

The Post-Scenic Element in Icelandic Saga Fredrik J. Heinemann

To interpret, as I understand the term here, is to bring out what is concealed in a given manifestation, to make evident what in the manifestation is not evident to the milieu in which the interpreter's audience lives. Interpretation can be applied to anything that bears information: a human gesture, an eclipse, a chart, for example. To interpret verbal utterance is to bring out what the utterance does not of itself reveal to a given audience. What an utterance reveals calls for no interpretation. Interpretation deals with here-and-now nonevident, or not-so-evident, matter embedded in whatever is evident. Verbal discourse regularly calls for interpretation. All utterance both reveals and conceals. The quest for utterance that reveals all and never needs interpretation is a quest for a will-o'-the-wisp.¹

This essay attempts to define what I am calling the post-scenic element in the Icelandic saga, a phenomenon which, so far as I know, has not been commented upon. I realize that I am attempting to interpret to a readership, many of whose members have a knowledge of the sagas I could never aspire to attain, a feature that they have either never noticed or not thought worth mentioning. If that is not enough, I then propose to classify this phenomenon, discuss its effects, and finally speculate on where it came from and how saga authors might have developed it. Should this paper manage to attract a live audience greater in number than the people who owe me large sums of money, I can perhaps only hope that my listeners, like Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*, are the kind of people who never criticize others for the way they make a living.

Post-scenic elements consist of characters' statements that either unexpectedly add to, or surprisingly contradict, actions which we have seen them perform. In all cases the statements comprise inaccurate reports of the actions, either for reasons that are hard to determine or because the characters seem to be lying, withholding information, or fabricating events. Such details are always initially mystifying and seem to be a snag in the narrative fabric of a saga, whose patterns at times resemble the linear arrangement of scenes woven into a tapestry which we take in as we stroll by. The post-scenic elements interrupt the flow of the narrative, causing us either to look back a page or two—to retrace our footsteps, as it were—at a scene that straightforwardly portrays some simple action or to re-examine some unremarkable event we have just read a few lines previously. Usually, when examples of this phenomenon are noticed at all, they are regarded as blemishes: textual corruption; an author's faulty memory; his failure to harmonize sources; or simply his inattentiveness. But the nature and pervasiveness of this feature suggest that, in fact, it is a narrative habit, something narratologists might call part of saga narrative grammar, that is, a saga-characteristic way of telling a story that serves a variety of narrative requirements. In trying to come to terms with something that may turn out to be nothing more than my own eye reflected in the microscope, I will tentatively propose two categories of post-scenic element: (1) untrue statements that have no apparent narrative function; (2) untrue statements that develop the narrative. After an examination of the two types, I will offer some speculation as to the origins of the phenomenon.

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To give some idea of the kind of strange narrative effects which the post-scenic element can create, I would like to look at a scene in *Vatnsdæla saga*:

¹Walter J. Ong, S.J., "Text as Interpretation: Mark and After", in *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context*, ed. John Miles Foley (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 147-69, at p. 147.

Síðan heyrði hann út dyn mikinn, er á leið kveldit, ok síðan kom inn maðr ok leiddi eptir sér best; sjá maðr var harða mikill, hvítur var hann á hárr, ok fell þat á herbor með fogrum lokkum. Þorsteini sýndisk maðrinn vera inn frðasti. Síðan kveykði þessi maðr upp eld fyrir sér, en leiddi áðr heat sinn til stalle; hann seti munnaug fyrir sik ok þó sik ok þerrði á hvftum dök. Hann renndi ok af verpli vænan drykk í stórt stúttarker ok tók síðan til matar. Allt sýndisk Þorsteini athæfi þessa manns merkiligt ok mjök hæverskligt; miklu var hann meiri maðr en Ketill, faðir hans, ok þótti hann, sem var, manna mestr. Ok er skálabúinn var mettr, sat hann við eld ok sá í ok mælti: 'Skipun er hér á orðin, eldrinn er nú meir folskaðr en ek hugða; hygg ek, at hann hafi verit fyrir skomma upp kveykðr, ok veit ek eigi, hvat þat veit, ok má vera, at menn sé komnir ok siti um líf mitt, ok er þat eigi fyrir sakleysi, ok skal ek fara ok leita um húsit'. (ÍF, VIII, p. 7)²

(After a while towards evening he heard a great din outside, and a man came in leading a horse behind him; the man was exceedingly large, white was his hair, and it hung down to his shoulders in beautiful curls. Þorsteinn thought him the handsomest of men. Then this man lighted the fire in front of him, but first led his horse to its stall; he placed a wash basin in front of him and washed himself and dried himself with a white cloth. He poured splendid drink from a cask into a large goblet and then began to eat. Everything about this man's behaviour impressed Þorsteinn as extraordinary and very worthy; he was much larger than Ketill, his father, and he seemed, as indeed was true, a great man. And when the inhabitant of the hall was finished eating, he sat in front of the fire and looked into it and said: 'Something is strange here, the fire has burned down more than I thought; I thought that it had been started just a short time ago, and I do not know what this signifies, and it might be that men have come and are plotting against me, and that is not without cause, and I shall go and look around the house'.)

Although the two references to the fire (underlined) occur in the same scene, they are, as we shall see, characteristic of the jarring effects caused by post-scenic elements. Sveinsson, the editor of the Fornrit edition, suspects textual corruption in this passage, for as he remarks 'the *skálabúi* ought to know better than anyone when the fire was lit' (ÍF, VIII, n. 3, p. 7). Whatever the reason, the *skálabúi's* memory lapse is curious. Is he befuddled by the splendid drink he has poured himself, or is there something about his lapse that is idiomatic to saga narrative style? Whatever we conclude, this and similar examples of the post-scenic element contain details that seem extraneous, unnecessary, or out of order in linear narration, as if the saga author had nodded off while composing.

