with great violence. This is the only poem in Davíð's collection written from the perspective of an animal. He wrote about animals and mythical creatures and from the perspective of

²³ Orig. Olgeirsson 2007, 82: “sumir hugsa um peninga, sumir um eitthvað annað – ensumir ekki neitt”.

historical figures, women and children mainly, but here the speaker is in the first person as the swan. The swan is in the sky to begin with, enjoying its pure and serene natural surroundings. While nature reacts to the swan in actively positive ways, down on earth the white wings are regarded differently. The swan is caught by a hunter, who cuts off its wings. The intimacy of the hunter kissing the swan on the breast and then sleeping on his wife's chest with his bloody hands, creates tension by combining the intimate physical space of the couple with the physical act of mutilation. This contrast becomes grotesque and by the end of the poem the swan is left in a liminal space on the shore, wingless and suffering but not dead. It is stuck and cannot fly away. Meanwhile, the wife is portrayed sweeping the floor continuously with the wings. Instead of gliding through the air, the wings are now destined to slowly deteriorate so that the woman can keep her house tidy. The swan becomes a "tragic victim of primitive stupidity" to use a phrase from Lyytikäinen's essay, and nature becomes a victim of domestic bourgeois life (2021). This poem can be read as a metaphor of the poet's life, describing the experience of fullness and flight and then the violent deprivation of freedom. The word "sweeping" at the end of the poem almost reads as the word "weeping" and during the translation process I considered having "the bloodied swan weeping" instead of "crying out" to mirror the rhyme of "hrópi" and "sópi" that occurs in the Icelandic. "Hrópa" in Icelandic does however mean to shout or call out so weeping felt too gentle in this context. The connection between the words remains in the sound of "sweeping" where the "s" at the end of "always" merges with the "s" of "sweeping" and leaves us hearing "weeping".

The treatment of the swan and feathers in this poem evokes Baudelaire's swan in his poem "Le Cygne" (1857, "The Swan"), in which the majestic bird is captured and robbed of its freedom and beauty, made to suffer in the city, "with a heart possessed by lakes he once had loved", "Stretching the hungry head on his convulsive neck, / Sometimes towards the sky" (Baudelaire 1993, 175). While we do not know whether Davíð read Baudelaire's poetry, there is an echo of the French poet's work in his poem. Both swans suffer due to human intervention, and they endure great pain and violence on the ground. In Baudelaire's poem, the swan "trailed his white array of feathers in the dirt. / Close by a dried out ditch the bird opened his beak" (*ibidem*). Davíð's swan likewise, shouts through an open beak, lies helpless on the shore, while his wings are used as brushes, trailed back and forth in domestic dirt. In "L'Albatros" (1857, "The Albatross"), Baudelaire similarly portrays an image of a trapped and humiliated bird. In this poem, the great big bird is captured by a crew of sailors and described as: "Hurt and distraught, these kings of all outdoors / Piteously let trail along their flanks / The great white wings, dragging like useless oars." (15). Like the swan in "Cut Wings", the albatross's powerless wings are pulled along the floor vividly demonstrating the bird's helplessness. "Cut Wings" locates pain in great beauty, pleasure in the monumental sky/heavens, and suffering on earth. It reminds us of various proximities, of life and death, beauty and death, humanity and cruelty.

Birds are present throughout *Black Feathers* as strong symbols which can be related to decadence. The title of Davíð's collection is a reference to the feathers of the raven. Ravens are remarkable in Icelandic folklore and myths, bringing both good news or cautionary notice.²⁴ They sometimes have the ability to speak or clearly communicate with humans but at other times they are mysterious and signify the Other. The ravens in Davíð's poems are

²⁴ The most famous example being Óðin's ravens Huginn and Muninn in nordic mythology and religion, where the two birds were sent off every morning to fly around the whole world and observe everything that happened in order to return at night and croak the news in detail to the god, who could in this way stay omniscient.

not necessarily bad omens but mysterious, wise, and to be respected. In Icelandic literature the figure of the raven is dualistic, a symbol of darkness but also resolution, such as in the tale “Skíðastaðir”, which is preserved in Jón Árnason’s collection of folktales and adventures, where a raven rewards a young girl who has fed it by warning her of a mudslide that is about to crush her farm, thus saving her life, and brings the bad news of death for the rest of her family (1864, 42-44).²⁵ In Davíð’s writing however, the raven is damned and destined to darkness because of its physical appearance – much like the poet who is damned by the human condition of existential anxiety.

