

ROBERT COOK

ON TRANSLATING SAGAS¹

1. Introduction

IN 1961 THE *SAGA-BOOK* published Ian Maxwell's "On Translation – I" and a follow-up article by George Johnston called "On Translation – II." Johnston later published another article on the subject.² There have of course been other studies of saga translation,³ but none which deals quite so squarely and straightforwardly with the practical issues of fidelity and diction that I wish to continue discussing here.

We have all heard some of the clichés dealing with "the queer world of verbal transmigration,"⁴ like the Italian word-play "*traduttore* (translator) – *traditore* (traitor)," which stigmatizes the translator as inevitably a betrayer of the original text, or the witty though antifeminist remark that "une traduction est comme une femme: si elle est fidèle, elle n'est pas belle — et si elle est belle, elle n'est pas fidèle." The issue underlying both these clichés is fidelity, a matter on which I concur with Maxwell and Johnston in preferring "a literal rendering, as close an adherence as possible both to the words and

¹ A first version of this paper was presented at the December, 1996 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Washington, DC. It was expanded into a talk given at a *Njáls saga* symposium in Hvolsvöllur, August 25–26, 2001, sponsored by the Sigurður Nordal Institute and The Saga Centre in Hvolsvöllur. I am grateful to Úlfar Bragason for inviting me to take part, and to Fritz Heinemann and Andrew Wawn for perceptive comments on this version. I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Hermann Pálsson, *traducteur extraordinaire*.

² *Saga-Book* 15, Part 4 (1961), 383–93 (Maxwell) and 394–402 (Johnston); Johnston, "Translating the Sagas into English." *BONIS* 1972 (Copenhagen: The Royal Library, 1973): 7–16.

³ For example, "Randolph Quirk, Dasent, Morris, and Problems of Translation," *Saga-Book* 14, Parts 1–2 (1953–55): 64–77; J. N. Swannell, "William Morris as an Interpreter of Old Norse," *Saga-Book* 15, Part 4 (1961): 365–82; Keneva Kunz, *Retellers of Tales: An Evaluation of English Translations of Laxdæla saga*. *Studia Islandica* 51 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1994).

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981): 315.

order of the original. The less a translator interferes the better" (Maxwell:390).

Maxwell was more concerned with words than with word order, and he is especially perceptive regarding the ease with which modern English idiom can distort thirteenth-century Icelandic: "very precocious" for *allbráðgörr* contains "a hint of ridicule or at least apprehension" not intended by the author; "Morris's 'very quick of growth' is awkward but nearer the mark" (387). Johnston's articles discuss many issues, however briefly: vocabulary, shifting tenses, word order, syntax and the verses. The present article will begin with a look at two nineteenth-century translators and then pass to the question of vocabulary, after which it will discuss the topics raised by Johnston, and further topics as well. My argument will be that literal translation must take into consideration a wide range of aspects of saga style, most of which are capable of being closely imitated in modern English.

Maxwell's article is a review of the translation of *Eyrbyggja saga* by Paul Schach and Lee M. Hollander (who translated the verses).⁵ Johnston's first article illustrates its points about close translation into modern English with citations from his version of *Gísli saga*, which was to appear in 1963.⁶ His later article goes over the same ground, with reference mainly to William Morris. The present article, which like Maxwell's will not deal with the thorny problem of the verses, is based on English translations of *Njáls saga*, of which there have been four to date:

- *The Story of Burnt Njal*, translated by George Webbe Dasent (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1861).
- *Njal's Saga*, translated by Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1955). Referred to below as "B-H."
- *Njal's Saga*, translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (London: Penguin Books, 1960). Revised version in *The Icelandic Sagas*, edited and introduced by Magnus Magnusson (London: The Folio Society, 1999), 493–753. The Penguin version is referred to below as "MM-HP." For completeness the 1999 Folio Society version is given when it differs, but the comments below refer to the 1960 Penguin version.

⁵ University of Nebraska Press, 1959.

⁶ *The Saga of Gisli*, translated from the Icelandic by George Johnston, with Notes and an Essay on the Saga of Gisli by Peter Foote (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1963).

- *Njal's Saga*, translated by Robert Cook. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 3 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997):1–220. Revised for *Njal's Saga*, translated with Introduction and Notes by Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 2001). The passages cited below are from the Penguin version.

Translation is, to varying degrees, an exchange between different cultures. Jón Karl Helgason has pointed out that for Dasent “Icelandic medieval history was, in its very nature, like parts of early and even contemporary British history.”⁷ This is not the place to go into Jón Karl’s argument in detail, but he, like Andrew Wawn,⁸ shows how for Dasent and Victorian England the Germanic virtues of courage and loyalty and energy, so well exemplified in the Icelandic sagas, had been handed down to the English more than to other Germanic peoples, as part of their nineteenth-century role as leaders of the world community. For Dasent this cultural continuity, added to the linguistic proximity, made it natural to aim at close translation. Medieval Iceland was not, from his point of view, an alien culture, and it is interesting that he compared translation to the act of fostering a child:

It was a foster-father’s duty, in old times, to rear and cherish the child which he had taken from the arms of its natural parents, his superiors in rank. And so may this work, which the translator has taken from the house of Icelandic scholars, his masters in knowledge, and which he has reared and fostered so many years under an English roof, go forth and fight the battle of life for itself, and win fresh fame for those who gave it birth. (Preface, xx)

This metaphor minimizes the difference between cultures and languages: a foster-child, even though reared in another’s house, remains the same person.

It is instructive to compare Dasent’s style of close translation with that of the other famous nineteenth-century translator of sagas into English, William

⁷ *The Rewriting of Njáls saga. Translation, Politics and Icelandic Sagas*. Topics in Translation 16 (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1999): 47.

⁸ *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000).

Morris.⁹ Morris did not translate *Njáls saga*, but in one of the journals of his trips to Iceland he made a translation from Ch. 78:¹⁰

Skarphedin and Hogni were abroad one evening by Gunnar's howe, on the south side thereof: the moonshine was bright but whiles the clouds drew over: them seemed the howe opened and Gunnar turned in the howe, and lay meeting the moon; and they thought they saw four lights burning in the howe, and no shadow cast from any: they saw that Gunnar was merry, and exceeding glad of countenance: and he sang a song so high that they had heard of it even had they been farther off.¹¹

George Webbe Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal*, p. 250:

Now those two, Skarphedinn and Hogni, were out of doors one evening by Gunnar's cairn on the south side. The moon and stars were shining clear and bright, but every now and then the clouds drove over them. Then all at once they thought they saw the cairn standing open, and lo! Gunnar had turned himself in the cairn and looked at the moon. They thought they saw four lights burning in the cairn, and none of them threw a shadow. They saw that Gunnar was merry, and he wore a joyful face. He sang a song, and so loud, that it might have been heard though they had been further off.

We see here a sharp contrast between the naturalness of Dasent's language and Morris's archaic obscurity: "abroad" (Morris) vs. "out of doors" (Dasent), "whiles" vs. "every now and then," "them seemed" (*þeim sýndisk*) vs. "they thought," "exceeding glad of countenance" vs. "he wore a joyful face," "they had" (for the more natural "could have") "heard of it" vs. "it might have been heard." Morris also preferred translation by cognates, sometimes sacrificing

⁹ E. R. Eddison, "Some Principles of Translation", appended to his translation of *Egil's Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930) has Dasent and Morris in mind when he writes: "Yet there are few good translators of sagas: perhaps only two good translators, and all the rest mostly bad" (p. 230).

¹⁰ *Þeir Skarphedinn ok Hogni váru úti eitt kveld fyrir sunnan haug Gunnars; tunglskin var bjart, en stundum dró fyrir. Þeim sýndisk haugrinn opinn, ok hafði Gunnarr snúizk í hauginum ok sá í móti tunglinu; þeir þóttusk fjögur ljós sjá brenna í hauginum, ok bar hvergi skugga á. Þeir sá, at Gunnarr var kátligr ok með gledimóti miklu. Hann kvað vísu ok svá hátt, at þó mátti heyra gǫrla, þó at þeir væri firr. Íslenzk fornrit 12: 192-3.*

¹¹ William Morris, *Iceland Journals*. With an introduction by Magnus Magnusson and a foreword by Fiona MacCarthy (London: Mare's Nest, 1996): 38.

sense to etymology: “howe” (*haugr*) rather than “cairn,” “lay meeting the moon” (*sá í móti tunglinu*) rather than “looked at the moon,” “so high” (*svá hátt*) rather than “so loud.” As many readers have asserted, Morris’s use of expressions and terms which never had any place in the English language has made his translations, in spite of their closeness and accuracy, largely inaccessible — even in his own day. Dasent’s English, on the other hand, was the ordinary idiom of his day, apart from certain exceptions for which he begs indulgence: “busk” (from *at búa sik*) and “boun” (*búinn*). “These with ‘redes’ for counsels or plans are almost the only words in the translation which are not still in every-day use” (Preface, xvi).

