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Pseudoarchaism and Fiction in Króka-Refssaga

In approaching this little-discussed saga I am going to assume that the literary question it poses can best be answered by reformulating them in anthropological and linguistic terms. This, be it understood, is not to depress literature, oral or written, to the level of anthropology or linguistics, but merely to clarify the question at <sup>that</sup> level before we presume to answer them on a higher plane. Aside from the polemics which have swirled around the little book of M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, The Saga Mind, since its translation into English, I believe that its author has given Scandinavianists a timely warning that the narrowly philological considerations of saga literature which are still prevalent today are powerless to comment on many sides of the sagas even as literature, and that, at the very least, questions of genre, historicity, fiction, etc., in this prose literature ask for a preliminary cultural clarification if they are to be answered satisfactorily.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, in the case of Króka-Refssaga, readers would like to guess, I imagine, what was the sagaman's attitude to the saga sources he exploited, and what kind of an art product resulted from his exploitation of them. Since the saga's hero has a folkloric counterpart in Gautrekssaga, a saga of olden times, investigation of the sagaman's sources will necessarily direct itself towards the fornaldarsaga genre of story-telling, the general subject of the fourth international saga conference.

The guessing at authorial intentions which is a chancy but unavoidable concomitant of saga research can be made safer, if not more accurate, for us by recognizing, first of all, that literary imitation such as we have in Króka-Refssaga is a species of archaism insofar as it constitutes a revival of an art form of the past. A genuine old-fashioned saga, however, it is not, since the imitated form was not tamely accepted by the sagaman as an Erbgut to be worked over as something precious from tradition,

but, rather, it has been consciously evoked in an individual act of creation which in fact substitutes for the authentic model in the past--the family saga--an imitation of it, without thereby continuing the tradition from which the original sprang. Every appeal, implicit or explicit, which the sagaman may address to tradition in this sort of literary creation merely registers the distance that stretches between his work and the traditional model which serves to authenticate it, as it were across a gulf in time. At the full ripening of the tradition, when<sup>a</sup> Njálssaga is in the writing and the richest harvest of two centuries is to be gathered, it not only bears its legitimate flower and fruit, but also scatters the future seeds of those secondary and tertiary creations which misleadingly resemble the primary ones at their maturity. Consequently, it is often exceedingly difficult to determine whether we are contemplating in them another art product of tradition, or a good reproduction, isolated by historical circumstances and nurtured in thinner soil by skillful artistic hands. An instance of this taxonomic difficulty is, of course, in Hrafnkatla, which, formerly regarded, and rightly so, I would say, as a consummate artistic fiction, has now been reevaluated by Dietrich Hofmann as a product of tradition again.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless, as Hofmann himself admits,<sup>3</sup> one must postulate both artistic creativity and some historical contact with tradition for the composition of a saga in the classic period (the thirteenth century), but with Króka-Refssaga, written in the fourteenth century, we need not have any critical reservations about its fictiveness, which entails a definite break with tradition. It is unobjectionably a pseudoarchaic work, a synthesis which is almost entirely devoted to reclaiming in form and style a lost inheritance in the literary patrimony of the previous age, which it survives outside tradition, among the sporadic and heterogeneous saga creations of the fourteenth century, as an anomaly whose justification must be sought partly in the canons of earlier classical sagawriting,

and partly in the artistic psychology of its creator and the Icelandic culture of late medieval times. In its historical isolation it verges on what we would call novelistic fiction, although, as Steblin-Kamenskij reminds us,<sup>4</sup> the fictive strain in saga literature, wherever it appears, as in the fornaldarsögur, can never be wholly sui generis in the modern meaning of fiction. As between unvarnished historical fact and fiction in its own right, the sagamen and their audiences did not pass beyond the intermediate esthetic stage of grudging appreciation of the well-told fable which they knew to be a lie. Ordinarily they were content to take the incidents of saga tradition naively for facts of history.

Now, if one chooses to assign a positive value to the phenomenon of pseudoarchaism, one would do well to reflect, secondly, that, in historical linguistics,

the mimicked archaism is the only real archaism. A linguistic feature is archaic only if the speech community regards it as one.... Speakers only consider their speech archaic if they are deliberately engaging in imitation or pseudo-archaism. The attitude of the speaker is the same toward what he perceives or imitates as archaic, whether he is basing his view on earlier texts, on the habits of older speakers, or on pure convention. 5

Calvert Watkin's linguistic maxim, "the mimicked archaism is the only real archaism", is relevant to the texts of the sagas, in which genuinely older poetic stylism, oral prose formulae, or larger cultural patterns of Old Norse society may be crystallized in an archaizing language or mode of thought. One calls immediately to mind the obstrusive pseudoarchaic passages in the Fóstbraeðrasaga, in particular, the flowery Eddic and skaldic allusions to the daughters of Rán and the dog of the elder tree.<sup>6</sup> Here a special field of research into the interplay between classical saga prose and archaic poetic diction waits to be explored.<sup>7</sup> A conservative attitude on the part of Icelandic speakers to their language and literature was bound to become <sup>more</sup> pronounced as the classic saga period came to an end, so that, by the fourteenth century, when saga writing was desultory and

disoriented, pseudoarchaism acquired its most positive value as a preservative of what was oldest and dearest to them in their culture. The nostalgia for the mother country (Norway) in which Sigurður Nordal saw the rationale of Icelandic historiography<sup>8</sup> has a peculiar pathos to it at this juncture when some remnant of it, clinging to the cultural achievements of the once independent republic, was channelled into literary imitation of the native family sagas, as in Króka-Refssaga, Kjalnesingasaga, Finnbogasaga, etc.

