

The Fantastic and the Supernatural in the *Saga Ósvalds konungs hins helga*: Patterns and Functions

Chiara Benati
(Università degli Studi di Genova)

1. Oswald and Ósvaldr

The medieval tradition dedicated to the life and the miracles of the Northumbrian king and martyr Oswald (604-642) has its roots in England, where the Saint is mentioned for the first time by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.

From Bede's account we get to know that in 633, when Northumbria was being weighed down by the pagan king Penda and by his ally Cædwalla, the Christian Oswald came back from Scotland to free his land. Here, before the decisive fight against Cædwalla, Oswald put up a cross under which the whole army could pray for victory. After his success against Cædwalla, Oswald began, with the help of the Irish missionary Aidan, to christianize his and other peoples. He was present when the West-Saxon king Cynegils, whose daughter he later married, was converted and stood as his godfather. On August 5th, 642 Oswald died fighting against Penda. From that moment on a series of miracles and supernatural events took place both at the place where he fell in battle and in presence of his relics (Curshmann, 1964, 169).

Apart from Bede, Oswald is the protagonist of a series of texts both in Latin and in English vernacular, such as the *Vita S. Oswaldi regis and martyris* by Reginald of Durham, the *Life of King Oswald* by Ælfric and the *Vita et Passio Sancti Oswaldi* by Henry of Avranches.

At the end of the seventh century some of the relics of Saint Oswald came for the first time on the Continent, to Friesland. Even though his devotion spread quite rapidly throughout Germany, the High German literary tradition dealing with the English saint is attested only from the fourteenth century onwards. In some of these texts, as for example the *Münchener Oswald*, the hagiographic account of Oswald's life, as known from Bede, underwent a radical change and was combined with the scheme typical of the medieval bridal-quest romance (*Brautwerbungsschema*) (Baeseke, 1907, 309). The English king Oswald was worried about the succession to the throne and decided, therefore, to get married. Inspired by God, he left England to get to the kingdom of the pagan king Aror, whose daughter he had chosen as his bride-to-be, thus combining the bridal-quest with Christianization and missionary activity.

In the Late Middle Ages this modified legend came, through Northern Germany, to Iceland, where it took the form we know from the only Old Norse narrative dedicated to the life and the miracles of the Northumbrian king and martyr, the *Saga Ósvalds konungs hins helga* (Ó.s.). The text is transmitted, together with other hagiographic sagas, in one single manuscript, the so-called *Reykjahlólabók* (Perg. fol. nr. 3 of the Royal Library in Stockholm, pp. 14r-19r), which is usually considered to date back to the second half of the fifteenth century.

2. The Fantastic as a Notion

The theoretical approach to the fantastic as a literary genre derives from the definition given by Tsvetan Torodov in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970). According to him, the fantastic involves an unresolved hesitation of the reader between natural and supernatural explanations of apparently supernatural events. This ambiguity as to whether a weird event is supernatural or not constitutes the pure essence of the fantastic; in this respect the mere presence of supernatural events is not sufficient to classify a text as fantastic, since these can also occur in epic and tragedy without provoking any hesitation.

The reader's hesitation in the face of the weird events narrated in the text determines its further classification as 'uncanny', 'marvellous' or 'purely fantastic': this uncertainty can be resolved by a natural explanation, such as a dream, drugs etc., in which case the text belongs to the uncanny; or it can be accepted as supernatural from the very beginning, as happens, for example, with magic powers and auxiliaries in some narratives that Torodov defines as marvellous. As mentioned before, only the unresolved hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations can be considered as characteristic of the purely fantastic genre (Brooke-Rose, 1983, 62).

In this paper, I will apply this criterion to the various supernatural episodes in the *Ó.s.*, in order to show that they differ in origin, model and function within the narration rather than in their belonging to the one or the other Torodovian category.

3. Supernatural Elements in the *Saga Ósvalds konúngs hins helga*

The narration of the *Ó.s.* can be divided into two parts with Oswald's death on the battlefield as turning point. Supernatural elements are present in both of them.