The discussion of vocabulary in saga translations has often, especially in the nineteenth century, been concerned with words of Latin and French origin. Morris attempted not only to reject such words, but also to imitate the Icelandic words themselves, either through etymological translation (“howe” for *haugr*, even “flock” for *flokk* when used for a group of men!) or through archaic English words. For Morris a *bóndi* is a “bonder,” and he studiously avoided that nasty French word “farmer.” Dasent, on the other hand, accepted the fact that French and Latin words were part and parcel of the English language, and he did not shrink from using them. This is the main difference between Morris and Dasent (and the reason that Morris seems, to many, quite unreadable). Maxwell finds Morris’s English archaisms “too many, too obtrusive, often too unconvincing” (p. 384), and yet argues that

we must put up with a few archaisms — when old gods and warrior kings and fate and fetches come into a story, it would be strange if an occasional ‘naught’, ‘thereby’, ‘behold’, or even ‘dwelled’ did not sneak past our pickets. (p. 385)

Johnston claims that Latin words “do not belong in the saga world,” and he “would rather avoid them, or at any rate keep their numbers down” (1961:400; cf. 1973:10). He claims to choose his vocabulary “from our conversational word stock” (1961:399) and to prefer “words that I can hear myself saying” (1973:11), and yet his translation of *Gísla saga* has phrases like “be wary for yourself” and the virtually incomprehensible “and now she has given me death’s word” (p. 28, for *en hon hefir nú gefit mér dauðaráð*).¹²

¹² See my review of Johnston’s *The Schemers and Víga-Glúm*, in *JEGP* 100 (January 2001): 83–87, for later instances of this style of translation.

I agree with Dasent that French and even Latin and Greek words have in the course of centuries become thoroughly naturalized in our everyday speech and are no less vigorous than native Germanic words. Only a kind of linguistic puritanism, stemming from an insular turn-back-the-tide-to-the-year-1000 mentality, would prefer “self-doom” to “self-judgement,” or “scathe” to “injury,” or “outlander” to “foreigner,” or “be wary for yourself” to “be on your guard.”¹³ (The avoidance of “guard” carries a special irony, in that the word is of Germanic origin, though transmitted to English through French.) And how are we to avoid words like “vengeance” and “avenge” and “discuss” and “agree” and “compensate?” (In the legal passages it is of course impossible to make do with native words, since our legal system derives from the French.)

Another problem with sticking to a Germanic vocabulary is the loss of shades of meaning and a consequent lack of precision. At the end of Ch. 8, the young boy who had mocked Hrut and then been forgiven with the gift of a gold ring, says (in my translation) “I shall always remember your decency” (“*pínum drengskap skal ek við bregða*”). Apart from the Latinate “decency,” which I chose in preference to Dasent’s “manliness” and B-H’s and MM-HP’s “noble-mindedness” (1999: “goodness”), I decided that the “foreign” word “remember” was better than the native “recall,” since it suggests a permanent condition rather than an occasional burst of memory.

Apart from these matters of diction, Morris’s translation is more faithful to the original than Dasent’s, though both aimed at literalness. Dasent’s passage begins with a “Now” of his own, as if to announce and call attention to a new event; “and lo!” is a similar interjection. He expands the simple *tunglskin var bjart* to two doublets: “The moon and stars were shining clear and bright,” evocatively rhythmic but a departure from the original. Prefacing the plain statement that they thought they saw Gunnarr’s mound open, Dasent adds “Then at once.” We may well wonder whether these intensifying devices were necessary. Nonetheless, Dasent’s translation of *Njáls saga* is far more literal, more true to the syntax and style of the original, than the two succeeding translations of that saga.

In the following I will say a bit more about word choice and then pass to a number of other topics, chiefly syntactic, which seem to me more important

¹³ The first three examples are taken from Karl Litzenberg, “The Diction of William Morris,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 53 (1937): 327–363, at 355 and 345. The fourth occurs (twice) on p. 16 of Johnston’s *The Saga of Gísli*, for *vertu var um þik*.

than vocabulary in defining a translation style that is a "word-by-word" as well as "sense-by-sense" rendering of the Icelandic. My illustrations will all be from the four translations of *Njáls saga*, and it should be stated at once that the comparisons are not meant to be invidious. Each of the four translations is reliable and accurate, and each translator has been true to his own program: Dasent's was mentioned above; Bayerschmidt and Hollander preferred "the more natural idiom of today" as better suited to suggest the original than "the artificial and ponderous vehicles of earlier periods" (p. 14); similarly, Magnússon and Pálsson found fault with Dasent for his "deliberately archaic flavour, a too-literal rendering of the Icelandic style and syntax, that make it unnecessarily alien to the modern reader" (p. 33). They represent the post-war agenda of the Penguin Classics under the editorship of E. V. Rieu: to supply the general reader with a wide body of translations in

readable and attractive versions, ... shorn of the unnecessary difficulties and erudition, the archaic flavour and the foreign idiom that renders so many existing translations repellent to modern taste.¹⁴

The Penguin program included Rieu's prose versions of the Homeric epics, readable but unexciting, and Dorothy Sayers' quite non-literal *Divine Comedy*. In this same vein, Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson exploited their authority as native speakers of Icelandic and their excellent command of English to provide a smooth and readable version, trustworthy without being closely literal. Their aims and those of Bayerschmidt and Hollander are essentially the same, though the American team is slightly more conservative.

My own translation, some forty years on, attempts a return to Dasent-like literalness, by which I mean imitating the original in as many ways as possible. Like all translators, I am a product of my time. Just as period instruments have come to the fore in performances of early music (especially in the 1980s), and paintings are restored to their original colors, and old texts are edited faithfully according to one manuscript rather than presenting a modern editor's conflation of texts, I aim at an authentic re-creation of the original, insofar as modern English idiom and syntax allow.

It has been interesting, at the very latest stage in the preparation of this paper, to look at Magnus Magnusson's revision (1999) of the 1960 Penguin

¹⁴ E. V. Rieu's objectives for the series, taken from the *penguin uk*-website (<http://www.penguin.co.uk/>), July 9, 2002.

translation by himself and Hermann Pálsson. Countless changes have been made in the direction of the principles advocated in this paper, strengthening my conviction that fashions in translation, like fashions in ties or shoes, change with the times.

2. Limited vocabulary

According to the Concordance to the Family Sagas, the total number of words in *Njáls saga* is 98,938 (not counting proper nouns); the number of lexemes in the saga is 3,135.¹⁵ While the proportion of lexemes to vocabulary is above the average for the family sagas, it is remarkably low for sophisticated literature. Verbal sparsity, the frequent repetition of a comparatively small number of words — whether derived from or imitative of oral style — is a feature of saga style that the translator should respect.

Speeches, for example, are introduced by *segja*, *mæla*, *svara*, *spyrja* and occasionally *ræða* — and no other words. The translation should accordingly limit itself to “say,” “speak,” “answer,” “ask,” “talk” and “discuss,” and not introduce many of the other words available in English for introducing speech, like “retort,” “reply,” “claim,” “assert,” “respond,” “declare” and so forth.¹⁶ The modern reader may find that the verb *segja* is over-worked, and he may find it strange to see it used both for questions and for statements, but such is the style of the saga:

Pangbrandr þagði, meðan hon talaði, en talaði lengi eptir ok sneri því öllu, er hon hafði mælt, í villu. “Hefir þú heyrð þat,” **sagði** hon, “er Þórr bauð Kristi á hólum, ok treystisk hann eigi at berjask við Þór?” “Heyrt hefi ek þat,” **segir** Pangbrandr, “at Þórr væri ekki nema mold ok aska, þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði.” “Veiztú,” **segir** hon, “hverr brotit hefir skip þitt?” “Hvat segir þú til?” **segir** hann. “Þat mun ek segja þér,” **segir** hon. (102.265)¹⁷

¹⁵ Handbook to *Íslendinga sögur. Orðstöðulykill og texti* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996): 19.

¹⁶ See Maxwell, 390: “if the text says *segir* there is no need to make it ‘retorted’ even if this word aptly characterizes the speech; for better or worse, saga-writers generally prefer to avoid this comment — and so distinguish themselves from the authors of novelettes”.

¹⁷ References are by chapter and page to *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954).

It is possible — and I would argue, desirable — to imitate what Otto Springer called “the colorless monotony of the verbs,”¹⁸ and render all five occurrences of *segja* with a form of “say,” as Cook does; Dasent, less strict for the nonce, has “asks” on the fourth occurrence. B-H, on the other hand, use “asked” three times and “answered” twice. MM-HP have “asked ... said ... asked ... asked ... replied”. The effect is to turn the stark, simple language of the saga into “the more natural idiom of today,” but such variety gives an unnecessarily false impression of saga style.¹⁹

The vocabulary of *Njáls saga* is deliberately limited, and the simplest words are used over and over again. The literal translator will want to translate *sjá* consistently as “see,” avoiding such variations as “glimpse” or “observe” or “catch sight of” or “spy” (MM-HP translate *Skarphedinn sá þá* at 45.115 as “Skarphedin caught sight of them”). Verbs for travel are for the most part restricted to *fara* and *ganga* and *ríða* — again, the English equivalents should be limited. The battle scenes pose a particular temptation to translators who wish to liven up and “color” the narrative, even though the Icelandic uses a limited number of stock terms, like *hoggva* and *þrifa* and *snúask* and *reka* and *kasta* and *hlaupa* and *leggja til* and *renna* and *snara* and *klofna* and *brotna* and *falla*. Those are precisely the verbs used in the following passage from Ch. 77, cited in two contrasting translations:

At this point, Thorbrand Thorleiksson leapt up on to the wall and **slashed** through Gunnar’s bow-string. Gunnar seized his halberd two-handed, **whirled** round on Thorbrand, drove the halberd through him, and hurled (1999: threw) him off the wall. Thorbrand’s brother, Asbrand, leapt up; Gunnar lunged again with the halberd, and Asbrand thrust (1999: got) his shield in the way. The halberd went right through the shield and between the upper arm and forearm. Gunnar then twisted the halberd so violently that the shield split and both Asbrand’s arm-bones **were shattered**; and he, too, **toppled** from the wall. (MM-HP, 170; only changes to the verbs in the 1999 version are included here)

¹⁸ “The Style of the Old Icelandic Family Sagas,” *JEGP* 38 (1939): 107–128, at 114.

