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ICELAND AND THE RISE OF LITERATURE IN 'TERRA NOVA'

Some comparative reflections

ICELAND—as is generally known—is a country where literature takes an important place in everyday life and where people are interested in problems of the older or newer literature to a very high degree. Where else for instance could the return of two old manuscripts be celebrated as an official ceremony as well as a festival for the whole country, as happened only a few years ago, when the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda and the Flateyjarbók came home to Iceland? And now try to imagine the consequences of finding in England a new manuscript of the Beowulf, or if in Germany Walther von der Vogelweide could be identified as the author of the Nibelungenlied—such a discovery would mean a sensation to a few scholars only and the majority of the people probably would not take notice of it at all. Now in spring 1973 it happened in Iceland that the largest newspaper, Morgunblaðið, published an article on the front page concerning a manuscript of the Njáls saga, which was said to have been discovered in the Vatican Library and in which Snorri Sturluson himself was attested to be the author of the Njála. In addition to this article the director of the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Jónas Kristjánsson, wrote a commentary, expressing his excitement about the discovery.—It was a joke, of course, an excellent joke on Fool'sday, April First; however, a joke of this kind could only be effective, if the majority of the readers could be expected to understand and laugh at it. And really, many people understood and laughed. It seems to me that such a joke is impossible in any country but Iceland.

If one asks why literature in Iceland has such an extraordinarily important place in the Icelandic society, it is very difficult to find an answer of some plausibility. The simplest answer would be that Ice-

land has had a literary tradition from the middle ages and that a sense of art and style, form and structure of literary texts has been preserved or developed through many centuries. But from this answer even more complex questions arise: what are the reasons for the enormous wealth of literature in Iceland during the high and late middle ages?

We all know that this has been asked very often, and we also know that the answers have never been quite satisfactory. Nevertheless I think it to be worth while reflecting on this problem somewhat more. I am sure it is not possible to explain the role of literature in the old Icelandic society or to solve the riddle of its development in a simple way; naturally these reflections can only be regarded as an attempt to present some possibilities of explanation.

I want to begin with two generally accepted statements:

- 1) The medieval literature of Iceland as a whole is incomparable with any other contemporary literature in Europe. Of course there are many continental influences on the literature of Old Iceland, especially in historical and theological works, but also in the narrative art of several kinds of saga literature. Neither writings in Latin nor any European national literature in the middle ages explains fully the complexity of saga art, its characteristic combination of subject, art and style, historical or pseudohistorical connections and a system of ethic values. Though we find a lot of influences in several aspects, saga literature as a whole is a specifically Icelandic phenomenon.
- 2) In Norway the conditions for the development of literature were obviously nearly the same as in Iceland. The differences between the Old Norwegian and the Old Icelandic language are of no importance for our problem. The fact that the number of Celtic people in Icelandic society must have been considerable does not provide the main reason for the development of medieval Icelandic literature. — The pre-literary traditions were most likely the same in Norway and in Iceland; for instance Eddic lays (in an older shape maybe) or the themes of *fornaldarsögur* were known in both countries. The influences of the European literatures, particularly the historical and theological literatures,

were effective in Norway as in Iceland, perhaps in some aspects earlier in Norway. The most artistic form of Germanic—maybe of European—poetry, the poetry of the scalds, existed in Norway already at the time of the discovery of Iceland. But the development of literature is quite different in both countries:

- a) the Eddic lays were preserved only in Iceland; here they were elaborated and probably first written on parchment,
- b) scaldic poetry has become a mere Icelandic art since the end of the 10th century,
- c) and again only in Iceland we find artistic prose narratives like those in the saga literature.

And this was at a time when the connection between Iceland and Norway was most intense. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Iceland of all the Scandinavian countries was clearly dominant in literary production. Nearly all the sagas about Norwegian kings and jarls, about Danish history (in the *Skjoldunga* saga and the *Knýtlinga* saga), and about events on the Orkneys and the Faroe Islands were written in Iceland or by Icelanders. And when King Sverrir of Norway wanted to have his biography written, he charged an Icelander, Karl Jónsson, with this work.

We all know more examples of this kind. But the question remains: what are the reasons for such a different development of literature in Norway and in Iceland? Since the literary preconditions were nearly the same in both countries, we have to look for explanations outside literature. Many attempts have been made in this direction in order to find a possible solution. Out of these I would like to quote only a few. For instance, it was supposed that the Norwegians, who emigrated from their home country, had been a kind of élite, men with a special longing for independence. According to another opinion the extraordinarily highly developed sense of literature among the Icelanders was a consequence of Irish influence on Icelandic literature or of the Irish strain in the Icelandic people. Other scholars suggested that the *alþingi* as a centre for communication and tradition was of extremely high importance for the literature of Old Iceland. Of course all the facts just mentioned could possibly have influenced the deve-

lopment of literature in Iceland. Nevertheless I consider it impossible that any single one of these factors could be regarded as the initial impulse for the rise of literature in Iceland to such an extremely high standard.