The first part is dedicated to the life of the Saint from the very moment of his accession to the throne. After a period of vacancy on the English throne, God inspired some of the mightiest and wisest men in the land to choose him as king. Hearing this, Oswald felt unworthy for this task and refused it. He even tried to run away, but eventually he couldn't help returning to the town together with the men who had been sent to persuade him. On the day of his crowning, he should have been anointed with the holy chrism, but it was God's will that this was not to be found anywhere. This was the sign of Oswald's unworthiness, he said. Just after he had pronounced these words a raven flew down from Heaven carrying in its beak a golden bowl full of chrism consecrated by Saint Peter himself. This raven, which also carried a letter sealed with a golden cross, was able to speak Latin and, in this language, announced that he had brought from Heaven the holy chrism to anoint Oswald with. The king was crowned and the raven remained with him in his palace.

After a while, Oswald began his activity as christianizer: not only did he build a big church in honour of Saint Peter, but he also started a series of military campaigns against the Pagans.

Even though the king's friends suggested that he should get married, in order to assure the succession to the throne, Oswald didn't appear to be interested in marriage and would rather have remained chaste. His advisers left, but at the same time an old pilgrim (but according to some sources he was an angel) with a palm in his hand came

to the palace. After having paid his respects to the king, he predicted that Oswald would marry a pagan virgin, Pia, Gaudon's daughter. God wanted him to wage war on Gaudon for her sake; in this way he would be also able to Christianize Gaudon's people. The pilgrim suggested sending the speaking raven as messenger to Gaudon's kingdom. At first the bird offered resistance, but, after the pilgrim/angel's intervention, it started speaking again, as it hadn't been heard to do since the day it flew down from Heaven with the chrism in its beak; at the same time the old man disappeared. Oswald then asked the bird to be his messenger and sewed under its wing his letter to the girl. The raven left.

After nine days, the bird arrived at Gaudon's palace, entered the hall through a window, alighted on the table exactly in front of the king and started speaking. Alone with the raven, Pia read Oswald's letter and immediately wanted to believe in the true God: she gave instructions to the bird and sent it back to Oswald with a letter and a ring.

During its flight back the raven encountered a storm and lost both the letter and the ring; they fell in the sea and were found by a fish. With the help of a hermit who prayed to God and the Virgin Mary to send an angel to find the fish, the raven was eventually able to bring the letter and the ring to his master.

Oswald prepared the ships and sailed to Gaudon's land, leaving behind the raven, which was brought to him by an angel, so that he didn't need to sail back to England. Once he had the raven with him, he sent it to Pia to announce his arrival.

Oswald settled down as a merchant, thus arousing Gaudon's curiosity. In fact he was both fascinated by and afraid of this mysterious man wearing the Cross. Once, while going to his tent, Gaudon saw a wonderful deer (but some sources state it was an angel) of Oswald's which was so beautiful that whoever saw it couldn't help desiring it. As the deer ran away, Gaudon followed it, leaving his daughter Pia locked in the castle. As soon as she heard that he'd left, she asked God for help to open the castle's doors and ran to Oswald's tent.

When Gaudon returned to the castle and saw that his daughter was no longer there, he ran after her until he arrived at the island where Oswald and Pia had stopped. In the fight that followed Gaudon lost many of his men and was defeated. As his adversary wanted him to be baptized, he replied that he would accept only if he and his God were able to resuscitate his soldiers. Oswald prayed and they came back to life. Since Gaudon wanted to see another miracle, Oswald asked a rock to give water and the water gushed from it. Gaudon was then persuaded, accepted the Christian religion and was baptized together with his wife and the warriors who had been resurrected: from now on his name would be Simon.

Oswald and Pia could sail back to England, where they celebrated their wedding... and they lived devoutly and chastely!

Once, after Oswald had fed some pilgrims, Bishop Aydanus took his right hand and predicted that this would never decompose ('mun alidreigi rothna'), since many people would wish to be nourished and strengthened by it ('því at marger menn munu bæðe verða fædder ok styrckter af henn'). And, says the narrator, his hand is still as if he were alive!

