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POPULAR AND LEARNED ELEMENTS IN THE ICELANDIC SAGA-TRADITION

I

It is a notorious weakness of the professional scholar that he tends to ignore the external pressures to which he is subjected. Some humanists feel such a deep obligation to justify themselves that they are wholly impatient of inherited ideas; others display an unreasonable degree of conservatism. Literary discussion has much to lose and little to gain from this process of polarisation, for the undoubted benefits of innovation can quickly be cancelled out by a loss of emotional contact with the subject. Perhaps it would be well to state that my argument in this paper is based on a conviction - which some would no doubt call a prejudice - that literary studies are in the first place an aesthetic activity. "Each generation must define the past in its own terms" - which is just one way of saying that important literary questions, whether historical or critical, are in constant need of re-evaluation. Individual experience, even ideology, should also be brought to bear upon the problems under discussion. One of the attractions of literary study is that it has no absolutes: the scholar who has respect for the integrity of his sources will try as far as is possible to adapt his response to the findings of linguistic and historical

research, but it is futile to suppose that literary results can be purged of all subjectivity, or that they can ever be held to have been "proved" in the sense attached to that word by the natural scientist. On the other hand, if literary study is to claim a certain freedom from restrictions it must be seen to keep an open mind. Its direct function is to present the work to the reader in a way which is meaningful, irrespective of differences in time and place, outlook, language or experience. It is above all else these concerns that make the subject distinctively humanistic.

The foregoing reflections are in a measure prompted by the controversy between Lars Lönnroth and Peter Hallberg concerning the possible European influences on Icelandic saga writing¹. These, at least, are two writers who can be said to have broken new grounds in saga studies, though their approaches could scarcely be more dissimilar. The nature of their dispute is sufficiently well known for a detailed recapitulation to be unnecessary. There are, however, certain considerations which I should like to put forward in relation to it.

Lars Lönnroth's basic assumption is that there may have been much more Latin influence on saga literature than has been previously accepted. This is not a priori unlikely considering the generally clerical or at least learned character of the oldest prose texts which have

come down to us; and the dearth of specific evidence is in itself no argument to the contrary, for significant parallels are more often discovered by accident than the majority would care to admit. There is nevertheless a strong suggestion that Lars Lönnroth has seized upon the notion of Latin influence because he finds its alternative theoretically displeasing. The established historians, whose main preoccupation is with ecclesiastical and political institutions, have a tendency to assume that all major European cultural movements are centrifugal. This is a convenient theory, inasmuch as it provides a framework within which individual problems can be discussed, but it ought not to be elevated into a doctrine: phenomena such as the Irish missions to the Continent prove that the exceptions are as important as the rule. Neglect of these exceptions has produced a seriously oversimplified view of the European Middle Ages - a view which the literary historian is all too easily tempted to adopt. The consequence in the case of the sagas is bound to be a certain scepticism concerning their origins, for it is hard to accept in terms of the given framework that a major literary genre could arise spontaneously in Icelandic conditions. This (or something very similar) would seem to be the attitude underlying Lönnroth's summary of his doctoral thesis, where we are presented by way of conclusion with a list of thematic and stylistic features offering good prospects to the hunter of Latin parallels.²

Icelandic literature is here brought within the safe jurisdiction of the medievalist: everything must be of Latin origin unless it can be proved to be native.

If one looks dispassionately at the history of Icelandic studies one can see that such a development was inevitable. The chauvinistic-romantic schools of thought cry out for some kind of reaction, and Lönnroth's mistake - now that the dust has settled - appears largely to have been a matter of tactics. Scholars with declared views on the subject might privately admit that debate is a necessary professional activity, but they give the impression of being reluctant to engage in it. The dispute about authorship is a case in point. Lönnroth takes a dim view of the tradition which ascribes certain works to Snorri Sturluson and his nephew Sturla Þórðarson. He fails to explain why these names should have been transmitted by the scribes while the bulk of Icelandic prose writing remains anonymous; but he raises the important question of Snorri's and Sturla's literary rôle, and emphasizes that their function may rather have been that of general editor than of author in the restricted sense. This point of view is not, in fact, entirely new, but it is presented in an unashamedly iconoclastic fashion. It is the manner rather than the matter which has caused most offence - the student of Irish is immediately reminded of the reaction to James Carney's Studies in Irish history and literature (Dublin

1955), where a tendency to overstate his case is again the author's besetting sin. (Cf. Oskamp 1970, 12.) Peter Hallberg's response to the insinuations against Snorri would surely have been different if his adversary's tone had been less provocative. Neither party actually emerges as a clear-cut victor: Hallberg, for all his display of superior philological skill, is content with a fervent reaffirmation of traditional doctrines, while Lönnroth's harsh scepticism puts him in a position where he lacks freedom to manoeuvre. The one thing which unites the combatants is the low value which they set upon opinion, by which I mean opinion for its own sake. They apparently fail to recognise that there is no such thing as a self-evident truth in questions of literary history. If I now attempt to find a position midway between Lönnroth and Hallberg, I do so in the full knowledge that I am liable to be hit by the missiles of both.