Let us begin with an example of type one, which consists of characters' misleading thoughts and statements that occur for no apparent reason. The example also comes from *Vatnsdæla saga* where Þorsteinn reflects on his father's earlier *hvøt*:

Honum kom nú ok í hug eggjan feðr síns, at þrótt ok djarfleik myndi til þurfa at vinna slíkt afrek eða qn-nur, en frami ok fagrligrir penningar mundi í móti koma, ok hann myndi þá þykkja betr gengit hafa en sitja við eldstó móður sinnar. Þá kom honum ok í hug, at faðir hans segði hann eigi betra til vágns en dóttur eða aðra konu ok meiri sormó væri frændum, at skarð væri í ætt beira en þar sem hann var. Slíkt hvatvi Þorstein fram, ok leitabi hann sér þá færís, at hann mætti einn hefna margra vanrétts, en í qðru lagi þótti honum þá skaði mikill um manninn. (ÍF, VIII, p. 8)

(He now recalled his father's exhortation that strength and courage would be necessary to accomplish such or similar deeds, but that fame and extensive wealth would be the reward, and he would then consider his time better spent than to sit by his mother's hearth. Then he also recalled that his father had said he was no better with a weapon than a daughter or any other woman and more honour would have been done his kinsmen if a gap had been left in the family in his stead. Such urged Þorsteinn on, and he then looked for a means that he alone might avenge many injustices, but on the other hand it seemed to him a great shame about the man.)

The peculiarity here is that nowhere in his father Ketill raumr's *hvøt*—see Appendix A—do we find the underlined taunt in the above passage. While it is true that his father had questioned his manhood in a manner that enraged Þorsteinn and caused him later to reflect upon

²All quotations from the sagas are from the Íslenzk Fornrit series, unless otherwise stated.

the insult while hiding in Þekull's hut, Ketill had stopped short of comparing him to a woman or wishing that he had never been born. Although this insult matches the tone of Ketill's harsh accusation, it nevertheless adds information to a lengthy scene that the reader had experienced a few pages earlier. It is only when we flip back that we discover that our memory has not played tricks on us. There seems to be no apparent reason to add these details to the already stinging rebuke which Þorsteinn has received from his father.

Another example of type one occurs also in *Vatnsdæla saga*. As a means of avenging the death of his father on Hrolleifr, Þorsteinn sends a shepherd to Ás on reconnaissance with specific instructions on how to proceed,³ which are carried out to the letter:

Sauðamaðr fór ok kom f Ás ok drap á dyrr, ok var eigi fyrr til gengit en hann hafði kveðit tólf vísur. Þá kom húskadlit ok spurði úfenda eða hvárt þeir bræðr væri heim komnir; hann kvað þá eigi heim komna ok spurði at sauðum sínum. Hann kvað þá eigi þær komna. Sauðamaðr fór aprt ok sagði Þorsteini, hvé margar vísur hann hafði kveðit. (ÍF, VIII, p. 68)

(The shepherd went and arrived at Ás and knocked on the door, and it was not answered before he had recited twelve verses. Then a servant came out and asked the news or whether the brothers had come home; he said they had not come home and asked about his sheep. He said they had not come there. The shepherd went back and told Þorsteinn how many verses he had recited.)

The shepherd knocks on the door and by repeating verses records the time it takes the servant to respond. The servant comes outside, he and the shepherd exchange words, and the shepherd returns home for debriefing. Nothing could be more narratively economical and straightforward. Yet when Þorsteinn asks the shepherd whether he had been inside, the shepherd replies, astonishingly, that he had gone in and looked around (*hann kvask ganga inn ok skyggask um*), at which point the following exchange occurs:

Þorsteinn spurði: 'Var bjartir eldr á arni eða eigi?' Hann svarar: 'Svá nokkut sem fyrir litu hefði verið kveykðr'. Þorsteinn mælti: 'Sáttu nokkura nýlundi f húsinu?' Hann kvask: 'Sét hafa hrúgu eina mikla ok koma undan fram rauti klæði. Þorsteinn mælti: 'Þar muntu sét hafa Hrolleif ok blótklæði hans; nú mun þangat eptir at leita; búask nú skjótt ok hætum á, hvat gerir'. (ÍF, VIII, p. 68)

(Þorsteinn asked: 'Was there a bright fire in the hearth or not?' He answers: 'As bright as a newly kindled fire can be'. Þorsteinn said: 'Did you see anything strange in the house?' He said he saw a great pile, and sticking out underneath was red clothing. Þorsteinn said: 'You must have seen Hrolleifr and his sacrificial clothes; now we must go there to investigate; let's get ready quickly and take a chance, no matter what happens'.)

The two scenes are contradictory: a shepherd is given an errand that he faithfully performs; later he claims to have done something we did not see him do. Assuming the shepherd is not lying, as his counterparts in other variations of the type-scene occasionally do, we must wonder why the author does not simply show the shepherd entering the house and then later have him tell Þorsteinn what he saw?⁴ Why does the character claim to have done things which,

³This is a type-scene in which someone sends a retainer to gather information and then questions him on what he has found out. Not infrequently, the retainer tells a story that conflicts with the scene we have seen dramatized, but the discrepancies arise because the retainer lies. Two such scenes that come to mind are one in *Njáls saga* in which Ótkell sends Skammkell to Mosfell to seek the advice of Gizurr hvíti (ÍF, XII, pp. 128-129) and one in *Eyrbyggja saga* in which Þorbjörn sends the no-account Oddr to seek the advice of one Spá-Gíls (ÍF, IV, p. 34); in both scenes the immediately apparent lies are skillfully built into the plots of the sagas and therefore do not take us by surprise. Thus, while the type-scene resembles the post-scenic element, the difference between what takes place in the type-scene and what later is said to have taken place does not surprise the reader.