The Northumbrian king made war on three pagan kings, in order to christianize them. The night before the final battle, he heard a voice predicting his martyrdom:

á morgun skaltu vera bæðe sitthjande ok rikjande með guðe ok hanns úthöldum í himerfki.

The day after, while he was speaking to his warriors, a big light came from the sky onto him and he heard God saying that he would have eternal life with him ('Ausvalde! Þú verðr eyfliflga lifande með mjer'). During the battle many of his warriors were killed, but as soon as they fell down, an angel came to take their souls to Heaven. Seeing this, Oswald praised God and breathed his last. Immediately an angel appeared to bring his soul to Heaven.

The second part of the saga is dedicated to his miracles and to the story of his relics: A horse became sick and was healed after having eaten some grass at the place where the Saint had been killed; a girl recovered from a severe illness after having lain on the same place; some rare plants had grown on the spot where he had been buried, thus indicating that a Saint was lying there; his bones emitted a good smell when exhumed; the house where part of Oswald's bones had been brought was burnt down in a fire, everything was destroyed apart from these; another part of his bones were found on the surface of his grave with a white dove alighting on them and flying away; in the monastery where Oswald's bones had been brought, a beam of white light came from the sky onto them, while the monks were praying and praising God; a poor possessed man was healed lying there; a blind man recovered his sight on the Saint's grave, where there gushed some water which could heal the sick.

As this short summary of its content has shown, unexplainable events are very common and play a fundamental role in the *Ó.s.* The second part of the narration is built almost exclusively on them, while in the first part they constitute the central moments in Oswald's life.

3.1. The 'Marvellous' vs. the 'Purely Fantastic'

Let us look deeper into these unexplainable or supernatural events: applying the above-mentioned Torodovian criterion to the passages in the saga which involve some sort of supernatural force, it is possible to notice that most of them can be classified as 'marvellous', since their supernatural (miraculous) explanation is accepted throughout the whole narration.

In some cases, however, the narrator also leaves a natural explanation open, so that the reader is uncertain about whether to consider them supernatural or not. Some of these passages could, in fact, be explained both naturally and supernaturally: the mysterious pilgrim who arrives at Oswald's castle just after he has declined to get married could be a common pilgrim as well as an angel, as the narrator suggests referring to some sources, or a kind of human alter-ego of the speaking raven, as hinted by his sudden disappearance, when the raven starts speaking again:

...ok hefur eg enn alldreigi fyr heyrrt þik mæla so skrytt nema í fyrstunne,
er ek sá þik, ok nú í annat sinn; en í þessu þá hvarf í burtu hinn gamle
maðr.

The same can be said also for the deer which everybody cannot help desiring: it could be an angel or a magical creature able to enchant whoever sees it, but it could also be simply a common deer, just better-looking than many others or with some peculiarity in the colour or in the antlers, which makes it particularly appealing to hunters. These

considerations are also valid for some of the miracles narrated in the second part of the saga, which make the reader hesitate as to whether he/she should believe they are real miracles or not and which might be explained as simple coincidences. The narrator does not always suggest a miraculous explanation for these phenomena. It depends, therefore, on the personal attitude of the reader to consider whether the rare plants growing on the Saint's grave are a supernatural sign, a sort of tribute of Nature to this king and martyr, or a completely natural phenomenon, due maybe to a particularly mild climate. In the same way, we are not sure if Oswald's bones are preserved by the fire of the house where they are kept, or if they are found on the surface of his grave just by chance or by some sort of divine intervention. This kind of hesitation is, in the classification of Torodov, characteristic of the 'purely fantastic'.

As I have shown, then, the weird episodes in the *Ó.s.* belong to two different Torodovian categories: the 'marvellous' and the 'purely fantastic'. This distinction constitutes a first level of analysis of the supernatural element within the *Ó.s.*

3.2 The Marvellous and the Fantastic: Their Possible Models

A further analysis has necessarily to be conducted on the origin and the possible models of these fantastic and marvellous episodes in the saga.

3.2.1 Biblical Echoes

Some passages in the *Ó.s.* clearly remind us of the Bible. Let us consider, for example, the scene of Oswald's crowning and anointing: the image of the raven flying down from Heaven echoes Christ's baptism in the Jordan, as described in Matthew, 3, 16-17:

'When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a Dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."'