In “Raven” (“Krummi”), Davíð describes the bird as a misunderstood animal that only desires to sing and be heard. The poem bids the reader not to judge the raven on its appearance, its darkness and croaks (Stefánsson 1995, 64). The third stanza of the poem sympathises with the bird, whose only desire is to sing beautifully:

Croak, croak and caw.
On some a curse rests,
never to reach the tune best,
though their heart has no request
other than to sing,
fly as the swans sing.

Krunk, krunk og krá.
Sumum hvíla þau álög á
aldrei fögrum tóni að ná,
þó þeir eigi enga þrá
aðra en þá að syngja,
fljúga eins og svanirnir syngja

The raven is here contrasted with the swan which is beautiful in both appearance and song. Despite the fact the raven desires nothing else but to sing, it can never exchange its cawing for swansong. In an earlier verse the speaker of the poem reminds the reader of the possibility of finding “sun-loving hearts” beating in those who “wear black feathers”, claiming an inherent beauty in darkness and attraction to the different and strange.²⁶ It is possible that Davíð is drawing a parallel with his own experience in this poem; as someone who stands out in his surroundings, someone whose heart will, like the raven’s at the end of the poem, be “tormented by desire, break”.²⁷

Though Davíð asks the reader not to judge the raven and to look beyond its appearance, he does the opposite when discussing and describing the appearance of women in a few of his poems. He blames their appearance for the presence of deceit and corruption. In “Proud are the Maidens”, Davíð draws attention to female material artifice and the speaker of the poem does so with bitterness and disgust, painting a picture of the maidens as perverse and malicious.

²⁵ The raven as a symbol of death, a knell, is one possible reading of the collection’s title and the author’s photograph portrays Davíð hugging a raven with its wing spread. He embraces the symbol of impending death and by leaning his head on it affectionately and looking solemnly straight into the camera, he is portrayed as overcoming death.

²⁶ Orig. Stefánsson 1995, 64, ll. 8 and 9: “sólelsk hjörtu”; “svörtum fjöðrum tjaldi”.

²⁷ Orig. Stefánsson 1995, 64, l. 22: “kvalið af löngun brestur”.

“The Maidens are still Proud” –

In Myrkárdalur
the maidens are still proud.
They won't see anyone
other than the wealthiest.

They style their hair
and gaze into the mirror,
pad their breasts and hips
and rouge their cheeks.

They want everyone
to bow down before them
but will only lead the
richest to their bed

and will only bed
the one with red-gold
livery, with farmhands
to pull the plough

the one who has servants
to fulfil every whim.
To decorate and adorn
is the maiden's occupation.

Clad in silk and
silver-pinned shoes,
they gavotte to
sensual chords.

That one, with the most
precious stones and gold
thinks herself the fairest –
but that's just not true:

If she parts with the pearls
and her embroidered silk
then it all just falls away –
she is ruined, empty.

In Myrkárdalur
the maidens are still proud
yet mostly their husbands
end up bankrupt, in tatters.

“Stoltar eru meyjarnar” –

Stoltar eru meyjarnar
í Myrkárdalnum enn.
Þær vilja ekki sjá
nema vellauðuga menn.

Þær bera smyrsl í hárið
og horfa í spegilinn,
stoppa brjóst og mjaðmir
og mála vanga sinn.

Þær vilja láta alla
lúta að fótum sér,
en rekkja hjá þeim einum,
sem ríkastur er.

En rekkja hjá þeim einum,
sem rauðagull á nóg
og getur látið þræla
ganga fyrir plóg,

sem getur látið ambáttir
gera allt, sem þarf.
Að greiða sér og mála sig
er meyjanna starf.

Svo ganga þær í silki,
á silfurspenntum skóm
og dansa eftir girndanna
ginnandi hljóð.

Sú, sem mest af gimsteinum
og gulli á sér ber,
þykist vera fegurst
– en því er ver:

Skilji hún við perlurnar
og skrautbúninginn sinn,
þá er hann allur skældur
og skininn, líkaminn.

