

The transformation of literary genres in Iceland from orality to literacy

It is reasonable to suppose that the whole system of poetic and narrative creation changed considerably in Iceland when Latin writing was introduced after the conversion to Christianity. Foreign literature was, as we know, introduced by the clerics and used to supplement or even replace the earlier indigenous forms of literature. Some types of oral stories and poems, especially those that were considered heathen or unchristian, must have disappeared or were transformed under the influence of new literary genres such as saints' lives and chronicles, imported from abroad and promoted by the Church. Yet it is difficult to find out exactly what happened, since our sources are from the time when the change from orality to literacy had already taken place.

One way to deal with this problem is to study the Old Norse terminology used to designate literary genres and literary activity in order to find out exactly what the terms referred to and how they originated. Such studies were carried out in the middle of the 1960's by M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij in Russia and, simultaneously, by myself in Sweden. We worked independent of each other and were not aware of each other's research until it was in fact completed and published in two different journals in 1965 and 1966.¹

Steblin-Kamenskij's research centered primarily on terms used in describing literary activity and the people engaged in such activity, for example the verbs "rita" (write), "yrkja" (create poetry), "setja saman" (compose), and the nouns "skáld" (poet), "ritari" (scribe) "sagnamaðr" (storyteller), "fræðimaðr" (a man versed in old lore). By studying how these words were used in various kinds of contexts he was able to conclude that the Icelanders even at an early stage had a precise terminology for describing poets and various kinds of poetic creativity but no corresponding terminology for describing authors of prose or the activity of creating or inventing sagas. Or in other words: while poetry was considered an art, and the poet often admired as an accomplished artist, the master of various kinds of traditional poetic forms such as *dróttkvæði* or *drápa*, the telling or writing of prose sagas was not considered an art but simply a way of reporting or recording what had actually happened. A "saga" was thus originally not a particular literary form but any story about the past. No distinction was made between the story itself and what it was about, nor between "history" and "fiction" in our modern sense. Our modern distinctions between various saga genres – "fornaldarsaga", "Íslendingasaga", etc. – simply did not exist in medieval sources. From these findings, Steblin-Kamenskij developed his famous theory of "unconscious authorship" which maintains that the authors of sagas, unlike the skalds, were not conscious of being authors but saw themselves as reporters of facts and traditional lore. Unlike the skalds, the authors of sagas are therefore anonymous and largely unknown.

Steblin-Kamenskij's theory of "unconscious authorship" was not compatible with the ideas of the so-called "Icelandic school", a group of saga scholars which at this time dominated Old Norse studies in the Scandinavian countries, and who saw the classical family sagas primarily as conscious literary creations by Icelandic authors of the 13th century. When Steblin-Kamenskij's book *Mir Sagi* was published in English translation in 1973 as *The Saga*

¹ Lars Lönnroth, "Genrebegreppen", in: "Feser om de två kulturerna. Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar", *Scripta Islandica* 15/1964 (published 1965), pp. 9-32; summarized in *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-Writing* (Stockholm, 1965); M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, "An Attempt at a Semantic Approach to the Problem of Authorship in Old Icelandic Literature", *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 81 (1966), pp. 24-34, summarized in *Mir Sagi* (Leningrad, 1971), translated as *The Saga Mind* (Odense, 1973), pp. 25 ff.

Mind, his ideas were strongly attacked by Peter Hallberg, who was a leading representative of the "Icelandic school" and at that time engaged in research aimed at finding the authors of individual sagas.² This led to an animated discussion between Hallberg and Steblin-Kamenskij³, and although the ideas of Steblin-Kamenskij have since then been more favorably received than they were in the seventies, they are by no means generally accepted by modern scholars.

My own research centered on terms used to designate prose genres in medieval Old Norse texts. Like Steblin-Kamenskij, I could find no trace of modern generic distinctions such as "fornaldarsaga" or "Íslendingasaga", but I did find numerous examples of terms used to designate literary prose genres of foreign origin, for example "heilagra manna sögur" (saints' lives), "riddarasögur" (romances), "dæmisögur" (*exempla*), lífssaga (a religious biography, *vita*), "ævisaga" (a secular biography) and "skröksaga" (fable, *fabula*). In addition I found many early examples of the term "þáttur" but not in the modern sense of a short story but only in the sense of "strand in a rope" or episode within a larger narrative. It seemed to me obvious that all of these generic terms – with the possible exception of "þáttur" – were of late origin, introduced by literate clerics in Christian times.