Similarly the voice announcing Oswald's eternal life on the eve of the battle against Penda:

Eyjal þú þíslavottur guðz ok ærligur riddare Ausvalldel! verttu ecki hryggr, heldr gieð þik, þvíat þegar á morgun skalltu vera bæðe sitthjande ok ríkjande með guðe ok hans úthvöldum í himeríki...

parallels Christ's promise to the Good Criminal hanged at His side: "Assuredly, I say to you, today will you be with Me in Paradise." (Luke, 23, 43).

This running parallel between Oswald and Christ culminates in the description of the moments preceding his death, when his words "'Drottenn Jesús Christus, faðer himnerkr! í þínar hendr fel ek anda minn!'", just before an angel comes to take his soul to Heaven are nothing but a quotation of Luke, 23, 46: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit".

The miracle which eventually gets Gaudon converted to the Christian religion also has Biblical origins: in fact, the image of the water gushing from a rock is present in various passages of the Bible, such as Deuteronomy 8, 15: 'who brought water for you out of the flinty rock', Judges 15, 19: 'So God split the hollow place that is in

Lehi, and water came out, and he drank', Nehemiah 9, 15: 'And brought them water out of the rock for their thirst' or Isaiah 48, 21: 'He caused the waters to flow from the rock for them'.

3.2.2 Miracles and Hagiographic Patterns

The image of the water spring is taken up again at the end of the *Ó.s.*, where it is said to gush out from the Saint's grave and to be able to heal every kind of illness. This is a hagiographic pattern which is common also to other saints' traditions, as for example the Norwegian and Swedish kings Olaf and Erik.

Many other miracles described in the second part of the saga have clear hagiographic models and are present in other saints' lives. Some of them belong to the category of contact healings, that is to say those caused by the contact of the sick with the relics of a saint, or with something which has been in contact with them. This is, for example, the case of the girl healed after having lain on the place where king Oswald had been killed:

Enn þegar at þau voru komin í þann stað er hesturenn stöck upp, þá lagðe meyjan sig niðr, enn hún sofnaðe jafn skjótt, ok þegar at hún vaknaðe, var hún orðen allheil af aullu sínu meine.

or of the possessed man who recovered after having lain where the Saint's bones had been kept:

Í þessu var einn fátækur maðr þar komin thil þess ef hann mætte fá nockura líkn síns meinlæthis, er hann hafðe, en þat var, at óvinrinn bjó með honum, ok hafði hann af thilvísan guðz almátthogs dreigizt þángat, er bein Osvalldus voru; en er hann hafðe legit þar lithla hrið, varð hann frelstur af þessum óvin...

In both of these episodes the verb *liggja* (to lie) plays a central role, since it is thanks to the contact of the whole body with the ground which had touched the Saint's bones, that they are healed.

3.2.3 Magical Animals and Fairy Tales

Other supernatural elements which are completely unknown to Bede's account, but are present in the High German poems on Saint Oswald, seem to be taken from fairy tales. A typical feature of fairy tales is the presence of speaking animals, such as the raven which acts as Magical Helper - as Propp calls it - and helps Oswald in his quest. In the *Ó.s.* not only does the raven play a fundamental role in Oswald's bride-quest, but, substituting for the Dove in the above-mentioned scene of the crowning, it also symbolizes the Holy Spirit coming on earth to anoint the new king of Northumbria.

In the same way as the raven represents the Hero's Magical Helper, the fish which finds Pia's ring and letter after the storm constitutes the Negative Helper interfering with Oswald's quest.

3.2.4 Epic and Pagan Echoes

Even though the *Ó.s.* is a fully Christian work, telling the story of a saint and martyr, in at least two episodes it is possible to find echoes of the pagan epic tradition. I am thinking, for example, of the passage where, after the battle against Gaudon and his army, Oswald prays to God for the dead to be resurrected: this image of the dead warriors coming to life again clearly reminds us of Snorri's *Edda*, where Hilde, thanks to her magical powers, is able to petrify all the fallen warriors, in order to call them to life again the following morning, so that the battle never comes to an end. In this case, however, the warriors are not resurrected to perpetuate hate and battle, but to show Christ's power, in order to convert Gaudon, who is later baptized together with them.

