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FÆREYINGASAGA - IDEOLOGY TRANSFORMED
INTO EPIC

I should like to begin by saying that I am going to lay before you a study of the Færeyingasaga¹⁾, in which I want first to subject it to an æsthetic analysis²⁾, next to investigate the writer/reader relationship, and finally to view the whole work in an overall social context.

1

I take it that the plot of the Saga is well-known, so that I need only remind you that it moves in two contextual unities, which are the world of Thránd and the world of Sigmund Brestisson. The first chapters of the Saga deal with Thránd's family and relate the story of how shredness gave him money and power. In the struggle for supremacy in the various parts of the Faroe Islands he defeats - with the assistance of a number of fight-loving men - two very powerful nephews of his, Brestir and Beinir. In order to avoid future trouble he brought their two sons Sigmund and Thórir to his home and later tried to rid himself of them by selling them as serfs. The buyer, however, a Norwegian merchant by the name of Hrafn, let them go. This is where the world of Sigmund Brestisson.

1) Færeyingasaga ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1927.

2) As regards this analysis, I am in debt of Professor P.G.Foote (The Saga of the Faroe Islanders. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College London 12 November 1964, published 1965).

begins in the Saga.

After travelling abroad for years Sigmund returns to the Faroe Islands as a grown man to avenge the death of his father. Thus the world of Thránd runs into the world of Sigmund, and as we know, the clash of the two worlds causes Sigmund's death. The Saga then moves on in Thránd's world, and shows how he tries to establish peace with people in the islands, not least with Sigmund's family. For some time after Sigmund's death Thránd seems to prosper, because his nephews (Sigurd Thorláksson, Thórd the Short, Gaut the Red) are a valuable help, but in the end they overdo the fighting, so that Sigmund's surviving relatives defeat them. After this Thránd dies of grief - and this is where the Saga ends.

The Færeyingasaga begins and ends with Thránd. In the middle of the work we find Sigmund's world and the struggle between the two principal characters. Before his fight with Sigmund Thránd defeats Brestir and Beinir, and after Sigmund's death he puts down traitors who are ready to acknowledge Norwegian rule of the islands.

In view of its composition the Færeyingasaga must be thought of as the saga of Thránd of Gata rather than the saga of Sigmund Brestisson. Thránd's world encloses Sigmund's world, and Thránd sees his wishes fulfilled, which his enemies do not, so that on the whole he has reason to be content.

It would, however, be a mistake to read the Saga as the report of the struggles of individuals, for when Thránd fights other saga characters, each wishes his social order established or consolidated. Thránd obstinately opposes Sigmund, because with the king of Norway as his commander-in-chief the latter works for the introduction of Christianity on the islands. And the fighting for power in the Faroe Islands is also the conflict of divergent ideas of how to divide the islands fairly among a few influential men.

Just as the Færeyingasaga text is one major unity: the life of Thránd, and one minor unity: the life of Sigmund,

the composition delineates one big space and one small space. There is only this to it that the relation between textual space and ideologico-geographical space is the other way round: Thránd, the principal character of the Saga, is the one who struggles for unconditional Faroe independence and the old faith, whereas Sigmund is in favour of Norwegian dominance, entailing the payment of tribute to the king of Norway and the introduction of Christianity. The relation between the narrow space and the wide space is clearly expressed in the fact that Thránd leaves the islands only once - in the beginning of the Saga, when he becomes a rich man, free from cares the rest of his life. Sigmund, on the contrary, does not hesitate to go to Norway every year, and even stays with his Norwegian friends all winter.

This is what the Færeyingasaga looks like if we consider the major lines of its structure: in its centre we see Thránd, the hero, whose power is threatened by enemies, whom he sweeps away easily. So here the Saga deals with the elimination of a new social order by the old order.

In my opinion one gets a much better insight in the ideology of the Saga by reading it more closely and examining the various episodes, in which Thránd does away with his enemies. What happens here in the events reported proves to be exactly the same thing as happens in the writer/reader relation. The minor episodes thus reveal what is the relation between the author of the Saga and his hero, and give us a clue to the way it was understood at the time of its creation (i.e. the time after the year 1200).