¹⁹ Although *mæla* seems to have more ponderous implications, whereas *segja* is more appropriate to everyday speech, the pattern is not consistent enough to suggest that *mæla* should be translated consistently as “speak” and *segja* as “say.” Njáll’s important speech about accepting Christianity, for example, is introduced with *sagði* (100.255).

At that moment Thorbrand Thorleiksson leaped up on the roof and **cut** through Gunnar's bow string. Gunnar grasped his halberd with both hands and **turned** quickly towards him and drove the halberd through him and flung him off the roof. Then Asbrand, Thorbrand's brother, leaped up; Gunnar thrust at him with the halberd, and Asbrand brought his shield to meet it. The halberd went through the shield and between the upper arm and forearm. Gunnar twisted the halberd so that the shield split and both his arm-bones **broke**, and Asbrand **fell** off the roof. (Cook, 127)

The contrast between "slashed" and "cut," between "whirled" and "turned," between "were shattered" and "broke" and between "toppled" and "fell" indicates how MM-HP have spiced the scene with herbs that are more tangy than those in the original. I have not made a count of the number of different words used in *Njáls saga* and in the MM-HP translation, but I am willing to bet my copy of Roget's *Thesaurus* that the list used by these Icelandic translators far exceeds the 3,135 lexemes used by the thirteenth-century Iclander who composed the saga.

3. Consistency

A related principle is to use the same English word for the same Icelandic word in all occurrences, or as much as possible. Dasent does this with great care, and I attempt the same. The editorial team for the Leifur Eiríksson project, which resulted in the publication of *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* in 1997, prepared lengthy lists of key terms, in fields ranging from law to ship-building, together with standardized English equivalents such as "follower" (*hirðmaðr*) and "hayfield" (*tún*) and "godi" (*goði*). Whether in a large-scale project involving forty sagas, or in translating a single saga, consistency seems desirable. Key concepts like *sæmd* and *virðing* and *drengskapur*, and of course legal terminology, should be translated consistently. This, however, is not always possible: I found that the context required some variation in the four occurrences of *drengskapur*, for example: I used "decency" in Chs. 8 and 9, "manhood" in Ch. 91, and "generosity" in Ch. 123.

The Leifur Eiríksson list did not include "little" words like *kasta*, for example, but according to my principle this word should be consistently translated as "throw" — I therefore regret that in the above passage I had Gunnar

"fling" Þorbrandr off the roof rather than straightforwardly "throw" him. This principle also applies to combinations like *góðar gjafir*, which appears approximately fourteen times (depending on the manuscript). Dasent consistently translates this as "good gifts," and so do I. B-H translate variously as "good gifts," "fine gifts," "splendid gifts," "goodly presents" and "fine presents." MM-HP translate it with slightly less diversity, as "good gifts," "fine gifts" and "handsome gifts" (in the 1999 version there are no more "handsome gifts" and only one instance of "fine gifts"). There is no need for elegant variation in this case.

The saga contains many formulas and repeated phrases, like *Nú er þar til máls at taka, nú er ór vöndu at ráða, njóttú heill handa, eitt skal yfir okkr báða ganga* and *mál er komit í ónýtt efni*. A literal translator will feel the need to duplicate these repetitions, some of which may be aesthetically significant.

The noun *liðveizla* ("help") is an important one in this saga where so much time is spent gathering forces. On two occasions in close proximity (65.162 and 66.164) *liðveizla* is joined with *atganga*, and though this repetition may not be significant, I have translated "help and backing" in both places; B-H, followed by MM-HP, have "help and support" in the first occurrence, and "support" in the second (1999: "help and support" in both).

Here is an example of a longer phrase, repeated once, which is more significant and should be translated the same way on each occasion: at the end of Ch. 42, Rannveig, Gunnarr's mother, warns Sigmundr — who has killed Þórðr leysingjason — against taking any more orders from Hallgerðr:

"En ef Hallgerðr kemr annarri flugu í munn þér, þá verðr þat þinn bani" (42.109).

At the beginning of Ch. 44, when Gunnarr arrives home from the Alþingi, he speaks to Sigmundr using the same expression:

"En þó hefi ek nú gervan þik sáttan, ok skyldir þú nú eigi annarri flugu láta koma í munn þér" (44.111).

A literal translation would highlight this repetition, but this is how it has been translated:

Dasent: "But if Hallgerda makes thee take another fly in thy mouth, then that will be thy bane" (Ch. 42); "But still I have made peace

for thee with Njal and his sons; and now, take care that thou **dost not let another fly come into thy mouth**" (Ch. 44).

B-H: "but if ever you **swallow Hallgerd's bait again**, it will be your death" (Ch. 42). "I have made a settlement for you with Njál, but never again **let yourself be tricked into doing such a thing**" (Ch. 44).

MM-HP: "but if you **ever take another of Hallgerd's baits**, it will cost you your life" (Ch. 42; 1999: "it will be your death"). "I have managed to make your peace with Njal and his sons this time, but you must **never allow yourself to be caught in this way again**" (Ch. 44; 1999: "I have now made a settlement for you with Njál and his sons, but you must never swallow another bait").

Cook: "but if you **rise to Hallgerd's bait again** it will be your death" (Ch. 42). "But still I've made a settlement for you, and you must never **rise to Hallgerd's bait again**" (Ch. 44).

Only the first and fourth of these reproduce the echo. Gunnarr's second use of the phrase is a deliberate repetition of the first, and deserves to be caught in translation.

4. Leaving unsaid what is unsaid

Another guide to literal translation involves keeping unsaid what is unsaid, leaving the reader to draw the appropriate conclusion. Ian Maxwell has commented on Schach's translation of *þótti morgum verra úti, þegar er sólina lægði* as "it seemed to many that there was something uncanny out of doors as soon as the sun got low:" "The saga does not *say* ... that things seemed uncanny — the voice that here breaks in is that of the teacher making things clear to his class" (p. 390). In *Njáls saga*, at the beginning of Ch. 8, Hrútr returns from the West Fjords and discovers that his wife Unnr has left Hrútsstaðir:

Hrútr kom heim ok brá mjök í brún, er kona hans var í brautu (8.26).

This reaction has been translated two different ways. Dasent did it literally:

Hrut came home, and **knit his brows** when he heard his wife was gone.

The next two translations, on the other hand, described the emotion behind the reaction:

B-H: "When Hrút came home and learned that his wife was gone, **he was extremely put out.**"

MM-HP: "When Hrut came home, **he was shocked** to find his wife gone." (1999: "Hrút came home and was greatly taken aback to find his wife gone.")

Here again I have followed Dasent's sure lead, accepting the fact that emotional states in the saga are commonly described in terms of physical reactions.²⁰ I have thus translated: "Hrut came home, and **his brows shot up** when he learned that his wife was gone."

Another example:

Gunnarr lá mjök langa hríð ok varp síðan af sér skikkjunni, ok var honum varmt mjök. (62.155)

Dasent: Gunnar lay a very long while, and threw off his shield [following a different manuscript] from him, and he grew very warm.

B-H: Gunnar lay there for a rather long time; he tossed his shield aside, and he had become quite warm.

MM-HP: Gunnar lay sleeping a very long time. Then he became **uncomfortably hot** and threw off his cloak. (1999: Gunnar lay there for a long time. Then he threw off his cloak; he was very hot.)

Cook: Gunnar lay there for a long time and then threw off his cloak, and he was very warm.

MM-HP have reversed the sequence of clauses and created a smooth logical relationship: Gunnarr is first hot, and then he throws off the cloak. Fine and well (though unnecessary), but is it important to specify that the heat was "uncomfortable?"

Kári vildi þá taka hest sinn ok ríða í braut. (148.423)

²⁰ See for example Skarpheðinn in Ch. 44. "*Gaman þykkir kerlingunni at, móður várri,*" *segir Skarpheðinn ok glotti við, en þó spratt honum sveiti í enni, ok kómu rauður flekkar í kinnr honum, en því var ekki vant.* ("The old lady enjoys all this," said Skarpheðinn and grinned, but sweat formed on his brow and red spots on his cheeks, and this was unusual for him.)

Dasent: Then Kari took his horse and was for riding away.

B-H: Kári took his horse and meant to ride away.