⁴*Landnámabók* narrates this event as follows:

given the closed nature of the scene, seem impossible for him to have done? I for one am unable to offer any answers that explain the narrative, rhetorical, or thematic function of this scene.

Another example of type one is from *Völsunga saga*. Gunnarr, Sigurðr, and Högni approach Brynhildr's father Buðli and then her foster-father Heimir to ask for her hand in marriage:

Þeir báa nú ferð sína listuliga, ríða nú fjöll ok dali til Buðla konungs. Bera upp bóncorðit. Hann tók því vel ef hon vill eigi níta, ok segir hana svá stóra at þann einn mann mun hon eiga er hon vill. Þá ríða þeir í Hlymdali. Heimir fagnar þeim vel. Segir Gunnarr nú ærendin. Heimir kvað hennar kjör vera, hvern hon skal eiga. Segir þar sal hennar skammt frá, ok kvað þat hyggja at þann einn mundi hon eiga vilja er ríði ekt brentanda er sleginn er um sal hennar.⁵

(Now they prepare their journey cunningly, ride over mountains and through dales to King Buðli's. They make their marriage proposal. He received it well on condition she does not refuse it, and says she is so proud that she will marry only the man whom she wishes. Then they ride to Hlymdalir. Heimir welcomes them graciously. Gunnarr now states their business. Heimir says that it is her choice whom she will marry. He says that her hall is close by, and said that he thought that she would wish to marry that man alone who rides the burning fire which surrounds her hall.)

Sigurðr then changes shapes with Gunnarr, rides through the flickering fire, encounters Brynhildr, and tells her, inaccurately, what Buðli and Heimir had stipulated:

En hann nefndisk Gunnarr Gjúkason—'Ertu ok ætluð mín kona með jávri feðr þíns, ef ek ríða þinn vafriðoga, ok fóstna þíns með yðru atkvæði.' (49)

(And he said his name was Gunnarr Gjúkason—'You are my intended wife as stipulated by your father if I rode through the flickering flames, and by your foster-father, provided you agree'.)

Once again the scenes contain a contradiction: Buðli had accepted the proposal without mentioning the test; Heimir, on the other hand, had simply stated Brynhildr's terms without consenting to anything. Many readers of the saga, if we judge from the written commentary, would regard this distortion as another example of the saga author's clumsiness.⁶ But could

Þorsteinn sendi húskarl sinn í Ás á njósn; hann kvað tólf vísur, fór til dura var gengit, ok sá fatahrúgu á brøndum, ok kom undan rautt klæði. Þorsteinn kvað þar verit hafa Hrolleif—'ok mun Ljót hafa blótat til langliffis honum'. (ÍF, I, S180/H147, pp. 221-222)

(Þorsteinn sent his servant to Ás on reconnaissance; he recited twelve verses before the door was answered, and he saw a pile of clothes on the hearth, and sticking out was a piece of red cloth. Þorsteinn said that must have been Hrolleif—'and Ljót will have been offering sacrifices to prolong his life'.)

This makes clear—something no one has ever doubted—that saga authors were capable of linear narration when they wished. At the point in *Vatnsdæla saga* where the text has *ok var elgi fyrr til gengit en hann hafði kveðit tólf vísur*, the narrator, had he chosen to, could have reported the details which he supplies post-scenically.

Saga narration is also capable of dramatizing a scene and then reporting it as it occurred, as can be seen by looking at a straightforward incident in *Valla-Ljóts saga* ((ÍF, IX, pp. 243-244), where a shepherd employed by Þórir discusses with a shepherd belonging to Ljótr's household the Yuletide festivities at their respective farms. Þórir's shepherd tells his counterpart all Ljótr needs to know to launch an attack on Halli. When Þórir later asks his shepherd what the two had talked about, we are told that the *sauðamaðr sagði allt þat, sem farit hafði* (ÍF, IX, p. 244: the shepherd repeated everything that had happened). Thus, sagas were capable—again, this observation will surprise no one—of accurately reporting a scene dramatized earlier in the narrative.

⁵This and other *Völsunga saga* quotations are from *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), p. 48.

⁶Andreas Heusler, 'Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda,' in *Germanistische Abhandlungen Hermann Paul dargebracht* (Strasbourg: Trübner, 1902), pp. 1-98; rpt. in his *Kleine Schriften*, II, ed. Stefan Sonderegger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), pp. 223-91; Klaus von See, 'Die Werbung um Brünhild', *Zeitschrift für*

this reversal have a rhetorical function? Does Gunnarr/Sigurðr misrepresent the conversations on purpose, and could this inaccuracy have any rhetorical or thematic function in the saga? Can we ask such questions of a saga so heavily dependent on a written tradition for its form and substance? Given the number of alterations of this scene later in the saga—two of which will be examined below—I feel we are justified in wrestling more with the text than some readers have been willing or capable of doing. Nevertheless, this post-scenic element does seem to be another apparently unmotivated excrescence, for if we assume that Sigurðr knowingly misreports what Buðli and Heimir have said, it is hard to see what he hopes to gain from doing so or how the inaccuracy characterizes him or how in any other way it plays a role in the saga.⁷

The second type of post-narrative element consists of characters' untrue statements that serve one of a number of calculated ends. An example from *Svarfdæla saga* demonstrates a reasonably straightforward use of this device. It occurs when Þorsteinn Þorgnýsson asks a retainer of Jarl Herjóðr's why everyone is so downcast as the Yuletide approaches. The retainer replies that Moldi, a viking berserkr who has challenged the jarl to a duel unless he gives him his daughter in marriage, is expected to arrive three days after Yule. Þorsteinn expresses his indignation that the jarl should be so concerned about this matter:

'Engi várkunn þykki [mér] á, at honum fái slíkt svá mikils'. Þessu var svá málit, at Þorsteinn hefði boðst til at ganga á hölm fyrir jarl. (ÍF, IX, p. 142)

('I find it inexcusable that such a thing disturbs him so much'. This was so construed that Þorsteinn had offered to fight the duel for the jarl.)