The minor episodes of the work should be taken to be instances of seduction - the word seduction to be taken in its most general sense, sexually, commercially (in advertising), mechanically (catching mice in a mousetrap). In all these cases the crux of the matter is that an individual is faced with an arrangement of signs or elements of signs which he believes he can understand and use. The mouse finds the cheese, and if it is hungry, hurries to get the satisfaction that cheese does give a mouse. We read an ad-

vertisement as an appeal to our needs and act accordingly. The goods may prove to be less useful than we expected.

People who make mousetraps, and people who write advertisements and sagas, know the way they have to go in order to obtain control over somebody else's consciousness. If they know the needs of some individual they can plan a message, which appeals to these needs. People can be talked into doing things which seem to satisfy their needs, but which are actually \neq useful to the seducer.

Thránd is a master of the art of seduction. I shall demonstrate this by an analysis of the ^{real} episodes of the Saga.

1. In chapter 2 on his journey abroad Thránd gets to the Holeyri fair, where Harald Gormsson, the king of Denmark, is also present. Suddenly two of the King's housecarls, the brothers Sigurd and Hárek, appear in the text without any apparent motive. It is said about them that one day they arranged with a merchant the purchase of a beautiful and expensive arm-ring, which they are to come and pay for the day after.

ok leið af sú nótt. En um morguninn gengr Sigurðr í brott ór búðinni, en Hárekr var eptir; ok lítlu síðar kemr Sigurðr útan at tjaldskörum ok mælti: "Hárekr frændi, sagði hann, seldu mér sjóðinn skjótt, þann er silfrit er í, þat er vit ætluðum til hringskaupsins, þvíat nú er samit kaupit, en þú bíð hér meðan ok gæt hér búðarinnar". Nú fær hann honum silfrit út í gegnum tjaldskarirnar.

Nú lítlu síðar kemr Sigurðr í búðina til bróður síns ok mælti: "tak þú nú silfrit, nú er samit kaupit". (ch.2-3)

Hárek explains that he has just handed over the silver, and they quarrel without understanding that they have been cheated.

The scene outside the tent has been arranged so as to give the reader a wrong impression which he shares with one of the characters. Immediately after, this impression is contradicted by a different impression which is just as convincing. As only one of them can be true, the reader must try to find an explanation later in the story, but not till chapter 22 is he told that all his

life Thránd profits from the turnover of the fair. Thus the otherwise inexplicable scene becomes clear. The first time "Sigurd" comes to the tent, he stays outside, so that he appears to his brother and the reader by his voice only. But Hárek and the reader, who view things from the same angle, do not hesitate to take part of a person's appearance for the whole. The second time "Sigurd" appears, he goes in, that is he is actually seen. If now we suppose that "Sigurd" No 2 does not lie when he denies that he has got the silver, the reader has to decide whether it is sufficient to recognise a person solely by his voice. We can, then, read the scene as a well-planned seduction on the part of Thránd, for why should it be there at all, if it was not he who was the perpetrator? Thránd has passed himself off as Sigurd and tricked Hárek into giving away all the money. The episode becomes absolutely grotesque when Thránd makes an awful amount of money by getting up a subscription in aid of the two poor victims.

The writer has put all his artistic ability into this little episode. What happens in the text, happens to the reader as well: we are the victims of the "intrigue" by Thránd and the writer arranging signs that we misinterpret. The characters of the Saga are thus cheated - in the concrete - while we move from being temporarily confused to smilingly admiring Thránd, the sly man.

2. This is the way in which Thránd acquires wealth and gains power. But it is not long after he has defeated his enemies in the islands that new adversaries appear who threaten his position. He has to prepare his defence, both openly by fortifying the farms of his allies, - and secretly - on the meteorological plane. I shall follow the latter point through the text to show the agreement in consciousness between Thránd and the narrator, which appears to me to be very characteristic of the work.

While Sigmund has won great fame for himself in the service of Earl Hákon, he has long been the subject of derision, for not having avenged his father. When at last he leaves, the Earl provides him with ships and a crew

and presents him with an arm-ring which is to bring him luck. The ring is handed over with a number of wise words about life, the ships with explanations of a practical nature.

