TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF FORNALDARSÖGUR

> Margir fyrri menn hafa saman sett til skemmtunar mönnum margar frásagnir, sumar eftir fornkvæðum eða fræðimönnum, en sumar eftir fornum bókum.
>
> Sigurðar saga þögla

As a teacher of Old Icelandic I often regret the fact that, while the study of the language has resulted in an organised body of knowledge, the literary side of my subject is still in a state of comparative chaos. Grammarians writing on syntax, phonology or any other aspect of Icelandic take it for granted that they must use the methods and assumptions of an established linguistic theory. Consequently, their work does something more than throw light on the language under study: it also serves to test the validity and adequacy of the chosen theory. And if it is of any real value, it must, by definition, be regarded as a contribution to the science of linguistics in general. Grammarians, we have learnt from experience, are people we can trust, if only because their statements are capable of verification, at least in terms of the postulates they work with. The process of explicating syntactic patterns in Icelandic and of identifying their elements involves a combination of

deductive and inductive methods: the linguist explores the particulars of the language according to the rules of a general theory and, as long as he abides by those rules, we have no difficulty in following his exposition, even when the language he is dealing with happens to be unfamiliar to us. Our trust is not so much in him as in the categories he uses.

But when we come to the question of how our medieval literature is being classified, analysed and interpreted, we are faced with a totally different situation. Our difficulty here does not consist in any lack of books and articles on the subject: on the contrary, the very quantity of the stuff is in fact a serious stumbling block. But what characterises most of the works masquerading as 'sage criticism' is the absence of critical theory. Many a scholar writing on the sagas simply arrogates to himself the right to make up his rules as he goes along, or else he keeps following blindly in the footsteps of his uncritical predecessors. The result is that critics specialising in other literatures who want to discover the essential nature of the Icelandic sagas find the bulk of what has been written on the subject both obscure and unhelpful. So while my students can learn a good deal <u>about</u> the Icelandic language before actually starting to read it, by consulting works on phonology, syntax and morphology, there is, as far as I know, not a single handbook on the literature that can be recommended to students for strictly critical purposes. Saga exegesis, as it has been

practised over the years, is not only lacking in theory, but it is primarily intended either for popular consumption or else for a narrow circle of specialists in Norse and Germanic studies, in which latter case it tends to be esoteric in character, irrelevant and idiosyncratic. There are, needless to say, some useful observations on individual aspects of certain texts, but a comprehensive, systemic analysis of early Icelandic literature taken as a whole is yet to be attempted.

The principal reason for the failure to study the sagas critically is not to be sought in the literature itself, but rather in the apparent assumption that they lie somewhere beyond the pale of literary criticism. While no one would take seriously a literary critic who decides one day to make a syntactic analysis of Norse and that without having mastered the discipline involved, few scholars are likely to object in the case of a linguist attempting to analyse our old stories and poems from a literary point of view. Numerous books and articles on the literary qualities of the sagas are in fact a by-product of the totally different activity of editing texts. It is just as if one is expected to believe that poring over saga manuscripts for a year or two will give the editor, without any special efforts on his part, a miraculous insight into the nature of narrative art, whether by osmosis or divine revelation. Surely, saga exegesis is too important a subject to be left to the whims of grammarians, philologists, antiquarians, historians, folklorists, or social anthropologists,

even though their fields of study impinge on ours, and there is, of course, much we can learn from their disciplines.