II

It seems to me that Latin ecclesiastical culture had a decisive effect on the development of medieval Icelandic literature. The extent to which Iceland was open to influences from outside is frequently understressed, and Lönnroth's thesis performs a useful service by the very emphasis with which it recalls this fact to our minds. On the other hand, the nature of these outside influences may have been rather different from what Lönnroth has assumed -

and the same applies to his numerous predecessors who have canvassed the theory of Latin models more discreetly. From an early date Icelanders studied in the schools of France, Germany and England, and the effect of their education can be clearly traced in the religious and historical prose of the twelfth century (Turville-Petre 1953, esp. Chapters V and VII). But this is not to say that the only Icelanders who travelled abroad were ecclesiastics and scholars, or that the medieval Latin classics were the only form of literature with which they came in contact. The folklorist who reads medieval Icelandic secular prose can have no doubts in his mind that the authors had encountered oral traditions stemming from both East and West, and that they did not hesitate to combine these with materials deriving from written sources. Nor does this apply only to lygisögur, or to the curious tales in sources like Flat-eyjarbók; even a classic family saga such as Njála offers evidence of the eclecticism practised by Icelandic writers. To take just a few examples: it is common knowledge that Flosi's dream is modelled on a story in Gregory's Dialogues (Sveinsson 1943, 8ff.), and that the account of Clontarf goes back to traditions current in the Norse islands of the West. But I wonder how many readers have paused to reflect on the incident at the Alþingi when Skarpheðinn insults Porkell hákr? It is told, as part of the build-up to this incident (ch. 119), that Porkell had won himself a formidable reputation out East: he had slain a finngálkn

in Finland and a flugdreki in Estonia. Baltic-Fennic folk-belief suggests a kernel of genuine tradition for the second exploit, though the first is obviously based on popular etymology. Of course the author (or his informant) could scarcely have had any specific information about the Estonian house-serpent, much less about the story-complex surrounding the Sampo of Kalevala;³ but he must somehow have known that such legends and beliefs were current in the region where Porkell had his adventure. I take it that he was here inserting a piece of local colour derived via oral tradition from the Baltic, i.e. from a milieu in which there were regular cultural contacts between the East Scandinavians and Baltic Finns.⁴ Dragon worship in Estonia received mention in Adam of Bremen (Gesta IV:17), but this to my mind neither increases nor diminishes the likelihood that Njála took the detail in question from an oral source.⁵

Here I think an important point requires to be made. Medieval Icelandic society was conservative and the economy of the country was weak. Influences from abroad would have their most widespread and immediate effect when they could be assimilated without imposing a strain on the community; conversely, innovations involving social adjustment or financial outlays would come both slowly and sparsely. To put the matter in a less abstract way: popular traditions from outside would find an immediate home in a country where oral storytelling and the re-

citation of poetry were regular pastimes, while book-learning from Latin sources would spread slowly amongst the limited public which could not only read and understand manuscripts but also afford to import them. The classic sagas - those which have earned Icelandic literature its justifiable fame - emerged between two and three hundred years after the coming of Christianity. It is unthinkable that this length of time should have been sufficient for a sophisticated art of vernacular narrative to have been developed on the basis of Latin models alone; and even if this were possible, the restricted circulation of Latin literature would make it highly unlikely that the resulting art would take the form which it in fact did. The sagas of Icelanders describe the achievements and quarrels of the more prominent families in the country. Features such as the conventional insertion of genealogies, or the bewilderingly large number of subsidiary characters, are in themselves indicative of a preoccupation with ancestral history, which is a well-known phenomenon in tradition-bound societies and owes nothing to the learned culture of the church. Generally speaking, the subject-matter of the sagas is not that which would have suggested itself to a clerical minority with vernacular literary ambitions. Nor does it seem probable that works of such grandeur could have been written to the mere order of an aristocratic patron - the Icelandic chieftains must indeed have been awesome personalities if they could inspire their clergy

to produce Egils saga or Njáls saga on commission. I do not mean to imply that clerical learning was irrelevant, but rather that its contribution was of a more restricted character than is often maintained. The principles of written composition had to be studied, and the vernacular applied experimentally to a wide range of subjects, before the language could acquire the flexibility and stylistic assurance exhibited by thirteenth-century writers. Latin models were an indispensable component in this process of self-education. But as far as content is concerned, Icelandic authors might well have restricted themselves to imitating the works from which they learned the basic techniques of their craft. (This is actually what they did in the twelfth century, and what their Norwegian cousins for the most part continued to do.) The imaginative writings of Icelanders from the period beginning c. 1200, and in particular those works which are classified as Íslendingasögur (sagas of Icelanders) and fornaldarsögur (legendary sagas), are so different in conception from what was produced elsewhere in Europe that we must somehow or other find an explanation for their sudden emergence.