Another episode which seems to have pagan roots again takes place on a battlefield: during the final battle against Penda, an angel comes to take the souls of Oswald's fallen warriors, just as the Valkyries did taking them to the Valhalla.

According to Zingerle other elements (i.e. the raven) are also to be considered as pagan and mythological echoes. (Zingerle, 1856).

4. The Marvellous and the Fantastic: Their Function

All these different models for marvellous and fantastic episodes in the *Ó.s.* are transformed and adapted to the hagiographic aim of the text, within which they have different functions.

The main function of the supernatural elements in a hagiographic text is to show the power of the Christian God as well as the sanctity of the protagonist. In this respect the miracles ascribed to Oswald's intercession both during his life and after his death constitute the most effective evidence of his sanctity. A distinction has, however, to be drawn between those supernatural elements which fulfil this function within the story, speaking, so to speak, to the characters of the saga, and those which are active outside the story, but within the narration and which appeal directly to the reader.

To the first group belongs, for example, the passage where the raven arrives at Gaudon's: seeing that it is able to speak everybody is astonished and even the pagan king lets it deliver its message. In the same way, the two miracles performed at the end of the battle against Gaudon (his men's resurrection and the water flowing from the rock) are mainly functional to the king's conversion.

A series of other passages is, on the contrary, aimed at suggesting to the reader a certain interpretation of the story. This is the case for the crowning scene and for all the episodes which contribute to the creation of the above-mentioned parallel between Oswald and Christ.

This distinction between elements that are effective within the story and those which support the narration overlaps almost completely with the one suggested by McTurk between a subjectivist and an objectivist approach towards the supernatural in the sagas. To be effective within the story, a supernatural phenomenon must, in fact, be described subjectively, that is to say in terms of what the characters perceive. Events treated objectively and described without any reference to the perception of the characters are, on the contrary, more likely to appeal directly to the reader and to persuade them. (McTurk, 1987, 191).

Taking into consideration the distribution of these two functional categories of marvellous and fantastic phenomena, it is possible to notice that the supernatural episodes aimed at demonstrating directly to the reader Oswald's sanctity and likeness to Christ are to be found mainly in the first part of the *Ó.s.*, where the bridal-quest is narrated. In the less hagiographic part of the text, in fact, it is more important than anywhere else to stress this aspect, while the miracles narrated in the second part of the text tend to impress both the characters within the story and the reader.

Other supernatural elements have a cohesive function within the saga. I am thinking, for example, of the prophecy about the Saint's right hand which will never decompose. This represents a clear connection between the two parts of the narration, since it anticipates the story of Oswald's relics. Similarly in two other episodes of the saga, the voice announcing Oswald's death has a proleptic function.

5. Conclusions

In this paper the supernatural elements of the *Ó.s.* have been classified and analysed on three different levels: respectively their belonging to the Torodovian categories of 'marvellous' and 'purely fantastic', their origin and their function within the saga have been taken into consideration.

Even though in hagiographic texts supernatural events are usually ascribed to God's intervention and therefore accepted as such, the analysis conducted on the *Ó.s.* has shown that in some cases the reader may be uncertain whether to consider them miracles or not.

These marvellous and fantastic episodes have, then, been studied in order to identify their models, which turned out to be very varied: from the Bible to the Germanic epic tradition, from hagiographic patterns and schemes to fairy tales. All of them are, however, transformed (e.g. typical pagan elements are replaced, the presence of magical creatures is compensated for by their association with Christian symbolism, etc...) and adapted to the hagiographic aim of the saga, that is to say to glorify God and his servant Oswald, by telling the latter's story.

Some of these supernatural episodes are merely functional to the development of the story, while others are aimed at impressing the reader, by suggesting a particular interpretation of the facts narrated.

Another important function of the marvellous and the fantastic in the *Ó.s.* is that of helping the textual cohesion by anticipating the future development of the events, as the prophecies about Oswald's right hand, death and eternal life do.