This exchange tenders Þorsteinn's oblique offer to fight the duel for the jarl—an implicature which the retainer, judging from the narrator's comment, obviously draws.⁸ Taking the bait, the jarl shortly thereafter asks Þorsteinn whether it is true that he has volunteered to fight Moldi. Þorsteinn expands his earlier remark:

'Við því geng ek eigi, en þat sagða ek, at mér þætti líkligt, at maðr mundi til verða at leysa þik undan hölmgöngu, ef þú leggur nokkur gæði til við hann'. 'Þat hefik talat', segir jarl, 'at þeim manni munda ek

deutsches Altertum, 88 (1957), 1-20; rpt. in his *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1981), pp. 194-213; Klaus von See, 'Freierprobe und Königinnenzank in der Sigfríðsaga', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 89 (1959), 163-72; rpt. in *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1981), pp. 214-23; *The Saga of the Volsungas*, ed. R.G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965); R.G. Finch, 'The Treatment of Poetic Sources by the Compiler of *Volsunga saga*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 16 (1962-65), 315-53; R.G. Finch, 'Brunhild and Siegfried', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 17 (1966-69), 224-60; R.G. Finch, 'Volsung-Niflung Cycle' and 'Volsunga saga', both entries in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York and London: Garland, 1993), pp. 707-11 and 711, respectively; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, *Islandica XLIII* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980); T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (London: Grafton, 1992), pp. 274-78.

⁷ I suppose one could argue that Sigurðr's inaccuracy here—let's, for the sake of the argument, call it a bold-faced lie—is the proper idiom for one carrying out such a deception. In the act of tricking Brynhildr he is incapable of saying anything that is remotely true, no matter how unimportant any given statement may be for his plan.

⁸ Another implicature to be inferred from this dialogue is that Þorsteinn is criticising the jarl's men for not relieving him of this challenge—a subtlety that the retainer, if the narrator's silence is any guide, does not seem to grasp. Þorsteinn seems to be getting his own back for the retainer's expression of disbelief that Þorsteinn does not know the *Mokki* saga, for his words echo the retainer's ('*Váarkunn mun þér á þykkja ...*'). Naturally, Þorsteinn must be careful about criticising the jarl's men, and apparently his barbed circumspection has not been taken on board.

gipta dóttur mína, er þenna mann gæti af ráðit'. Þorsteinn segir: 'Ekki spurða ek þessa af því, at ek ætli mér þetta, heldr fyrir þat, at ek veit fleiri munu til verða, svá sem fleiri vitu'. Hættu þeir nú þessu tali, ok lífor at jólum. Gladdist jarl nú heldr við orð Þorsteins. (ÍP, IX, p. 143)

'I would not go that far, but I did say that it seemed likely that someone would be prepared to release you from the duel if you offered some incentive'. 'I have decreed', says the jarl, 'that I will marry my daughter to the man who gets rid of this man'. Þorsteinn says: 'I did not ask because I wished this for myself, but rather because I know that the more will be willing the more who know'. Now they break off their conversation, and Yule approaches. The jarl was rather gladdened by Þorsteinn's words.)

Þorsteinn's post-scenic embellishment (underlined) that he had suggested that the jarl offer an incentive to fight Moldi betrays Þorsteinn's motives. He wants the jarl to know of his willingness to fight the duel but, in the tradition of the unassuming courtly hero (think of Gawain's deference in requesting Arthur's permission to fight the Green Knight), without thrusting himself forward. At the same time his elaboration provokes the jarl into making Þorsteinn a quid pro quo offer, thus essentially binding the jarl into a contract. Moreover, Þorsteinn's inventiveness permits him to act his part in a charade, the pretence that he is not an opportunist capitalizing on the desperate situation of an ageing warrior trying to preserve his heroic dignity.⁹ Naturally, when the jarl states the terms of the barter, Þorsteinn quickly retreats behind a wheedling modesty formula ('I myself would never dream of presuming to aspire to marrying...')—which, more than anything else in the narrative, reveals his strategy in deferentially approaching the jarl with his modest proposal. The jarl seems happy enough, whether merely relieved, satisfied at finding such an unassuming prospective son-in-law, or amused at Þorsteinn's transparent ploy being a matter for the reader's interpretation. Thus, the post-scenic element in this episode seems motivated by the demands of characterization.¹⁰

The second example of type two comes from *Vǫlsunga saga*. After spending the three 'chaste nights'¹¹ with Gunnarr/Sigurðr, Brynhildr goes to Heimir's and tells him 'secretly' (*af trúnaði*) that a king had come to visit her and

'reið minn vafröga ok kvazk kominn til ríða við mik ok nefndisk Gunnarr. En ek sagða at þat mundi Sigurðr einn gera, er ek vann cifa á fjallinu, ok er hann minn frumverr'. (p. 50)

('rode through my flame-wall and said he had come to marry me and called himself Gunnarr. But I said that Sigurðr alone would do that, to whom I swore an oath on the mountain, and he was my first man'.)

Once again, when we look back at the scene between Brynhildr and Gunnarr/Sigurðr behind the flame-wall—it occurs one page earlier in Finch's edition—we find that she made no

⁹Þorsteinn's behaviour here resembles that of the young Beowulf when offering his services to the ageing monarch, Hroðgar, who is also confronted by a kind of berserker. See the classic account by Edward B. Irving, Jr., of Beowulf's courtliness in *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 63-67.

