

IMPROVING HISTORY WITH OLD NORSE POETICS: A 17TH CENTURY THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

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During the Renaissance, interest in language, especially the vernacular, grew to great proportions. Theories of language and interpretation were advanced and elaborated. The classic texts were published in thorough and often extensively commented scholarly editions. As the vernacular languages became more esteemed, due attention was paid to them and editions of vernacular texts became common. In the Nordic countries, a few editions and translations were published during the sixteenth century, but in the seventeenth century they flourished. Contrary to today's interest in sagas of Icelanders and dislike for fornaldarsagas, it was primarily fornaldarsagas that were published. The main reason may be that the fornaldarsagas which were first published are those which largely are set in Sweden, where the editions were prepared. Gautreks saga, Herrauds ok Bosa saga and Hervarar saga were published between 1664 and 1672. Snorri's Edda, together with Hávamál and Voluspá, was published in 1665 in Petrus Johannis Resenius' edition. One main purpose of the editions was of course to supply scholarship with source material. In historical research, several kinds of sources were used; most important may be the Bible, whose truthfulness was considered to be unquestionable even though it often had to be interpreted to reveal underlying truths. The works of the classical authors were highly esteemed, but could be considered less useful than old "Gothic" texts such as Snorri's Edda.

The major part of 17th century antiquarian research has been forgotten today, as it was only a portion of a greater developing tradition. But there is in particular one major Swedish work of the time that survives oblivion, and which is always remembered with astonishment and a kind of horrified admiration. That is the monumental Atlantica, which Olof Rudbeck wrote in four volumes during the last decades of the 17th century. Even at that time, it was considered preposterous by many, ingenious by even more. This was not the first time that Swedish historians had related Swedish history to the world history, maintaining that Sweden was the home of the powerful Goths, who shaped the history of the world. They came from the land of the Goths, Gotaland, Götaland, up here in the North. For that matter, attempts to show how great a part one's fatherland had played in the development of the civilized world were common in many countries during this period. Olof Rudbeck, however, goes to extremes in his argumentation, and he has an entirely new idea: Sweden is the lost land Atlantis, the great civilization that Plato described and about which many legends were told.

While Rudbeck is known to us mainly because of his far-fetched conclusions, there has been a general agreement that many of his basic scientific principles are quite sound. In his theoretical and methodological discussion, he displays a surprisingly rational critical sense, which is rather strange when one regards the conclusions he comes to. Gunnar Eriksson has recently thrown light on the historical method of Rudbeck.¹ He relates *Atlantica* to a greater tradition of philosophy and science, and shows how Rudbeck's method was in many respects very modern. Rudbeck's method comes very close to that of Francis Bacon. This is the empirical way of compiling and examining facts, and letting the facts structure the interpretation. Instead of starting from a given paradigm, one lets the material shape the paradigm. It has been shown by Eriksson how this for its time well developed empirical method underlies Rudbeck's medicinal and natural scientific works, as well as *Atlantica*. The principles of his archaeological studies, for example, in many ways seem sensible even to modern scholars.

It transpires that Rudbeck's ideas for interpreting literary sources resemble Bacon's. Bacon states that after the Fall of man, there was a period when man lost his knowledge about the world. When man started to gain wisdom anew, the wisdom was conveyed in the form of myths, veiling the truth. This happened for two reasons: either people were not capable of grasping the knowledge in any other form, or those in possession of knowledge did not want it divulged to the common people. This description fits what Rudbeck calls *gätetiden*, *tempus mytologicum*. So the myths are enigmas that are to be interpreted allegorically. It is only possible to interpret a myth correctly if one knows all the material connected to it — such as other myths — so that one can view it against its right background. The interpretations that Rudbeck makes are closely connected to baroque symbolism, where the relationship between sign and referent can be distant and mystifying. Olof Rudbeck reads the book of nature. Especially here, in his allegorical and etymological interpretations, Rudbeck provokes his reader with far-fetched conclusions. Still, his argumentation can be said to be based on an empirical gathering of facts and material.