Iceland was a 'terra nova'. This term I want to use in a more extensive meaning. Iceland was not only a 'terra nova' as a country newly discovered, settled and colonized. 'Terra nova' in my meaning also signifies a new beginning of a community, the creation of new political, legal and social orders.

But if we try to compare the particular situation of Iceland and its literature with some similar societies or literatures, we meet a lot of difficulties. It seems impossible to find a country or a society with conditions identical to the ones which characterised Iceland. The settlement of a new country or a new landscape is not always combined with the creation of new orders. Moreover, the beginning of quite new political or legal orders, which sometimes lead to the creation of a new state or a new nation, is not necessarily combined with the settling of a new land.

I think it will suffice for our reflections to compare the Icelandic situation with that of a few other societies or countries which are 'terrae novae' in only one of these respects, or to state how far Iceland seems to be incomparable at all.

The aim of such comparative reflections is to illuminate the rise of literature in a country like Iceland. But what kind of material can we compare? Probably it would not lead to any results if one were to try to compare single works or artistic forms or genres of literature in different societies. We have to start with the most characteristic peculiarities of Old Icelandic literature. These characteristics, I think, can be shown by disregarding all details and reducing the differences between Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian literature to the most striking points. These could be the following items:

- a) In Iceland probably old traditions were preserved better than in Norway.
- b) In Iceland such old traditions were not only preserved orally, but were written on parchment. It can be taken as a rule that the process of writing itself influenced the works being written.

In this way an oral tradition may never be quite the same as the corresponding work in written 'literary' shape. I want to call this very complicated process 'literarisation'.

- c) But in Iceland new traditions arose also about the events during the discovery and settlement of the country and especially about the forming of new orders and the conflicts connected with them. These traditions must have been considered very important ones by the Icelanders for a long time, both in the pre-literary stage, and, obviously, also afterwards. This means that these traditions were subject to 'literarisation' in a similar way as the older ones.

These differences between Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic literature are not always clearly apparent, and certainly they are not simply stages in a chronological development.

Let us now look at these three elements somewhat closer.

1. THE PRESERVATION OF OLD TRADITIONS

It is commonly known that traditions of several kinds as well as the language itself are very often preserved much better in colonized countries than in the homeland itself. So, for example, the language of Bavarian speaking colonists in the so-called Seven Communities (Sette comuni) in Upper Italy has been preserved in a very archaic form through many centuries, and though it is now named 'Cimbrian' it is a very old form of Bavarian dialect.—In the Gottschee, a city and district in Jugoslavia colonized by German speaking people, the theme of the Middle High German poem 'Kudrun' still existed in our century as a ballad with the title 'Die Meererin'. As in these communities old traditions, sometimes only relics, are preserved particularly well in so-called 'Sprachinseln', where settlers are surrounded by a people speaking another language. We can find such settlements especially in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Europe, mainly as the result of planned colonizations.

But there are other examples, too. Scholars in folk tale research know that folk tales, first of all Märchen, in the New England States in North America, and sometimes even in Australia, are preserved

better and very often in a more archaic form than in England itself. In the New England States dances also are still alive which are nearly forgotten in the home country.

Preserving old traditions does not mean that tales or songs, which have been told or sung once, will be handed down and delivered unchanged and will be told or sung in the same manner for ever. Sometimes a 'Gattung', a literary genre, is alive in such a way, that not only old themes or subjects are retold or resung, but also new tales or songs are created in a traditional manner. Heroic tales and heroic poetry in oral tradition are still alive in some Balcanic regions in the south-east of Europe—we all remember the works of Parry and Lord. Here not only songs and tales are living, but the way of singing and telling, and new events may be told or sung just like the old stories. One of the best examples of such traditional art can be found in our neighbourhood, on the Faroe Islands. There themes of *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur* and many other tales have been passed on through oral tradition from the middle ages up to our days as ballads sung in connection with dance. The Faroese dance ballads are in my opinion one of the most astonishing examples of oral tradition of any people speaking a Germanic language. But here again we can see that tradition does not mean sterile conservation; themes and forms do not remain unchanged through a long time; on the contrary, as long as tradition is still alive, themes and forms will be developed and subjected to alterations. The dance ballads had become the only existing form of poetry in this society. During the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century the ballad assumed the functions of other literary genres: satires on events of the present were sung and danced, and even a political satire, the *Fuglakvæði* by Nolsoyar Páll, was performed in this way and is still living as dance song nowadays.