The question of literary kinds in medieval Iceland can never be settled satisfactorily unless the assumptions on which the categories are based meet certain rudimentary requirements. First, it should be self-evident that we must take into consideration the total range of the narrative literature in question. It is simply not good enough to set up categories like 'fornaldarsögur', 'riddarasögur', 'lygisögur', 'konungasögur' and 'Íslendingasögur', only to discover that certain tales cannot be readily accommodated in any of them, while others might be fitted into two or more. Using the traditional categories, the student will probably find it difficult to place Skáldasaga, Hróa þáttr and Hemings þáttr Áslákssonar,[1] to name but three obvious examples. More importantly, the criteria used for classificatory purposes should be chosen on scientific principles and rigorously applied. Where else in the world of literary studies do we find the nationality of the protagonist serving as the sole factor for determining the category to which a story belongs? I am, of course, alluding to the 'Íslendingasögur' and 'Íslendingaþættir'. What Bárðar saga and Hrafnkels saga have in common is that the title hero is an Icelander, which tells us very little about the nature of either story. Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar and Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs also

figure an Icelander in the principal role, but they differ radically in theme, mode and purpose. On the other hand, there is *Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana*, which is set entirely in Iceland, but since the protagonist is not a native Icelander, we must either ignore the distinctive feature of the hero's nationality or else place *Gunnars þáttr* in a category by itself. Discerning readers who know *Hákonar saga gamla* by Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284) and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason (c. 1200?) will probably find the differences between them no less significant than the common factor that both deal with Norwegian rulers. The term 'konungasögur' is useful when we treat the two sagas as sources, potential and actual, for the history of Norway, but once we start looking at them critically the blanket term becomes a matter of inconvenience.

Medieval scribes were of course fully aware of the fact that the stories they copied out differed generically from one another, but as they have not left us any systematic classification, we must work out our own. However, the terms they used to characterise individual narratives are still useful. In this connexion, we might mention 'fornsaga', 'lygisaga', 'skröksaga', 'lífssaga', 'ævisaga', 'dæmisaga', 'riddarasaga', 'stjúpmæðrasaga', 'heilagra manna sögur' and 'heiðinna manna sögur'. Two of these terms (lygisaga and riddarasaga) are used by modern scholars to classify secular tales. The term 'Íslendingasaga' which was originally the

title of a book by Sturla Þórðarson and probably modelled on titles like Historia Anglorum has long been used as a blanket term for stories about Icelandic heroes belonging to a much earlier period than Sturla had in mind.

As is the case of certain other current labels for literary kinds in medieval Iceland, the term 'fornaldarsaga' and the sense in which it is used are essentially a legacy from nineteenth century romanticism, which tended to base its generic distinctions on historical rather than critical considerations.[2] It appears to have been coined by C.C. Rafn, who used it as a blanket term for a collection of tales which he edited in 1829-30, and we have been stuck with it ever since.[3] But editorial convenience and literary categorization are not necessarily the same thing, and since the Fourth International Saga Conference is devoted to the purpose of studying the 'fornaldarsögur', it seems not inappropriate that we should take this opportunity to consider the adequacy of the term. Broadly speaking, the title Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda gives a fair idea of what the three volumes contain: with certain exceptions, listed below, the tales are set, partly at least, in Scandinavia (Norðrlǫnd), the action taking place in ancient times (fornöld), which is usually identified with the legendary and historical period ending with the settlement of Iceland late in the ninth century. However, the distinctive features of time and place do not apply equally well to all the narratives concerned. Let us look at the time

element first.

Yngvars saga víðförla is set in the first half of the eleventh century. The title hero is said to have died in 1041.[4] References to contemporary Scandinavian rulers make it perfectly clear when the events described, fantastic as they are, were thought to have taken place. Like other leading characters in a saga with an eleventh century setting, Yngvarr was a real historical personage, and since there are numerous runic stones in Sweden commemorating those who accompanied him on his Russian expedition, there is no doubt that he undertook that journey. Since other stories set in the eleventh century fail to qualify for membership of the exclusive fornaldarsögur club, we are bound to wonder why Yngvars saga is so readily admitted there. Is the reason simply that the hero was of Swedish and not Norwegian nationality? Or the fantastic and fanciful elements in the description of his adventures? In either case, the time factor does not apply in the case of this particular narrative. Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns is set several decades earlier, in the reign of King Ólafr Tryggvason (995-1000), or more than a century after the so-called fornöld is supposed to have come to a close. The title hero is presented as a convert to Christianity, and his adventures are so closely linked with the proselytizing king that it is impossible to separate the purely legendary stuff from the rest without destroying the unity of the story. Two other tales, Norna-Gests þáttr and

Sörla þáttr are associated at one level with King Ólafr, and at another with heroes of myth and legend. And *Tóka þáttr Tókasonar* describes a mysterious stranger who visits King Ólafr Haraldsson (d.1030), describing his adventures at the courts of Hrólfr kraki and Hálfr.