In his method and his faith in its capacity to structure a paradigm, Rudbeck thus comes close to baconianism. In his view on the greater questions of life, however, he does not seem to adhere to any particular tradition. Eriksson quotes from a letter, in which Rudbeck once showed

¹Gunnar Eriksson: "Gestalter i svensk lärdomshistoria 1. Olof Rudbeck d.ä.", *Lychnos* 1984. Quotations from *Atlantica* are made from *Olaus Rudbecks Atlantica*, svenska originaltexten. På uppdrag av Lärdomshistoriska Samfundet utgiven av Axel Nelson, I-V (*Lychnos-Bibliotek* 2:I-V), Uppsala och Stockholm 1937-50.

how one can examine a clock in many different ways, depending on from what angle one views it. Even if one is able to understand how it was constructed, one can never decide where the clockmaker started. This illustrates Rudbeck's opinion that one can never find "the first point" when examining the phenomena of the world. Gunnar Eriksson suggests that this simile may imply that Rudbeck thought that there is a sphere that man is not able to research because he does not have the right instruments for it. In that case, this sphere must be left to religion. Atlantica thus combines old models of interpretation with a modern scientific examination of nature; it combines the Middle Ages with the modern world.

The results that Rudbeck achieved are spectacular. But his theory of interpretation is no less interesting. I will not attempt to decide whether Rudbeck took the theoretical discussion as his starting point, or whether he constructed the theoretical discussion in order to justify his statements. The answer to that question does not really seem important. Instead I shall try to show how Rudbeck uses Old Norse texts not only as historical sources, but also as theoretical guides which supplement the Latin theory of interpretation.

As is well known, the main purpose of Atlantica was to prove that Sweden is in fact the lost civilization Atlantis. According to this theory, it was from these territories that the people who founded most of the cultural centres of the world originated. When the Latin culture came to the North with Christianity, it was actually returning to where it came from. Rudbeck uses etymological and symbolical interpretations to show that especially Greek and Roman mythology correspond to the mythology of the North. Names and descriptions have changed, events have been obscured, but they are the same. The mythology relates real events that have taken place up here in the North, on Atlantis. Rudbeck explains that most of what happened in the early history of the world, the great historical persons and wars, have been described in what he calls "enigmas, and above all skaldic poems" ("genom gåtor, och hellst uti Scaldewijsor [poëtiske verser] och dichter", Atlantica II, 29). He quotes classical authors and fathers of the Church to reveal the veracity of heathen mythology, but only as long as one realises that it does not really tell of gods, but of historical persons. The skalds, as Rudbeck calls the poets and wise men, have embellished the stories, sometimes in order to soften the criticism of posterity against kings and other powerful men. However, while descriptions may have been changed, the actual events were often accurately related. After this period, the tempus mytologicum, people began describing the world in other ways and it then became difficult to understand the old poems, the enigmas. Additional problems arose when poems were transmitted in tradition, wrongly repeated and often misunderstood. This, and the fact that

language changed, made the truths contained in these poems more or less unintelligible to us.

When the kings left the North to subjugate the world, the tales about them and their deeds went with them, and were spread throughout the world. The stories were even more obscured and transformed as they reached different cultures and interpreters. This is why one has to know the entire material, and the narratives in all their different shapes, says Rudbeck, so that one may see the place and meaning of each separate enigma. Then, perhaps, one will be able to discern the underlying truth. When taking one's point of departure in the material to be examined, one must also bear in mind its beginning and end; its cause and purpose. This is necessary if the object examined, the enigma, is to be viewed in its correct place.

As an example of how the topic or area may determine the interpretation, Rudbeck offers the following: "Jag hafwer förtärt siöguden Neptunum, korngudinnan Cererem och trögårdzgudinnan Venerem" (*Atlantica* II, 40). "I have consumed the sea god Neptune, the corn goddess Ceres and the garden goddess Venus" — this of course sounds absurd unless one takes Neptune as a metonymy for wine or water, Ceres, connected with cereals, as standing for bread, and Venus as meaning lettuce. Rudbeck goes on describing the frame of reference, the sphere in which an object may be interpreted. He says that if one is speaking about the king, different referents are meant in different situations. Among celestial bodies, the sun is king; among metals, gold is. The lion or the bear is king if the discussion is of animals, among birds the eagle or the hawk is king.