HP-MM: Then Kari wanted to **saddle** his horse and go away. (1999:

Kari then wanted to take his horse and ride away.)

Cook: Then Kari wanted to take his horse and ride away.

We may guess that Kári puts a saddle on his horse — just as in the above example we may assume that Gunnarr was uncomfortably hot — but the saga does not tell us that.

I must confess, however, to neglecting this principle in at least one instance. After killing Lýtingr, Ámundi the Blind comes to Njáll, who tells him that his deed was understandable, *því at slíkt er mjök á kveðit, en viðvörunarvert, ef slíkir atburðir verða, at stínga eigi af stokki við þá, er svá nær standa* (106. 274). I translated this “for such things are preordained, and when they occur they are a warning **not to decline the claims of** close kin.” “Decline the claims of” is needlessly explanatory and goes beyond the down-to-earth Icelandic phrase *at stínga af stokki við*, glossed by Cleasby-Vigfusson as “to prick one out of one’s seat.” The simple word “rebuff,” used by B-H and also by MM-HP, is preferable; “shove aside” might be even more in line with the original.

5. The historical present

A likely carry-over from the spoken language into saga style is the often disconcerting and illogical shifting between past tense and present tense: *Hann komsk út á ána undan þeim ok svá til hrossa ok hleypir, til þess er hann kemr í Ossabæ. Hqskuldr var heima, ok finnr hann þegar* (99.253: “He **fled** across the river to the horses and **gallops** off, until he **comes** to Ossabaer. Hoskuld **was** at home, and Lyting **goes** to him at once.”) Dasent and Morris were literal translators in this regard, and George Johnston has been the main modern advocate of this approach, both in theory and in practice:

In my opinion the tenses of the Icelandic should be followed as closely as possible; their effect is startling and vivid, the events come before the eye of the reader as they seem to do in life, unpredictably and unceremoniously (1961:396; cf. 1973:13).

The argument in favor of preserving the tense shifts is that they preserve the flavor of oral narrative style. The claim is made that we shift our tenses in colloquial narrative today, but in fact (though there may be a class element here) most of us tell our stories strictly in the past tense, without relapses into "and so he says to me." Nothing is gained by such renderings as "And when Alfdís heard their noise she asks what thugs were on the move out there" (from George Johnston's *The Saga of Gisli*, p. 43). What was natural to saga style and to the oral tradition behind it is not natural to literary English today. This is one area in which the principle of strict literalism can be safely set aside.

6. The paratactic style

Njáls saga, like all of the *Íslendingasögur*, contains many dependent clauses — relative, temporal, causal, concessive, conditional — though far less often than we are accustomed to, and in fact independent clauses predominate. This style is usually called paratactic, as opposed to hypotactic; the latter makes extensive use of subordination in connecting the details of the narrative, whereas saga style places simple sentences and elements of sentences side by side, giving them all equal weight and foregoing subordinating conjunctions like "when," "if," "because," and "although." This is what we expect from oral narration, or a literature based on oral narration. It is the natural style for straightforward narration: *Eptir þat gengr hann í braut; tók þá at morgna* (88. 214). A translation which kept this style would read "After that he went away. The dawn was coming," rather than "Then he left the place as it began to dawn" (B-H) or "Dawn was breaking as he went away" (MM-HP; 1999: "After that he went away; dawn was breaking by then"); B-H and MM-HP employ smooth modern hypotaxis, combining an independent clause with a dependent clause. In the B-H version, Hrapp's leaving is foregrounded by means of the independent clause; in MM-HP the breaking of dawn is foregrounded. In the Icelandic the two events are given equal weight, each with an independent clause.²¹

²¹ The extensive use of independent clauses goes along with a tendency of this style to present information piecemeal. Maxwell (390) gives this example from *Eyrbyggja saga*: *fann hann Gunnlaug, son sinn, fyrir durum; lá hann þar ok var vitlauss*. Schach and Hollander translated this as "discovered his son Gunnlaug lying unconscious before the door," but "found his son Gunnlaug before the door; he was lying there senseless" would better preserve the syntax of the Icelandic.

Standing out against the predominantly paratactic background are the saga's many complex sentences, the most complex of which tend to be in direct speech:

[Flosi:] "*Sé ek þat gǫrla, þó at vér dræpim Njál eða sonu hans, þá eru þeir svá mikils háttar menn ok stórættaðir, at þar mun svá mikit eptir-mál verða, at vér munum fyrir margs manns kné ganga verða ok biðja oss liðsinnis, áðr vér komim oss ór þessum vanda.*" (117.294)²²

[Bjarni Broddhelgason:] "*Ek vil ok spyrja þik, Flosi, hvárt nokkurr er allmikill lögmaðr í foruneyti yðru, því at yðr eru tveir kostir til: annat-hvárt at biðja sætta, ok er sá allgóðr, hinn er annarr at verja mál með lögum, ef má ok sé varnir til, þótt þat þykki með kappi at gengit.*" (138.364)

To preserve the style of the Icelandic original, including the contrast between parataxis and hypotaxis, it is important to imitate the sentence structure. This involves resisting the tendency to follow the hypotactic style of modern written English.

Hann [Hrappr] var fǫrull mjök ok var aldri heima. (87.213)

Dasent: He was a great wanderer, and was never at home.

B-H: He was always on the go and never home.

MM-HP: But they saw little of him, for he was often away. (1999: But he was always on the move and never at home)

Cook: He was often on the move and was never at home.

MM-HP, in contrast to the other three translators, create a dependent clause which establishes a causal relationship between the elements: Hrappr's being away is the reason that his host and hostess see little of him. To justify the new causal clause — it would be tautological to say that Hrappr was not much there because he was always away — the independent clause is changed from "he was never at home" to "they saw little of him," another step away from literalness.

Here is another instance:

²² Flosi has some of the most complex sentences in the saga, perhaps reflecting his complex moral and legal situation. For other examples see 123.314 and 128.325.

hann [Guðleifr] *komsk í skotfæri við hann ok skýtr til hans* [Galdra-Heðins] *spjótinu ok í gegnum hann.* (102.260)

Dasent: and got within spearshot of him, **and** shoots a spear at him and through him.

B-H: And **when** he came within range he hurled his spear at him, and it pierced him.

MM-HP: **When** he came within range, Gudleif hurled a spear through him. (1999: When he came within range he hurled a spear at him and right through him.)

Cook: He came within range of him **and** threw his spear at him and through him.

In conformity with modern English style, B-H and MM-HP turn the first clause from an independent clause to a temporal dependent clause, with “when.” Their versions read well, but miss the steady, hammering effect of “this ... and this ... and this.”

On the evening of the burning at Bergþórshvoll, Njáll suddenly sees blood everywhere in the house:

Qllum fannsk þá mikit um qðrum en Skarpheðni; hann bað þá ekki syrgja né láta qðrum herfiligum látum. (127.324)

Dasent: All thought this strange but Skarpheðinn, he bade men not be downcast, nor to utter other unseemly sounds.

B-H: All were greatly perturbed except Skarpheðin. He asked them not to put on a sad face or otherwise behave in unseemly fashion.

MM-HP: Everyone was greatly perturbed except Skarp-Hedin, **who** told them that they must not wail or do anything disgraceful. (1999: Everyone was much perturbed except Skarp-Heðin; he told them not to wail nor do anything unseemly.)

Cook: This seemed a big thing to everyone except Skarpheðin. He asked them not to grieve or behave in an unseemly way.

MM-HP’s creation of a relative clause (“Skarp-Hedin, who”) substitutes hypotaxis for parataxis and thereby puts Skarpheðinn’s important speech into a dependent or secondary clause.

7. The “ok — ok — ok — ok” construction

As these examples show, the paratactic style often takes the form of a string of independent clauses or clausal elements — like a series of verbs governed by the same subject — joined by the conjunctions *ok* and *en*, which must be among the most frequent words in the saga.²³ A close translation, in my view, will want to keep the *oks* and the *ens* and all the independent clauses.

This construction is used less commonly in direct speech than in narrative, where it can be an effective way of moving quickly through a series of events.

gerði þá margr sem vant var at fara til fundar vil Njál, en hann lagði þat til mála manna, sem ekki þótti líklegt, at eyddusk sóknir ok svá varnir, ok varð af því þræta mikil, er málin máttu eigi lúkask, ok riðu menn heim af þingi ósáttir. (97.242)

Hon [Hildigunnr] tók skikkjuna ok þerrði þar með blóðit allt ok vafði þar í blóðlifrarnar ok braut svá saman skikkjuna ok lagði í kistu sína. (112.282)

Nú er þat til máls at taka, er Kári er, at um sumarit eptir fór hann til skips síns ok sigldi suðr um sæ ok hóf upp gongu sína í Norðmandi ok gekk suðr ok þá lausn ok fór aptr ína vestri leið ok tók skip sitt í Norðmandi ok sigldi norðr um sjá til Dofra á Englandi. (159.462)

In the third instance, two of the translators break the passage into separate sentences — three sentences in B-H and two (one broken up by a semi-colon) in MM-HP. The other two translators keep all seven “ands” and thereby the breathlessness of this long sentence. Cook has:

To tell now about Kari: the following summer he went to his ship **and** sailed south across the Channel **and** began his pilgrimage in Normandy **and** walked south **and** received absolution **and** returned by the western route **and** took over his ship in Normandy **and** sailed north across the Channel to Dover in England.