Coming to the criterion of place, we see at a glance that *Hjálmþérs saga* does not belong with the rest. In that particular story the title hero, a grandson of the king of Syria, is the prince of an imaginary country called Mannheimar. Apart from the short sentence "Helt Tóki til Englands", there is not a single reference to Western or Northern Europe; Scandinavia is not even mentioned. Instead, we find not only Syria, but also Bóósia (Boecia), Serkland (Land of the Saracens), Hundingjaland (Land of the Cynocephali?) and Arabia. It is in keeping with the exotic setting that people mentioned in the tale bear such Icelandic-sounding names and Núdus, Lúcartus and Ptólemeus! I can see no valid reason why *Hjálmþérs saga*, rather than other tales of the kind usually relegated to the ignominious category of 'lygisögur', should be regarded as a 'fornaldarsaga'.

One justification for treating the stories in Rafn's anthology as a separate and homogeneous category is the light they are supposed to throw on oral tradition in early Scandinavia, and many of them demonstrably meet that requirement. Several tales, including *Völsunga saga* (essentially a prose rendering of heroic poetry), *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*,

Gautreks saga, *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and (notwithstanding its late date) *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, all contain genuine materials culled from the heroic tradition. Moreover, fragments of myth and legend are to be found in several other stories. The principal reason for including *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, *Norna-Gests þáttr* and *Tóka þáttr Tókasonar* is not so much the temporal setting as their use of legendary materials. But in this, as in other respects, it is difficult to draw a definite line between the 'fornaldarsögur' and the 'lygisögur'. The great King Goðmundr of Glasisvellir cuts a no less dashing figure in *Samsons saga fagra* than he does in *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, and those who want a guide through Risaland and Jötunheimar could do a lot worse than to read the description of these fascinating places in *Samsons saga*. The fact is that the raw materials going into a saga, even when we can isolate and identify them, are inadequate in themselves for the purpose of determining the literary category to which it belongs. As is the case of the 'lygisögur', the 'fornaldarsögur' derived their stuff from disparate sources: popular tales, folklore, myth, legend, foreign romances, medieval and classical learning,[5] and so on. What matters most is not the origin of the stuff, but how it is shaped into a recognizable literary form. I shall come to that point later, but first I would like to consider briefly the status of the 'fornaldarsögur' in relation to the total literary experience of the Icelanders

in medieval times.[6]

In the literature of early Iceland (c. 1100 to 1400) taken as a whole, we distinguish between two main narrative types: 'history' and 'fiction'. The term 'fiction' denotes stories whose themes and characters are subordinated to a plot, whereas in the case of histories, i.e. factual descriptions of the past, it is the course of events, rather than a literary convention, that determines the ultimate shape of the narrative. Broadly speaking, we find that most of the so-called 'Íslendingasögur', 'fornaldarsögur', 'riddarasögur' and 'lygisögur' are fictions in the critical sense of the term. The category of 'history' is represented by such obvious examples as Íslendingabók, Landnámabók, Íslendingasaga and other narratives making up the Sturlunga saga corpus, Hákonar saga gamla, Heimskringla (in spite of certain fictional elements), Orkneyinga saga, Knytlinga saga and Færeyinga saga.