Up to this point, Rudbeck has been using current theories from Latin tradition, referring to classical authorities. But now he will show more precisely how the similes of the poets should be interpreted, and to corroborate his assertions he will adduce an entirely new material that has never been used in a similar way before. He says:

Kan man intet få igen Begynnelsen och Endan på ett Wärck, uthan man kommer allenast til at see någre Ordh, så måste man grant achta hwart ord: som til Exempel. Konungen sitter å handa Fiållum o Fiåll, dhett är Bergh, och hwadh handh är, är noghsampt allom bekant. Nu kan ingen Konungh sittia på eens handh, icke heller kan en handh wara berg. Men tänk nu effter hwad för Diuur är, som wistas på bergen, och bäras på ens Handh och kallas Kung; intet Leyonet och Biörnen, ty dhe äro för stoorra at sittia på Handen, icke heller Hwaalfisken, ty han fins ey på Bergen, icke heller Solen, uthan Hööken, den sitter på handa Fiollum. (*Atlantica* II, 41)

In this way, Rudbeck underlines the importance of the frame of reference. He sees the world as divided into a number of systems or spheres, where a metaphor or any figure of speech changes its meaning as it changes its surroundings. We recognise Rudbeck's empirical method here, too. Just as we must know all myths to be able to interpret the single myth correctly, so we must know the myth well to be able to interpret the single trope or paraphrase that is in the myth. In this case, the myth itself is the frame of reference.

"Handa Fiällum", the mountain of the hand, seems to be taken from Old Norse. "The king of the mountain of the hand" seems a good kenning for "hawk". Although I do not know of any example of exactly this kenning, it comes very close to kennings such as "the mountain of the hawk" for "hand". The whole discussion quoted was very likely derived from Old Norse tradition. This becomes more obvious as we continue the quotation:

Dherföre är såsom Edda talar om våre gamble Scaldes, at en får gifwa alle Gudar, Konungar, Förstar, Diuur, Foglar, Fiskar, Örter och Träan etc. andras Nampn, allenast han något tillägger, genom hwilket han kiennes igen, antingen aff dness serdeles gierningh, eller Slächt, eller Fäderneslandh, eller något annat: såsom om man säger dhen Eenögde Nicudur, då förstas Oden, ty han war eenögd, nemner man om Siökrijg och kallar en Siöwarg, då förstas om Siöröfware, talar man om Fiskar, så är det Geddan. (Atlantica II, 41.)

This description of how to specify a paraphrase by putting a descriptive attribute to it, is easily recognisable from Snorri's Edda. This is how it is expressed in the Danish translation that was available to Rudbeck in the edition of Resenius:

Asianernis Naffne mue retteligen saaledis modificeris, at neffne den eene Asian med den andens Naffn, oc giffve hannem Øgge-Naffn udaff hans eigntlig Gierning eller Slect. Ligesom naar vi kallede Odin eller Thor, enten Tyr eller med en anden Asians eller Alffes Naffn, da tager jeg med det fremmede Naffn Hanon eigntlig, oc icke den anden som det ellers hørde til med rette. Ligesom E.G. der som vi neffne den hengendis Tyr, den lade Tyr, da ere de Odens Naffne, thi at være hengendis, oc ladit, ere de Naffne som beqvemmer Oden selff.²

²Edda Islandorum an. Chr. MCCXV Islandice Conscripta per Snorronem Sturlæ, ed. Petrus Resenius, Havniæ 1665, Dd 1r-v.

Rudbeck has enlarged the applicability of Snorri's discussion considerably: instead of applying only to Scandinavian gods and mythological creatures, this means of description is possible for virtually any phenomenon one could think of. The description of the kenning, this typical feature of Old Norse poetry, shows Rudbeck the way towards a more concrete and exact interpretation than the Latin tradition can supply. The name of a god may refer to any other as long as there is an attribute to indicate in what context the name, in Snorri's example Tyr, should be understood. When described as "hanging", Tyr becomes the name of Odin in "Hangatyr". This is how Rudbeck proves that words and names can change their meaning as soon as they change their context. The principle is also illustrated by the structure of Snorri's Edda, where mythological episodes are related in order to give the background of numerous poetic expressions and paraphrases. There are lists with examples of metaphors, synonyms and alternative words of all kinds of things — deities, weapons, animals and so forth.³ All this suits Rudbeck perfectly. Here, in the Gothic records that express to him basic truths, he has found sanction and justification to do what he could not otherwise have done: to interpret apparitions and events of history and myth as liberally as he does. With his "Old Norse" theory and method of interpretation, Rudbeck seems to have reached farther than any other scholar in grandiose interpretation of Gothicism. It is unlikely that he learnt this method from Snorri's Edda, but this is where he learnt to justify it.⁴

Now there is one remaining complication. In Snorri's description of the construction of the kenning, the attribute is of great importance, since that is what shows the context in which the symbol or the paraphrase is to be understood. When using this model of interpretation, Rudbeck of course generally lacks an attribute that suggests the true meaning of the word. Strictly speaking, he should have one. But Rudbeck easily solves this problem by emphasizing the statement he reads in the Edda when explaining how one should understand Plato's words that there were elephants on Atlantis. He must explain why there were no elephants in Sweden when Plato says that there were:

³This character is especially significant in the edition of Resenius, where Magnús Olafsson had structured and numbered first the mythic narratives, and then the catalogues of poetic expressions.

