

YVAIN-IVENS SAGA : TRANSLATION OR TRAVESTY ?

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper : *Yvain-Ívens saga : translation or travesty ?* (a comparative study of two medieval texts) indicates clearly enough what it is about. As *Ívens saga* is not based directly on a French original, but on a manuscript tradition which begins with a Norwegian translation (cf *Kölbing*), there would be little to be gained by making a word for word comparison of the two texts and concentrating exclusively on linguistic or translational problems.

I shall therefore attempt to show that, beyond the personal (and unverifiable) intentions of author and translator, there are some very good reasons for the differences which exist between the French and Icelandic Texts. If, as is obvious, the story of Yvain underwent major transformations and pruning in Iceland whilst the French version continued almost unchanged, this cannot simply be put down to any putative laziness on the part of the Icelandic copyists, in contrast to the then evident seriousness and conscientious professionalism of the French scribes ! In reality, what has happened is that successive generations of Icelandic copyists, following on from the first Norwegian translator, undertook a wide-ranging process of assimilation which, although in many cases unconscious, was certainly necessary if this exotic literary work was to interest, and be comprehensible to, an Icelandic audience.

At first sight, there would seem to have been nothing which predisposed a Norwegian and then Icelandic audience to receive and assimilate the French courtly romance. As Jean Frappier has pointed out (*Amour courtois et Table Ronde*. Genève, Droz 1973. p. 4) : "The French courtly ideal was born and flowered in 12 th-century France ; it represents both a social and a literary phenomenon, inseparably linked". But Norway and the more Iceland possessed a very different social structure and, when Hákon the Elder (1217,1263) encouraged the introduction of the courtly romance into Norway and had Yvain translated : "Ok lýkr hér sögu herra Ívens, er Hákon konungr gamli lét snúa ór Franzeisu i Norroenu" (115,6), he did so precisely in order to familiarise his kingdom with the courtly ideal and, through the values which it represented, to bring a very Germanic Norway closer to the French model of Christianity and feudalism which

was, at the time, the most advanced in Europe.

This gap which existed between France and Norway - and therefore all the more so between France and Iceland - explains the numerous differences we find from one text to the other. However, before pointing out the elements which allow a French and an Icelandic (because the old Norse version of Yvain only exists in Icelandic manuscripts, it was written by Icelandic scribes) treatment of the story of Yvain as conceived by Chrétien de Troyes to be differentiated, I shall try to make explicit those elements characteristic of Yvain which are retained in *Ivens saga*. They certainly exist, which is fortunate, since it would otherwise be impossible to speak of an Old Norse version of the Yvain!

NB : All passages quoted are taken from :

- *Le chevalier au lion (Yvain)*, publié par Mario Roques, Paris Librairie Honoré Champion Editeur, 1978.

- *Ivens saga*, herausgegeben von Eugen Kölbing (Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek). Halle a. S. Max Niemeyer. 1898.

I - ELEMENTS RETAINED IN IVENS SAGA

A - *Plot* : Those elements of Yvain which are most completely preserved in *Ivens saga* all belong to the field of subject-matter or, to be more precise, to the diegesis¹ : "that which belongs to, or is connected with, the story". As M. Zink has pointed out, "a brief summary of the saga would hardly differ at all from the summary given by M. Roques of Chrétien's poem... There are few additions to Chrétien's text... and the equally small number of modifications apply only to points of detail".

The plot of Yvain thus remains practically unchanged in *Ivens saga*. This is a point worth stressing, because the plot, heavily suffused by the influence of the "merveilleux" and the psychology of love, had nothing in common with the legalistic and historical narratives with which the Icelanders were familiar. It is therefore hardly surprising that the plot, which is on the whole so well preserved, should have undergone modifications of detail.

B - *The "merveilleux"* : These modifications, which affect certain passages of the text developed at some length by Chrétien, leave the elements of the "merveilleux" (whose purpose is to surprise, astonish and, in short, "émerveiller" the reader or listener) almost untouched.

The "merveilleux" is always based on a transgression of the limits of ordinary verisimilitude, and its most characteristic grammatical form is therefore the superlative. Depending on the nature of the limit involved,

various types of "merveilleux" can be distinguished ; in *Yvain* these include the magical (beyond what is "natural"), the magnificent (beyond ordinary beauty), the terrifying (beyond ordinary evil or ugliness), and the admirable (beyond ordinary qualities of cunning and valour). All these different "types of "merveilleux" always overlap to a greater or lesser extent.