²³ A modern writer who has made excellent use of the “and — and — and” device is Vladimir Nabokov: “He met five buses, and in each of them clearly made out Liza waving to him through a window as she and the other passengers started to file out, and then one bus after another was drained and she had not turned up.” *Pnin* (London: Penguin Books, 1960): 44 — see also 112, 145.

Here is a shorter example of the typical use of *ok* in an action scene:

ríðr Otkell á hann ofan ok rekr sporann við eyra Gunnari ok rístr hann mikla ristu, ok blæddi þegar mjök. (53.134)

Dasent: Otkell rides down upon him, **and** drives one of the spears into Gunnar's ear, **and** gives him a great gash, **and** it bleeds at once much.

B-H: Otkel rode down upon him **and** grazed Gunnar's ear with one of his spurs. That produced a long gash which immediately began to bleed very much.

MM-HP: Otkel, who was wearing spurs, rode into him. His spur struck Gunnar's ear, making a deep gash that bled freely at once. (1999: Otkel rode into him; his spur struck Gunnar's ear and made a deep gash. Blood poured from it at once.)

Cook: Otkel rode at him **and** his spur struck against Gunnar's ear **and** made a big gash, **and** blood flowed at once.

Again, Dasent and Cook preserve the "ands" and the four separate staccato statements; B-H keep only one "and," and MM-HP manage to do without them entirely, creating a totally different structure: two sentences, one with a relative clause and the other with a participial phrase.

One of the most famous sentences in the saga, this time in direct discourse, uses the "and—and" device:

"Fögr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnsk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi." (75.182)

Dasent: "Fair is the Lithe ; so fair that it has never seemed to me so fair; the corn fields are white to harvest, and the home meadow is mown ; **and** now I will ride back home, **and** not fare abroad at all."

B-H: "Fair is the slope, fairer it seems than I have ever seen it before, with whitening grain and the home field mown; **and** I shall ride back home **and** not go aboard [sic] at all."

MM-HP: "How lovely the slopes are," he said, "more lovely than they have ever seemed to me before, golden cornfields and new-mown hay. I am going back home, **and** I will not go away." (1999: "How lovely the hillside is — more lovely than it has ever seemed to me

before, golden fields and new-mown meadows. I am going back home. I am not going anywhere.”)

Cook: “Lovely is the hillside — never has it seemed so lovely to me as now, with its pale fields and mown meadows, **and** I will ride back home **and** not leave.”

Many comments could be made on this Icelandic sentence and its four translations, but our present concern is the syntax, where the two phrase-linking *oks* create a run-on effect, as though in Gunnarr’s mind the view of Hlíðarendi overflows into his decision to return home and then into the negative re-assertion of this decision, all in one continuous outpouring. The effect, like all such “ok — ok — ok” effects, deserves imitating.

8. Avoiding the present participle

The participial phrase, introduced by the present participle, is unknown in *Njáls saga* and in most of the family sagas, though quite common in the *riddarasögur*, for example. In Modern English it is an economical way to express simultaneity of action, by creating a kind of truncated subordinate clause. As churlish as it may seem to ban from saga translations such a common and natural device, I believe the attempt is worthwhile, as a further way of preserving the paratactic style.

Peir [Kári and Björn hvíti] *riðu þá um daginn austr á fjall fyrir norðan jökul ok riðu aldri almannaveg ok ofan í Skaptártungu ok fyrir ofan bæi alla til Skaptár ok leiddu hesta sína í dæli nökkura, en þeir váru á njósn ok höfðu svá búit um sik, at eigi mátti sjá þá.* (150.429)

Dasent: Now they rode that day east on the fell to the north of the Jökul, **but** never on the highway, **and** so down into Skaptartongue, **and** above all the homesteads to Skaptarwater, **and** led their horses into a dell, **but** they themselves were on the look-out, **and** had so placed themselves that they could not be seen.

B-H: That same day they rode east into the mountains, **but** never along the usual route, down into the region of the Skaptá River Junction, **skirting** the upper boundaries of all farms till they got to the Skaptá River. They led their horses into a depression, **but** they remained

on the lookout **and** posted themselves so that they could not be seen themselves.

MM-HP: They rode east that day into the mountains north of the glacier, never **using** the main track, **and** down to Skaptriver-tongue, **keeping** well above all the farms on the way to Skapt River. There they led their horses into a hollow **and** kept close watch **while remaining** out of sight themselves. (1999: no change in syntax)

Cook: That day they rode east into the mountains north of the glacier, **but** never rode on the common path, **and** then down into Skaftartunga **and** above all the farms as far as the Skafta river, **and** there they led their horses into a hollow **and** kept on the lookout **and** placed themselves so that no one could see them.

The Icelandic has six *oks* and *ens*, and Cook and Dasent have the same number, thus keeping the sentence structure of the original. B-H keep most of them, but replace one with the present participle “skirting,” a convenient way of linking events in English, but quite out of keeping with saga style. MM-HP go even further than B-H in the use of the present participle, with not one but three: “using,” “keeping” and “remaining.” The result is fluent modern English, but the style is radically different.

Here is a shorter example, from the episode of the burning:

En er Helgi heyrði þetta, kastaði hann skikkjunni; hann hafði haft sverð undir hendi sér ok hjó til manns, ok kom í skjöldinn, ok af sporðinn ok fótinn með. (129.329–30)

Dasent: But when Helgi heard that, he cast away the cloak. He had got his sword under his arm, **and** hewed at a man, **and** the blow fell on his shield **and** cut off the point of it, **and** the man’s leg as well.

B-H: But when Helgi heard that he threw off the skirt. He had been holding a sword under his arm. He now struck at one of the men **and** the blow cut off the lower point of the shield, **and** with it, the man’s leg.

MM-HP: When Helgi heard this, he threw off the cloak; he was carrying a sword under his arm, **and** now he struck at one of the men, **slicing** off the bottom of the shield and **severing** his leg. (1999: When Helgi heard this he threw off the cloak; he had been carrying a sword under his arm, and now he struck out at one of the men and

hit his shield; it sliced off the bottom of the shield and severed his leg.)

Cook: When Helgi heard this he threw off the cloak. He had been carrying a sword under his arm, **and** swung it at one of the men **and** hit his shield, **and** it cut off the lower part of the shield **and** the man's leg as well.

Again, Dasent and Cook have kept from the original the series of "ands," while B-H create separate sentences and also conflate two clauses into one ("and the blow cut off the lower point of the shield"). MM-HP resort to the present participle twice.

9. Shift from indirect to direct discourse

The sagas have a high percentage of reported speech, both indirect (*oratio obliqua*) and direct (*oratio directa*), as well as a striking number of instances in which indirect discourse leads, suddenly and without preparation, into direct.²⁴

Njáll sagði hann vera inn mesta afreksmann — "ok ert þú mjök reyndr, en þó munt þú meir síðar, því at margr mun þik ofunda." (32.84)

Hann [Njáll] kvezk sofit hafa til þessa, en kvezk þá vaka, — "eða hvi ert þú hér kominn svá snemma?" (98.251)

hann [Njáll] segir, at þeir mundu fullu verði keypt hafa, — "ok hyggið at því, at þér launið eigi því, sem hann mun vilja." (108.276)

Flosi tók þá fésjóð af belti sér ok kvazk vildu gefa honum; hann [Hallbjörn sterki] tók við fénu, en kvezk þó ekki eiga gjafir at Flosa, — "en þó vil ek vita, hverju þú vill, at ek launa." (134.350)

Flosi tók lítt á þeirra ferð ok kvað þó eigi víst um, hvárt hér næmi staðar; — "er Kári engum manni líkr, þeim er nú er á landi váru." (151.435)

²⁴ Alfred Jakobsen has counted 109 instances of this shift in *Njáls saga*: "Om halvreplicker i norrønt", *Maal og minne* 1980:150-166, at 152.

The effect of this construction is to create a movement from the less vivid to the more vivid, to produce "a heightening of the tension; the indirect discourse leads up to the thing which is to be emphasized."²⁵

In a literal translation, indirect discourse should be kept in indirect discourse, likewise for direct discourse, and the shift from one to the other should be preserved. This has generally been observed by translators, but occasionally the temptation to choose the greater immediacy of direct discourse has not been resisted:

Höskuldr bað hann fyrir ráða, ok spurði, hvar hann mundi helzt á leita. (97.240)

MM-HP: "I leave it in your hands," said Höskuld. "Where are you thinking of seeking a match?" (1999: Höskuld bade him decide, and asked where he thought it best to look.)

The shift from indirect to direct has been variously handled:

Flosi segir henni bönordit. Hon kvezk vera kona skapstór, — "ok veit ek eigi, hversu mér er hent við þat, er þar eru svá menn fyrir, en þat þó eigi síðr, at sjá maðr hefir ekki mannaforráð." (97.241)

Dasent: Flosi told her of the wooing, but she said she was a proud-hearted woman.

"And I know not how things will turn out between me and men of like spirit; but this, too, is not the least of my dislikes, that this man has no priesthood or leadership over men."

