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## ‘Á Kálfskinni’: Sagas and the Space of Literature

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**Abstract:** The “space of literature” is a metaphor for literature introduced by the French writer and critic Maurice Blanchot to express the specificity of literary discourse, which says what otherwise cannot be said. In this it produces a community around the unsayable. This ability to say something previously unsaid makes literature to some extent akin to scientific inquiry. In the last decades, research in Old Norse-Icelandic studies has not focussed on this aspect of the saga literature. The study of the sociological conditions for literary production in medieval Iceland can explain why the self-conscious pursuit of literary expression resulted in the emergence of a unique literary genre, the Saga about early Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*). This group of sagas projects on a particular temporal and spatial construct, that of Iceland during the Settlement and Conversion periods, the unspoken concerns of their time of writing, the Sturlung age and its aftermath.

The choice of the theme ‘Sagas and Space’ for the 2015 Saga Conference in Zürich confirms how receptive Old Norse studies have always been to new approaches to their sources. Throughout the history of scholarship, many breakthroughs in the field can be associated with theoretical developments in the wider humanities and social sciences. In recent decades, structuralist and post-structuralist theory have been applied to narrative and poetic texts, as well as methods inspired by anthropology (Glaser 1983; Tulinius 2002; Pálsson 1992). More recently, gender studies, post-colonial studies, new philology and memory studies have brought new insights to the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature (Clover 1993; Jakobsen 2007; Ríkhardsdóttir 2012; Eriksen 2013; Hermann, Mitchell and Arnórsdóttir 2014). None of these new discoveries were foreseen. That is what is so exciting about research, even in a domain with such a long history of scholarship. There are always new and unpredicted developments. Something not yet imagined and until then unimaginable comes to the surface in the collective endeavours of the scholarly community.

This ability to bring forth the unimagined and unexpected is also an aspect of literature. The art of arranging words to tell a story, and/or to create a poetic

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effect, the way literature experiments with meaning, all this is just as inductive to discovery as scientific inquiry. It can say the previously unsayable, that which a culture or a society cannot express otherwise. It opens up what Maurice Blanchot called “l’espace littéraire” or the “space of literature”, a very important space indeed and the subject of this paper (Blanchot 1955).

## The literary (re)turn

Many of the recent approaches challenge the study of the sagas as literature. Anthropology underlines the otherness of the culture which produced them: a culture with different attitudes to kin, to honour, to gender, etc.; a culture in which the historically constituted concept of literature did not exist in the way it does today (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993, 25–28). Literature as we now conceive it is the product of numerous historical developments: that of a market for books and their professional production, the subsequent invention of the printing press, of copyright and—most importantly—the idea of the inspired author who came, for a while, to occupy a similar slot as that of the priest or prophet in a culture from which religion was receding (Laurenson 1971).

Three more recent approaches, also represent a challenge to the study of Old Norse texts as literature. They are Mediality, New Philology and memory studies (Glauser 2007; Eriksen 2013; Hermann, Mitchell and Arnórsdóttir 2014). Contents change when they are expressed in different types of media: the runic inscription, the oral performance, the stone-carving, the illumination, the manuscript. In so many ways, it is the medium which is the message. New Philology makes us aware of the fluidity and protean nature of the medieval text which can acquire new meaning in each new manuscript context. Memory studies, finally, remind us that both sagas and poetry are preoccupied with the past and are based on some kind of memory, albeit shaped and transformed by media, by social demands and circumstances as well as by individual point of view.

These approaches diverge from the more traditional attitude of the so-called Icelandic school (Sveinsson 1971; Nordal 1983). One of its features was to celebrate the saga authors for their literary skills. More recent methods are critical of concepts such as that of individual authors, composing fiction and uniquely responsible for a fixed text. They contextualize the creation and writing down of the sagas and other texts from the medieval Norse world. They do not deny their literary value, but it is not their main emphasis.

The time has come to focus again on the sagas as literature. We now have theoretical tools to think about their literary artistry in the context of the period

under study in its own terms, and not based on a nineteenth and early twentieth century conceptions of literature. The theme chosen for the saga conference, i. e. space, is an invitation to do so.

I will begin by outlining the probable development of a sociological field of literature in twelfth and thirteenth century Iceland, before going on to discuss its implications in the light of Maurice Blanchot's philosophical reflections on the "space of literature" (Blanchot 1955). For him literature is not just an elevated pastime. On the contrary, it is the expression of our very humanity. It confronts us with our mortality and our monstrosity. It also creates community. The opening up of the space of literature is both a social and an existential event. I will illustrate this with an example from the saga literature. In a final part, a childhood memory will, I hope, convey better than any theorizing what may be learned from Blanchot about the sagas.