Granted that genuine older and archaic elements of a language and literature preserve themselves in pseudoarchaic forms, it will be nonetheless practical, thirdly, to establish technical criteria by which the true archaism can be distinguished from the false, the primitive from its later manifestations. These criteria have been provided in an essay of 1952, "The Concept of Archaism in Anthropology", by Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>9</sup> A pseudoarchaism is detectable by external coincidence, where two elements from separate historic contexts are the same, and by internal discrepancy, where one element is at variance with its context. Applying these criteria to the synthetic art products of a late medieval culture in decline, we may be strongly drawn to place a negative value on them as spiritual symptoms of disunity, artificiality, rootlessness, escapism, etc. "Pseudo-archaic societies," in Lévi-Strauss's severe opinion, "are condemned societies."<sup>10</sup> However, his opinion is based on a rather romantic notion of the harmoniousness of primitive existence and a corresponding belief that the historical process is essentially disruptive of social life in its timeless primitive state.

In sum, there are three things to reckon with in turning to Króka-Refssaga and its sources: namely, that literary imitation from outside an anterior tradition is a species of archaism which is properly pseudoarchaic; secondly, that in the culture of speakers and writers who share a differentiated but joint language together whatever is authentically archaic must be couched in

pseudoarchaic equivalents to be apprehended among them as archaic; and thirdly, that pseudoarchaism can be detected by a two-fold test for external coincidence of elements out of historical context and internal discrepancy between element and context. The second point might tempt us to upgrade the value of pseudoarchaism, but the third would probably cause us to downgrade its value again.

Our saga can be tested for inauthenticity, under point three, by analyzing it in the formal categories of the family saga which Theodore Andersson tabulated in his book, The Icelandic Family Saga.<sup>11</sup> These categories--introduction, conflict, climax, revenge, and counterrevenge, reconciliation, and aftermath-- will correlate systematically the external coincidence of form and style between Króka-Refssaga and the main body of the family sagas, and give us a rough idea of the artistic faithfulness of its author to saga tradition, separated though he and his work were from that tradition by the cultural decline of fourteenth century Iceland. Against this backdrop of outward literary conformity the internal discrepancies in the saga--e.g., in genealogical matter--will stand out more prominently, permitting us to define more exactly the fictional nature of the writing in it. Our scholarly attempts at a definition of saga fiction will be greatly facilitated by its connection with another class of sagas, the fornaldarsögur, of which the Gautrekssaga supplies the folkloric analogue to it in Gjafa-Refr's success story. Finally, since our saga is very skemmtileg, as Scandinavianists are agreed,<sup>12</sup> a fair appraisal of the sagaman's pseudoarchaism might conclude on a positive note, under point two above.

By an "analytic reading" of the text in Íslensk fornrit XIV,<sup>13</sup> the first six chapters of Króka-Refssaga comprise the introduction of a family saga. The following introductory narrative items are of most interest:

1) The unpromising childhood of Refr Steinsson, fífl and kolbítr, who "had no other occupation than to roll around before the feet of those who came and went there ..." (ch. i).

2) Refr's first mankilling on coming of age (ch.iii). On his death-bed, Steinn, his father, foresees trouble from a neighbour whose sheep stray into the family fields to graze. After Steinn's death, Þorgerðr, his wife, hires a man to keep the stray sheep out of their property; their neighbour kills him, but Refr revenges him by killing the neighbour, and leaves home.

3) Refr's skill as a carpenter and shipwright (chs.iv-v). Under the roof of Gestr, his maternal uncle, the young hero reveals a talent for carpentering by flawlessly fashioning distaffs for the household (popularly called krókarefskefli in Icelandic tradition thereafter). Gestr sets him to work building a seagoing seal-hunting boat, which he makes a present of to the builder on its completion.

4) Refr's second mankilling and emigration to Greenland (chs.v-vi). Speared in the back by a wrestler whom he had thrown, Refr axes him to death at one blow by his ship, and prepares to put to sea right away with a picked crew of men. His uncle's parting words to him: "...I wish that you would have written up the tale (frásögn) of your journey, because it will appear remarkable to some people; for I believe that you are the next wisest man in our generation..." (ch.vi). Out in Greenland Refr marries one Helga Björnsdóttir and settles with her on a farm, but in so doing he incurs the enmity of Þorgils Víkarskalli and his four sons, of whom the eldest had been refused in marriage by Helga.

Needless to say, the awkward beginnings of Refr Steinsson are a standard opener for the sagas of many another famous hero--the Hamlet of Saxo, Starkaðr, Grettir, Víga-Glúmr, etc. -- and such beginnings were especially favored in late medieval saga writing; Gjafa-Refr of the Gautrekssaga is likewise denominated a fool, "fífl" being added slightly to his patronymic (Rennisfífl or Reimisfífl).<sup>14</sup> The character of the "coal-biter" was, unlike other fixed character types in medieval narrative, dynamic and capable of sudden changes which fascinated the sagamen and their audiences.<sup>15</sup>

In the opening scenes of the saga the murder of the shepherd

which initiates the action of the story is analogous to the slaying of Einar in Hrafnkatla or even to the violent death of Hávarðr's son as a shepherd in Hávarðarsaga-- provocations which also precipitate events in those sagas. Very likely the murder scene in Króka-Refssaga , ch.iii, was generic to the family saga.