The total range of secular prose fiction in early Iceland can be classified into different categories by using such obvious and universally acceptable criteria as the social and ethical status of the principal hero, or the quality of the world in which he exists. Using the second alternative, we see that the total literary cosmos of early Icelandic fiction divides into three primary worlds. First, there is the timeless, hypothetical world of myth, inhabited by gods and other extramundane beings. The myths in Snorra-Edda (as well as the poems on which they are based)belong here. Second,

there is the alien, aristocratic world of hero legend and romance, a world which is essentially human, though it shares certain obvious features with myth: the hero may be of divine origin, gods and goddesses make an occasional appearance, various laws of nature are suspended at will. In broad geographical terms, the world of romance corresponds to Europe (outside Iceland), though the hero's adventures may take him to more distant parts, not only to Ethopia in the south and India in the east but also to purely mythical regions. Under the blanket term 'romance' belong the 'fornaldarsögur', 'riddarasögur', 'lygisögur' and those episodes in the 'Íslendingasögur' that are set beyond the author's native land. Third, there is the familiar world of experience, mirroring the realities of the author's own environment: stories like *Bandamanna saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs* and *Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana*, which are not only set in Iceland but also free of fanciful elements, constitute a class of their own and could be best described as 'naturalistic fiction'. One of their characteristic features is that the protagonist is a non-aristocratic member of society, such as a farmer or a sea-going trader. In contrast, the typical hero of romance is either the son of a king or else someone closely associated with royalty. Looking at the 'fornaldarsögur' from the point of view of the hero's status in society, we find that *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Ketils saga hængs* and *Áns saga bogsveigis* differ radically

from the rest: not only is the hero a farmer's son, but also he remains a member of that class for the rest of his life. In that respect, he can be compared to the heroes of the 'Islendingasögur', particularly those where the protagonist passes through a heroic or romance phase as a warrior, fighting berserks, monsters, vikings and other enemies of society.

On the basis of how closely each fictive story corresponds to what the author could observe and experience in his native land, the total corpus of early Icelandic fiction can be seen as a spectrum, with myth and stories in a naturalistic mode at the two opposite extremes, while heroic legend, romance and historical romance (e.g. *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga*) occupy the central grades of the total literary order. Once we realise the central position of the 'fornaldarsögur' in early Icelandic secular fiction taken as a whole, it becomes easier to place each individual tale within the given range. The term 'hero legend' is useful for the purpose of separating such stories as *Völsunga saga* and the Starkaðr episode in *Gautreks saga*, where the narrative mode follows a convention inherited from a pre-literate period, from the majority of the tales in Rafn's anthology which are essentially romances. Within that broad category we have one historical romance, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, mentioned above, and one sacred romance *Eireks saga víðförla*, but secular romances of a legendary kind, such as *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar* and

many others, constitute a large part of the total collection.

In the romances, whether historical or legendary, secular or sacred, foreign or native, we find that one of their salient features, separating them from naturalistic fiction, is that the hero undertakes an important quest, or a series of quests, involving hazards and triumphs on his part. This of course is a feature shared by the 'riddarasögur' and the 'lygisögur'. On the successful completion of his quest(s), the hero emerges a greater man than before he set out and in doing so he proves himself superior to the rest of the cast. The quests in the romances can be classified into several categories, depending on the ultimate goal and the perils involved. The hero may set out to rescue an abducted princess (Egils saga ok Asmundar), to undertake a dangerous mission at the behest of a hostile king (Bósa saga ok Herrauðs; Sturlaugs saga starfsama), to lead an army against the usurper of a throne (Göngu-Hrólfs saga), or seek a wife either for himself or for a friend (Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar); revenge is yet another motive behind the quest (Sörla saga sterka, Örvar-Odds saga). When Göngu-Hrólfs saga refers to Yngvars saga víðförla, it singles out the goal of the hero's quest: he set out in search of the source of a river. In some cases, including Eireks saga víðförla, the quest is the result of a solemn vow: "Þess er getit eitt jólakveld, þá strengdi Eirekr þess heit at fara um allan heim at leita, ef hann fyndi stað þann, er heiðnir menn kalla Odáinsakr, en

kristnir menn jörð lifandi manna eða Paradísum. Þessi heitstrenging varð fræg um allan Nóreg". The title hero of Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar is presented as the nephew of "Eirekr inn víðförli, er fann Ódáinsakr". Here, as elsewhere in romance, the notion of a quest dominates other elements in the description. In Örvar-Odds saga, which is essentially cyclical in shape, as the hero ends his long life at the very place he set out from, we have a succession of quests, linked together by his personality and by the protean nature of his principal adversary, Ögmundr Eyþjófsbani. In contrast to other romance heroes, Örvar-Oddr fails in his revenge-quest, since the antagonist is, like Glámr in Grettis saga, an evil spirit and therefore indestructible.