Some of the societies favourable for preservation of old traditions are isolated, either by the geographical situation (mountain valleys, islands) or by language. An isolated situation is often combined with the lack of influences from outside. But there are exceptions, too: the New England States have not been isolated in this sense, and neither has Iceland. Isolation cannot be the sole factor in explaining the preserving of old traditions in a society, but it will favour it. It is difficult to say what the essential reasons for such a tendency might be—

probably a psychological one; maybe an inclination to honour and preserve all that had been of common possession in the home country.

As already mentioned, it is above all folk tales, ballads, dances, legends, and similar traditions that are generally well preserved. As a rule traditions of such kinds are passed on only in a community, in an auditory for instance or in a circle of dancers and singers. Very often the artistic form of such traditions is not very complicated. In Iceland *fornaldarsögur* (in an oral, pre-literary stage) and maybe Eddic lays belong to this group. But there is the scaldic poetry, one of the highest developed artistic forms of poetry we know, which depends on an individual poet with an extremely good sense of language, rhyme, and metre. Scaldic poetry is not a kind of folk poetry and cannot be compared with folk poetry or folk literature in general. I think there is no doubt that scaldic poetry is a traditional art, too, but a tradition bound in strong rules. Where such a poetry existed elsewhere, it was generally connected with a sacral or secular school of poets, as for instance in Old Ireland, and the poems created by such authors are functionally destined. Also the scaldic poetry in Norway had been a functional one, and scalds, as for instance the Norwegians Þjóðólfr and Eyvindr in the tenth and the Icelanders Sighvatr Þórðarson and Arnórr Þórðarson in the eleventh century, were court poets. But already in the tenth century scaldic poetry had become an art independent of the courts of kings and jarls, and it is first of all Icelanders like Egill, Kormákr, and Gísli, who used the possibilities of scaldic poetry as a free artistic form without a functional limitation. At a very early time these Icelanders using traditional forms created a kind of *l'art pour l'art* poetry.

2. THE LITERARISATION OF OLD ORAL TRADITIONS

Probably we would not know anything about the old traditions of Iceland and Norway, if so many of them had not been written down in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But of course the term 'writing down old traditions' does not mean the same as 'literarisation'. When Snorri quoted scaldic verses in the *Heimskringla* or in his *Edda* he

obviously wrote down traditions as he knew them, and the anonymous scribe who first wrote Eddic lays probably did it in a similar manner. This does not mean that these traditions must have been preserved unchanged, but the alterations or additions were limited. When folk tales, ballads, or legends are written down, this is very often performed by scholars; and putting them on paper or parchment begins in general the ending of a living tradition. Also Snorri's approach to scaldic poetry was a scholarly one aimed at explaining scaldic poetry at a time when it had passed its highest achievements. Themes and rules of Eddic and scaldic poetry were fixed; writing down was not an innovation in the development of these genres. Writing down old traditions is a very common process and examples can be found in many times and cultures, from Charlemagne, who ordered to collect and write down German heroic lays to Elias Lönnroth, who collected Finnish epic songs and elaborated the epos Kalevala out of this material.

Prose narratives in folk tradition like Märchen, hero tales, Sagen and legends are never fixed by rules of form and metre as poetic traditions, and the so-called 'epic laws of folk tales' are not at all laws or rules comparable with metric rules in poetic tradition; they are mere tendencies of composing and narrating a story. These tendencies are followed more in Märchen, less in other kinds of folk tales.

Saga literature is first of all literature, and thanks to the work of many scholars—not the least Icelandic ones—today there is no doubt that the sagas in the shape we can read them in manuscripts are works of literature and not products of folk tradition. But probably all the sagas are built on traditional material, and in my opinion we are not allowed to neglect this fact. Of course these pre-literary oral traditions are vague in many respects; we do not know very much about the subjects of such traditions and still less about their form. But without these traditions a very great part of saga literature would not exist. Therefore the process of literarisation of oral traditions is an extremely important one, and one of the most fascinating I know.

I did not succeed in finding a society or a literature comparable with Iceland in this respect. There are for instance single works built on folk traditions like Kalevala, The Cid or even—to a lesser degree—the Decameron of Boccaccio. But I do not know a single national

literature where a whole literary genre depends on folk tradition and has nevertheless become an artistic literary prose of high standard.