Craftiness and craftsmanship go hand in hand in the career of Króka-Refr. His given name of "Fox" --an exclusively Icelandic name in Old Norse--is associated with the trade of carpentry in Gíslasaga through a carpenter, Refr, who is commissioned to carve a wooden likeness of two men in the act of homosexual intercourse (ergi) as a foul insult to them.<sup>16</sup> Refr Steinsson 's byname, Króka--figuratively, "of the tricks", or "devices" --which is bestowed on him in chapter xix by King Haraldr harðráði was coined from a word for hooks, hooks perhaps not unlike the wooden hooks (unci) with which Saxo's Hamlet plots by the fire to trap his stepfather and his household one day, and destroy them all.<sup>17</sup> However, the symbolic name of our hero designates more generally the trickster character of the kolbitr and the artisan in folklore and mythology, whose dominant prototypes in Scandinavia were the medieval Hamlet and Völunðr the smith, respectively.<sup>18</sup> But was there ever a "real" Refr Steinsson in Iceland? It seems, as the editors of Króka-Refssaga have conjectured,<sup>19</sup> that the author of the saga adapted Refr's family name and those of his parents from the genealogy of the Oddleifsson clan in Landnámabók H 101--one of the rare genealogical contacts of the saga with historical tradition, contrived as it is. Of this clan a Refr inn gamli dwelt in Brynjudalr, but any factual resemblance between him and Refr Steinsson is purely coincidental, or, rather, by artistic design.

In chapter vi the wished-for frásögn of Refr's journey to Greenland constitutes something like an internal discrepancy, since frásagnir were really the oral stuff of saga tradition, not the written stories of later stages of saga composition; and

certainly no traditional hero would be requested by a relative to dictate his exploits to a sagaman for the benefit of posterity. In effect, the author is announcing through the mouth of Refr's uncle his own conscious intention to fictionalize the subsequent life of Refr in Greenland. This fictionalization involves as we shall see, imitation of the poetic and adventurous life of Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld while in Greenland, as told in Fóstbraeðrasaga.

The central conflict of Króka-Refssaga arises in chapter vii, out in Greenland, with many repercussions elsewhere.

The Víkarskalli family group, who dislike Refr for marrying Helga, kill a white bear that he had sighted, but had been unable to go after because he was temporarily without hunting weapons. They belittle the new immigrant-- "never has a duller head come out to Greenland than he carries on his shoulders"--and impugn his manhood by alleging homosexual practices of his back in Iceland--"he became a woman every ninth night". Refr pretends, in his devious way, not to have heard of this slander, and busies himself in his workshop shaping a heavy spear for a blood-letting.

The climax of the saga occurs explosively in chapter viii:

In the head-splitting manner of Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, Refr cuts to pieces Þorgils and his four sons with the spear, on a rampage through their homestead. Then he assembles his family, which now includes three sons, on shipboard, and sails away into hiding, and out of the saga for a while.

This bloody episode was modelled in the smallest verbal details on the Fóstbraeðrasaga skirmishes of Þormóðr with Þorgrímr trolli and his four nephews, in chapter xiii--a family group of the same size as the Víkarskalli one, and in which Þormóðr kills the uncle and then three of the nephews, by ambush.<sup>20</sup> Thus Króka-Refr is assimilated to a better-known poet-adventurer in Greenland that he may be situated more familiarly in the Greenland setting.

In chapters ix-xiii and xiv-xv ensue the respective sequences of revenge and counterrevenge, in which these are the principal events:



1) Refr is nowhere to be found by Þorgil's avenger, his brother in law, Gunnarr (ch.ix). Eventually he is tracked by some wood chips from his workshop up a remote Greenland fjord. Gunnar is indebted for this sleuthing to an emissary of the Norwegian king's, Bárðr, who has been sent out to Greenland to collect skins and walrus tusks. Cruising the Greenland coasts, he found Refr for Gunnarr, and together they try to burn down his workshop; but no sooner are the fires lit than a built-in sprinkler system begins to operate mysteriously, quenching the blaze. In a confrontation with the would-be burners, the masterbuilder does not hesitate to challenge the king's authority with a broad hint: "Neither you nor the Greenlanders are destined to bestride my dead body--though I should stay here as many more winters--not unless you get assistance from a wiser man"--by which is meant the king himself (ch.x). Stymied, they must withdraw.

2) Gunnarr conveys three precious gifts to the Norwegian king through his returning representative--a polar bear, chess pieces of walrus ivory, and a carved and gold-inlaid walrus skull-- which the latter presents to the king in Nidaros. Haraldr extends his official thanks to the giver, but advises his emissary to give Greenland a wide berth in future and not hunt the fox to his lair(chs.xi-xii). Speculating out loud about the construction of Refr's sprinkler system, and thereby declaring himself to be the "wiser man" who might outwit Refr, the king deduces that he has piped water into his shop by wooden conduits which tap a lake in a glacier above the fjord, and accordingly he devises a plan for Gunnarr to disrupt the system. An excavation is to be dug down to the underground stream that runs into the conduits, and the stream dammed up; the shop can be then be readily burned and the fox caught. (ch. xiii).