Thus my findings tended to confirm Steblin-Kamenskij's conclusion that the indigenous saga was not regarded, at least not originally, as a literary genre or artform. On the other hand, my findings also suggested that several new generic concepts were introduced by the clerics in the 12th and 13th centuries and could possibly have influenced the saga-writers when they were reporting local saga traditions. Literary scholars have, particularly in later years, found many examples of crossbreeding between the indigenous saga forms and "riddarasögur", "heilagra manna sögur", et cetera. Although the classical family sagas and mythical-heroic sagas are obviously to a great extent based on Icelandic oral tradition, the traditional stories were probably to some extent reshaped according to new patterns when they were recorded by clerics versed in medieval Christian literature.

In this paper I shall approach the problem of generic classification from a somewhat different angle which I hope may help us a little bit further in understanding how the Icelanders thought about various kinds of literature or oral discourse.⁴ Hopefully, this will also throw some light on Steblin-Kamenskij's theory about "unconscious authorship".

2.

In Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* from around 1230 there is in the section "Skáldskaparmál" a short paragraph listing various names or *heiti* for speech that may be used by the skalds in their poetic compositions. The passage reads as follows:

Mál heitir ok orð ok orðtak ok orðsnilli, tala, saga, senna, þræta, söngur, galdr, kveðandi, skjal, bifa, hjaldur, hjal, skvál, glaumur, þjarka, gyss, þrapt, skálp, hóll, skraf, dælska, ljóðeska, hégómi, afgelja. Heitir ok rödd, hljómr, rómr, ómun, þytr, göll, gnýr, glymr, þrymr, rymr, brak, svipr, svipun, gangr. Svá skal orrosto kenna við sverð eða önnur vápn eða hlífur.⁵

Anthony Faulkes has translated the passage as follows:

² Peter Hallberg, "The Syncretic Saga Mind: A Discussion of a New Approach to the Icelandic Sagas", *Medieval Scandinavia*, 7 (1974), pp. 102-117

³ See *Medieval Scandinavia*, 9 (1975), pp. 187-191, and 9 (1976), pp. 164-172.

⁴ I discussed this passage in an article in Swedish, "Den muntliga kulturens genrer. Diskursformer i Snorre Sturlassons Edda," in: *Fiktionens förvandlingar. En vänbok till Bo Bennich-Björkman*, eds. D. Hedman and J. Svedjedal (Uppsala, 1996), pp. 182-193.

⁵ *SnE*, p. 192. The last sentence is only found in one of the two manuscript branches but was probably included in the original text.

Speech is also called words and vocabulary and eloquence, tale, story, wrangle, dispute, song, incantation, recitation, chat, quavering, conversation, talk, prating, banter, quarrel, mocking, prattle, blather, bragging, patter, inanity, cant, triviality, twaddle. Noise is also called sound, voice, resonance, howling, clamour, din, clash, uproar, roar, crack, thud, report, clatter. By means of these expressions battle shall be referred to in terms of swords or other weapons or shields.⁶

As the last sentence indicates, these lists of *heiti* are primarily intended to show how one can construct kennings for "battle" by combining a noun denoting some kind of noise or speech with a noun denoting some kind of weapon, for example "the dispute of swords" or "the clash of shields". One may nevertheless use these wordlists as a clue to Snorri's generic classification system or, to be more precise, the classification system that he inherited from oral tradition.

On closer inspection, the enumerated *heiti* can be divided into two main categories, each represented by a separate wordlist:

- 1) terms denoting verbal expressions or verbal behaviour (*Mál ---afgelja*) and
- 2) terms denoting nonverbal sounds (*rödd --- gangr*)

Both lists start out with the most general terms - meaning simply "language" or "sound" - and end with more specific terms denoting rather specialized *types* of language or sound, for example "twaddle" or "clatter". It is thus clear that Snorri is not simply listing various *heiti* at random but has a very clear idea of their relative position in a sort of semantic hierarchy, in which the more general term has its place before the more specific term.