Stoltar eru meyjarnar
í Myrkárdalnum enn,
– en flestir verða bændur þeirra
fátækir menn.

This is not the only way Davíð represents women in his collection but here he conjures an image of the “inherently perverse” and shallow woman. As Asti Hustvedt explains in the introduction to *The Decadent Reader*, the female body is “abhorrent” for its natural and reproductive powers, whereas the feminine “may be admired because it is duplicitous, mys-

terious, and finds its ultimate realisation in artifice” (1998, 19-20). “Proud are the Maidens” presents an image of the femme fatale, where the woman who “parts with the pearls” and takes off the costume of beauty and arrogance is actually a horrid creature underneath. The husbands are portrayed as victims of female nature. The proud maidens of the poem value artifice and money above all, leaving their husbands broke and miserable. Although we might argue that this poem is a general critique of lifestyle and meretriciousness, as Davíð “attacks [...] materialism in any form”, the gender-specific stereotype cannot be ignored (Beck 1968, 224). The women hide behind the jewellery, “silk, / and silverpinned shoes”. They perform as women but are potential monsters in their “true nature”, giving themselves willingly to lust and enjoyment at any cost (Stefánsson 1995, 110-12). While the maidens are sick in their vanity and descend into physical deformity the husbands are portrayed as victims that descend into poverty and vapidness.

The poem “Portrait of a Woman” portrays the idea of the femme fatale again but in four short lines (Stefánsson 1995, 71). Here, the poet evacuates the female body. Her internal landscape is a completely blank canvas though the exterior looks beautiful and lively:

“Portrait of a Woman”

Your body is as fair
as the birch in full-leaf,
but your soul is
barren, a husk.

“Kvenlýsing”

Þinn líkami er fagur
sem laufguð björk,
en sálin er ægileg
eyðimörk.

This description compares the beauty of the female body to a birch tree in its most beautiful state. It does not say the body is like the tree, but its beauty compares with the tree's beauty. It compares the female body to nature but also keeps it separate from it. Meanwhile, the mind is simply empty. The woman's body is a beautiful exterior, a shell for the poet to project onto and into. These short lines sum up the decadent woman that is an artificial container, ready to be ventriloquized or simply dismissed. In Icelandic, “eyðimörk” can be translated to mean “desert” or “wasteland” but it also conveys a general meaning of emptiness, meaning empty land/area. The choice of the word “husk” seems more appropriate to convey that message in the poem, as “desert” in English has stronger connotations with geographical locations and an environment full of sand and warmth. In Icelandic “ægileg eyðimörk” means “a dire desert”, with an emphasis on the negative quality of that space. The word “husk”, however, signifies more strongly given the context because unlike a desert, which is full of heat and light, a husk is empty, without interior. Like Ernest Dowson in his poem “Ad Manus Puellae” where he describes the lady's glove as “the empty husk of a love” (83), Davíð's intention in the poem is to empty the female body and attribute to her an inherent coldness, suggesting deceit on her behalf. He suggests a conflict between the exterior and interior of her body: he might simultaneously lust after the one while fearing the other.

Lust and erotica are prominent features of Davíð's poetry in this first collection. His poem “Delirium” is an excellent example. Through a marriage ritual, almost a coronation, Davíð portrays a blasphemous scene of lust and physical violation. The mixing of religious symbols and violence in the lustful scene this poem recalls the work of continental European decadent writers fascinated by the proximity of pain and pleasure. The images of the maltreated body and beautiful fabric, a crown of ice and shoes from fire are decadently sensual and the poem contains

imagery suggestive of the rituals of Catholicism. Thorns and ornamental garments of saints in agony and ecstasy, who derive sexual pleasure from the pain of devotion and punishment, are images that beguile decadent writers such as Algernon C. Swinburne.

The subject in “Delirium” is a woman without autonomy who is described by a speaker that has complete power over her body. He mistreats her body while simultaneously elevating it in the almost ritual-like proceedings of his dream. Calling the poem “Delirium” is possibly a self-reflexive or apologetic act, but it is not self-critical as the dream is manifested in such rich erotic imagery that the poem is presented as taking pleasure in itself.