If Icelandic prose literature seems to be unique in this respect, it is worth considering the presuppositions for such a development. I want to mention only a few, but probably one can find some more:

- a) Oral traditions must be considered important to the people or people must at least be interested in them.
- b) Already the oral tradition must contain some formal or artistic tendencies in composing or narrating a story.
- c) There must be an impulse to literarise such native traditions, probably inspired by other literary genres or works or by influence from foreign literature.
- d) There must be men who are familiar with the native traditions as well as with the literary impulse, especially the one coming from foreign literature.

With the first of these suppositions—people's interest in oral traditions—I want to deal later. The second one has recently become again an object of scholarly discussion.¹ Investigating early works of Old Norse literature, particularly translations, historical and theological works, some scholars have found scenes or episodes narrated in a manner we know from *konungasögur* or *Íslendingasögur*. I tend to agree with these scholars that here the written works show at an early stage of Old Norse literature the manner of oral narration. There are not many examples of this kind, but enough to prove the existence of a kind of narrative art already preformed in oral tradition. Of course by this I do not advocate the old 'free prose theory' in its extreme form; today nobody still believes that oral sagas were like the written ones. But the fact that oral traditions existed before the written sagas and were connected with them, shows at least the existence of some inherent formal tendencies, for instance the way to compose a scene or to tender a dialogue. These are not artistic laws or rules, just as the so-called saga-style is not determined by rules but

¹ E.g. Jan de Vries: *Die isländ. Saga und die mündl. Überlieferung*, in: *Festschrift f. F. v. d. Leyen*, München 1963, S. 169–176; D. Hofmann: *Die mündl. Vorstufe der altnord. Prosaerzählkunst*, in: *Annales Universitatis Saraviensis* 10, 1961, S. 163–178; also: *Vers u. Prosa in d. mündl. gepflegten mittelalterl. Erzählkunst d. german. Länder*, in: *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 5, 1971, S. 135–175.

by a particular way of telling a story, differing from one saga to the other.

As to point three: It is superfluous to talk about foreign influences on saga literature—there is no doubt they existed, and it is quite irrelevant to ask what in detail is native Icelandic and what is due to foreign influence.

Of more interest is the fourth supposition: namely men familiar with native traditions as well as with foreign literature. During the middle ages in many European countries there were only few links between folk traditions and written literature. On the continent education and knowledge of literature was attached to monasteries. The language spoken there was Latin, but there is some evidence that clerics also used older traditions of oral literature. The epic poem *Waltharius manu fortis* was created by a clergyman, and is based on older heroic tales; but language and form of the poem are Latin, not German. On the continent the reshaping of old oral traditions in written literature remains an exception. Telling a story or singing a lay is one thing; writing it down another. The 'upper class' of clergymen in the famous monasteries, where scholarship and literature flourished, was a kind of international élite.

Conditions in Iceland were quite different. Christianization was no interruption, neither in tradition nor in the social structure of the country. The leading families in pagan times were to a large extent the leading families during the first Christian centuries too. Education, higher learning and historical or literary knowledge were not necessarily attached to the monasteries, as Ari or the *Oddaverjar* prove. And on the other hand clerics like Karl Jónsson of *Pingeyrar* also wrote in Icelandic.

Obviously there was no gap between learned laymen and clerics on the one side, common people on the other. The number of inhabitants and the non-hierarchic structure of society may have favoured these conditions.

Nevertheless it is astonishing that these men writing works like some of the earlier *konungasögur* or *Íslendingasögur* did not use Latin as historians and chroniclers did on the continent; instead of it they used their vernacular language and obviously tried to combine traditional themes and formal tendencies with their literary experience.

I want to repeat: I am not able to cite any other culture with a literary development comparable to the Icelandic one.

This now leads us to the final question: what is the essential impulse which led to the further development of such traditions in such an uncommon way?

3. TRADITIONS OF THE 'LANDNÁM'-TIME AND SAGA-LITERATURE

The most important innovation within old Icelandic literature are the *Íslendingasögur*, stories about events concerned with the original discovery and settlement of the country, the establishment of the *alþingi*, conflicts between individual families, and about Christianization; in short, about the beginning of Icelandic history. It is irrelevant to our discussion whether the events told in the *Íslendingasögur* are historical reality or—more or less—fictions. We may suppose that the content of a major part of the *Íslendingasögur* was considered historical reality, at least at the time when these sagas were composed, as is attested by Sturla Þórðarson.

These events and the creation of new social, legal and political order signify not only the beginning of Icelandic history in a chronological sense. About 870, when the first settlers came to Iceland, the island was empty except for a few Irish monks. The settling meant a completely new start, not only as regards the material conditions which the sagas mention repeatedly—think of the chapter 29 of the *Egils saga* which describes the planning of Skallagrím's farms according to questions of economy. The possibility to create everything anew out of their own vigour must have further strengthened the already clear striving for independence of the new colonists. Innovations had to take place not only in the personal sphere but more so in social intercourse. The hierarchical order of Norway had lost its validity; new forms had to be developed.