Refr meanwhile takes countermeasure<sup>s</sup> against this plan:

1) He outfits his ship secretly for a trans-Atlantic voyage, loading it with Greenland wares, and assembles his family on board again. On the second assault of Bárðr and Gunnarr upon the workshop, the place looks just as it was before except for a newly dug ditch along its seaward wall. Doggedly the king's men unearth the conduits to the sprinkler system, smash them apart, and finally succeed in setting fire to the place. Refr, stepping outside, asks them whose plan it was to proceed thus--some "more thoughtful fellow" than they, he knows, is behind it. Bárðr merely retorts that they are going to seize him and his property now, and either hang him above his shop or burn him in it. But Refr, ducking in again, has one more trick up his sleeve: as the place smoulders in clouds of damp smoke, its seaward wall topples into the ditch dug below, burying

four of the burners there and at the same time spreading a roadbed for his ship which has been mounted on wheels inside the shop. It rolls under its own weight to the water and launches itself, and Refr and his family depart in it for Norway (ch.xiv).

2) Heedless of his master's prudent advice, Bárðr chases him out to sea in his boat. Refr drops his sail so that he can close with him. As his boat comes alongside he hurls a spear through him, while his crew disable the vessel by cutting its rigging. Then he hoists sail and is off again. Gunnarr in turn gives chase in the dusk, but now Refr lowers his sail gradually (his men rowing the boat) and deludes Gunnarr and his crew into believing that as sail is reduced their boat is outdistancing them. So Gunnarr abandons the chase at nightfall, and conveys no gifts to the Norwegian king this season. "People all said the same", the author writes in the best old saga style, "that few (revenges) would have been executed worse for one man (Bárðr or þorgils?)" (ch.xv).

In these sequences of events we encounter two pieces of curious machinery--a home-built sprinkler system of hollowed logs and a wheeled ship--which, whether fictional or historical, belong to the last period of saga-writing in the midfourteenth century. In chapters xvii-xviii of þjalar-Jónssaga<sup>21</sup> there is a fabulous account of the construction of a ship on wheels inside a mountain and its launching forth on a flood of water which has been pent up in the hollow of the mountains. As in Króka-Refssaga, the emergence of this nautical prodigy from its construction site floors the witnesses to it outside, who take to their heels in fright. However, this contemporary saga source does not contribute anything to Refr's rude sprinkler system, which like the krókarefskefli (cf.above, p.6) conceivably was inspired by the handiwork of the Icelandic bóndi about the farm.<sup>22</sup> In any case its down-to-earth pragmatism is quite foreign to the fabulousness of the ship-building in þjalar-Jónssaga.

Of greater significance than this source matter is the fact that in the above sections of the revenge narrative the bold hero directly or indirectly pits himself against a Norwegian king. In the family sagas Andersson can point to no more than

one heroic opposition to a king, in the enmity between Egill Skallagrímsson and Eric bloodaxe and his queen;<sup>22a</sup> and Eigla is a skáld-saga to boot! The case is so exceptional that we may allow ourselves to view Refr's trans-Atlantic battle of wits with Haraldr harðraði either as an external coincidence with respect to Eigla, or else as an internal discrepancy in his saga and in Egill's. In other words, we can extract a common motif from two sagas (a bonafide saga and an imitation), or we can restrict the heroic opposition in each to an absolute exception. I am inclined to the latter alternative for obvious reasons.

The reconciliation of Refr with the royal power in chapters xvi-xx requires him to peddle his Greenland wares at the Danish court for protection. He still acts at times like þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld with the Norwegians, in his use of pseudonyms, whereas his peregrinations to the Danish court and thence to the continent (on a pilgrimage) follow the itinerary of another Greenland voyager, Auðunn vestfirzkr;<sup>23</sup> but let us not get ahead of the story.

1) On landing at Nidáros, Refr disguises himself as an old merchant under the name of Narfi. A local ladies' man and retainer of the king, Skálp-Grani, flatters Helga in the bower of their lodgings--to him the lady is too young and beautiful to be the wife of an old man. Refr-Narfi glimpses them together in dalliance through a window, and attacks the seducer with his spear, despite protests from his wife that the Norwegian hasn't damaged any of his goods. Refr kills him notwithstanding and drags his body aside to a wooden fence, concealing him by it before risking an audience with the king to defend himself from the charge of murder. At a Thing meeting he describes this killing in such involuted and punning (prose) language to Haraldr that only the king can understand afterwards what he has said and done. Once Refr-Narfi has delivered his self-incriminating speech, he flees hastily to Denmark by sea (ch. xvi).

2) The king interprets Narfi's speech phrase by phrase to the court. A sample phrase: "fjallskerða konu", "to 'gully' a woman, " means "to beguile a woman", or gilja konu, because fjallskarð is synonymous with gil, "ravine". When Haraldr has unravelled the phraseology of the speech, he in-

stitutes a search for the merchant on land and sea; but as usual Refr is nowhere to be found. (ch.xvii).