The obstacles confronting the hero on his adventurous journey to the desired goal, include the lady's reluctance to be wooed, monsters, berserks and other evil-doers, as well as the hostile elements of nature. In a typical romance, there is a happy ending, with death-knells sounding for the enemy and wedding bells for the hero. Another recurrent feature is that the hero, usually at the age of eighteen, fights a noble-minded opponent; afterwards they become blood-brothers. The hero exemplifies how to make friends and win a wife. His adventures are of course typical of the legendary romances, but they have many parallels besides in the historical romances describing the young Icelandic hero abroad. The viking episodes in Njáls saga, Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa, Egils

saga, and others should not be regarded as borrowings from the 'fornaldarsögur', but rather as manifestations of a powerful inherent element in the literature.

The raw materials that went into the making of the sagas, irrespective of the mode in which they were written, do not, as I have already said, provide us with all the criteria we need for classificatory purposes: the formal treatment of those materials and their relevance to the quality of human existence and ideals in early Iceland must also be taken into consideration. It goes without saying that we should study each individual saga in its totality, not only from the point of view of its morphology but also of its semantics. Apart from those 'fornaldarsögur' that demonstrably got their materials from the pre-literate tradition of Scandinavia, there are certain other elements which are obviously of the same origin. In this connexion we might mention the Hálogaland cycle, which are not necessarily oral tales transmitted by successive generations of Icelanders from the time of the settlement; it seems to me no less likely that Gríms saga loðinkinna and Ketils saga hængs are truly Norwegian in the sense that the Icelandic 'author(s)' heard these tales in Norway. Whatever the origins of the materials of the 'fornaldarsögur', it should be plain enough that most of them belong, formally at least, to the romance tradition of medieval Europe, and for that reason it would be a mistake to try to draw a sharp dividing line between them and the 'riddarasögur' and 'lygisögur'.

FOOTNOTES

1. In his informative guide Sagaliteratur (Stuttgart 1970), Kurt Schier places Hemings þáttr among the 'fornaldarsögur', and that in spite of its eleventh century setting. Considering the fact that a good many other minor tales have 'charakteristische Merkmale einer Fornaldarsaga', the inclusion of this particular þáttr in the category does not appear to serve any useful purpose.
2. Sigurður Nordal's threefold division of the early narrative literature of Norway and Iceland (Sagalitteraturen, Nordisk Kultur VIII:B, København 1953, pp. 180-82) is an extreme case of the romantic approach. See Kurt Schier's remarks in op. cit., pp. 6-8.
3. Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum útgefnar af C.C. Rafn, I-III bindi. Kaupmannahofn 1829-30.
4. "Enn þa er Ynguar andadizt, uar lidit fra burd Jhesu Christi mxl ok einn uetur." Yngvars saga víðförla, utg. Emil Olsen, København 1912, p. 30. The same date for Yngvar's death is given in the Icelandic Annals. References in the saga to "Oddr munkr in fróði" and his oral informants serve to suggest that learned men in medieval Iceland would probably have objected to its inclusion in the 'fornaldarsögur' category.
5. For classical and medieval elements in the sagas, see Margaret Schlauch, Romance in Iceland, New York, 1934.

FOOTNOTES (continued)

6. The following paragraphs are based on my paper "Early Icelandic Imaginative Literature", which was given in Odense last November at a Symposium on Medieval Narrative. The Proceedings of the Symposium will be published by Odense University later this year.