[Sigmundur] talaði við Hákon jarl, at hann vill létta þessum hernaði ok vill leita út til Færeyja, kvez eigi lengr vilja heyra þat, at hann hefndi eigi fœður síns ok honum sé því brizlat, ok beiðir jarl efla sik til þessa ok gefa sér ráð til, hversu hann skal til hátta. Hákon svarar ok segir, at hafit er tor-sóttligt til eyjanna ok brim mikit - "ok þangat má eigi langskipum halda, ok skal ek láta gera þér knörru ii. ok fá menn til með þér svá at okkr þykki vel skipat". (ch.23)

On Sigmund's arrival in the islands the Earl proves to be right in his weather forecast:

Létu nú í haf ok gaf þeim vel byri, þar til er þeir höfðu fugl af eyjum ok heldu samflota. [...] Nú rak á storm fyrir þeim, ok skilðuz þá skipin, ok hafa nú rekit mikit, svá at doe-grum skiptir. (ch.23)

Though his force is halved, Sigmund wishes at once to attack Thránd. When the weather has improved and they approach Thránd's home island, Austrey, he says, "at hann mundi þat helzt kjósa at fá vald á Þrándi." (ch.24); but the weather again proves refractory.

Ok er þá berr at eyjunni, kemr á mót þeim bæði vindr ok stormr, svá at ekki er nálægt um, at þeir næði eyjunni (ch.24)

Strangely enough there are no meteorological difficulties near Svíney and Skúfey, where Sigmund makes his way afterwards. On a first reading there is nothing surprising in this, for the weather can behave most strangely in the islands, but in a wider perspective these obstacles on the sea which simultaneously delay the march of the plot, are instances of how Thránd's knowledge about conditions in the world of the Saga is as much more comprehensive than that of the other characters, as that of the author is deeper than that of the reader. Only much later in the Saga, when Sigmund is taking Thránd - whom he has temporarily defeated - in a triumphal procession to Ólaf Tryggva-

son, the King of Norway, does the reader understand whose interests the weather serves, so that he is able to see the episodes I have quoted, in a true light.

Thránd, of course, refuses to go with Sigmund on this show journey to Norway, but Sigmund forces him and he sets out.

En er þeir váru eigi langt í haf komnir, þá hittu þeir bæði í strauma ok storm mikinn, urðu við þat aptreka til Færeyja ok brutu skip sitt ok tyndu fé öllu, en mönnum varð borgit flestum. Sigmundr barg Þrándi ok mörgum qðrum. (ch.31)

The next time Sigmund wants to go to sea, the same thing happens: obnoxious weather, the wrecking of ships, the loss of preciousities etc. At length he finds there must be a catch somewhere.

Sigmundr sagði, at honum þótti mikit farbann á liggja. Þrándr kvað svá fara mundu, hversu opt sem þeir leitaði til, ef hann foeri nauðigr með þeim. (ch.31)

Both Sigmund, the deluded character of the Saga, and the reader, seduced as he is in the same way, now realise that it is Thránd who is the weathermaster. Sigmund lets Thránd go on condition that he "sór trúnaðareid at hann skal hafa ok halda kristiliga trú, vera trygg ok trúr Óláfi konungi ok Sigmundi" (ch.31). On the face of it, it looks as if Sigmund has carried the day, though he did not bring Thránd to Norway as he had planned. With his Christianity and his weak policy he has, however, not won any victory, rather the opposite, for a few pages further on it says:

Nú fór um kristni í Færeyjum sem víðara annarstaðar í ríki jarla, at hverr lifði sem vildi, en þeir sjálfir heldu vel sína trú. Sigmundr helt vel trú sína ok alt lið hans ok lét kirkju gera á boe sínum. Þat er sagt frá Þrándi, at hann kastar raunmjök trú sinni ok allir hans kumpánar. (ch.35)