3) At the Danish court the fugitive from justice in Norway is welcomed by King Sveinn Úlfsson who invites two of his sons to be raised as wards of the crown, and possesses himself of the Greenland wares which he has brought (ch.xviii).

4) Back to Norway, Haraldr learns of the death of Bárðr from the crew of his ship, which has limped into port, and realizes that the slayer of Skálp-Grani and of Bárðr must be one and the same man, Refr Steinsson, whom he now nicknames Króka-Refr for his crookedness. A punitive expedition under the leadership of Grani's brother, Eiríkr, is dispatched forthwith to Denmark to ambush the Greenland fox (ch.xix).

5) Refr, disguised as an old man once more, but under a different pseudonym (Sigtryggr, calqued on one of þormóðr's, Ótryggr), greets the expedition on the coast of Jutland and himself pilots Eiríkr and his men to the nearby encampment of the fox. His sons and sailing companions do not put up a resistance, and he leads them off captive to safety, taking them to two Danish longships manned by two hundred warriors --reinforcements from King Sveinn. This naval force is more than a match for the Norwegians, of whom all but Eiríkr and ten others are slain in a sea fight with them. Graciously, Refr spares Eiríkr's life, if he and King Haraldr swear not to lie in wait for his anymore. Thenceforth, by decree of King Sveinn, the Greenland fox retains the name of Sigtryggr (his pseudonym) in his adopted country of Denmark (ch.xx).

The Danish King, Sveinn, could not have done more for Auðunn vestfirzkr, but the most intriguing incident in the reconciliation is indubitably the complication at the outset of the man-killing of Skálp-Grani, together with Refr's riddling confession of the crime to King Haraldr. It is not a scene indeed which is very conciliatory, nor does it fit into the itinerary of Auðunn vestfirzkr, on which, as I have said above, Refr's career moves to its close. However, the behaviour of the fox at the Norwegian court is true his basic character of the trickster, and <sup>if</sup> we look into the legend of one of his trickster prototypes--the medieval Hamlet--we can parallel this mankilling with the stabbing of the interloping councillor by Amlethus in Saxo's version of the Hamlet legend.<sup>24</sup> When Amlethus has stabbed the eavesdropper where he has secreted himself in the bedstraw, and disposed of the

body down a privy, he jokes about the death crudely to his stepfather, saying that the dead councillor went to the privy and while relieving himself, "fell in". Refr, too, has to dispose of a body somewhere, and his punning speech to Haraldr about the disappearance of Skálp-Grani is stylized in the same vein as Amlethus' evasively witty replies to his stepfather and any others of the household<sup>who</sup> pry into his menacing eccentricities. In this literary parallelism there is an inconsistency of form on the side of Króka-Refssaga which is to be expected in an untraditional work of art: Refr delivers his quasipoetic speech in prose rather than in conventional skaldic verses, and his punning depends on none of the regular associations of words in skaldic poetry. Hence the sagaman had to insert a chapter (xvii) in which the all-knowing King Haraldr would expound Refr's funny neologism<sup>s</sup> to readers of the saga.

The aftermath of the narrative (ch.xx) dovetails closely with the pious ending of Auðuns þátr vestfirzka.

1) Refr, repentant, undertakes a pilgrimage to Rome, but takes sick and dies on the road in France, and is buried in a French monastery.

2) Of his sons, Steinn, Björn, and Þormóðr (named after the Kolbrúnarskáld), the first became the progenitor of the Danish archbishop, Absalom (1128-1201), and the third fathered a noble line of descendants out in Iceland, at Kvennabrekka (Refr's birthplace).

As in the introduction the genealogy of Refr and his parents was derived from Icelandic settlement history, so in the aftermath some Danish church history is derived from the genealogy of his sons, with equal improbability.

To recapitulate the chief external coincidences between Króka-Refssaga and the family sagas, we can assert that our saga accords structurally with Hrafnkatla in the introduction(2), with Fóstbraeðrsaga in the climax, with the Hamlet legend in the reconciliation (1-2), and with Auðuns þátr vestfirzka in the reconciliation (3, 5) and the aftermath (1). More precisely, Króka-Refssaga builds on certain set scenes in this saga

literature which were to hand in the traditional repertoire of the family saga. One other important coincidence between Króka-Refssaga and Egilssaga in the revenge category (1) may possibly be an internal discrepancy of theirs because of the infrequency of the motif of heroic opposition to a king in the family sagas.

The notable lack, on the other hand, of hardly any genealogical ties between the personnel of our saga and the old families and first settlers of Icelandic tradition and history demonstrates internally that Króka-Refssaga lies outside tradition in every sense (and not just chronologically), and that the above-enumerated coincidences merely impart a patina, a lustre of age, to its pseudoarchaic structure which synthetically preserves a vanishing art of story-telling. The sagaman's juggling of the name of the Oddleifsson clan in Landnámabók and Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld's pseudonym in Fóstbraeðrasaga, in order to invent a family genealogy and an alias for Refr Steinsson, should not divert our attention from this prime negative evidence for his artistic intentions and his true relationship to saga tradition. A further clue to his intentions is expressed in the wish of Refr's uncle that the frásögn of the hero's Greenland journey be written up, presumably in the literary mode of Fóstbraeðrasaga with its archaizing poetic prose.