Many scholars have supposed that the sagas of Icelanders were a natural extension of the biographies of Norwegian kings, and that these in turn grew out of the Latin saints' lives which were part of the professional baggage of the clergy. This formula is not only

seductively simple but also reassuring in its compatibility with the centrifugal view of history. Unfortunately it rests on the all too slender thread of the First saga of St Óláfr, a thread which has recently been cut. Ever since the publication of Gustav Storm's Otte Brudstykker af den ældste Saga om Olav den hellige (Christiania 1893) it has been assumed that the miracles of Óláfr in AM 325 IV 4to belong with certain other fragments concerning the saint in the Norwegian Riksarkiv (NRA 52). None of the fragments preserved in Norway are of a legendary character; the status of the Arnamagnæan material is therefore crucial if it is to be argued that hagiography provided the initial stimulus to the composition of kings' sagas. It has now been shown that the Copenhagen and Oslo fragments probably have nothing to do with each other. A severe blow is thus delivered to a widely supported theory: in particular, it is no longer possible to strengthen the (imagined) clerical flavour of the First saga by bold analogy with hagiographic episodes in the Legendary saga (Louis-Jensen 1970).

These arguments are of profound significance, for they provide philological indications that the clerical background to the sagas may be more imaginary than real. Latin learning is displayed in individual instances, and the actual techniques of writing were evolved in an ecclesiastical context; but the intellectual growth of the Icelandic church is in no way synonymous with the

origins of secular literature, and a slight widening of the historical perspective makes it difficult to understand why anyone should have wished to think so. Being neither richly endowed nor in close touch with the Continent, the church lagged behind in important areas, for example in liturgical usage. The elevation of the Host gives direct ritual expression to the doctrine of transubstantiation, which was promulgated by the Lateran Council of 1215 and has since occupied a central place in Catholic belief; but it took more than half a century for the practice of elevation to reach Iceland (Fæhn 1955, 615 and note 60). The Þorlákstíðir, which are the only substantial monument of Icelandic music from the period before the Reformation, were not composed until the fourteenth century. Even then the melodic material was borrowed wholesale from Dominican models of much earlier date. One would have expected the patron saint to have been provided with an office rather sooner, and certainly while the island was still independent of Norway, but one is driven to the conclusion that the church simply did not have the necessary resources.⁶ The unfinished cathedral at Kirkjuböurin the Faroes likewise bears witness to the economic disability which afflicted the island dioceses of the North Atlantic, though it acts as a simultaneous reminder that they shared the artistic aspirations of the mainland. It is hard to see why literary composition should have constituted an exception when Icelandic manifestations of European

ecclesiastical culture were for the most part belated and derivative. If the initial stimulus to saga authorship is still to be sought in Latin books, despite the absence of any demonstrable line of descent from the saints' lives, we must postulate an almost unthinkable complex process of literary osmosis. The breadth of reading which that process would presuppose can scarcely have been enjoyed by the Icelandic clergy in the formative years at the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century. I have already implied that manuscripts were expensive.⁷ Doubtless there was an adequate supply of those books which (to use King Alfred's words) were "most needful for all men to know". But the libraries, as far as we are able to determine, never contained much in the way of foreign imaginative literature - least of all in the crucial period to which I am here referring.

There is an inevitable link between the investigator's overall perception of medieval Icelandic society and his attitude to the problem of saga origins, as is clearly illustrated by Lars Lönnroth when he puts up a general case against "the theory of the two cultures". According to an old view of Icelandic literary history, the first half of the thirteenth century saw a systematic separation of functions: the educated laity set about recording the traditions of the country, in an outburst of patriotic awareness which was partly stimulated by the threat from Norway, while the clergy confined themselves more and more

to those subjects which were their immediate personal concern. This interpretation rests on a particular set of subjective assumptions, and Lönnroth has ample justification for calling it in question.⁸ It would be profoundly ridiculous to suggest that the clergy abstained from writing on secular subjects, or to formulate a rule to the effect that sagas could only have been written by laymen. Equally objectionable, however, is Lönnroth's contrary assumption that sagas could not have been written by laymen. This too is based on certain preconceptions; it is not so much a refutation of the theory of the two cultures as an inversion of it in the light of more recent fashion. The primary motive for doubting Snorri's authorship of the works attributed to him is a general scepticism concerning the level of secular education. Common sense, not to mention the analogy of other countries, tells us that it cannot have been high. There must nevertheless have been some individuals among the aristocracy who shared the studious bent of the clergy whom they employed; and in any case the hypothesis of clerical rather than lay authorship in no way simplifies the question of what authorship actually means in such a context. Lönnroth writes that "Heimskringla and the Prose Edda should ... really be regarded as a single stage in the textual history of several works collected and adapted by Snorri's assistants" (1965b, 14; cf. 1965a, 94-95). That may well be so (or partly so), but we must still decide whether it was Snorri or his