The main results of this analysis of the supernatural in the *Ó.s.* can be summarized in this scheme, which takes up again all the examples cited in the paper.

	Event	Hesitation	Model	Functional to the Development of the Story	Appealing to the Reader	
	Raven instead of	x	Matthew,	x	✓	

Oswald's Life and Quest	Dove		3, 16-17		
	Speaking Raven	x	Fairy Tales	✓	x
	Pilgrim/ Angel(?)	✓		x	✓
	Fish 'stealing' ring and letter	x	Fairy Tales	✓	x
	Doors opened	x		✓	x
	Deer	✓		✓	x
	Resurrection of Gaudon's Men	x	Hilde	✓	x
	Water from the Rock	x	Dt. 18, 15...	✓	x
	Prophecy on the Hand	✓		x	✓
	Voice from Heaven	✓	(Luke, 23, 43)	x	✓
	Light and Voice from Heaven	x	Luke, 23, 43	x	x
	Angel taking the Dead	x	Valkyrie	x	✓
Death	Angel taking him	x	Valkyrie	x	✓
Miracles and Relics	Horse	x		✓	✓
	Girl	x	Contact healing	✓	✓
	Plants indicating his Grave	✓		✓	✓
	Good Smell from the Bones	✓		✓	✓
	Relics not burning	✓		✓	✓
	Bones on the Surface	✓		✓	✓
	Dove	✓		✓	✓
	Light indicating the Relics	x		✓	✓
			Contact		

	Possessed	x	healing	✓	✓
	Blind	x		✓	✓
	Water from the Grave	✓	See also Olaf, Erik	✓	✓

Bibliography

- Georg Baesecke, *Der Münchener Oswald, Text und Abhandlung*, Breslau: Marcus, 1907.
- Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.²
- Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal. Studies in narrative and structure, especially of the fantastic*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Margaret Cormack, *Saints' Lives and Icelandic Literature in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, in Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Birte Carlé (eds.), *Saints and sagas: a symposium*, Odense: Odense University Press, 1994, 28-47.
- Michael Curshmann, *Der Münchener Oswald und die deutsche spielmännische Epik*, München: Beck, 1964.
- Claudia Händl, *Oswald* in Walther Killy (ed.), *Literaturlexikon. Autoren und Werke deutscher Sprache*, IX, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Lexikon Verlag, 1991, 24-26.
- Marianne Kalinke, *Oswalds saga konungs* in *The Audience of the Sagas*, I, Göteborg: Göteborg University, 1991, 268-277.
- Oskar Klockhoff, *Små bidrag till nordiska literaturhistorien under Medeltiden. Om Oswalds saga*, Uppsala: Esaias Edquists Boktryckeri, 1880, 1-30.
- Jónas Kristjánsson, *Sagas and Saints Lives in Christianity and West Norse literature*, I, Copenhagen: Copenhagen University, 1985, 551-571.
- Rory McTurk, *The Treatment of the supernatural in the saga-narrative*, in *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Conference of Teachers of Scandinavian Studies in Great Britain and Northern Ireland held at University College London, March 23-25, 1987*, London: University College, 1987, 191-206.
- Rory McTurk, *The Supernatural in Njáls saga: a narratological approach*, in John Hines and Desmond Slay (eds.), *Introductory essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992, 102-124.
- Osvaldr in Reykjahólabók. Islandske helgenlegender*, I, ed. Agnete Loth, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1969, 71-95.
- Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Saga Óswalds konungs hins helga*, ed. Jon Sigurdsson, *Annaler for Nordisk oldkundighed og historie*, 1854, 3-91.
- Clare Stancliffe, Eric Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald. Northumbrian King to European Saint*, Stamford: Paul Watkins Publishing, 1995.
- Tsvetan Torodov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970.
- Ole Widding, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, 'Low German influence on late Icelandic hagiography', *Germanic Review* 37 (1967), 237-262.
- Ignaz Zingerle, *Die Oswaldlegende und ihre Beziehung zur deutschen Mythologie*, Stuttgart – München: Gebrüder Scheitlin, 1856.