The episode of the storm which Calogrenant unleashes by the fountain is a good example of a "merveilleux" moment at once magical and terrifying. The original text is followed down to the smallest detail - cf. the word for word translation of 100 in the following passage : "Tant fu le tans pesmes et forz/ que cent fois cuidai estre morz" (445) which becomes : "Svá var stormrinn mikill ok ókurligr, at C sinnum kom mér í hug, at ek munda deya skulu" (15,5).

The description of the birds singing after the terrible storm provides an example of magical and magnificent "merveilleux" elements in combination ; here too the Icelandic version sticks closely to the French. The bird-song is described with great precision, with the French lines : "doucemant le oisel chantoient,/si que molt bien s'antr'accordoient ;/ et divers chanz chantoit chascuns ;/ c'onques ce que chantoit le uns/ a l'autre chanter ne oi" (465) finding an exact echo in the Icelandic : "allir þessir fuglar sungu sinum röddum svá samþykkiliga, sem allir hefði eina raust : en þó söng hvorr þeira sinn söng, svá at engi söng annars söng" (16,8).

The description of the ox-driver, this "Mor" who becomes at this point "einn leiddiligan blámann" (8,9), is a typical example of the "merveilleux" of terror whose purpose is to send a shiver up the spine of the reader or listener. This passage too is transferred almost word for word to the Icelandic version ; all the same elements, which combine to stress the grotesqueness and bestiality of this appalling character, are present. "une grant maçue en sa main" (291) becomes : "eina marsleggju mikla í hendi" (9,1) ; "si vit qu'll ot grosse la teste/ plus que roncins ne autre beste" (293) becomes : "hann hafði meira höfud en asni" (9,2) ; even the breadth of his forehead remains the same, as "et front pelé/ ot près de deux espans de lé" (295) is translated as : "enni hafði hann skolott ok II spanna breitt" (9,3). It is only certain abstract expressions, such as "ialz de çuete, et nes de chat" (300), which change, replaced in the Icelandic version by adjectives, ie. more concrete determinations : "augu kolsvört ok krótótt nef" (9,4). This change is broadly in line with the specific intentions of the Icelandic saga as a genre, which are to portray the things which it describes, rather than suggesting or comparing.

The sympathetic description of Lunete's wily tricks brings us to the "merveilleux" of admiration ; and once again the Icelandic version remains faithful to the French original. The passage "Dame, fet ele, hauciez la main !/ je ne voel pas qu'après demain/ m'an metoiz sus ne ce ne quoi/ que vos n'an faites rien por moi" (6623) is translated as : "Eigi vil ek, at þér kennid mér í morgin, at þér sverid þenna eid sakir min" (112,8).

The various battle-descriptions provide further examples of the

"merveilleux" of admiration, all of which are comparatively well preserved in the Icelandic version. The main elements of the single-combat scene between Yvain and Gauvain, for instance, are all present in the Scandinavian text, particularly significant among them being the fact that in both versions they fight until night-fall, with "tant se combatent longuemant/ que li jorz vers la nuit se tret" giving : "börduz þeir svá lengi, at daginn tók at kvelda ok ljósit minka" (106,7), and that the blood is described as boiling up out of their wounds, with "et li sanc tuit chaut et boillant / par mainz leus fors des cors lor colent" (6202) being "approximately" translated as : "ok var þeim svá heitt, at blodit vall i sárinum" (106,8).

C - *Adaptation of concepts and proper names* : The "merveilleux" is by no means the only exotic element to have been preserved in *Ivens saga* : a number of elements which are more or less typical of the courtly romance have also been introduced into the saga, or adapted by it for its own use.

The most striking example is obviously provided by the fate of the concept of "courtoisie" itself. As it has no equivalent in Scandinavia, the term appears in Icelandic texts in the form "kurteisi" (a complete borrowing from French) ; the adjective "kurteiss" also appears. On the other hand, the idea of valour was no stranger to the Scandinavian civilisations, and the chosen equivalents of "corageus" and "preuz" are standard adjectives such as "röskr" and "vaskr", taken directly from the indigenous narrative tradition. In the same way, the ideas of grace and beauty are rendered by Icelandic terms such as "fridr" and "fagr".

The concept of "servise" on the other hand appears to have been imperfectly understood by the translator and the copyists, since it is translated by the verb "þiona", which falls a long way short of rendering the full sense. Cf : "sidan gekk maerin brott ok til herra Ivens, ok þionadi honum eptir vanda" (38,8).

The translation of the words giant and dwarf is an example of much more successful adaptation. "jötunn" (86,12), which is the exact translation of "jaianz" (4084), belongs to Nordic mythology and would have been as familiar to an Icelandic audience as the giant to the French. The same is true of "uns nains, fel come boz anlez" (4096), translated into Icelandic by : "enn dvergr digr ok þrútinn" (87,2).