Repeatedly one can observe in various literatures of the world how—at a certain moment in literature—a distinct turning back occurs towards the time of the beginning of the state or nation. This can happen in many different ways. In Ancient Rome, to use a very obvious example, the historiographer was thought of as especially digni-

fied and historical writing as the only appropriate literary occupation for a man in politics. History was conceived as a model, above all the history of the beginning, 'ab urbe condita'. Livius states this quite clearly in the preface to his historical work.

In the mind of the Romans 'ab urbe condita' constituted the actual starting point for the initial impulse that led to the Imperium Romanum. In Roman literary tradition over and over again the recollection of the origin of the city becomes apparent. For our purposes it is of minor importance whether the description of the origin of Rome reflects in a condensed form historical realities or whether mythical paradigms are taken as its basis, as has been presumed occasionally.

This search for the origins, the turn towards the time when the actual impulse for the entire further development was given, is always combined with the first constitution of political and legal orders. Apparently the process of the creation of a state or a nation virtually begins with such an initial establishment of laws.

Another manner of inquiring after origins goes even further back in time. Very often it starts with the—generally legendary—tradition of a people's immigration. Rome's greatest epic poem, Vergil's Aeneid, dealt with the origin of the people depicting how Aeneas came to that country and thus established a point of origin.

One can gather similar evidence from Hebrew literature. The Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, can never be estimated too highly for their significance in the selfconsciousness and selfcomprehension of the Jewish people throughout thousands of years. This great book, revised by a redactor, goes back to many individual traditions, which were passed on orally throughout a longer period of time. The whole process of gathering and revising the separate traditions into the present book took almost one thousand years. Here again we find two very characteristic events as points of culmination: the establishment of a—today still compulsory—legal order by Moses and the appropriation and settling of the Promised Land. These are factors which can be regarded as typical for such a literature referring back to the origin of a people.

Let us return to Iceland.—

Once again I want to point out that in an attempt to determine what motives have led to a certain phenomenon in literary development,

very little can be proved by exact materials. Therefore, I must ask you again to look at these thoughts as I have characterized them: as reflections only.

Some time after the 'landnám', in Iceland like in other 'terrae novae' a consciousness must have developed to have created something entirely new. Thus the oral traditions concerning these events received a special emphasis and were regarded as extremely important ones. As in Rome and Israel the establishment of laws played a significant part. From this point of view it is certainly not by chance that the description of legal procedures take up so much room in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Iceland displays an important difference in comparison with other similar societies: in them the events marking the origin of a people or state lie in the far, sometimes mythical past, whereas in Iceland only a comparatively short temporal distance separates the authors of *Íslendingasögur* from the events of the 'landnám'-time, a space of time which under favourable preconditions can be bridged by oral tradition. It has already been observed that out of the turmoils of the Sturlunga days the events of the 'landnám'-time were seen in an idealizing and glorifying light. This fits in easily with the conceptions here exposed.

I should like to summarize the preceding reflections in short.

In Iceland as in many other newly settled regions older traditions were conserved better than in the motherland. But already in the 10th century the court poetry of the scalds was elaborated and severed from its functional connexion.—I had to leave aside the question of the coherence between this development of scaldic poetry and of Icelandic narrative prose.—The most vigorous impulse for the developing of new traditions and especially for their conservation and their being handed down I see as a 'consciousness of initiation' among the Icelanders; this, however, crystallized only after some delay.

The awareness of standing at a beginning, of having created something entirely new, and the process of shaping new orders as well, evidently had considerable psychological and sociological consequences. The strengthened selfconsciousness led to a new—and sometimes problematical—political conception and later on to idealizing the

situation and the events of the beginning. For these reasons the traditions were considered extremely important, thus providing an essential supposition for their being passed on.

In my view these are the most important factors concerning psychology and tradition in the Icelandic literary development. But they would hardly have led to such an impressive literature, if there had not also existed a receptivity to literary influences from outside. In order to combine native traditions with foreign literary impulses it was necessary to have men of literature, who were familiar with the traditions of the country, who were attached to these, and at the same time were experienced in foreign literatures.

To me the shaping of literature in Iceland is a multifarious and complex process, and we can only follow it with our present knowledge to a limited extent; in many respects we depend on hypotheses. The development of the old Icelandic literature is however a model and exemplum of the interaction of the most diverse vigours within and outside literature, which probably has no parallel in world-literature.