⁴The importance of the frame of reference in itself is of course not a new invention. Even Aristotle, in his work on rhetoric, speaks of it when he demonstrates how the goblet is to Dionysos what the shield is to Ares, whereby the shield of Dionysos becomes a metaphor for goblet and vice versa (The "Art" of Rhetoric, with an English Translation by John Henry Freese, London 1947, III. iv. 4).

Elefanter äro ofta införde i Sverige, men aldrig här i myckenheet sedda, och derföre förstås här genom Elefanter Ulfar, ty man lär af Edda uti Diurens namn, at man må kalla det ena diuret med det andras namn, allenast det skal igenkiennas wid sina åthäfwor och natur, eller wid sit boo och hemwist. /.../ Att nu här af Platone Ulfar kallas Elefanter på Skaldeart, wiises strax af Platonis efterföljande ord, i hwilka han kallar det Diuret det snålesta. Det är nu hela werlden bekandt, at intet Diur är snålare af alla grymma och snåla, såsom Leyon, Biörnar, Parder, och sådana, än som Ulfwen. (*Atlantica* I, 184)

The long and the short of this argumentation is that the description prescribed for a kenning does not necessarily have to be directly and syntactically tied to the main word. Instead of an attribute, it is enough that the frame of reference in some manner is explained in the narrative. With a stand-point such as this, one may easily choose the most suitable context from the surrounding text or from one's own previous experience. Thus, one is able to decide the point of departure oneself, with the sanction of one of the oldest Gothic records. As so many scholars after him, Rudbeck is not satisfied with Snorri's treatment of older traditions. He thinks that Snorri has often misunderstood the wisdom concealed in the stories he relates. But Snorri, whether consciously or not, conveys the most original and ingenious manner of understanding the culture and history of the world. In this era, Snorri's Edda is often considered to be a redaction of the poetic Edda, which in turn draws upon an original Edda, made by the æsir. Where such fundamental wisdom is given, where so many comprehensive myths are related, there instructions may be found as to how the hidden levels of reality shall be penetrated.

It is no novelty to state that Rudbeck's research and conclusions are outstanding in many ways. But I think that the reason for this, or the justification of it, is no less unique. Rudbeck departs from traditional theories of interpretation when they do not suffice, and turns instead to older documents of a higher wisdom. Old Norse poetics become a theory for interpretation of history. Since the time when mythical and allegorical interpretations and exegesis were first spread, it has been the moral philosophy and ethics that have been the main subject. Fathers of the Church and philosophers have paved an important path. Historical scholarship, on the other hand, has lent on philology and other disciplines, but has primarily used explicit sources — although often much corrected. Rudbeck embodies both these manners of examining the world. He does not seem at all interested in ethics and moral philosophy, but in historical research he emphasizes those methods that have before been more or less reserved for theological and moral

interpretation. Previously, morally and ethically true statements have been read under the veil of allegory. Rudbeck, however, is not interested in moral and ethical truths. He does not seem to believe in any other form of truth than historical facts.

History is often thought to be important because it conveys ethical values: historical studies supply edifying exempla of virtues, vices and so forth. But history according to Rudbeck is much more concrete, nearly corporeal, although it employs methods developed in order to understand the abstract and spiritual levels of the world. If we leave the message of Rudbeck's Atlantica, to look briefly at its structure, it gives the impression of a confused construction: especially in the last three of its four volumes, it is filled with diversions and unlinked rows of mystifying arguments. In many ways, it is a patch-work that leaves the reader without any idea of which direction he should choose. This pattern is so obvious, that it is tempting to think that it is what Rudbeck intended. His magnum opus is to be read like the book of nature. Atlantica should be read with the same method that it explains and employs. It exemplifies itself. Atlantica is an impressive monument of Gothicism, but is also worth being remembered as a monument of inexorable consistency.