The translation of the term "netun" is less accurate. It is certainly true that "amedui le fil dou netun" (5507) is not exactly the same as "tveir jotunssynir" (98,18). Nevertheless, the substitution of a term from Icelandic mythology for a standard term from popular Romano-Christian mythology at least guarantees an approximate understanding of this episode.

While it is true that certain of the proper names, unknown to the Norwegian and Icelandic audience and therefore with no connotative value, are absent from *Ivens saga*, for example : "Carduel en Gaies" (8), the

"Dunoe" and the "Seone", others have been adapted : thus "la Bretagne" appears as the more familiar "Englandi" .

The use and adaptation of proper nouns in fact fulfills two different functions. The first is to underline the exotic and particular quality of the story : which explains why some French names are assimilated into the Icelandic context by phonetic transcription : Yvain becomes Íven, Gauvain becomes Valven, Alier becomes Alies, down to Loradin (596) who turns into Nadein (20,5). This assimilation-process leads on to a second function : proper names must not be completely foreign to the audience, who must be able to identify them as representing specific individuals and even react to the connotations which they carry. This is why "Harpins de la Montaigne" becomes "Fjalls-harrier", whereas poor old Lunete, called "luneta" by the Icelanders, loses for them all the astronomical connotations which are attached to her name.

From the foregoing points it may safely be concluded that the semantic content of the Yvain is, broadly speaking, also present in Ivens saga.² Such a close correspondence on the semantic level was only made possible, however, by some major formal changes designed to make the French narrative comprehensible to a Norwegian and then Icelandic audience.

The next stage will be to determine the extent of these formal transformations.

II - DIFFERENCES

A) Overall form : "literary genre" : The greatest differences between the French and Icelandic versions are to be seen at the formal level. The French narrative is written in octosyllabic verse, the Icelandic version in prose. This change is due to the fact that the pre-existing narrative structure with which the Icelanders were familiar was the prose-narrative of the "saga"-type. In fact, the old Norse translation was already written in prose.

The switch from verse to prose obviously results in the loss of the musical elements, rhyme and rhythm, from the text. This loss results in a gap opening up between the status of the French performer - Chrétien de Troyes, who sang his text- and that of the Icelandic narrator, whose importance diminishes as his narrative itself becomes the sole focus of attention. The loss of rhyme and rhythm leads to the loss of that tension which is peculiar to poetic language, and the Icelandic text tends to somewhat dilute the highly condensed composition of Chrétien.

The switch from verse to prose also results in the disappearance of

certain elements which were there to point up the "poeticity" of the text : it is impossible, for instance, to invent prosaic equivalents for alliterations like : "leissiee la desheritée, desheitiee et desconfortee" (5811). The relatively numerous *Stabreime* which the Icelandic text contains (for example "svá... at sverdin nidr koemi á herdar þeira ok handleggi, á laer eda lendar fljúgandi" (24,3)) are not in fact poetic ornaments, of the same nature as the French alliterations which often are not only prosodic but also rhetorical ornaments.

In the same way, the lengthy, slightly precious comparisons and metaphors have no real equivalent in the Icelandic text. As a general rule, the numerous rhetorical figures (such as chiasmus and antithesis) which draw attention to the text as such, rather than to the diegesis, are absent from the Icelandic version. Furthermore, it is noticeable that all the allegorical elements have disappeared from *Ívens saga* : there is no question either of the personification of love (a distant avatar of Eros !) or of the allegory of Love as a prison.

Ultimately, it can be said that *Ívens saga* was only able to adapt the story of Yvain in a way that the Icelandic audience would understand, by cutting out the traditional ornamental elements with which the French were so familiar.

B) Differences in narrative structure : On this structural level the gap between the two texts is widened even further. As far as the relations between narration and diegesis are concerned, *Ívens saga* tends to preserve a relatively exact isochrony³, as opposed to the strongly an-isochronous tendency exhibited by the French version. Whereas Chrétien shows us throughout how he himself is constructing the narrative-content out of a purely textual reality, particularly by making judgements about what he is writing (such as : "Ne sai qu'alasse demorant / a conter le duel qu'eie an fit"), the narrator of *Ívens saga* reports the events which make up the diegesis without ever intervening.

The an-isochrony of the French text is apparent both in its temporal divisions and in its logical structure. Events are "organised" and distributed against the time-continuum by the all-seeing mind of the narrator. Syntactically, one of the main consequences of this position is an increased occurrence of subordination ; in addition, the most frequently employed temporal subordinating conjunction is "tant que", which nuances what would otherwise be a simple chronological succession with a hint of a logical connection. The Old Norse text on the other hand makes only very occasional use of subordinate constructions.