“Delirium”

Since it is so deathly quiet
ha, ha – now I fall asleep,
and meet, O in a dream
tonight, the queen.

I give her a crown
I have fashioned from ice,
and she will soon dance
as a queen should.

I give her a midnight veil
to shroud her body,
so no one will witness
how I’ve dishonoured it.

Then I give her red shoes
stolen from the flames,
and bind her pale neck
with a crown of pink thorns.

Then I smear her breast
with a cross of my blood
and kiss her cheek like Jesus –
no, like Judas.

Then we spin and spin
and drink poison wine
... I become the king of demons
and take my queen.

“Óráð”

Ha, ha – nú sofna ég,
fyrst svona er dauðahljótt;
svo hitti ég í draumi
drottninguna í nótt.

Þá gef ég henni kórónu
úr klaka á höfði sér.
Hún skal fá að dansa
eins og drottningu ber.

Svo gef ég henni svarta slæðu
að sveipa um líkamann,
svo enginn geti séð,
að ég svívirti hann.

Svo gef ég henni helskó,
hitaða á rist,
og bind um hvíta hálsinn
bleikan þyrnikvist.

Svo rjóðra ég á brjóst hennar
úr blóði mínu kross
og kyssi hanaí Jesú nafni
Júdasarkoss.

Svo dönsum við og dönsum
og drekkum eitrad vín.
... Ég verð konungur djöflanna,
hún drottningin mín.

The dancing represents a state of excess and madness. It is continuous and wild. Dance is here a way of transcending oneself mentally, or a way of descending into the realm of physical desires and corruption. Guðni Elísson describes the dance as “symbolic phenomena” (Elísson 2006, 354-55) and compares this focus to Friedrich Nietzsche’s in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1883) where he should “only believe in a god who knew how to dance” and “one must dance – dance over and past yourselves!” (Nietzsche 2006, 29, 285). While it is not clear whether Nietzsche had a direct influence on Davíð’s philosophy it is evident

that Davíð was heavily influenced by the Swedish poet Gustav Fröding (1860-1911), who was known for writing openly about revelry, women, alcohol, the neglected and mundane. “[F]ew poets were so clearly influenced by Nietzsche [as Fröding]”, Guðni explains (Elísson 2006, 355). These themes most certainly caught Davíð’s attention. It is difficult to establish precisely what Davíð had read by the time he published his first volume of poetry, but in his biography, *Touch my Harp: Biography of Davíð from Fagriskógur (Snert hörpu mína: Ævisaga Davíðs frá Fagraskógi, 2007)*, Friðrik G. Olgeirsson describes the “foreign influence” on Davíð and mentions Fröding as an important source of ideas and style, especially Fröding’s references to folklore and use of colloquial language in a lyrical style, including as well the influence of Danish poet and painter Holger Drachmann and translations to Danish from Russian by the Danish writer Thor Lange (Olgeirsson 2007, 112).

Along with the wild dancing, the “poison wine” in the poem is symbolic. Through these juxtapositions and references the poem “reconciles two sides of the same coin: degeneration and regeneration” (Fleurot 2014, 75). It is another route of descent and is also the point at which pleasure and death meet. Poison wine might reference something more specific, such as absinthe, but it more likely signifies a physical and mental condition. The wine is mind-altering, addictive, and inevitably damaging and dangerous – though consumed willingly in the heat of the moment of the ritual. The pleasure is in the descent, in the risk and danger. As well as pain and pleasure, there is a sense of hardness and softness in the poem. The violent actions against the woman’s pale body and the soft fabrics are vividly juxtaposed. There is even a form of resurrection as the woman rises as a queen after being maltreated. The relationship between style and subject-matter creates a striking tension in the poem. The language of the poem is playful and simple, even innocent in its fairy-tale references to “king and queen”, while the subject is violence and malice. In the original Icelandic, the end rhyme in the second and fourth line of each stanza (ABCB) creates a steady ritualistic beat. As the sibilance increases, so does the sinister, dark undertone, changing the dream into a delirium.