¹⁰Þorsteinn is guilty of at least one other imaginative reconstruction of an earlier dialogue. Just before he fights Moldi this exchange occurs:

'Hversu komstu at sverði Ljótr ins bleika, bróður míns?' Þorsteinn sagði: 'Ljótr sendi þér kveðju á deyjanda degi ok þat með, at honum þóttir þú líkastr til at hefna hans'. (p. 147)

(How did you come by the sword of Ljótr the Pale, my brother?' Þorsteinn said: 'Ljótr sent you his greeting on his dying day along and also that he thought you the most likely to avenge him'.)

Ljótr said nothing of the kind, but this misrepresentation permits Þorsteinn both to display his *Schadenfreude* and to entertain his audience.

¹¹A phrase coined, as far as I know by Anne Heinrichs, '*Annar er vart eðli*: the type of the prepatriarchal woman in Old Norse literature', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, eds. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1986), p. 119.

statement resembling the underlined one.¹² Why does she fabricate this statement, and why does the narrator tell us that she speaks confidentially to Heimir? The answer requires that we assume that *Völsunga saga* is a well-constructed narrative rather than a botched work that simply paraphrases numerous eddic poems, an assumption which apparently few readers of the saga are willing to make.

I assume that Brynhildr and Heimir share several secrets unknown to other characters in the saga: (1) Brynhildr and Sigurðr have produced a daughter, Áslaug; (2) Brynhildr never wanted or planned to marry anyone, including Sigurðr;¹³ (3) the flame-wall, designed after Sigurðr married Guðrún, was meant to preserve her celibacy and not to choose the most valiant suitor by insuring that no one except Sigurðr would be able to ride through it. Assuming that the married Sigurðr would not attempt the feat, she was confident that no one else could manage it. As a consequence, Brynhildr spends the chaste nights in a state of confusion, signalled by her initial reaction to Gunnarr/Sigurðr's appearance in her bower: '*Eigi veit ek gerla hversu ek skal þessu svara*' ('I hardly know how I shall answer this'). What puzzles her, of course, is how Gunnarr/Sigurðr managed to cross the flames. This is the significance of the statement she makes to Heimir, and is readily understandable as something she had said not to Gunnarr/Sigurðr but as part of the oaths she was forced to swear in order to preserve her celibacy. Like the other statements I am examining in this essay, this one apparently adds matter to a conversation we have witnessed. But, in fact, Brynhildr's remark summarizes statements she had made about her marriage partner, as we may reconstruct them by looking at statements she makes before and after this scene: (1) '*En ek strengða þess heit þar í mót at giptask engum þeim er hraðask kynni*' ('But I swore an oath in response to marry no one who knew fear', p. 35); (2) '*...ok þar kom at ek hétumsk þeim er riði hestinum Grana með Fáfnis arfi ok riði minn vafrioga...*' ('and for this reason I promised myself to the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fáfnir's legacy and who would ride my flame-wall', p. 53); (3) '*Ok þess strengða ek heit heima at feðr míns, at ek munda þeim einum unna, er ágeztr væri allinn, en þat er Sigurðr*' ('Home at my father's I swore a solemn oath that I would marry only the one who is the most noble born, and that is Sigurðr', p. 53); (4) '*Ek vann eið at eiga þann mann er riði minn vafrioga, en þann eið vilda ek halda eða deyja ella*' ('I swore an oath to marry the man who rode through my flame-wall, and that oath will I keep or else die', p. 56); (5) '*Síðan leiddi Atli mik á tal ok spyr ef ek vilda þann eiga er riði Grana. Sá var yðr ekki líkr, ok þá hétumsk ek syni Sigmundar konungs ok engum qðrum...*' ('Then Atli led me aside

¹²In his recent *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* (Berkeley, etc.: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 82, Jesse Byock offers a less likely translation of this passage: 'Yet when I swore the oath on the mountain, I had said that Sigurd alone could do that...'. This rendition violates the syntax of the Icelandic and misconstrues *er* as an adverb.

¹³I assume her actual desires, which she had shared only with Heimir—as opposed to the many other statements she makes to other characters about her marriage plans—are finally expressed in her remarks to Gunnarr in Chapter 32:

'Ok enemma ríðu þér til saka við hann ok við mik, þá er ek var heima með feðr mínum, ok hafða ek allt þat er ek vilda, ok málða ek engan yðarn minn skylda verða, þá er þér ríðuð þar at garði þrfr konungar. (p. 59)

('Soon you conspired against him and me when I was at home with my father and had everything that I desired, and I intended that none of you would be mine, when you three kings rode into the courtyard.')

Everything else she says about marriage, according to my reading of the saga, ought to be regarded as her insincere public pronouncements that she is forced to make after the two commands that she marry (the one by Öðinn and the other by her father) are uttered.

for a conversation and asks whether I wished to marry him who was riding Grani. He was not like you, and I had promised myself to the son of Sigmundur and to no other...'). Her remarks document her attempt to rule out all men as marriage partners by demanding that they fulfil the following unachievable conditions: (1) a man of inhuman courage (all men know fear, except for Sigurðr but he, being married, will not try); (2) a man who can ride Grani through the flames (no one but Sigurðr can do this); (3) a man of the most noble birth (Sigurðr, by definition); (4) a man who can ride through the flames (Sigurðr); (5) no one if not Sigurðr (thus no one). I read the Brynhildr saga as the defeat of her attempt to remain celibate. Because Heimir is a party to her thinking, he draws the correct implicature and acknowledges his own bewilderment by simply stating the obvious, *Heimir kvað nú svá búið vera mundu* (Heimir said that now matters would have to be as they are, p. 50).