It relates the succession of events by using a series of independent propositions in which temporal relations are stressed by means of adverbs. As in the sagas, the most frequently-occurring adverb is "þa", which does not order events in relation to other events, but presents them in a purely

chronological way, with every appearance of objectivity.

The logical structure of the French narrative, organised around subordinating constructions of cause and condition, is a further source of an-isochrony. These propositions very frequently lead to a gap opening up between narration and diegesis. The logical structure of the Icelandic text, however, sticks to its isochronous point of view ; in this respect, it is significant that the most frequently-occurring type of subordinate clause is the subordinate of consequence introduced by "svá at", which corresponds to the way in which events unfold, in a chronological progression from cause to effect.

As for the narration and diegesis on the one hand, and the narrator on the other, it is noticeable that everything which might tend to suggest the omni-presence and omnipotence of the narrator is rigorously excluded from *Ívens saga*. There is not a single narratorial intervention in the saga, and the first person singular is banished from it altogether, except when one of the heroes of the diegesis temporarily becomes the narrator and reports on events in direct speech, as is the case with Calogrenant.

In the same way, the second person plural, used by Chrétien to address his audience, is never used for this purpose in the saga. All the interior monologues (cf. the long monologue of Yvain (1432-1510), which presuppose the presence of an omniscient narrator, also disappear in the Icelandic version. On the other hand the spoken monologues, which do not automatically imply the existence of an omniscient narrator, have been retained.

In more general terms, the very construction of the French narrative itself betrays the presence of an omni-present and omniscient narrator. In fact, it depends on an almost Proustian interplay of anticipations and development, in which the narrative is built up as a series of amplifications of the narrator's text. This procedure is completely foreign to the Icelandic narrative tradition, which attempts on the contrary to transmit an independent diegetic content ; the saga has no aim but story-telling, which is why it seems so neutral in narrative tone.

C) *Implications for the narrative content* : It is clear from what has just been said that the greatest differences between *Yvain* and *Ívens saga* are formal in nature. Yet, these formal differences do have important repercussions on the actual content of the narratives ; and the elements of the French story do undergo modifications in Icelandic which correspond to the different type of narration through which they are mediated. There is, for instance, no element of suspense in the Icelandic story. This is due to the nature of the procedure by which suspense is created, which involves the literal suspension of the narrator's relation of the events of the diegesis, and would therefore contradict the isochronous stance taken by the Icelandic narration.

For the same reason, the Icelandic text retains the battle-scenes

intact, while almost all of the "galant" digressions disappear. This difference is not due to the oft-claimed brutality of the Viking character, but goes back to the simple fact that battles are almost always reported from a non-focalised standpoint, more compatible with the narrative habits of the Icelanders ie., broadly speaking, with the laws of the saga-genre.

Digressions on the subject of love, on the other hand, always involve direct narratorial intervention in the narrative, which is incompatible with these same laws : they must therefore be excluded from the Icelandic version. The same is true for the proverbs and maxims which, in the French version, are included for the edification of the audience. They pre-suppose the existence of a narrator-moralist, which would considerably over-step the narratorial function as conceived of in Iceland where it was traditionally reduced to a minimum.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis has shown that the elements of *Yvain* retained in *Ívens saga* are different in nature from those which have undergone transformations.

The similarities which exist between the two are due to the concern of the translators to produce a faithful rendering, and thus belong mainly to the level of the content, whilst the differences are due to the relative inflexibility of the mental framework within which the translation had to be carried out, and are therefore linked to questions of form.

Indeed, the French narrative could only be appreciated as such by a Norwegian and then Icelandic audience via a transcription into the only narrative structure with which it was familiar ; this was a form of narrative prose which was to become the literary genre of the saga. Therefore, any elements of the French story which were incompatible with the laws of the saga had to be bannished from *Ívens saga*. A being who comes to Earth from a planet where there is no gravity will be no less subject to downward acceleration than earthmen ; in the same way, once the story of *Yvain*, which originated in a literary world ruled by different laws, had entered the Old Norse domain, it was inevitable that it would undergo certain transformations in order for it to fit the norms of its new literary and socio-cultural environment.

In actual fact, the differences between French and Icelandic norms in this field are due to the gap between the status of the French and Icelandic authors. This gap derives from the fact that the French, as Latin, have always enjoyed a different relationship with the practice of writing as such from that of the Icelanders, of Germanic origin.