assistants who made the dominant contribution to the partnership. The mention of his name in the manuscripts suggests that the answer is Snorri, and it is entirely possible that his work of co-ordination⁹ was recognized as authorship by the scribes. They themselves felt free to alter details of wording or to conflate dissimilar exemplars, as anyone who has edited an Icelandic text is well aware: authorship for them probably consisted in the imposition of a particular form or viewpoint on materials which were partly or even wholly pre-existent. I am firmly persuaded that the laity in Iceland were as well equipped for authorship in this sense as their clerical brethren. What was required was not skill in writing, for that practical talent was readily available on hire, but a fund of traditional knowledge combined with the ability to organize it. These qualities could be found in both cleric and layman; the difference between the two categories was that the cleric did not require the services of an amanuensis to give verbal shape to his ideas. It may be objected that this difference was indeed great, but the scribes' habitual disrespect for the wording of their exemplars shows that it was above all the outline which interested them. The exact formulation of individual sentences had nothing to do with the integrity of a work as they saw it.¹⁰ When a cleric wrote a saga he fulfilled two roles simultaneously, and to that extent approached closer to our ideas of authorship than the layman such as Snorri who, in the Icelandic

phrase, "put (a book) together" (setti saman, cf. Lönnroth 1965a, 17). But he was on the same footing as the layman in all other respects. The anecdote of the wedding at Reykjahólar has important implications here, for it will be remembered that it was a priest, Ingimundr, who told the story of Ormr Barreyjarskáld, "with many verses, and a good flokkr of his own composition at the end" (Porgils saga ok Hafliða, 18). Ingimundr was not acting on this occasion in his priestly capacity. Whatever he may have been taught in the course of his professional training, it was not the tale of Ormr with its exotic Hebridean background or the art of making poetry in the vernacular. Oral storytelling was clearly a well developed art long before Latin culture began to make itself felt in Iceland, and Ingimundr was probably neither the first nor the last to recite Orm's saga. If, however, the latter had come down to us in a manuscript version we should possess "a single stage in the textual history" of a work which had previously existed orally - and we should know with more certainty that a priest had participated at the oral stage of the textual transmission than that it was a priest who committed it to parchment.

I cannot prove that oral narration was a more favoured pastime in Iceland than the study of Latin authors, but a general assessment of the social history of the country compels me to think so. It would be very remarkable if the production of written sagas implied a conscious

setting aside of oral traditions, for these preserved just the kind of information in which people in general, and the leading families in particular, were chiefly if not exclusively interested. The sagas of the thirteenth century were as much parochial in outlook as the earlier learned literature was international: this applies whether we are speaking of the sagas of Icelanders, which focus on the period before and after 1000, or of legendary sagas purporting to tell of remote prehistory. Saga writing, even if it was wholly in the hands of clerics, must have satisfied some kind of demand. A peasant community would sooner call for records of its existing traditions than for a series of newly invented substitutes. Lars Lönnroth has himself conceded the relevance of secular patronage in this context, though he distinctly underestimates the power of the consumer. A historical interpretation which makes adequate allowance for social conditions leads inevitably to a hypothesis of traditional origins for the saga literature. On this view, the oldest written sagas are to be explained as a synthetic product originating at a point in time when the clerical skill of writing was pressed into the service of a much older activity, namely, the preservation of tradition. Preservation implied both transmission and renewal. The former could be better assured if there was a written record to aid the memory, and at least in that respect there could be no hostility to the production of such records. The latter implied an artistic freedom

for the writer which did no more than continue age-old practice: contrary to common opinion, word for word repetition was neither looked for nor applauded by the oral storyteller's public. An individual personality may still be detected behind the inherited text of a saga. There is nothing in the theory of oral origins which denies us that freedom, or which forbids us to suppose that wholly fictional works were composed at a later stage: the origins of a genre are not to be confused with its subsequent evolution.¹¹ Equally, there is nothing contradictory to the theory of oral origins in the observation of particular stylistic habits in a text, for these belong to the "single stage" at which the work was written down and are not derived from the tradition. Texts can be grouped together on the basis of such features, as Peter Hallberg has shown in his work on Snorri,¹² but the question of the writer's relationship to his sources remains entirely open.