In recent years, I have, among others, attempted to study the literary production in Iceland and the rest of the West Norse area, in light of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Tulinius 2014, 167–209). He invites us to view society and its complex web of relations, representations and meanings, as a three-dimensional "social space" in which social actors compete to enhance their positions by acquiring different types of capital: economic, symbolic and cultural (Bourdieu 1990). Different positions in society engender different ways of navigating the social space. Here habitus, a set of dispositions, representations and attitudes, acquired from the social group to which one belongs, will shape how the actor behaves, what he strives for and how he evaluates it (Bilton et al. 1987, 331).

## Literary field

With his theory of fields, Bourdieu also enhances our understanding of society as a complex, multi-layered and dynamic space. To explain the concept of field, Bourdieu uses the metaphor of a room full of people sitting around tables and playing cards. This room represents society as a whole. A person comes into the room and assumes that the same game is going on at each table, but soon discovers that this is not so. At every table a different one is being played, following different rules and for a variety of stakes. The tables with their special games and their respective rules and playing chips are the different fields within society (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 94–115).

In Commonwealth Iceland, it is possible to identify several fields. One would be that of free landholders and their domain of activity, which involves among others interaction with the chieftains, who also belong to that field. Another would

be that of the Church, and a third field that of the royal Court. In addition there would be what I have called a field of power where these different other fields intersect but where only the major players within society are active: chieftains, bishops, kings and their retainers. Close to this field of power, there also evolved in Iceland a separate field of literature. This special space within society which allowed for the pursuit of excellence in the artistic use of language would have been in some sense comparable with the field of literature as it evolved on a larger and more general scale in Western culture from the Renaissance onwards. For obvious reasons, it would also have been quite different (Tulinius 2009, 65–68).

If a field is an area within society where actors are all competing for the same types of capital by engaging in the same activities and following the same rules, what would the game of literature look like in this period? Or to put it differently, what are the stakes the different actors are playing for? On the one hand, they would be competing for some kind of material reward, on the other for recognition.

We should distinguish, to begin with, between the practice of poetry and that of prose. Both material rewards and honours bestowed upon good poets are well documented in the literature. They stem mostly from rulers and can be seen in a nutshell in the life of Snorri Sturluson who composed poetry in honour of prominent Norwegians and was recognized for it both in the form of gifts and position at the royal court (*Sturlunga saga*, 254; 256–257). It is his nephew, Sturla Þórðarson, who tells us this, and we should of course be careful not to take his account entirely at face value. Snorri's success in Norway should also be seen in relation to the promises he made to the Norwegian king and regent to bring Iceland under Norwegian rule and also to Snorri's status as one of the most powerful men in Iceland in his time and therefore in a position to implement these promises (*Sturlunga saga*, 263).

The idea of the Icelandic poet at the foreign court, recognized and rewarded for his poetic talent, is probably to some extent a cultural or social myth, in the meaning given to this concept by Roland Barthes in his famous *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957). Such myths are quite present in the discourse of society but only occasionally attested in reality: the young movie star “discovered” in a diner and promised to success on the silver screen, or the self-made entrepreneur, rising from rags to riches through intelligence and hard work in the mythology of the capitalist democracies of recent times. Like these, the idea of the skald at court seems to be a cultural construct, hiding a more complex reality. It is nevertheless quite a productive myth. People believed in it and it influenced their behaviour.

One of its effects would have been an incentive to strive for excellence in the art of poetry. Snorri's *Edda* is a strong indication that such a pursuit existed,

since it acknowledges that young men wanted to engage with it. The episode in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* in which the protagonists, Gunnlaugr and Hrafn, are asked to comment on each other's poetry adds to this picture. The judgements of taste they produce are informed, but also indicative of perceptions of differences in style and quality (*Gunnlaugs saga*, 80; 86). Skaldic poetry is a demanding art form. To appreciate it you need to be a connoisseur and its practitioners are better qualified than others to judge its value.

Moreover, the practice of poetry transcends social classes, at least to some extent. The literature tells us of skalds as high up in the social ladder as kings and earls, but also of poor farmers whose poetic skills are recognized by their peers in the field of literature. An example of this is a stanza by Snorri, which is addressed to an otherwise unknown poet from Northern Iceland, Eyjólfur, who is not rich, but a good man and an excellent poet. Here is the second half:

þvít skilmildra skálda  
 skǫrungmann lofak ǫrvan;  
 hann lifi sælstr und sólu  
 sannauðigra manna (Bjarni Einarsson 1992, 34–35).