So far we have only been confirming in part the thesis of Willi Emmerich that troublemakers of the type of Króka-Refr are preeminently nonhistorical imaginary figures whose literary function it is to bring out the ethical or mental superiority of the more historical figures they oppose.<sup>25</sup> But if Króka-Refr is unhistorical and his saga largely fictional, what kind of literary fiction are we actually dealing with in his escapades?

Above and beyond the imitation of the family sagas, the fiction of Króka-Refssaga rests ultimately with a folktale of the "lucky Hans" variety, which in the High Middle Ages lodged itself in a fornaldarsaga of the generous king, Gautrekr, to form the story of how munificently he rewarded an Icelandic ne'er-

do-well by the name of Refr, or Refo in Latin, and married his daughter to him. This tale which is first recorded by Saxo Grammaticus, and again in the Gautrekssaga of the second half of the thirteenth century,<sup>26</sup> is the oldest archaic saga inheritance which under literary wrappings has been transmitted to the pseudoarchaic Króka-Refssaga. It is surprising that hitherto its influence has been duly traced in Auðuns þáttir vestfirzka,<sup>27</sup> but not in our saga,<sup>28</sup> which absorbed it either through the Þáttir or from Gautrekssaga itself.

To summarize the scenario of our saga is at once to uncover the residium of the folkloric "Refssaga" in it: an unpromising lad of Kvennabrekka who has proved himself by a couple of man-killings in Iceland and emigrated to Greenland slays an emissary of the Norwegian king in a counterrevenge incident and sails for Norway with a boatload of Greenland wares to ingratiate himself with the king; but, falling afoul of another royal retainer in Nidaros, he must needs flee to the Danish king, instead, who forcefully defends him and his family from a Norwegian punitive expedition to his camp in Jutland, on receipt of the Greenland wares. In Gautrekssaga, Auðuns þáttir, and Króka-Refssaga alike, the Icelandic fortune-seeker has to circumvent an evil counsellor, selfish steward, or meddling retainer(s) of one king and trade in gifts with more than one king before he can find favor at length in a Scandinavian court.<sup>29</sup> The sole disparity between Króka-Refr and Auðunn and Refr Rennisfífl is that our hero is not quite such a "lucky Hans"--gaefumaðr-- as the other two, and in places even seems cast in the role of "antihero" to Auðunn, e.g., failing compromisingly to kill or capture a polar bear in Greenland (ch.vii) and facing not one court representative of the throne, in Norway, but two. He may have been too selfwilled (sjálfráðr) to prosper always.<sup>30</sup> By hook or by crook, however, he wins out in the end, to enjoy the same good fortune that they have.

In the course of being converted into saga and fiction the

folktale of "Refssaga" alters from a simple tribute to the legendary generosity of King Gautrekr, the mildingr, to a frank celebration of the remunerative gift diplomacy of the ne'er-do-well, Refr Rennisfífl. Refo in Saxo's Gesta Danorum will not let a smooth courtier of King Goto (Gautr) of Norway praise the generosity of his monarch more highly than that of Gótricus (Gautrekr) in Denmark, and on a wager manages by a transparent ruse to inveigle two gold arm-rings from this worthy, who rejoices to be tricked into greater generosity towards him. When after this the Norwegian courtier refuses to pay the wager, Refo kills him.

This single prestation is multiplied in the subsequent Gautrekkssaga to a series of exchanges of gifts between Refr Rennisfífl and several kings--Gautrekr, Ælla of England, Hrólfr kraki, and a sea-king, Óláfr, with an evil counsellor, Refnefr (Fox-snout). The series displays in its <sup>extended</sup> linearity the mediatory character of the trickster,<sup>31</sup> as well as the obligatory reciprocity of gift-giving in general,<sup>32</sup> and from these aspects sheds light on the negotiations in the final scenes of Auðuns Þáttr and Króka-Refssaga. As Refr Rennisfífl says to Hrólfr kraki, "I have received gifts from men, and yet I have given them, too, on occasion."<sup>33</sup> In short, he who gives gets, and in himself will be both benefactor and beneficiary.

Gjafa-Refr, as he is nicknamed in the fornaldarsaga, is profitably guided throughout his transactions with royalty by an earl who was a baulky beneficiary of his, somewhat averse to giving gifts, though he would gladly receive them. The earl assists him with a sense of perpetual embarrassment that he has never sufficiently recompensed a gift from him of the Rennir family's prize bull, for which he gave a paltry whetstone. But the conscience-stricken earl instructs Refr to put the whetstone in the hand of King Gautrekr, to throw at his tired hawk, and he will receive an arm-ring for it. And when he has traded the ring through two more transactions for a helmet and a coat of mail, he is told to trade these with the sea-king, Óláfr, for



the command of his fleet, with which he can hope to intimidate King Gautrekr, so that the latter will give him his daughter in marriage. There is no hitch in any of these transactions, except, predictably, in the prestation to Óláfr of the helmet and coat of mail, half of which (the helmet) his evil counsellor grabs, but without dissolving the charmed circle of gift-giving. The earl honorably discharges his obligation to Refr, and the peasant's son obtains a kingdom with the hand of the princess. It is noteworthy that, as in Króka-Refssaga, naval support is needed to complete the circle and end the story happily.