What, then, was the nature of these sources? Sigurður Nordal and his disciples repeatedly tell us that we can never know, but current opinion is a little less pessimistic. Variants of the same story, whether in different sagas or in different redactions of the same saga, have been scrutinized in the hope of achieving more clarity on this point. The method is often thought of as the personal invention of the Norwegian scholar Knut Liestøl, and the conclusions to which it led him are viewed with that peculiar suspicion which only folklorists can arouse. In

point of fact it had been used before Liestøl's time, for example by Adolfine Erichsen (1919) in her study of Ljósvetninga saga; it was Liestøl's gift for systematization, rather than the originality of his mind, which earned him a key position in saga studies. His thesis was that Iceland had a richly developed oral tradition, of which the saga manuscripts preserve little more than a direct transcription (Liestøl 1930, esp. Chapter II). It is most regrettable that the book-prose school has made so little effort to distinguish between the two parts of this postulate. That Liestøl was probably wrong in denying artistic freedom to the writer does not mean that he was wrong in assuming a sophisticated tradition. Opinions will, of course, vary as to the degree of sophistication which can be assumed: my own preference is for the solution offered by Theodore M. Andersson, who has made a careful review of the evidence and has arrived at a formula which is both moderate and unambiguous. According to him, the variants "show that a saga writer was not bound by the written word ... He composed ... from his stock of lore and recollections. Even if the details were fluid, the tradition was narratively firm, that is to say, the gist of the story was constant" (Andersson 1964, 182). Eminent authorities would now appear to have swung round to this way of thinking. G. Turville-Petre writes in one of his most recent papers that there are verses in Gísla saga which "could not be understood unless a prose explanation

went with them"; accordingly, if we accept previous findings concerning the age of these verses, we must think that the author of the extant saga had materials on which to build ("... much of the substance told in the prose of Gísla saga, although not the form in which it is told, must date from the twelfth and not the thirteenth century"). The corollary is not shirked. "In a modified way, we may be drawing back to the theory of the oral saga" (Turville-Petre 1970, 15-16).

I have already expressed the opinion that foreign influence would most readily make itself felt on the level of popular tradition. If this is so, and if we accept a theory of oral origins for the sagas, we must be prepared at every turn to find foreign elements woven into the narrative fabric. The genre was well adapted to the assimilation of new material, notwithstanding its firm roots in native tradition and its (pseudo-) historical pretensions. I may say that I cannot too strongly endorse Andersson's judgment regarding the issue of historicity. When Liestøl asserted that the Íslendingasögur claim to be history he was making "an aesthetic statement aimed at clarifying the relation of the saga writer to his material" (Andersson 1964, 50; cf. Liestøl 1930, Chapter IX). The function of the saga was to provide the family with a sufficiently impressive past, and embellishments could do it no harm as long as they did not detract from its psychological truth.

Besides, the entertainment value of a story was important. The epilogue to Göngu-Hrólfs saga ([2]39) tells us that old poetry and tales "hafa ... meir verið framsett til stundlegrar gleði enn ævinlegs átrúnaðar". The stylistic self-consciousness may strike as late, but not the sentiment. It is surely wrong to draw a sharp line of division here between Íslendingasögur and fornaldarsögur. The latter tend to be looked upon as a product of the age of decadence - a type of saga which only began to be written in the second half of the thirteenth century and which was both socially and artistically inferior to what preceded it (cf. Hallberg 1969, 40-41, 130, 132). This is to overlook important factors. Anne Holtmark (1966) has observed that it was quite compatible with the dignity of Sturla Þórðarson to recite Huldar saga, and that there were several Icelandic families who traced their line back to the hero of a fornaldarsaga. Such tales made their distinctive contribution to family history while providing excellent entertainment at the same time. It might be added that not a few Íslendingasögur devote introductory chapters to the adventures of remote ancestors prior to the age of Settlement. I cannot find any essential difference between these chapters and the fornaldarsögur; nor is there any real evidence that the fornaldarsögur are stylistically impoverished. A common origin for both types of saga can therefore be assumed - something which is in any case

theoretically desirable. Differences in tone and content reflect differences of attitude to the tradition: it goes without saying that the fornaldarsögur use foreign motifs more often than the Íslendingasögur. Basic principles, however, are the same in both cases. The saga writer who combined entertainment with instruction will have felt free to borrow from the works of his predecessors. Copious supplementary material, both native and imported, was available from oral sources. That is why I personally believe that a study of individual motifs can throw fresh light on the relationship between Norse and Celtic literature (cf. Chesnutt 1968). The fornaldarsögur and Prose Edda promise the richest harvest, but there is no reason why the Íslendingasögur should be excluded from investigation: see for example Guðmundsson 1967, Chapter 7. In the same way, I would expect motif research to throw up evidence of links not only with England, France and other major European countries, but also with the Baltic, Finno-Ugric, Byzantine and even Oriental worlds. The growth of Latin learning in twelfth-century Iceland coincided with the Crusaders' occupation of the Holy Land; Rögnvaldr Kali and Nikulás Bergsson claim their place in the history of Northern culture alongside the less adventurous majority.