During the process of translating “Delirium” the “poison wine” became a point of discussion. For the sake of a more poetic language, the question arose: what is the poison? Can it be referred to as “deadly nightshade” or “hemlock” instead of just “poison”? Or as something else? While this could have offered a more refined and sophisticated phrasing, neither of these plants grow in Iceland and there are no snakes, scorpions, or other venomous creatures. There are no obvious sources of poison in the country. Here it felt right to maintain a cultural translation, not introducing or imposing new ideas onto the image, but rather keeping it general and allowing the poison to be the generic notion of poison – the altered and intoxicated state of mind. In contrast, other words were made more specific in order to convey their meaning more precisely. One example is the line “Svo gef ég henni helskó”. Here “helskó” (which directly translates to “hell-shoe”) is replaced with “red shoes”, to reference the fairy tale, *The Red Shoes (De rødesko, 1845)* by Hans Christian Andersen. It tells the story of a girl who becomes trapped in beautiful red shoes which make her dance and dance until she amputates her own feet to escape them. The Icelandic word, “helskór”, is a reference to shoes either causing death or bound to the feet of the dead. Though the original does not bear a specific reference to Andersen’s fairy tale it is fitting to maintain the connotation between the shoes and death, the price of Beauty and vanity as well as Davíð’s tendencies to reference folk- and fairy tales. It is also a text that Davíð would have been familiar with and had access to.

Writing about the progression of Neo-romanticism in Iceland and the emergence of the anti-hero in Icelandic literature, Guðni describes the decadent poet as “more depressed than

his predecessor, often full of melancholy and despair, a victim of his own desires, a self-elected wanderer abandoned by God and man” (Elísson 2006, 352). The speaker in “Delirium” is certainly a victim of his own dark and secret desires and portrays what was described as a temperament emerging in Icelandic literature of the 1910s: “a self-consciousness that understands itself through destructive needs” (*ibidem*). The speaker of the poem is neither an observer nor an innocent bystander but instead is notably active, and is, in fact, the agent or the performer of the ritual. The speakers are often active participants in Davíð’s poems, no matter what shape they assume, human, animal, or spirit. They often tell a cautionary tale, in the style of fables and fairy tales. Unlike traditional fairy-tale narratives, Davíð’s rarely offer a happy ending or a resolution, which recalls Oscar Wilde’s handling of fairy tales where “the moral is not to be found in the punishment of the bad and reward of the good” (Fleuret 2014, 71). Fleuret describes Wilde’s fairy tales as “a call for change”, because they are not conveying and perpetuating classic moral narratives but instead casting light on social issues and power hierarchies. As Fleuret notes: “In Wilde’s tales, the opposition is clear between who is rich and who is not, but also between who has the means to express himself and who doesn’t” (72).

In Davíð’s and Wilde’s tales there is often no solution or way of avoiding violence, punishment, or cruelty. In Wilde’s story *The Happy Prince* (1888) society’s focus is on artificiality and beauty over kindness and charity. The protagonist, a golden gem-cast statue of a prince, takes pity on people in the city and gives away his valuable exterior to those in need. He does this with the help of a bird who continuously delays its migration to warmer lands to assist the statue. Their efforts are neither noticed nor valued: the bird dies in the cold of winter and the statue of the Happy Prince is eventually taken apart and melted down as he is not beautiful any more. Despite their noble work, both characters gain no recognition until they have transcended earth and God deems them “the two most precious things in the city” (Wilde 1920, 37). Wilde draws attention to injustice, where there are no consequences for violence and oppression, and no one, not even the most innocent creatures, are able to escape evil. Davíð takes a more traditional approach to the fairy tale. He uses them as cautionary tales although they do not offer the resolution of a better life. His characters are not innocent, but have been tempted, tricked, or even murdered. Some of them are cautionary tales, as, for example, in the narrative of the poem “Abba-labba-lá”, which is an attempt to save others from the speaker’s fate as well as an entertaining story. Instead of creating fairy tales as an escape that “often spoke for the humble reader’s wish to acquire a better life”, Davíð and Wilde use them as reminders of reality. Like Wilde, as Fleuret suggests, Davíð might “not [have] believed that a magic wand is enough to solve the miseries of the world” (2014, 71-73).