The final example I would like to examine is the most complex of all those so far discussed.¹⁴ After Brynhildr learns of the shape-shifting from Guðrún, she asks Gunnarr the following question:

'Hvat gerðir þú af hring þeim er ek selda þér, er Budli konungr gaf mér at efsta skilnaði, er þér synir Gjúka konungs kómuð til hans ok hétuð at herja eða brenna, nema þér næðid mér? Síðan leiddi hann mik á tal, ok spyrr hvem ek kœra af þeim sem komnir váru, en ek buðumk til at verja landit ok vera höfðingi yfir þriðjungi liðs. Váru þá tveir kostir fyrir hendi, at ek munda þeim verða at giptask sem hann vildi, eða vera án alls fjár ok hans vináttu; kvað þó sína vináttu mér mundu betr gegna en reiði. Þá hugsaða ek með mér, hvárt ek skylda hlýða hans vilja eða drepa margan mann. Ek þóttumk vanfær til at þreyta við hann, ok þar kom at ek hétumsk þeim er ríði hesinum Grana með Fáfnis arfi ok ríði minn vafðoga ok drepi þá menn er ek kvað á.'

¹⁴Another example of type two occurs in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Strictly regarded, it is not a post-scenic element, but a post-narrative element, for we are told something in summary which a later dramatization then dilates. Both devices have in common the introduction of contradictory material into the saga. A bit of summary before we look at the example: At the death of his father, Brynjólfr, Bárðr inherits the estate ultimately deriving from his grandfather, Björgólfr. Two of Björgólfr's illegitimate sons, Hárekr and Hraekr, apparently appeal to Bárðr for a part of Björgólfr's estate which Brynjólfr had earlier refused them: *Bárðr fór heim til búa sinna ok gerðisk brátt höfðingi mikill; en Hildirþarsynir fengu ekki af afriinum þá heldr en fyrr* (ÍF, II, pp. 21-22; Bárðr went home to his estate and became a great chieftain; but the sons of Hildirþr received no more of the inheritance than before). After Bárðr's death and his friend Þórólfur's marriage to his widow, the two illegitimate brothers make a claim to Þórólfur for their alleged share. Þórólfur responds to their request as follows:

'Þat var mér kunnigt of Brynjólfr ok enn kunnara um Bárð...; var ek nær því, at þit hófuð þetta sama skáll við Bárð, ok heyrðisk mér svá, sem honum þætti þar engi sannindi til, því at hann kallaði ykkir frillusonu.' (ÍF, II, p. 26)

(I knew Brynjólfr and knew Bárðr even better...; I was present when you raised this claim with Bárðr, and it didn't sound to me as if he thought there was any truth in it, for he called you bastards'.)

We have neither witnessed nor been told anything of the kind. (In his *Íslensk Fornrit* edition Nordal comments that this appears to be an oversight on the author's part: 'Þetta virðist vera misgáningur söguritarans. Þeir Bárðr og Þórólfur höfðu ekki verið saman á Hálogalandi eftir andlát Brynjólfs; sjá 8. kap. niðurl', II, n. 1, p. 26.) Be this as it may, the new matter has a clear function on the plot level and, perhaps, on the thematic level as well. There was no narrative reason to dramatize Bárðr's refusal of their claim to their inheritance; the illegitimate brothers are kept in the background until needed. But the brothers' animosity towards Þórólfur must be given concrete form in order provide a motive for their campaign of slander that leads to his death at King Haraldr's hands. It is thus narratively useful to have Þórólfur deliver the stinging insult that they are bastards, although he purports merely to be citing his friend Bárðr and in any event voices an apparent legal fact. However, in experiencing first-hand the slight that the brothers receive, the reader is prepared for their revenge on him. In addition, Þórólfur's tactlessness signals a theme—the family propensity for delivering gratuitous insults—that the rest of the saga will develop extensively.

(‘What did you do with the ring I gave you, the one King Buðli gave me at our last parting when you sons of King Gjǫfki came to him and threatened to destroy or burn unless you obtained me? Then he led me aside and asks which of those who had come I would choose, but I offered to defend the land and be a commander of a third of the army. There were then two choices to hand, that I would have to marry the one he chose, or be without all wealth and his friendship. He said also that his friendship would serve me better than his anger. Then I considered whether I should accede to his will or kill many a man. I judged myself incapable of contending against him, and so I promised myself to the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fáfnir’s inheritance, ride through my flame wall, and kill those men I chose. Now no one dared to ride except Sigurðr alone. He rode through the fire because he did not lack courage to do so. He killed the dragon and Reginn and five kings, but not you, Gunnarr, who grew as pale as a corpse, and you are neither a king nor a champion. And I swore this oath at my father’s, that I would love that man alone who was the most noble born, and that is Sigurðr. Now I am an oath breaker, because I do not have him, and that is why I will contrive your death. And I have Grimhildr to thank for this. No woman can be found worse or more cowardly than her.’)

The key to understanding this question is to recognize that Brynhildr has knowingly invented Buðli’s ring and that she is using this invention to test the validity of Guðrún’s testimony by baiting a trap for Gunnarr.¹⁵ I have discussed Brynhildr’s suspicions during the nuptial scene with Sigurðr/Gunnarr. Given her suspicions I read the following scene as Brynhildr’s intentional provocation of Guðrún in order to learn how Gunnarr crossed the flames:

Þat er einn dag er þær gengu til árinna Rfinar at þvá sér, þá óð Brynhildr lengra út á ána. Guðrún spyr hví þat gegndi.

Brynhildr segir, ‘Hví skal ek um þetta jafnask við þik heldr en um annar? Ek hugða at minn faðir væri ríkari en þinn, ok minn maðr unnit mörq snildarverk ok riði eld brennaða, en þinn bóndi var þræll Hjalpreks konungs’.