The social function and popular origins of the sagas are thus far more important than the clerical education of scribes. The implication from the point of view of literary criticism is that we should adopt evaluative

criteria which are appropriate to a popular art form, and in particular refrain from judging a saga by its degree of conformity to our own norms. Though Hrafnkels saga attracts us on account of its symbolism, ambiguity and narrative economy, it does not follow that the Icelandic public thought it better than other sagas which lack these qualities. If the number of surviving manuscripts is anything to go by, a light-hearted and loosely assembled yarn like Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar had nearly as much appeal as the stark and intense Egils saga. We are also rather ignorant of the medieval Icелander's judgment in matters of style. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (cf. Andersson 1964, 78 and note 53) reckons with a good deal of oral influence on the style of the sagas - not least with regard to those features which a modern reader admires as unusual. The simplicity of approach, the use of direct speech, and even the detached attitude of the narrator may be nothing more than a reflex of the spoken idiom. How then are distinctions to be made between naivety and calculated effects? Liestøl (1930, esp. 26-31) was forthright in his strictures upon a style which is usually adulated; there is nothing remarkable from the folklorist's point of view in stereotyped phraseology or a frequent use of understatement. As to structure, there are at least as many examples of botched effects as there are strokes of genius. Grímr's laughter in Droplaugarsona saga (Hallberg 1969, 68-69), or the "thief's eyes" of Hallgerðr in Njála, are fine examples of an anticipatory

device with a deliberate purpose; on the other hand, there can be no greater anticlimax in Icelandic literature than the final meeting between Kári and Flosi (Njáls saga ch.159), where the accumulated suspense of the last section of the narrative is allowed to ebb away in a few lines. I think we should be on our guard against inaccurate encomia of the saga style. We should certainly ask ourselves to what extent the phenomena in question are distinctively Icelandic. The sagas habitually express character through action; they also abound in formulae, and in passages where the sublimity of the situation is offset by the prosaic language. All these things are thought of as unique qualities of the genre, but all of them can be paralleled elsewhere - the works of Malory, which are the product of a completely unrelated literary culture, are just one source of comparison which springs to mind.

Scholarship has yet to establish a set of critical principles which are consistent with the popular character of the sagas. Moreover, there are ancillary problems to be solved before a genuine improvement in critical method can be claimed. The editorial problem is one of them; it is not easy to make a stylistic analysis if one is uncertain as to the proper choice between variants, and hazardous to say anything about structure if a text exists in widely differing redactions. A redaction may represent the conflation not only of two or more manuscripts, but

also of manuscripts with oral tradition. The existence of a secondary oral tradition was accepted by previous generations of textual scholars,¹³ and more recent studies have done nothing to disprove it. Sometimes we cannot tell whether the form in which a particular passage appears is that chosen by an oral narrator, or by the "author" who first wrote the saga down, or by a scribe who had made arbitrary changes. If a scribe happened to be an active tradition-bearer¹⁴ - as some scribes doubtless were - his changes could constitute an improvement on what went before. We may frequently have to do with a combination of good and bad qualities for which no single person is responsible. This is an area where criticism must come to terms with the unfamiliar concept of authorship which I discussed earlier; it is only one example of the difficulties that remain to be confronted.

III

This paper has sought to counterbalance the Icelandic book-prose theory as well as the reaction which it called forth. I have stressed the traditional background on the one hand, while on the other I have argued that an internationalist standpoint is of more benefit to motif research than to conventional literary history. But I would readily admit that significant foreign parallels are not exclusively to be found on the level of oral tradition. The educated

minority must have left some marks on secular literature; we have only to ask ourselves where they did so, and with what effect. The answer appears in the texts of the sagas, but not merely in those passages for which a direct analogue can be cited. Lists of such instances, though easy to assemble, tell us very little that we need to know. A more rewarding procedure is to seek out areas of convergence between native and foreign ideas, for it was precisely at these points that the learned Icelander received intellectual stimulus.

One of the Latin books which must certainly have been known in thirteenth-century Iceland is the Etymologiæ of Isidore of Seville. Hólar and Viðey possessed copies of this work when their libraries were inventoried in the 1390s, but it had been used long before that time by the authors of Porláks saga and Rímberga (cf. Olmer 1902, 53; Paasche 1957, 324; Gjerløw 1962). In the first book of the Etymologiæ Isidore has something to say about heroic poetry and the men whom it celebrated: "Heroicum enim carmen dictum, quod eo virorum fortium res et facta narrantur. Nam heroes appellantur viri quasi aerii et caelo digni propter sapientiam et fortitudinem" (Lindsay 1911, I: xxxix, 9). The Icelandic reader could not fail to have been struck by the relevance of this dictum to the Edda poetry. What is not so obvious is whether he would also have considered it to be applicable to the prose sagas. The remarks prefixed to Piðriks saga in a late Icelandic copy