The list of terms denoting nonverbal sounds is of no particular interest for the understanding of Snorri's literary categorization, but his list of terms denoting verbal expressions certainly is, for it contains several terms which are known as names of traditional Old Norse genres - for example "saga", "senna", "söngr", "galdr" - although there are also terms which do not seem to have any such meaning, for example "orð" - which simply means any kind of word or expression - and "hégómi", which roughly means the same as "nonsense".

Which are then the principles underlying this list of *heiti*? As far as I can see the principles are the following. Snorri is first (Stage A) listing general terms for language ("mál"), verbal expression ("orð", "orðtak") and verbal skill or eloquence ("orðsnilli"). This leads him over to a second stage (B), where he lists more specific terms denoting various types of public oral performance ("tala", "saga", "senna", "præta", "söngr", "galdr", "kveðandi"), which are not necessarily to be understood as "genres" in the modern sense but are nevertheless very close to actual and well-known oral genres. Finally, Snorri proceeds to a third stage (C), where he lists terms denoting speech acts of a more trivial and private nature ("skjal", "bifa", "hjaldr", "hjal", "skvái", etc.)

The terms listed at stage B provide us with a clue to Snorri's generic concepts, although it would be grossly mistaken to believe that these were the *only* generic terms he knew. To what extent does he then himself use these terms in referring to various kinds of discourse? Some years ago I tried to answer this question by systematically looking up all occurrences of "orðtak", "orðsnilli", "tala", "saga", "senna", "præta", "söngr", "galdr", and "kveðandi" within the texts of Snorri's two great works, *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda*.⁷ The result I

⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes (London & Melbourne, 1987), p.154. I am using this excellent translation throughout except in the very few cases where I have a slightly different interpretation of the text.

⁷ Lönnroth (1996), pp. 85-89.

reached was that Snorri in fact uses most of these words, often several times, in referring to texts or verbal expressions that are either mentioned by him or constitute a part of his own discourse. The word "orðtak", for example, is used at least three times in the *Prose Edda* in referring to sayings or proverbial expressions that are quoted within the text. The word "tala" (speech) is used no less than 34 times in *Heimskringla* in referring to formal speeches that are generally held by some prominent character at a thing meeting or a similar occasion and quoted verbatim by Snorri as part of his narrative. The word "saga" (story), is used regularly in referring to any kind of narrative told within Snorri's text, for example the story of Balder's death in the *Prose Edda* or the biography of Olav Tryggvason in *Heimskringla*. The word "senna" (dispute, wrangle) occurs a couple of times in referring to verbal disputes that are also quoted in the text. And the words "söngur", "galdr" and "kveðandi" are used in Snorri's texts at numerous occasions when he refers to songs, incantations and recitations that are likewise quoted as part of his discourse, especially when the activities of skalds or magicians are described.

We may thus conclude that practically all these words were part of Snorri's vocabulary when referring to various kinds of oral texts and oral discourse that formed part of his own literary composition. All of the words are also obviously ancient Icelandic words that existed in the oral culture of Iceland long before writing was introduced by the servants of the Church.

On the other hand, these words can hardly be considered names of literary genres in the same sense as, for example, "riddarasaga", "ævisaga" or "drápa", because they do not refer to specified artistic creations composed by authors but to forms of discourse that were part of everyday life or traditional lore and thus not normally judged by æsthetic criteria. In that sense the terminology bears witness to the "unconscious authorship" which prevailed not only among Icelandic storytellers at the oral stage but also among early saga-writers such as Snorri Sturluson. Thus it appears likely that Snorri regarded himself as an artist or "author" when he composed poetry but not when he composed sagas. This does not mean that he was necessarily unconscious of the fact that he often improved the sagas he had heard by changing the wording or even adding new details. But this was always done within the limits of traditional storytelling and thus not considered original creation.

As the art of saga-writing developed, however, the generic terminology also developed, and eventually it became possible to name various new types of prose genres that did not conform to indigenous modes of narration but to new rules of literary creation, imported from abroad. Thus the vocabulary reflects the transition from orality to literacy in a way that is well compatible with Steblin-Kamenskij's theory about "the saga mind" but also with the idea that the Icelandic sagas were gradually integrated in the medieval literature of Western Europe. Yet it took several centuries before the Icelanders began to see their native sagas as literary prose genres par with romances or novels. Terms such as "fornaldarsaga" or "Íslendingasaga" were then introduced to distinguish their own kind of narrative from the imported prose genres.