Guðrún svarar með reiði, ‘Þá værir þú vitrari ef þú þegðir en lastaðir mann minn. Er þat allra manna mál at engi hafi slíkr komit í veröldina fyrir hversvetna sakir, ok eigi samir þér vel at lasta hann, hví at hann er þinn frumveir, ok drap hann Fáfnir ok reið vaflogann, er þú hugðir Gunnarr konung, ok hann lá hjá þér ok tók af hendri þér hringinn Andvaranaut, ok máttu nú hér hann kenna’.

(One day when they had gone to the Rhine to bathe, Brynhildr waded farther out into the river. Guðrún asked what that signified.

¹⁵ Heusler’s treatment (see above, note 4, at pp. 260, 270) of the ring motif has cast a long shadow over this passage. He regards the rings as a clue to the reconstruction of the lost sources and concludes that the author invents the motif in which *Andvaranaut* serves as a betrothal ring. In its earliest versions the ring-exchange motif had two forms, an alleged earlier one (as preserved in the *Prose Edda*) in which Sigurðr/Gunnarr exchanges *Andvaranaut* with Brynhildr—to whom he had not been engaged—for an unnamed ring, and a later one (as recorded in *Völsunga saga*) where their betrothal precedes his trading an unnamed ring for *Andvaranaut*. Heusler’s tortuous argument implies the following correspondences: (1) when during the proxy nuptials Sigurðr gives Brynhildr *Andvaranaut*; the name betrays nothing about their former acquaintance, because the ring has obviously not changed hands since he obtained it from Fáfnir’s hoard; likewise, the ring Sigurðr takes from Brynhildr can have any name except *Andvaranaut* (or, of course, no name at all); (2) when he takes *Andvaranaut* from her, this implies an earlier betrothal, for otherwise when and how did she get his ring? Thus, when Brynhildr asks Gunnarr what he has done with the ring named _____, only one name, *Andvaranaut*, can signify a betrothal ring. That she names it Buðli’s ring means, therefore, that it can never have been a betrothal ring in a source. In order to show that the saga author, and not some intervening work, was responsible for making *Andvaranaut* the betrothal ring, Heusler eliminates all the intermediate, fragmentary, or non-extant lays as possible models. The most likely source (because Heusler thought it began with the betrothal) is the non-extant **Sigurðrviða in Metri*, but it also must be rejected, for the attribution of the ring to Buðli—also from **Metri*—precludes it as an betrothal ring. Therefore, *Andvaranaut*-as-betrothal-ring is a motif that must have been invented by the saga author. The obvious deficiency in Heusler’s argument is his failure to account for why the author invented this ring, a failure that results from Heusler’s assumption, apparent throughout his article, that the author simply did not notice, or was powerless to harmonize, such contradictions. Source studies of the saga, without exception, assume that the author does not belong to the first rank of saga writers.

Brynhildr says, 'Why should I be equal to you in this more than in other matters? I think my father was more powerful than yours, and my husband has performed more feats of prowess and rode the burning fire, but your husband was King Hjálprekr's slave'.

Guðrún answers in anger, 'You would be wiser to be silent than to attack my husband. Everyone knows that no one his equal in any way has ever come into the world, and it ill befits you to criticize him, because he was your first lover, and he killed Fáfnir and rode through the flame-wall, while you thought it was King Gunnarr, and he lay with you and took from your hand the ring Andvaramautr, and now you will recognize it'.)

Confusion about this scene abounds.¹⁶ But if we assume—against so much testimony by scholars of the first rank—that the saga does make sense, then Brynhildr's motives follow a clear pattern: doing everything she can to avoid marriage, she naturally grows suspicious at the thwarting of her carefully laid plans. When she learns that Sigurðr plays an (albeit unwitting) role in her deception, she takes revenge on those responsible, first on Sigurðr and ultimately, because of the loss they suffer in Sigurðr, on Gunnarr's clan. Thus, the post-scenic element in *Völsunga saga* constitutes a high-water mark in the sophistication with which the tradition used one of its narrative building-blocks.

3

What conclusions can be drawn from such a brief survey of post-scenic elements? One answer is that in a few demonstrable cases the device can be seen to further the narrative needs of saga narrative. In general we might posit a device that saga authors employed to signal to his audience the significance of a detail. Another way of putting the matter is to regard the author as saying, 'Pay attention to this detail, I am adding it to what I have already told you, it will figure in what I am next about to tell you'. Naturally, what is required to make the argument more convincing is a larger number of examples drawn from a wider range of textual types within the Icelandic corpus. I can only state that these example here offered are merely those that I happen to have noticed in desultory readings of the sagas over a relatively short period of time, a matter of a few weeks. More reading in the expectation of further discoveries may well round out the vague contours here suggested.

How can we account for such a narrative style? One possibility is that it may be a survival of oral-formulaic rhetoric. A similar survival of structural elements was posited by David K. Crowne in Old English poetry in 1960, and since has been extended by many hands to other literary traditions.¹⁷ The implications of Crowne's observation, not all of which were immediately apparent, still occupy scholars of medieval literatures.¹⁸ Here, further definition is also required.

¹⁶For example, Klaus von See assumes that the *senna* at the river is pointless; see 'Freierprobe und Königinnenanzug in der Sigfridsage', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 88 (1957), 163-172; rpt. in *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1981), pp. 214-223, at p. 222. See also T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (London: Grafton, 1992), pp. 274-276, who states that 'it is impossible for this part of *Völsunga saga* to make sense' (at p. 276).