(AM 178 folio) may possibly imply that he did: we read there that sagas teach the distinction between good and evil, though it is not said that they were actually written for that purpose.¹⁵ Isidore explained that it was the "wisdom and bravery" of heroes which made them "worthy of heaven". E.R. Curtius has shown that he was here expressing an ideal of conduct which in time degenerated into a commonplace: the phrase sapientia et fortitudo is a rhetorical topos in which the essential qualities of the hero are juxtaposed (Curtius 1938, § 9, and 1954, Chapter 9). Authors who knew the topos tended in practice to be less demanding than they ought to have been. Their heroes might have one of the required attributes, but rarely both; Roland in the French poem is fortis, Oliver is sapiens. The great majority of Icelandic saga heroes were of the same breed as Roland. Their bravery, though incontestable, often verged upon rashness, and there were other respects too in which their ethical code was imperfect. Readers who were conscious of the ultimate ideal must have longed for a family history which extolled the wisdom as well as the valour of its protagonists. Njála was perhaps the one saga which thoroughly satisfied their demands: it celebrated not only the fortitudo of Gunnarr but also the sapientia of Njáll, and in many ways it laid the greater emphasis on the latter. The correspondence would not seem to be wholly accidental, for the very structure of the story can be understood in terms of the topos. The

first section treats of the fighting man par excellence, the second of the wise counsellor who abhors bloodshed. Gunnarr and Njáll thus clearly emerge as the representatives of extremes; the paths which they choose are estimable in themselves, but neither can lead to perfection.

Njála approaches closely at this point to the so-called secondary epic, which may well explain the esteem in which it is held at the present time. I do not in fact think that it qualifies for the title of epic: it is not equivalent in kind to the Chanson de Roland or the Nibelungenlied. It does, however, share something of the epic's fullness of treatment.¹⁶ And there is surely no comparable example in Icelandic of the fruitful blending of diverse elements. The author had a breadth of interest which was not hamstrung by theoretical inhibitions; serious history could exist side by side with antiquarianism and still leave room for trivialities like the adventures of Porkell hákr. I said previously that the saga authors required a fund of material and the ability to organize it. The author of Njála took the bulk of his material from native sources - both oral and documentary - but he inhabited a conceptual world which was at least partly European. His organizational principles were subject to influence from outside.

Sigurður Nordal (1957, 23) has described Njála as "a symbolic fable of the vanity of human wisdom". This is at best a half-truth. The author struggled to reconcile

artistic aims which were seemingly contradictory: he tried to compose a story which had symbolic meaning for the erudite and traditional authority for the common people. (Paradoxically enough, this aspect of his achievement remains unaffected by the structural flaws in the section following the Burning, which merely reflects his sense of responsibility to the less sophisticated section of his audience.) We must face the fact that the saga displays an internal order of priorities which is inconsistent with Nordal's interpretation.¹⁷ The different kinds of narrative material are complementary - not subordinate - to the moral design. Such a design indeed exists, but only in embryonic form; criticism has no licence to endow the author with ambitions which he made no effort to realize. By the same token the relevance of the Latin topos to the saga ought not to be exaggerated - after all, the antithesis between bravery and wisdom was inherent in the tradition from the moment that Gunnarr was brought into association with Njáll. It is reasonable to think that some Icelanders of the thirteenth century were familiar with Isidore's formula, and arguable that the author of Njála was one of them. But there can be no certainty as to the justice of such assumptions. I would hazard a guess that the author of the saga did see the applicability of the topos; further than that I am not prepared to go. Njála still makes artistic sense to Icelanders who have never heard of the Etymologiæ or Gregory's Dialogues.

The last seven centuries have seen no significant change in that regard.

Literary parallels to the sagas should accordingly be treated with some caution. They do not always point to external influences, but may rather indicate that the writer has perceived a native analogy to a continental European idea. The observation will sometimes have had little significance; sometimes, however, it will have created a sense of artistic solidarity with the outside world. The relationship of European literature to the sagas is that of a secondary stimulus, not a primary source. Icelandic authors did not require it as a model, though the more self-conscious among them will have been encouraged, and perhaps even reassured, by the discovery of common ground. I am here referring to form as well as content. The vernacular prose medium of the sagas was a natural outgrowth of the technique of oral narration; it lacked any established precedent in the major European literatures, which preferred verse for historical and fictional subjects. The beginning of saga writing happened, however, to coincide with a reaction against the prevailing fashion. French authors who are concerned about the credibility of what they write express an actual dislike of verse composition: Georges Doutrepoint, in his monumental work on the mises en prose, gives examples of this tendency from the beginning of the thirteenth century (Doutrepoint 1939, 385).

European movements furnished the saga writer with a line or two of defence against charges of literary deviation. Such an effect will not have been unwelcome.

The approach to the sagas which I have here outlined may be characterized as neo-nationalistic. I am fully aware of this fact, and I by no means expect the "rationalist" party to accept all of my premises. Scholars who continue to operate with the hypothesis of learned origins may well be able to produce new arguments in its favour. In doing so, however, they will be laying themselves open to the criticism which Erich Auerbach directed against rationalistic interpreters of the Old Testament (Auerbach 1946, 19). The rationalist's explanation is often persuasive, but it may nevertheless be psychologically absurd: that is an occupational danger which he must learn to live with.