Latin, the Romanic civilisation was always well acquainted with writing. Even among people who could neither read nor write, there was never any feeling that this technique for fixing and preserving the spoken word had anything inherently sacred about it. And once this stage was reached it was possible to use writing in many different ways, including as a type of game ; by using the need to write down a verbal description of imaginary events as a pretext, writers were able to play about with their texts and push themselves into the foreground as author-narrators.

This development is inconceivable in the context of the Germanic-Nordic civilisation of that time. Its own runic form of writing was by no means a mere instrument for the transcription of speech ; it was intimately connected with various incantatory and magic practices. As it was also accessible only to the initiated, this form of writing was therefore most unsuitable for the transcription of profane stories ; which meant that the corpus of Icelandic stories and epics was preserved, over a long period, by means of oral transmission alone. As Scandinavia progressively became converted to Christianity, so a growing tendency to use the Latin alphabet

developed. However, this procedure was never really in harmony with a set of literary traditions whose major distinguishing feature was precisely its "un-literariness", its lack of dependence on the "littera". Because of this, the relationship which existed between the Icelandic story-teller and the practice of writing was that between a workman and his tools : writing was simply a means of setting down and fixing a story, and in no sense an end in itself. It does not matter what size brushes Picasso used, all that counts is the finished picture ! For an Icelandic Sagamaðr the picture was the diegesis, or "plot", and it mattered little what stylistic means were used to convey it to the audience. Thus, the most important thing in *Ívens saga* is not the text, to which the reader's attention is never explicitly drawn, but the events narrated : the diegesis.

The Icelandic narrative structure, which corresponds to the literary genre of the saga, is to the narrative content of the *Yvain* what Kant's a priori forms of perception are to the matter of the phenomena ; two aspects of reality which can only be perceived simultaneously, and which inform and enhance each other. The Icelandic form is different from the French, so it is not surprising that the narrative as a whole should undergo modifications which also affect the content.

It is clear from these considerations that the didactic and less than disinterested purpose (the introduction of Christian and courtly values into Norway) which lay behind Hákon the Elder's support for the importation of the courtly romance, was never fulfilled in the way he had hoped. As it turned out, the Icelanders retained for their own use those aspects of the *Yvain* which appealed to them (the excitement, the battle-descriptions and feats of cunning), and which were familiar to them from their own traditions. The rest they forgot about, or deliberately excluded. The clearest example of this is the way in which King Arthur's judgement, full of astuteness and intelligence, is described in *Ívens saga* ; whereas Chrétien goes on for little short of one hundred lines in praise of his faculty, the corresponding section of the Icelandic text merely has : "Sem Konungrinn heyrdi þetta, þá mælti hann : "Med því moti, at í hvárr ykkar kennir odrum þenn sigr, þá vil ek vera domandi ykkar ok allra ydvar". "Ok festu þau þetta í dom konungs". (109,2)

Is this because Iceland, with its long Republican traditions, was inherently hostile to this type of imported discourse ?

- 1 cf Gérard Genette : *Figures III*, Edition du Seuil 1972. p. 280 "diégétique : dans l'usage courant, la diégèse est l'univers spatio-temporel désigné par le récit ; donc, dans notre terminologie, en ce sens général, diégétique "qui se rapporte ou appartient à l'histoire".
- 2 Even if the semiotic content of the *Yvain* disappears from the old Norse version.
- 3 cf Gérard Genette, *op. cit.* p. 123 : l'isochronisme d'un récit peut aussi se définir comme celui d'un pendule par exemple, non plus relativement, par comparaison entre sa durée et celle de l'histoire qu'il raconte, mais de manière en quelque sorte absolue et autonome, comme *constance de vitesse*. On entend par vitesse le rapport entre une mesure temporelle et une mesure spatiale (tant de mètres à la seconde, tant de secondes par mètre) : la vitesse du récit se définira par le rapport entre une durée, celle de l'histoire, mesurée en secondes, minutes, heures, jours, mois et années, et une longueur : celle du texte mesurée en lignes et en pages. Le récit isochrone, notre hypothétique degré zéro de référence, serait donc ici un récit à vitesse égale, sans accélérations ni ralentissements, où le rapport durée d'histoire/longueur de récit resterait toujours constant. Il est sans doute inutile de préciser qu'un tel récit n'existe pas, et ne peut exister qu'à titre d'expérience de laboratoire : à quelque niveau d'élaboration esthétique que ce soit, on imagine mal l'existence d'un récit qui n'admettrait aucune variation de vitesse, et cette observation banale est déjà de quelque importance : un récit peut se passer d'anachronies, il ne peut aller sans *anisochronies*, ou si l'on préfère (comme c'est probable), sans effets de *rythme*.
- 4 I underline the word *Icelandic* because it is possible that the *Norwegian* translation was much more faithful to the French original.