The schematic development of this story in Gautreks saga is, among other things, what marks it as a European folktale.<sup>34</sup> By comparison, the negotiations of Auðunn vestfirzka and Króka-Refr with the Norwegian and Danish king<sup>s</sup> are much less mechanical and their gift-giving goes no farther than from the Norwegian to the Danish court. Nevertheless, the prestatory principle in the fornaldarsaga--real mutual obligation as against apparent one-sided generosity--is binding on the kings and heroes in the Páttur and our saga, and it is implemented in our saga by a stratagem of force employed in the fornaldarsaga. Furthermore, Króka-Refr, like his folkloric counterpart, is a trickster who mediates "between the worlds" (peasantry and royalty, Iceland and Scandinavia, etc.) in driving a bargain with his Greenland wares, even though he does not drive it to the length<sup>s</sup> that Gjafa-Refr can. The realism inherent in the forms of the family saga blended in Króka-Refssaga sensibly delimit his trickery, which is often up against grave obstacles.

It remains in conclusion to venture a brief definition of the fiction in this saga of ours and an assessment of its artistic value. If it is a skröggsaga, a "false" family saga, it is clearly a skrögssaga with a difference, for it does not entertain its readers with mountains and marvels on the scale of Þjalar-Jónssaga (cf. above, p. 10), but, on the contrary, fosters an illusion of realistic sobriety and perfect verisimilitude. And

yet it also communes with the fantasies and fairy tales of the fornaldarsögur which fabled of wheeled ships and the generous King Gautrekr and the gifted and lucky Refr, the namesake of Refr Steinsson. Similar more or less artistic mixtures of family saga and fornaldarsaga were concocted in the fourteenth century,<sup>35</sup> but Króka-Refssaga is the most imaginative and the most realistic of the genre. It was conceived after the Gautrekssaga as a trickster tale of a kólbitr, unreal or surreal in outline, which was then colored in realistically in the family saga style. Its author was near enough to saga tradition to have mastered the art of the family saga thoroughly, but he plainly wrote as if he were working outside it--otherwise he would not have left so many genealogies hanging in the air. His work, therefore, is pseudoarchaic and its fictiveness twofold, an artificial imitation in form and style and a popular fantasy of "rags-to-riches" in content. What redeems its fictiveness from falsity is the belated sagaman's serious dedication to the oldest tradition of saga-writing, to which he subordinated everything fanciful in his subject matter. Thus, as in speech mimicry (cf. above, p:4f), the old was rendered in "olden" guise. One most admire in the last analysis his transformation of the grain of artistic truth in folktale and fornaldarsaga into the pearl of plausible fiction which is Króka-Refssaga.<sup>36</sup> We may say with his enthusiastic continuator in the Króka-Refs rímur, "Gaman er líkt að glósa slíkt / af grundum pells í óði...."<sup>37</sup> "It's a pleasant exercise to gloss such a work for the costly material in its poetry..."

FOOTNOTES

1. See especially in Saga Mind, trans.K.H. Ober (Odense,1973), chs. 1-2
2. "Hrafnkels und Hallfręðs Traum", Skandinavistik VI,i(1976), pp.19-36
3. Ibid., p. 31.
4. Op.cit., p.42 f.
5. C. Watkins, "Language and its History", in Language as a Human Problem, eds. M.Bloomfield and E.Haugen (New York,1974), p. 94
6. In chs. iii-iv of the saga; see on these allusions J.Kristjánsson, Um Fóstbraðarasögu (Reykjavik, 1972), p.267 f.
7. See the programmatic essay of Oscar Bandle, "Isländersaga und Heldendichtung", in Afmaelisrit Jóns Helgasonar (Reykjavik, 1969), pp. 1-26.
8. Snorri Sturluson (2nd ed.,Helgafell, 1973), p. 113 ff.
9. Translated in Structural Anthropology (I) by C.Jacobson and B.G. Schoepf (New York, 1963), pp. 101-19; see p.114, and cf. the dissenting paper by M.I.Pereira de Queiroz, "A noção de arcaísmo em etnologia ...." in Revista de Antropologia I, ii (Dec.,1953), p.108, where his criteria are entirely, but unreasonably, rejected.
10. Structural Anthropology (I), p. 117.
11. Cambridge, Mass.,1967. See Lars Lönnroth's review in Speculum XLIII (Jan.,1968), pp. 115-19: Egilssaga, Grettissaga and Njálssaga might resist Andersson's schematization, according to Lönnroth.
12. E.g., Sigurður Nordal, in Um íslenzkar fornsögur, trans.from Danish by A. Björnsson (Reykjavik, 1968), p. 169:..."einnig hrein skáldsaga, en laus við erlenda rómantik, mjög skemmtileg og vel sögð ."
13. Ed.J. Halldórsson (Reykjavik, 1959).
14. See Wilhelm Ranisch's introduction to his edition of this saga in Palaestra XI (Berlin, 1900), p. lx.
15. See G.B. Wood's Harvard doctoral dissertation of 1910, The Unpromising Hero in Folklore, Epic, and Romance, on this character type, which deserves further study.
16. Íslenzk fornrit (I. f.) VII, eds. B.K. Þórólfsson and G.Jónsson (Reykjavik, 1943), p.10.
17. Saxonis Gesta Danorum, eds. J.Olrik and H.Raeder (Copenhagen, 1931), III, vi,6, p. 78.
18. On the tricks of Amlæthus/Amlóði see my article (despite misprints), "The Medieval Hamlet: a Lesson in the Use and Abuse