B-H: Flosi told her about the proposal, but she answered that she was a woman of very proud mind — "and I am not sure how I shall behave in the matter, seeing on the one hand, men of such importance, and what is still more significant, that this man has no position of leadership among men."

MM-HP: When she arrived Flosi told her of the proposal.

"I have my pride," said Hildigunn, "and I am not sure whether this proposal suits me, considering the kind of people involved — particularly since this is a man without authority."

²⁵ Margaret Jeffrey, *The Discourse in Seven Icelandic Sagas* (Bryn Mawr, 1933): 20. See also Irmgard Netter, *Die direkte Rede in den Isländersagas* (Leipzig, 1935): 27.

(1999: Flosi told her of the proposal. She said she was a proud woman, “and I do not know how it would suit me to have such people involved — especially since he is a man without authority.”)

Cook: Flosi told her of the proposal.

She said she was a proud woman — “and I don’t know how it would suit me to be involved with such people, especially since the man has no godord.”

Dasent obliterates the anacoluthon by putting Hildigunnr’s comment in a separate sentence. MM-HP turn the indirect remark (*Hon kvezk vera kona skapstór*) into a direct statement by Hildigunnr (“I have my pride”), creating dramatic boldness at the cost of fidelity to the original syntax.

Translators sometimes turn indirect discourse into direct, but it happens rarely that they do the opposite. In Ch. 3, however, there is an unusual case in which a character — not the narrator — uses direct speech to report the speech of another character.

Litlu síðar mættu þeir Ogmundi; hann sagði þeim kveðju Gunnhildar ok þat með, at hon myndi eigi bjóða þeim, fyrr en þeir hefði fundit konung, fyrir orðs sakir: — “at svá þykki, sem ek grípa gulli á við þá; en ek mun þó til leggja slíkt sem mér sýnisk; ok veri Hrútr djarfmæltr við konung ok biði hann hirðvistar.’ Hér eru ok tignarklæði, er hon sendi þér, Hrútr, ok skalt þú í þeim ganga fyrir konunginn.” (3.13)

Dasent: After that they met Augmund, and he brought them a greeting from Gunnhilda, saying, that she could not ask them to her house before they had seen the king, lest men should say, “I make too much of them.” Still she would do all she could for them, and she went on, “tell Hrut to be out-spoken before the king, and to ask to be made one of his body-guard;” “and here,” said Augmund, “is a dress of honour which she sends to thee, Hrut, and in it thou must go in before the king.”

B-H: Afterwards they met Ogmund who brought greetings from Gunnhild, adding that she could not invite them to her house before they had seen the king, because of the talk it might stir up — “and that it does not appear as though I were overeager to have them with me. But I shall put in a good word for them. Tell Hrut to speak up to the king and ask to be one of his retainers.”

"And here," said Ogmund, "is a robe of state, which she sends you, Hrút, and in which you must appear before the king."

MM-HP: A little later they met Ogmund, who brought them Gunnhild's greetings and a message that she would not ask them to her house until they had been to see the king, in case people started saying that she was making too much fuss of them; but she would do all she could for them, and in the meantime Hrut was to speak up boldly before the king and ask to be admitted to his court.

"And here," he added, "is a robe she sends you, Hrut, to wear when you go before the king."

(1999: A little later they met Ögmund; he brought them Gunnhild's greetings and a message that she would not ask them to her house until they had been to see the king, in case of gossip — "'It would look as if I were heaping favours on them. But I shall give whatever help I please; and Hrút is to speak up boldly before the king and ask to be admitted to his court.' And here is a ceremonial robe she sends you, Hrút; you are to wear it when you go before the king.")

Cook: Soon after that they met Ogmund; he gave them Gunnhild's greetings and added that for fear of gossip she would not invite them to come to her until they had met the king. "It mustn't seem that I'm lavishing favours on them," she had said, "and yet I will help him as I see fit. Hrut is to speak boldly to the king and ask to be one of his followers."

"And here are some noble robes," Ogmund went on, "which she has sent for you to wear when you come before the king."

All of the translators have been uneasy about this passage, which would be obscure if translated with absolute literalness. Dasent changes the queen's direct speech into indirect speech ("Still she would do all she could for them") and adds the introductory "and she went on." B-H give the closest rendition of the passage, adding only "said Ogmund" to clarify that last speech. Cook clarifies that speech and also Gunnhild's (with "she had said"). MM-HP put all of the queen's direct speech into indirect discourse. This is an unusually tricky passage; for the most part, however, straightforward translation of reported speech proves no difficulty.

10. Word order

This is an area in which the fundamentalist approach to translation must be tempered, simply because the inflectional system of Old Icelandic permitted greater flexibility than is possible in English. Where English has a strong preference for the subject-verb-complement order, the Icelandic sentence can begin with a verb (*Fóru menn þá heim til búða sinna*, 141.376), an object (*"þik eru vér komnir at finna, vinr;"* *"liðveizlu vilju vér þik biðja,"* both 138.367), an adjective (*"Torsóttir þótti yðr ek næstum vera, er ek vilda eigi taka undir vandræði yður,"* 139.370), or an adverb (*"Einu hverju sinni reið Njáll upp í Mörk,"* 93.236).

Apart from the common verbal fronting (*Fóru menn þá heim til búða sinna*, 141.376) or adverbial fronting (*Um haustit sendi Mörðr Valgarðsson orð ...* 76.185),²⁶ inversions occur especially in direct speech, where they often lend emphasis or proverbial force. In such cases it is sometimes possible to retain the order of the Icelandic:

"Sjaldan hefði ek aðra haft at skildi fyrir mér." (5.17)

"Seldom have I used others as a shield for me."

"Fögr er hlíðin, ..." (75.182)

"Lovely is the hillside — ..."

"ok eru köld kvenna ráð". (116.292)

"Cold are the counsels of women."

"Berr er hvern at baki, nema sér bróður eigi." (152.436)

"Bare is the back of a brotherless man."

More often, however, the inverted order is too jarring in modern English, though for Dasent in mid-nineteenth century it seems to have been less of a problem.

²⁶ Certain adverbial beginnings ("now," "then," "soon," "later" and the like) are common in both Old Icelandic and English: *Litlu síðar fundusk þeir Njáll*, 60.152, "Shortly after, he met with Njal." The difference is that in Icelandic the verb follows immediately, whereas in English the subject must follow.

"Af henni mun standa allt it illa, er hon kemr austr hingat," segir Njáll. (33.87)

Dasent: "Because from her," says Njal, "will arise all kind of ill if she comes hither east."

Cook: "Every kind of evil will come from her when she moves east," said Njal.

"Góðar eru gjafir þínar," segir Gunnarr. (47.122)

Dasent: "Good are thy gifts," says Gunnar.

Cook: "Your gifts are good," said Gunnar.

Hróðný mælti: "Þér fel ek á hendi, Skarphedinn, at hefna bróður þíns" (98.252)

Dasent: Then Rodny said, "into thy hands, Skarphedinn, I leave it to take vengeance for thy brother"

Cook: Hrodny spoke: "Skarphedin, I place in your hands the vengeance for your brother."

Þar bjó Hildir inn gamli. (101.258)

Dasent: There Hildir the old dwelt.

Cook: Hildir the Old lived there.

Flosi mælti: "Því vil ek heita Sigfússonum at skiljask eigi fyrr við þetta mál en aðrir hvárir hníga fyrir qðrum." (124.315)

Dasent: "This," said Flosi, "will I promise to you, ye sons of Sigfus, not to part from this quarrel before one of us bites the dust before the other."

Cook: Flosi spoke: "I will promise you Sigfussons not to give up until one side or the other perishes."

Hallr svarar: "Boðin mun honum sættin, sú er sæmilig er, ef hann vill sættask." (147.421-2)

Dasent: "A fitting atonement shall be offered him," says Hall, "if he will take it."²⁷

Cook: Hall said, "He will be offered honourable terms if he's willing to settle."

11. Understatement (litotes)

Lee Hollander, who was one of the translators of *Njáls saga* in 1955, published an excellent article on this subject in 1938, in which he stated:

I am decidedly not of the opinion that the litotic phrase of the original is invariably best rendered by the non-litotic equivalent; quite on the contrary, for English, as well as the other Germanic tongues themselves relish the device.²⁸

Hollander's opinion is worth heeding, since understatement is so much a part of saga style. The following instances of how the translators have dealt with understatement follow a three-part division suggested by Hollander's article.

a) The Denied Negative.

[Njáll to Gunnarr:] "*En þó er eigi þrvænt, at ek hafa ámæli af konu minni eða sonum mínum fyrir þetta, því at þeim mun mjök mislíka.*" (43.110)

Dasent: "but yet it is to be looked for, that I shall have blame from my wife or from my sons for that, for it will mislike them much."

B-H: "**I shall certainly be reproached** by my wife and sons for doing so, for they will take it greatly amiss."

MM-HP: "even though **I am sure to be reproached** by my wife and my sons for doing so, as they will disapprove strongly." (1999: "But it is not unlikely that I shall be reproached by my wife and my sons for doing so, since they will take this very badly.")