The speaker of the next poem attempts to warn the reader of the dangers of the world by describing his own miseries in an encounter with a seductress. The poem “Abba-labba-lá” presents another version of the decadent woman where the speaker of the poem becomes a victim of a seductive she-beast.²⁸

²⁸ In “Abba-labba-lá”, á is pronounced “ow” as in “cow”.

“Abba-labba-lá”

Her name was Abba-labba-lá!
Dark-haired, dark-browed,
she lived in a shack in the woods
between green boughs
and believed the land was breathing.

But no one knew where
she had come from.
And no one knew why
she was wild, unbridled.
And no one knew why
she would bite and lash out. –

Her name was Abba-labba-lá!
Her dark-hair, dark-brow
drove everyone crazy,
that tried to hold her down.
Abba-labba-lá drank
beast blood.
Beast blood.

. . . Once I saw
Abba-labba-lá
dancing in the forest,
dark-haired, dark-browed.
My heart burned
so I cried out:
Abba-labba,
Abba-labba,
Abba-labba-lá!

And then she came running
and kissed me and laughed
bit me and drank my life-
blood, – I died.

Now I haunt the
forests and coves shouting:
Beware, curious folk,
beware, lonely folk,
of Abba-labba-lá!

“Abba-labba-lá”

Hún hét Abba-labba-lá.
Hún var svört og brún á brá
og átti kofa í skóginum
á milli grænna greina
og trúði á stokka og steina.

En enginn vissi, hvaðan
hún kom í þennan skóg;
enginn vissi, hvers vegna
hún ærslaðist og hló,
og enginn vissi, hvers vegna
hún bæði beit og sló. –

Hún hét Abba-labba-lá.
Hún var svört á brún og brá
og gerði alla vitlausa,
sem vildu í hana ná.
Á Villidýrablóði,
á villidýrablóði
lífði Abba-labba-lá.

. . . Einu sinni sá ég
Abba-labba-lá.
Hún dansaði í skóginum,
svört á brún og brá.
Mér hlýnaði um hjartað
og hrópaði hana á:
Abba-labba,
Abba-labba,
Abba-labba-lá!

Þá kom hún til mín hlaupandi
og kyssti mig og hló,
beit mig og saug úr mér
blóðið, – svoégdó.

– Og afturgenginn hrópa ég
út yfir land og sjá:
Varið ykkur, vesalingar,
varið ykkur, vesalingar,
á Abba-labba-lá.

“Abba-labba-lá”, is one of the wilder poems in the collection, being especially playful and loud with its fast rhythm, ellipsis, and exclamation marks. It illustrates the overwhelming feeling of obsession and desire through the use of fast-paced repetition and alliteration. Maintaining the tone of each poem was important in the translation process. Here, preserving the simplicity of the language in “Abba-labba-lá” was crucial, where the tone is fable-like and rudimentary. Retaining the moments of wit and humour, such as in the abrupt line “– so I died” (“– svo

ég dó”) is also important as it conveys Davíð’s playfulness and his eye for surprise. In order to preserve the strong rhythm of the poem, only a few lines are moved around. The last three lines of the third stanza have the eerie repetition of “á villidýrablóði/á villidýrablóði”. In the original the repetition of “beast blood” is in lines 5 and 6 before the last one, but changing the syntax so that the stanza closes with the repetition feels more impactful in the translation. In the last stanza, the word “vesalingar” in line 3, meaning wretch/unfortunate/poor thing, is not repeated in the English translation, and the words “curious folk” and “lonely folk” are chosen instead to cover the wider meaning and feeling of the word in Icelandic.

Abba-labba-lá is a wild female creature, a seductress in the forest. There is no direct indication of her beauty in the poem but instead there are references to her exoticism and mystery. She is simply described as “dark-haired, dark-browed”. She is desirable and exciting until the speaker finally manages to approach her. Then the poem turns: she attacks the speaker and murders him by sucking his blood like a vampire. This is the femme fatale again. The speaker, now speaking from the dead in the last verse, warns other suitors by repeating “beware [...] beware of Abba-labba-lá”, and her true nature as a monster is declared.