We see that the weather magic in these episodes and the way the writer describes it, has two functions. In the first place it serves as a weapon in Thránd's hands in the struggle with Sigmund, the wind and contrary currents taking Sigmund to places he had not planned to go. Secondly,

the playing around with the weather on the part of the author implies that information which was his and Thránd's alone, is handed on to the other characters and the reader. In the story Thránd holds back certain information in order to trick Sigmund into doing, not what is good for Sigmund but what is useful to Thránd. But in the story-telling pattern, the writer/reader relation, where there can be no conflict of interests of a material kind, the intrigue functions in a different way. The reader steps into the action with the consciousness of Sigmund, finds what misfortunes are caused by his delusion - and adopts Thránd's view of the events. It is this transformation of the reader's consciousness, which is the most important prerequisite in the efficiency of the *Færeyingasaga* as an instrument of ideological persuasion.

3. When Thránd seduces characters in the Saga, the author "pilots" the reader's consciousness, and when Thránd defeats his political opponents, the reader's sympathies veer away from the brave, but stupid losers over to the victor and passive manipulator. The fact that Sigmund dies, does not only mean that a character passes out of the text; it also means that a thought is so efficiently driven out of the reader's head that he will take care never to do or think of doing the things referred to. The plot of the Saga is told not only as a good and entertaining story - it is the power of language to interpret human action on the basis of psychological and political ideas which have been incorporated as common property in the language of the community. Sigmund's death, as interpreted in the text, is endowed with a persuasive power which is foreign to traditional conceptions of the sagatext as a bit of harmless aesthetic entertainment.

For what happens at the end of Thránd's and Sigmund's endless fight, is that blindly believing in his ideals Sigmund walks right into the trap which Thránd, who thoroughly understands the mind of his enemy, has laid for him. When (in chapter 37) Thránd arrives with his men at

Skúfey¹⁾, Sigmund is gone; but for the very reason that the night before Thránd dreamt that he can now defeat Sigmund, he starts a search which because of his ability to scent tracks in nature soon yields results. However dark is falling, and they soon lose track of Sigmund and his two followers, one of whom is Thórir, his cousin. Ergo Thránd has to resort to magic and in mockery call appealingly to Sigmund's weakness for heroic gesture:

"þat er nú til Sigmundr at gera vart við sik, ef þú ert hugar þíns eigandi ok þykkiz vaskr maðr vera, sem þú hefir lengi kallaðr verit". (ch.37)

It is important for Sigmund under no circumstances to lose face. So hidden by the growing darkness he shortly after kills a comparatively unimportant member of Thránd's group, after which he hurries back to his two friends, crossing a deep ravine in a marvellous jump backwards. When trying to escape the three of them get to a rock near the sea. Here Thórir says, quite sensibly: "nú munu vér veita hér vörn sem auðit má verða". (ch.37) Sigmund is sorry he has to answer: "Ekki er ek til varnar foerr, [...], þvíat sverð mitt varð mér laust áðan, er ek hljóp ofugr aptr yfir gjána". (ch.37) As Sigmund has now lost his sword and is very tired, he has to try, with the two others, to cross the sea to Suðrey by swimming. As we know, the two others die before they get there. Sigmund is so exhausted that he is defenceless when he is found lying near the sea by three Suðrey men, who are eager to take the ring he was given by Earl Hákon. Thus it is Thránd's intrigue that leads Sigmund to his death.

On the background of the three intrigues we can now draw some preliminary conclusions about the composition of the Færeyingasaga. We can in this also see how elegantly

1) The author says Skúfey, but we have the right to think that he has confounded this island and Stóra Dímun. In general, he seems strikingly ignorant about Faroese conditions; it is, however, possible to explain his ignorance through an investigation of the relation between the author and the plot of the Saga (cf. part 3 of this paper).

Thránd's victories on the low plane harmonize with his rôle in the plot as a whole.

In the story of the Haleyri fair and the wind and weather episodes we saw how the reader, by reason of the point of view of the narrative, is led into illusions parallel to those which are brought into the consciousnesses of the saga characters. We are tricked together with Sigurd and Hárek, and fooled like Sigmund. As in each case it is Thránd who is behind the foolery, the psychological portent of the intrigue is that it is Thránd who pilots the consciousness of the characters and the reader.