²⁷ Notice that Dasent moved "says Hall" from its position in the Icelandic. I have made it a rule not to do so, though in some cases it seemed best to break that rule, as in Ch. 58: "'You women always think that no one is a match for Gunnar,' said the men, '...'"

²⁸ "Litotes in Old Norse," *PMLA* 53 (1938): 1-33, at 4.

Cook: "But **it is not unlikely that I will be blamed** for this by my wife and my sons, since they will take this very badly."

Only the last of these preserves the denied negative; the first three eliminate the understatement altogether.

*Kolskeggr heyrði ok mælti: "Þat mun **eigi engra tíðenda** vita."* (54. 136)

Dasent: Kolskegg heard what she said, and spoke, "This betokens **no small tidings**."

B-H: Kolskegg overheard this and said: "**Great tidings** are afoot, no doubt."

MM-HP: Kolskegg heard her. "That promises **big events**," he said. (1999: Kolskegg heard this and said, "That means big events are on the way.")

Cook: Kolskegg heard this and spoke: "That means **no small news**."

Only Dasent and Cook preserve the understatement, although B-H may be said to include it with the words "no doubt."

92.230: *en hann [Þráinn] kvezk aldri skyldu fé gjalda ok svaraði styggt ok kvezk **hvergi þykkjask varbúinn** við Njálssonum, hvar sem þeir fyndisk.*

Dasent: but he said he would never pay any money, and answered crossly, for he said **he thought himself quite a match** for Njal's sons wherever they met.

B-H: but he declared he would never pay them any money. He gave peevish answers and said that **he considered himself a match** for the sons of Njal wherever they should meet.

MM-HP: but Thrain said that he would never pay them anything. He was curt in his replies, and said that **he thought himself a match** for the Njalssons anywhere. (1999: but Thráin said he would never pay them a penny; he was curt in his replies, and said he was ready to take on the Njalssons wherever they met.)

Cook: but he answered sharply and said he would never pay them a

thing and that **he would never be unprepared** to take on the Njalssons, no matter where they met.

In this case only Cook preserves the understatement.

b) The Denied Positive. As distinct from the preceding, which is in effect a strong positive, the denied positive becomes a strong negative.

[Gunnarr to Sigmundur:] "*at hann sé þér engi skapbætir*" (41.106)

Dasent: "that he is no betterer of thy temper."

B-H: "that he is hardly the type of person to improve your disposition."

MM-HP: "he does little (1999: nothing) to temper your character."

Cook: "that he does not improve your character."

"*Eigi var Þórhalli frænda gott í hug, er hann var eptir í búðinni, ok eigi veit ek hvat hann tekur til.*" (142.378)

Dasent: "**Our kinsman Thorhall was not easy in his mind** as we left him behind in the booth, and I know not what he will be at."

B-H: "**My son Thorhall was not in good spirits** as we left him behind in the booth. I do not know what he proposes to do now."

MM-HP: "**My kinsman Thorhall was not easy in his mind** when we left him behind (omitted in 1999) in the booth, and I do not know what he will do."

Cook: "**My son Thorhall was not in good spirits** back there in the booth, and I don't know what will be his next step."

In both cases, all four translators preserve the understatement.

Nú er frá þeim Katli at segja, at þeir riðu, sem mest máttu þeir, þar til er þeir kómu til Svínafells, ok sögðu sínar farar eigi sléttar. (146.419)

Dasent: Now it is to be told of Kettle, that they rode as they best might till they came home to Swinefell, **and told how bad their journey had been.**

B-H: To return to Ketil and those with him: they rode as fast as their horses could carry them until they got to Svínafell **where they reported how badly they had fared.**

MM-HP: Meanwhile, Ketil of Mork and the others rode as fast as they could all the way to Svinafell, **where they reported their misfortunes** (1999: and reported that their journey had not gone well),
 Cook: To return now to Ketil and the others: they rode as hard as they could until they reached Svinafell, **and they told that their journey had not been smooth.**

In this case only the fourth translation keeps the understatement; the other three have in effect re-written "not good" as "bad."

c) Litotes effected without negation, but instead by a weak qualifier, resulting in a strong positive or negative statement.

[Hrútr to Høskuldr:] "**Ærit fōgr** er mæR sjá, ..." (1.7)

Dasent: "**Fair enough** is this maid, ..."

B-H: "**Beautiful** this maiden certainly is, ..."

MM-HP: "The child is **beautiful enough**, ..."

Cook: "The girl is **quite beautiful**, ..."

B-H lose the understatement; Cook's "quite" is intended to give qualified assent, but unfortunately might also be taken as an intensifier.

"*Sjaldan hefí ek aðra haft at skildi fyrir mér.*" (5.17)

Dasent: "**Seldom** have I had others as a shield before me."

B-H: "**Rarely** have I made use of others as a shield before me."

MM-HP: "**I'm not in the habit of** using others as a shield." (1999: "I have seldom used others as a shield.")

Cook: "**Seldom** have I used others as a shield for me."

MM-HP's "I'm not in the habit of" keeps the understatement but puts it in other terms. The other three preserve the understated word "seldom / rarely" (meaning "never").

"*Pat mun mér sízt í tauma ganga, er Hrútr segir mér.*" (12.36)

Dasent: "Hrut was not far wrong when he told me"

B-H: "Rarely has it happened that Hrútr was wrong in his predictions."

MM-HP: "I can always rely on Hrut's predictions." (1999: "What Hrut tells me is seldom wrong.")

Cook: "Whatever Hrut tells me can be trusted."

MM-HP and Cook have lost the understatement. Better would be: "I'm never let down by what Hrut says," which captures the understatement, though it fails to duplicate the difficult metaphor of a horse getting entangled in the reins and being unable to move.

[Helgi Njálsson's response to Sigurður jarl's question as to whether he has the power of prophecy:] "*Lítt er þat reynt.*" (85.206)

Dasent: "That has been little proved."

B-H: "It has not yet been put to the test."

MM-HP: "It has never yet been tested." (1999: "It has not yet been tested much.")

Cook: "There's been little experience of that."

By emphasizing "not yet", B-H and MM-HP lose some of the bite of "little" for "never."

"*Flestir munu af manni þessum illt hljóta.*" (87.213)

Dasent: "Most men will get ill luck from this man."

B-H: "This man will bring bad luck to most people."

MM-HP: "That man will bring ill luck (1999 adds "to people") wherever he goes."

Cook: "Most people will have misfortune from this man."

The force of the litotes lies in "most" (*flestir*) for "all;" MM-HP lose this force by substituting "wherever he goes."

"*Optar hefir þú fyrr verit glaðari en nú.*" (115.288)

Dasent: "Often hast thou been more glad ... than thou art now."

B-H: "I have often seen you in a more cheerful mood than now."

MM-HP: "I have often seen you more cheerful."

Cook: "You have often been merrier than now."

B-H and MM-HP introduce the first person, quite unnecessarily, but all four translations preserve the understatement.

Pau [Björn hvíti og Valgerður] *áttu gnóttir í búi.* (148.424)

Dasent: and they had enough to spare in the house.

B-H: They had an abundance of everything at their farm.

MM-HP: There was plenty of everything at their farm.

Cook: They had enough of everything at their farm.

B-H and MM-HP replace the qualified "enough" with the unqualified "plenty."

Ketill svarar fá. (151.435)

Dasent: Kettle answers never a word.

B-H: Ketil made not much reply.

MM-HP: Ketil said nothing.

Cook: Ketil said nothing.

Only B-H preserve the understatement; the others "translate." Cook should have written "Ketil had little to say."

12. Sound features²⁹

The final topic to be considered moves into another area of style, the phonological, where the sagas present still more features worthy of consideration by translators. The most obvious of these, alliteration, is especially prominent in proverbial utterances.

"illt er þeim, er á ólandi er alinn." (6.20)

Dasent: "Ill goes it with those who are born on a barren land."

B-H: "unhappy the man who lives in a foreign land."

MM-HP: "Far from home is far from joy."

²⁹ The following discussion has been helped by the observations in *Íslensk stílfræði*, ed. by Þorleifur Hauksson (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1994): 280.

Cook: "it's difficult to dwell in a distant land."

The alliteration in the Icelandic is three-fold and vocalic. Dasent has a double alliteration ("born ... barren"), B-H none at all, and Cook a three-fold d-alliteration. MM-HP introduce anaphora ("far from ... far from").

"veldrat sá, er varar" (41.106)

Dasent: "His hands are clean who warns another."

B-H: "Forewarned is forearmed!"

MM-HP: "Warning wards off blame."

Cook: "Whoever warns is free of fault."

Dasent substitutes an iambic rhythm for the alliteration, which the other translators keep. Cook has, perhaps excessively, two alliterative pairs (w — w and f — f).

skamma stund verðr hönd hoggvi fegin (42.109, 99.253, 134.349)

Dasent: "but a short while is hand fain of blow."

B-H: "Short is the hour of victory" / "short is the hour of triumph" / "a short time is the hand fain of the blow."

MM-HP: "the hand is soon sorry that it struck." (1999: "the hand is soon sorry for the blow" in Ch. 42, "the hand is soon sorry that it struck" in Chs. 99 and 134)

Cook: "the hand's joy in the blow is brief."