## Footnotes ii

- of a Myth", in Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte LI,iii (1977),p.381 ff., and on the skills of Völundr, who was a shipwright like Króka-Refr, Grimm's Teutonic Mythology, trans.J.S.Stallybrass (reprint New York,1966), I,p.376 ff. Whether the Icelandic Refr figures were originally animals in the Indo-European beast fables and epics or not, as Stig Wikander argues in "Från indisk djurfabel til isländsk saga", Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund: Årsbok (1964),p.110 ff., is uncertain.
19. P. Pálsson in the preface to his edition (Copenhagen,1883), p.xxxii, and J.Halldórsson in the preface to his,p.xxxiv.
  20. Cf.with I.f.VI,p.233: "þormóðr hóggr þá í hófuð honum ok klýfr hann í herðar niðr..." I.f. XIV,p.136: "Refr hóggr þá til hans með spjóttinu ok klýfr hann í herðar niðr." As R. Heller has stressed in his recent contribution to Jakob Benediktsson's afmaelisrit, "Zur Entstehung der Grönlandszene der Fóstbraeðrsaga", Sjöttu ritgerðir (Reykjavik,1977),I. p.330 and fn.18, the author of Fóstbraeðrsaga loved such expressions. The borrowing in Króka-Refssaga is noted by its latest editor, J.Halldórsson,p.xxxv.
  21. Sagan af þjalar-Jóni (Reykjavik,1907),pp.38-43--a source cited by J. Halldórsson in his preface to Króka-Refssaga p.xxxvi.
  22. Halldórsson,p.xxxvii, refers us to archaeological reports of the remains of a drainage system of ditches under the floor of an Icelandic house in Narssaq,Greenland; but the setup in Refr's shop is a flushing apparatus of hollow logs.
  - 22a The Icelandic Family Saga, p.108,f.
  23. These observations from Halldórsson's preface,pp.xxxv-xxxvi.
  24. Cf.Gesta Danorum III, vi,12-15,pp.80-1.
  25. See the "Einleitung",p.viii, and "Ergebnis",p.103 f., to his Leipzig doctoral dissertation, Untersuchungen zur Rolle von Intriganten und Bösewichtern in einigen Islendinga Sögur (1955).
  26. Texts for this tale in Gesta Danorum VIII, xvi,1-4,pp.247-8, and Gautrekssaga, ed.Ranisch,pp.26-7 and 35-49 of the longer version, or pp.60-71 of the shorter. Reference to Gautrekssaga hereafter will be to the longer version of the saga. Cf.the not altogether complimentary mention of Gautrek in the twelfth century Háttalykill,sts.28 a-b,ed.F.Jónsson in Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning B (reprint Copenhagen, (1973),I,p.500 f. On the early "Refssaga" see Ranisch's preface to Gautrekssaga, pp.liii-lxxv.
  27. J. de Vries, Altnordische Literaturgeschichte (Berlin,1967), II,p.487; preface to the Þáttr in I.f. VI,p.ciii; and Wikander (as in fn.18,above),p.94 ff.

Footnotes iii

28. Even Ranisch has overlooked its total effect on Króka-Refs-saga.
29. This statement is valid whether the steward in the Háttir was an oriental functionary or not. See on him Stefán Einarsson, "Aefintýraatvik í Auðunar 'aetti vestfirzka", Skirnir CXIII (1939), pp.164-71.
30. On the luckless man in Old Norse literature, see H. Pálsson's contribution to the Afmaelisrit Björns Sigfússonar (Reykjavík, 1975), "Um gaefumenn og ógaefu í íslenskum fornsögum," p.142 f.
31. See Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in Structural Anthropology (I), p.224 ff., and the more psychological study of the character type in the sagas by John Lindow, "A Mythic Model in Bandamanna Saga," Michigan Germanic Studies III, 1 (1977), pp.1-12; cf. on the structuring of sagas by myths H. Bessason's concept of "mythological overlays" in his contribution to Sjöttíu ritgerðir I, p.275.
32. See the monograph of M. Mauss, Essai sur le don, in Marcel Mauss: Sociologie et Anthropologie (Paris, 1968), pp.145-279, which takes its theme from the lines in the Hávamál, st.42, "Vin sínum / skal maðr vinr vera/ ok gjalda gjöf við gjöf.."
33. Gautrekssaga, ch.x, p.42
34. See the chapter, "Abstrakter Stil", in Max Lüthi's Das europäische Volksmärchen (5th ed., Munich, 1976), pp.25-36.
35. See De Vries's review of these mixed sagas in his Altnordische Literaturgeschichte II, section 296. Cf. S. Einarsson, Íslensk bókmenntasaga (Reykjavík, 1961), p.186f., on Fljóts-daelasaga.
36. Cf. again Steblin-Kamenskij on the notion of "artistic truth" and fiction in the fornaldarsögur, Saga Mind, pp.39-43.
37. Flokkr I, st.2, as in P. Pálsson's edition of Króka-Refssaga og rímur, p.51.