NOTES

1. For bibliographical details see BONIS [Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies] 1963 (Copenhagen 1964) no. 211; 1965 (Copenhagen 1966) nos. 187, 330-333; 1966 (Copenhagen 1967) no. 161; and 1968 (Copenhagen 1969) nos. 174, 320, 322, to which add Samlaren LXXXVIII (1968 for 1967) 190-197 [P. Hallberg].
2. Lönnroth 1965b, 23-24. - It should be mentioned that Lönnroth has considerably modified his views since the publication of his thesis: he is now willing to accept the hypothesis of oral recitation in prose, and would by implication also accept the existence of an active Icelandic narrative tradition. Cf. Lönnroth 1971a, esp. the concluding pages, and 1971b. Neither of these latter publications had reached me when the present paper was written - a fact which the reader is asked to bear in mind when considering my objections to Lönnroth's earlier work.
3. For these see Looorits 1949-60, §§ 74, 89; Lid 1943 and 1951; and Fromm 1967, 262-277.
4. Compare K. Krohn's views on the genesis of Kalevala (see for example Krohn 1927, 16 ff. and 71 ff.), as well as the discussion of Scandinavian-Estonian contacts in Looorits 1949-60 and v. Schroeder 1906. - It is interesting that several other sagas locate flugdreki incidents in the remote, almost imaginary world lying to the East and North. Thus, Gull-Póris saga gives a brief account of Valr the viking, whose treasure was hidden norðr við Dumbshaf (344-345); this tradition recurs in Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar (136 ff.), and its influence is doubtless to be detected - despite the difference of geographical

location - in the name and role of the "black berserk" Fair in one of the late romances (Victors saga ok Blávus, 29). Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar also mentions Valr's uncle, Hárekr Bjarmakonungr, in an incident (128-129) which exhibits a special likeness to Kalevala. (For another appearance of this Hárekr in the fornaldarsaga repertoire see Bósa saga, 58.) Very similar to Valr and Hárekr is the redoubtable warrior Grímr ægir, whom Göngu-Hrólfir encounters during a battle fought skamt frá Aldeigjuborg (Göngu-Hrólfis saga, 208 and [2] 21-[2] 22). On the Baltic-Fennic milieu of Old Norse-Icelandic dragon traditions see further Chadwick 1959.

5. Adam's book does not appear to have been particularly well known in Iceland. A translated extract from Book II is preserved in AM 415 4to, which is a fragment of an encyclopedic manuscript dating from the early fourteenth century: see Kålund 1917-18, 59-62. There is another copy in Flateyjarbók, of which 415 may here be the direct exemplar, cf. Jónsson 1927, 145-146. Turville-Petre (1953, 204) mentions the possibility that the twelfth-century author of Hungrvaka was "influenced, perhaps indirectly or through an oral medium", by the Gesta. Other Icelandic writers who may have borrowed from Adam are Ari and Oddr Snorrason: see Ellehøj 1965.
6. The negative attitude of the Norwegian archdiocese must also have had an inhibiting effect. Contrary to received opinion, the Guðmundar saga Arasonar does not support the assumption that the Office and Mass in their existing form were composed in the first half of the thirteenth century. Cf. Ottósson 1959, esp. 68 ff.

7. Lars Lönnroth has made the same point for a different purpose (1965b, 12).
8. Not, however, on the mere grounds of its subjectivity, when the critic himself is no model of 'objective rigour' - Lönnroth's summary of earlier opinion (1965a, 5-6) may also be a trifle unrefined for some tastes: Meissner, Nordal, Einar Ól. Sveinsson and the rest share certain tendencies, but not the conscious community of purpose which seems to be implied.
9. Despite the imperfections noted by Lönnroth (1965a, 88ff.).
10. But it ought not to be inferred that all scribal alterations were drastic: they failed, amongst other things, to obliterate linguistic affinities of the kind which have been pointed out by Peter Hallberg (see note 12 below).
11. Too much general importance can be attached to studies like Nordal's Hrafnkatla (1940); see for example Hallberg 1969, 61.
12. The most recent exposition of his method is Hallberg 1968.
13. e.g. by Jiriczek and Schröder; cf. Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar, 63 and notes 1-2.
14. i.e. a member of the community who took an active part in the recitation of oral tradition. We may suppose that the number of such persons was never very large.
15. Piðriks saga af Bern I, 6⁹⁻¹³ [read pær, or þat with sg. verb, for MS þau (line 12)?] - It is uncertain whether the prologue to Piðriks Saga is genuine, though its influence has been detected in a fourteenth-

century redaction of one of the kings' sagas (see introduction to the edition, XXIII-XXVIII, LV).

16. "Epic" is here to be understood in Curtius's sense (see Curtius 1954, 177). An entirely different question is the possible genetic link between the Íslendingasögur and the "heroic lays" of the Edda: cf. Bandle 1969.
17. Nordal is more than a little disingenuous when he adds that the "bare stem of 'moral' is covered with such a luxuriant growth of exciting narrative that the reader may forget to look behind it" (loc.cit.).

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