Again Dasent turns a deaf ear to the alliteration, as do B-H (who also translate the saying differently on each occasion). MM-HP have a three-fold s-alliteration, and Cook a twofold b-alliteration.

"Berr er hvern at baki, nema sér bróður eigi." (152.436)

Dasent: "Bare is back ... without brother behind it."

B-H: "Bare is the back without brother behind it."

MM-HP: "One's back is bare without a brother." (1999: "Bare is back without brother behind it.")

Cook: "Bare is the back of a brotherless man."

This one is easy, and all four translators make use of the three cognate b-words, "bare ... back ... brother."

Alliterating proverbs are to be expected in Germanic tradition, and also alliterating legal formulas, like *sannr at sǫkinni* and *neyta eða njóta þurfu þessa vættis* (both on 142.391) When alliteration occurs elsewhere, it is not always clear whether the effect is coincidental or not.

"*Margir eru þess vinir mínir makligir, at ek leggja til þat, sem heilt er.*" (21.58–9)

"*Þú hefir þó mest at gort,*" segir Gestr, "*þó at ǫðrum verði auðit í lög at leiða.*" (103.268–9)

[Hildigunnr] *gekk fyrir Flosa ok greiddi hárit frá augum sér ok grét.* (116.290)

Morðr skipti þá skjótt skapi sínu. (135.356)

Only the first and third of these seem to me to be possibly deliberate, and I have accordingly made an effort to reproduce the effect:

"I have many friends for whom it is fitting that I give good counsel."

[Hildigunn] entered the room and went before Flosi and wiped the hair away from her eyes and wept.

The other translators have not attempted alliteration in these passages, perhaps wisely.

Apart from alliteration, *Njáls saga* makes use of other sound patterns which the translator would do well to imitate.

Anaphora (use of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses):

Flosa brá svá við, at hann var í andliti stundum rauðr sem blóð, en stundum fǫlr sem gras, en stundum blár sem hel. (116.292)

Dasent: Flosi was so stirred at this, that **sometimes** he was blood-red in the face, and **sometimes** ashy pale as withered grass, and **sometimes** blue as death.

B-H: Flosi was so agitated that his face was **now** as red as blood, **now** as wan as grass, and **again** as black as Hell itself.

MM-HP: He was so agitated that his face changed colour rapidly; **one moment** it was as red as blood, **then** pale as withered grass, **then** black as death. (1999: Flosi was so agitated that his face was in turns as red as blood, then pale as withered grass, then black as death.)

Cook: Flosi was so stirred that his face was, in turns, **as** red as blood, **as** pale as grass, and **as** black as Hel itself.

Dasent's treatment is the most effective, with its repetition of "sometimes." Cook's "as" is a weaker link. B-H and MM-HP both have broken sequences ("now ... now ... again" and "one moment ... then ... then").

"Stefni ek máli þessu til fimmtardóms, ...; stefni ek nú til sóknar ok til sektar fullrar; stefni ek lögstefnu; stefni ek í heyranda hljóði ..."
(144.395)

Dasent: "I **summon** this cause before the Fifth Court, ...; I **summon** it to be pleaded now and to full outlawry. I **summon** with a lawful summons. I **summon** in the hearing of all men at the Hill of Laws."

B-H: "I **call** this suit before the Fifth Court; I **call** this suit before the court and I demand complete outlawry; I **declare** this in accordance with the law, and I **declare** it in the hearing of all men at the Law-Mount."

MM-HP: "I **refer** this action to the Fifth Court, ... I **refer** this action for immediate trial and full sentence. I **refer** it lawfully, in public (1999: in the hearing of all), at the Law Rock."

Cook: "I **summon** this case before the Fifth Court, ... I **summon** it now for prosecution and full punishment. I **make this legal summons**; I **make this summons** in the hearing of all at the Law Rock."

Once again, Dasent is most consistent, repeating "summon" four times. B-H shift from "call" to "declare." MM-HP keep to the same verb, but conflate the last two statements into one, so that the repetition of "refer" is three-fold rather than four-fold. Cook repeats the word "summon" four times, but weakens the effect by shifting from the verb to a verbal phrase.

Epiphora (use of the same word or element at the end of successive words or clauses):

Gunnarr ... var bláeygr ok snareygr og roði í kinnunum. (19.53)³⁰

Dasent: He was **blue-eyed** and **bright-eyed**, and ruddy-cheeked.

B-H: He had **sharp blue eyes** and a ruddy complexion.

MM-HP: He had **keen blue eyes**, red cheeks, ... (1999: with ruddy cheeks)

Cook: He was **blue-eyed** and **keen-eyed** and ruddy-cheeked, ...

B-H and MM-HP eliminate the epiphora by combining two adjectives into a single phrase. Cook follows Dasent very closely, but the effect is a series of three hyphenated adjectives, when it would have been closer to the rhythm of the original to have something like "he was blue-eyed and keen-eyed and his cheeks were ruddy."

Skarphedinn ... var ... gagnorðr ok skjótorðr. (25.70)

Dasent: Skarphedinn ... had a great flow of words and quick utterance.

B-H: Skarphedin ... spoke trenchantly, [but often] rashly.

MM-HP: Skarp-Hedin ... was ... quick to speak and scathing (1999: pointed) in his words.

Cook: Skarphedin ... spoke to the point and was quick to do so.

None of the translators, it appears, has even tried to duplicate the epiphora here, illustrating — as often with scaldic poetry — the frequent impossibility of capturing both the precise meaning and the sound pattern.

"Ærit mun hann stórvirkr," segir Njáll, "en eigi veit ek, hvé góðvirkr hann er." (36.96)

Dasent: "He will be a **great worker** enough, I daresay," says Njal, "but I do not know whether he will be such a **good worker**."

³⁰ In *Íslensk stílfræði*, 280, this device is mentioned as characteristic of the descriptions in *Njáls saga*. Reference is made there to Lars Lönnroth, "Det litterära porträttet i latinsk historiografi och isländsk sagaskrivning," *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 27 (1965): 68–117, who traces such descriptions to saints' lives and Latin writings.

B-H: "He is likely to accomplish a lot of work," said Njál, "but whether all will be good I don't know."

MM-HP: "His work will have vigour enough," said Njal. "But I'm not so certain of its value." (1999: "He will work hard enough," said Njál, "but I do not know how well he will work.")

Cook: "He'll be a **hard worker**, sure enough," said Njal, "but I don't know whether he'll be a **good worker**."

Dasent and Cook keep something of the effect, though less concisely, by opposing "great / hard worker" with "good worker". B-H ignore the sound pattern, and MM-HP replace it, reasonably enough, with an alliterating contrast, "vigour" vs. "[no] value".

Symploce (repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning, and another at the end, of successive clauses):

hann [Helgi Njálsson] *var fríðr maðr sýnum ok hærðr vel; hann var sterkr maðr ok vígr vel; hann var vitr maðr ok stilltr vel.* (25.70–1)

Dasent: He too was fair of face and had fine hair. He was a strong man and well-skilled in arms. He was a man of sense and knew well how to behave.

B-H: He was a man of handsome appearance with a fine head of hair. He was strong and well skilled in arms, sensible and even-tempered.

MM-HP: He too (omitted in 1999) was a handsome man, with a fine head of hair. He was strong and skilful with arms, intelligent and even-tempered.

Cook: He was a handsome man with a good head of hair; he was strong and a good fighter, clever and even-tempered.

Although the task is easy enough, only Dasent proves worthy here. The others ignore the device and combine the second and third clauses into a single clause with a series of adjectives.

In defining and advocating a rather conservative mode of translation, and moving the discussion into the areas of syntax and rhetoric (understatement) and phonology, these remarks have been a bit on the preachy side. My as-

sumption has been that in any work of art there is a harmony between form and content, and that a translation must therefore try to preserve that harmony as much as possible and avoid restructuring the form along modern lines. It has been embarrassing, however, to discover in the course of this writing a number of instances where I failed to live up to my own teachings — and many more remain unconfessed. Like the Bible-belt preacher caught in sin, I can only plead “Do as I say, not as I do!”

EFNISÁGRIP

Umræður um það hvernig þýða skuli Íslendingasögur á ensku hafa að miklu leyti snúist um orðaforða (hvort velja skuli fornleg orð af germönskum stofni eða orð sem töm eru nútímafólki), en öðrum atriðum sem koma til álita við nákvæmar þýðingar hefur að sama skapi verið lífllur gaumur gefinn. Í þessari grein eru bornar saman þær fjórar þýðingar á Njáls sögu sem út hafa komið á ensku (Dasent 1861, Bayerschmidt og Hollander 1955, Hermann Pálsson og Magnus Magnusson 1960, Cook 2001) og þær notaðar til þess að ræða — auk orðaforðans — álitamál eins og samræmingu í orðalagi, orðaröð, sögulega nútíð, setningargerðina *ok – ok – ok – ok*, hægna notkun lýsingarháttar nútíðar í nútímaensku, skipti úr óbeinni ræðu í beina, úrdrátt og stíleinkenni sem snúast um málhljóð, s.s. stuðlun og epifóru. Greinin segir fyrir um þann þýðingarstíl sem höfundur álfur við hæfi lesenda á öndverðri 21. öld.

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