Monsters and ghosts are common motifs in Icelandic folktales as well as in Neo-romantic literature, though the speaker in the poems is rarely a ghost. Guðni attributes the popularity of this particular figure to “horror-romanticism”, and Davíð’s biographer agrees, explaining that Davíð’s darker, decadent poems were “not a testament to [the] mental problems of the poet” but were “sprouts of the horror- or frightful-romantics that had been popular abroad for some time”.²⁹ This term “horror-romanticism” (Elísson 2006, 354) seems to refer to a mixture of themes derived from romanticism: Neo-romanticism, symbolism, the Gothic, as well as folklore. This hybrid term might easily also encapsulate some tendencies of decadent poetry.

Conclusion

Iceland was certainly a remote and isolated place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but that does not mean the culture developed without external influences. As Gunnar Harðarson maintains in his book *The Stretcher behind History (Blindramminn bak við söguna)*, “many accepted ideas believed to be authentically Icelandic might in fact be the offspring of forgotten foreign ideas that stand as painting stretchers behind the visible image of the Icelandic literary- and ideological history”.³⁰ Davíð’s poems capture the unique sensibilities of lyrical poetry in Iceland in the beginning of the 20th century, but more work needs to be done, both on translating and critically evaluating his contribution to literature in the early 20th century. Davíð was certainly a powerful voice in Icelandic literature, not only with this first collection but with the nine collections of poetry that followed, a novel, and four plays. He published four very different poetry collections between 1919 and 1929, each dealing with different themes and topics as he began to move away from traditional forms. In the fourth collection, *New Verse (Nýkvæði, 1929)*, he began writing in free verse and increasingly he became interested in historical references and scenarios as well as travelling. The life of the wanderer became a prominent theme. Gradually, the lust and fantasies in his early work gave way to a passion for

²⁹ Orig. Olgeirsson, 2007, 112: “ekki endilega til vitnis um sálarlega erfiðleika höfundarins”; “angi af hryllings- eð askelfirómantíkinni sem hafði verið vinsæl erlendis um tíma”.

³⁰ Orig. Harðarson 2009, 9: “margar viðteknar hugmyndir sem taldar eru rammíslenskar séu í raun og veru afsprengi gleymdra erlendra hugmynda sem standa eins og blindrammi bak við hina sýnilegu mynd af íslenskri bókmennta- og hugmyndasögu”.

a changed world where socialist motifs become dominant, especially after the poet's visit to Russia in 1928. Throughout Davíð's career his love for storytelling is apparent and as Gunnar Stefánsson comments in a foreword to Davíð's complete poetic works: "All of Davíð's poetry reeks of fervour; his works are never phlegmatic, always alive".³¹

Davíð was not the only Icelandic poet residing in Reykjavík or in more rural areas writing about decadent themes. There are undoubtedly other poets working at the turn of the 20th century, who, like Davíð, were influenced by Scandinavian and European literature more broadly, and who were writing poems with the potential to be disruptive, grotesque, and exciting. In the search for Icelandic decadence, writers of both poetry and prose whose work is worth examining further, writing around the same time as Davíð, include Sveinn Jónsson (1892-1942), Sigfús Blöndal (1874-1950), Stefánfrá Hvítadal (1887-1933), Sigurður Nordal (1886-1947), and Jóhann Sigurjónsson (1880-1919). Sveinn Jónsson and Sigfús Blöndal, like Davíð, wrote about themes of death, pleasure, anti-heroes and mystical women. Sveinn, in particular, writes about the place "where pleasure is linked to death through a mad, crazed dance" as Guðni describes Sveinn's poem "Poison" ("Eitur"). There the speaker exclaims in a strong rhythm in the refrain: "Poison! More Poison! / Warm will I dance and wanton. / Poison! Poison! Poison",³² combining dancing and an altered mental state just as Davíð does in "Delirium": "Then we spin and spin / and drink poison wine" (Elíssson 2006, 354). New translations of these poems will expand our understanding of the reach of decadence towards the Arctic Circle.

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³¹ Orig. Stefánsson 1995, 38: "Skaphita Davíðs leggur af öllum skáldskap hans; verk hans eru aldrei daufgerð, alltaf lifandi".

³² Orig. Björnsson 1971, 96: "Eitur! Meira eitur! / Ör vil ég dansa og heitur. / Eitur! Eitur! Eitur!"

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