When Sigmund suffers an ignominious death, something else happens. Here the reader does not take long to discover that Sigmund is again on the point of being seduced, and that this seduction will be the end of him. Therefore we read about his death with a certain well-informed aloofness. But as this well-informedness is identical with the consciousness of things which has been Thránd's all the time, the result of the intrigue is that Thránd pilots the saga characters with the same information and technique as those with which the author pilots the reader.

In this way Thránd can, psychologically, be called the actual author of the Færeyingasaga. It is with his superior knowledge that the intrigue has been planned; it is his material welfare that values are brought to bear on; and it is his life that the plot encircles from beginning to end.

2

I hope that it is clear from what I have already said that I do not believe in the so-called objectivity of the sagas and their exclusive aim as entertainment, which some criticism has had as its implicit or explicit hypothesis. This is due partly to my immediate impression in my readings, partly to my ideas of epic art in general.

The Færeyingasaga is in its composition the work of

a master with its variegated and subtle seduction of both characters and readers. With a grim smile the author pulls all the threads effortlessly and brilliantly, holds back necessary information, leads our thoughts astray. Being thrown hither and thither, as happens to us when we read this saga, is marvellous entertainment. But it is more than that.

The sagas are entertainment all right, but this entertainment is to be thought of as an instrument with which to influence the reader's consciousness, and it is an influence of an ideological nature. In spite of the fact that the style of the sagas does not allow of passing judgment on people, thoughts and actions, the author is in planning the plot able to work with the consciousness of the reader as with a lump of clay. If for a start we feel sympathy for Sigmund who, with idealistic bravery, opposes a stiffened social order, we end up by acknowledging the old order for the cunning with which Thránd, its figure-head, defeats less clever adversaries. The plot in itself is proof that Sigmund's insurrection was unjustified or at least not well-founded.

Let me compare the influence on the reader which we find in the Færeyingasaga with the difference between a comedy and a tragedy. In their composition these two have centrally a character whose thoughts reach beyond the social frame he is in. Both in the tragedy and the comedy wicked people design against the dreamer, generally with success. The difference between them rests in the angle ^{re}form which the defeat of the idealist by the intrigue is seen. In the tragedy the author adheres to the dreamer's point of view, complaining of the wickedness and intractability of the world. But in the comedy the author sides with the intriguers and laughs with them at the poor individual who has been held up as a laughing-stock.

The Færeyingasaga reminds me more of a comedy. With its continued shunting of consciousnesses taking the reader from sympathy with a loser to respect for the clever winner it has the structure of a comedy. If it is at all

a problem to see this, it is because Sigmund reads his own life as a tragedy and thus exhorts the reader to do the same thing. The tragedy of the *Færeyingasaga* is, however, both textually and psychologically embedded in its comedy. This is also seen in the fact that all his life Sigmund is earnest, one could say dead-serious, whereas Thránd is full of fun.

It may be difficult to see anything but entertainment in the *Færeyingasaga*, but this is among other things due to the fact that it was not written for us. The Saga was a message to thirteenth century Icelanders, why also its ideological function must be understood on the background of the social conditions of the time. What we do not know about big farmers and husbandmen or the conflict between a little island in the Atlantic and the kingdom of Norway, was well-known to contemporary Icelanders. It is my belief that they were able to find the same conflicts in the *Færeyingasaga* and have used the text as a collective affirmation of their own point of view in the political strife of the times.

I believe this for two reasons. First this analysis can define a phenomenon which is not to be found in the text of the Saga, but which is necessary for the understanding of the writer/reader relationship, namely the consciousness with which the writer supposed that the reader was endowed when he wrote the text. On the background of what I have said I imagine that this consciousness, presupposed present in the reader's head by the author of the Saga, is an aristocratic, nationally Icelandic consciousness.

If I regard the *Færeyingasaga* as an almost ritual confirmation of an ideological community, it is, in the second place, owing to an apparent agreement between contrasts in the plot of the Saga and disagreements of a political kind on Iceland at the beginning of the 13th century.