¹⁷'The Hero on the Beach: An Example of Composition by Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 61 (1960), 362-72; for a list of relevant studies of this theme see Alain Renoir, 'Oral-Formulaic Context: Implications for the Comparative Criticism of Mediaeval Texts', in *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. John Miles Foley (Columbia: Slavica Publishers, 1981), p. 438, n. 42. Add to this list: Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, 'Guthlac on the Beach', *Neophilologus*, 64 (1980), 290-96; Fredrik J. Heinemann, 'The Hero on the Beach in *Fóstbræðra saga*', *Neophilologus*, 68 (1984), 557-61.

¹⁸See, for example, Alain Renoir, 'Oral-Formulaic Rhetoric and the Interpretation of Written Texts', in *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context*, ed. John Miles Foley (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 103-35, at pp. 105, 123, 128-31, 132-33.

In addition, the post-scenic element could reflect how literate authors steeped in the oral tradition remember and thus structure their tales, using only that which is necessary for any given point in the saga and then picking up the parts they need later, either not noticing that they later add something or purposively varying what had come before. We may imagine that an oral narrator forgets details, habitually tells us that things happened that in fact either did not or else happened differently, and adds to his story as he goes along, as if to say, 'Oh, I forget before to mention that...'.¹⁹ Obviously, it is impossible now to reconstruct from the extant sagas the stages of this development from oral to written form or to determine whether saga authors were conscious of this habit. It may be that they imitated this oral style as a conscious feature of archaism, or that they gave such a structure no more thought than they gave, say, to the forms of finite verbs or the case of nouns following prepositions.

How do we respond to the post-scenic element? To begin with, as I hope I have demonstrated, such occurrences are not examples of narrative crudity, but may be part of the grammar of saga narrative technique. For this reason we need to place each occurrence in its context within a saga and within the tradition at large.

¹⁹Perhaps Hygelac's expression of relief at Beowulf's triumphant return from Denmark is an example of this habit:

	'ic 88 lange bæd,
þæt 88 þone wælgæst	wihte ne græne,
læte S88-Dene	sylfe geweorðan
g88e wi88 Grendel'.	

(*Beowulf* 1994b-1997a: 'I long pleaded with you, that you under no circumstances should approach the murderous spirit, should let the South-Danes themselves undertake battle with Grendel'.)

This remark contradicts two earlier statements about Beowulf's undertaking. Although they are not dramatized, they make no mention of Geatish apprehension. The narrator simply states that 'the wise men did not blame him for that expedition, although he was dear to them' (lines 202-203), a comment which Beowulf himself embellishes when he greets Hroðgar: 'then my people, the best wise men, urged me that I should visit you, Prince Hroðgar, because they knew the power of my strength' (lines 415-418). While Hygelac's reluctance is naturalistically possible, and dramatically effective, its introduction at this late point in the narrative is surprising.

Appendix A

Þat var eitt sinn, at Ketill mælti við Þorstein, son sinn: 'Önnur gerisk nú atferð ungra manna en þá er ek var ungr, þá girntusk menn á nokkur framaverk, annatvegga at ráðask í hernað eða afla fjár ok sóma við einhverjum atferðum, þeim er nokkur mannhættu var í, en nú vilja ungrir menn gerask heimaelskir ok sitja við bakelda ok kýla vomb sína á miði ok mungáti, ok þverr því karlmennska ok harðfengi, en ek hefi því fjár aflat ok virðingar, at ek þorða at leggja mik í hættu ok hörð einvígi. Nú hefir þú, Þorsteinn, lífúinn krappt hlotit afls ok vaxtar, er þat ok líkast, at þú fylgir þar eptir þinni athöfn ok fari þar eljun eptir ok öll tilræði, því at eigi villtu víkjask eptir atferðum inna fyrri frænda þinna ok sýnir þik eptir því, sem þú ert ásýndum, ok mun hugr fylgja vexti. Þat var ríkra manna síbr, konunga eða jarla, várna jafningja, at þeir lágu í hernaði ok öfluðu sér fjár ok frama, ok skyldi þat fé eigi til arfs telja né sonr eptir fæður taka, heldr skyldi þat fé í haug leggja hjá sjálfum höfpingjum. Nú þótt sýnir þeira tæki jarðir, máttu þeir eigi haldask í sínum kostum, þótt virðing felli til, nema þeir legði sik ok sína menn í hættu ok herskap, aflandi [sér] svá fjár ok frægðar, hverr eptir annan, ok stíga svá í fótspor frændum sínum. Nú ætla ek, at þér sé ókunn hermanna lög, ok mætta ek þau kenna þér, ertu nú ok svá aldrs kominn, at þér væri mál at reyna [þik ok vita], hvat hamingjan vill unna þér'.

(One day Ketill spoke to his son, Þorsteinn: 'The behaviour of young men nowadays differs from when I was young. Then men eagerly desired deeds of fame, either to go on viking expeditions or to increase their wealth and honour by some manner of activity involving danger, but now young men wish to become stay-at-homes and sit by the fire and fill their bellies with mead and ale, so that their manhood and valour decrease. But I acquired wealth and reputation by daring to expose myself to danger and hard fighting. Now, Þorsteinn, as to might and size you are graced with little strength; and it is most likely that you will follow your own ends and pursue things according to your own energy and enterprise, for you will not wish to imitate the conduct of your forefathers but comport yourself as you appear, and your spirit appears to be like your body. It was the custom of great men, kings or jarls, our equals, to go on viking expeditions and win themselves wealth and fame, and that wealth did not belong to their estate nor did their sons inherit it, but rather that money was laid in the burial mounds next to the chieftains themselves. Now although their sons inherited the lands and honour befell them [?], they could not maintain themselves except by exposing themselves and their men to danger and harrying, increasing thus their wealth and fame, each after the other, and so following in their kinsmen's footsteps. Now I think that you are unaccustomed to the viking customs, and I am capable of teaching them to you; you are now of an age that it is time to test yourself and find out what fortune will bring you'.)