In translation it says: “I praise the generous poet and remarkable man. May he live happy under the sun, this truly wealthy man.” Eyjólfur's true wealth resides either in his moral qualities or excellence as a poet or both. One can assume that the attention paid by Snorri to this man inferior to him in wealth and status has to do with the latter. It indicates that though Eyjólfur is far from the field of power, in which Snorri is such a gifted player, they belong together to another field, that of poetry.

That the importance of poetic excellence is greater than just the reward the skald can expect for his poetry, is also attested by several examples of skalds showing irritation when their works have been criticised. Their achievement has value in itself and when that worth is called into question, their position within the field of poetry is also challenged (*Gunnlaugs saga*, 79–81; *Sturlunga saga*, 264; 269).

But did this field of literature also encompass the practice of story-telling, written or oral? Here, the sources give us less to build on. We are informed by Sturla Þórðarson that Snorri composed “bóksögur”, i. e. stories on books. The fact that books were read aloud for entertainment is also attested in the account of Þorgils skarði's last night in 1258, when the saga of St Thomas of Canterbury was read to him (*Sturlunga saga*, 734). As Hákon the old lay dying in the Bishop's palace in Orkney, in 1263, books of all kinds were read aloud to him, both in Latin and the vernacular (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, 261).

We also know that saga entertainment was a feature of feasting, as *Morkinskinna* informs us, most notably in the account of the story-telling Icelander in chapter 44 (*Morkinskinna*, 235–237). Þorgils saga ok Haflíða also stages entertainment with sagas and poetry and here it is noteworthy that the tellers of tales are not only poets, but also prominent men in contemporary society: the priest and former goði Ingimundr, and the rich farmer and legal expert Hrólf. Both are participants in the field of power or at least close to it (*Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* 1952, 13–18).

That the art of the story-teller can also lead to social promotion is indicated by the narrative of the disgraced Sturla Þórðarson at the court of King Magnús, telling a story so much better and in fuller detail than previously heard, that he is invited to narrate it to the queen and king who later commissions him to write the biography of the king's late father (*Sturlunga saga*, 767).

Like all of these accounts, this one is situated somewhere on the spectrum between what we would call today fiction and history. Despite its probable grounding in real events, this narrative also presents the social myth—possibly particular to Icelandic society in the period—of the specialist of poetry and narrative who receives recognition for his craft. The existence of the myth is a strong signal that the field of poetry encompassed another one, that of story-telling, oral and written.

## Self-aware artistry

Signs of a self-awareness of the story-teller and his craft are internal to the sagas themselves. Laurence De Looze and others have written about this in *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga* (De Looze 1989 and 1991). These indications of authorial self-consciousness are a sign that the craft of the saga writer or composer is socially recognized and its practitioners observe and appreciate the work of their peers. This supports the idea that there is a space for the pursuit of excellence in the art of narrative within Icelandic society in the first half of the thirteenth century.

In Snorri Sturluson's *Saga of Saint Ólafr* in *Heimskringla* there is a delightfully humorous and superbly narrated tale of Hrærekr, the Oppland king. Ólafr has vanquished him and blinded him, but nevertheless keeps him at his court and treats him honourably. Hrærekr makes repeated attempts on King Ólafr's, until the latter finally has had enough and has Hrærekr deported to Iceland, where he spends two winters with chieftains, and a third winter at the small farm of Kálfskinn, where he dies. Hrærekr himself declared, so the saga says, that this is where he had been the happiest after he had been deprived of his throne (*Heimskringla* II 1945, 46–49; 101–107; 117–128).

There is a constant restrained playfulness in this account. It is never explicit, but the author is obviously having a lot of fun while describing the character of Hrærekr. There is also a strong sense of compassion for the blind king and his plight, despite his murderous intentions. Though other sources tell us that Hrærekr did indeed die in Iceland, no other saga gives the account of his many attempts on Ólafur's life nor do they name his final dwelling-place, Kálfskinn (*Heimskringla* II 1945, lx).

When the saga says that Hrærekr was “af öllum mest metinn”, i. e. “most appreciated by all”, “á Kálfskinni”, at Kálfskinn or in another possible reading “on the calf's skin”, i. e. the parchment, I believe the author is drawing attention to his own prowess as a story-teller in treating this victim of history. He has brought him back to life and given him the respect he deserves. This happens in the physical space of literature, i. e. the skin of the calf, which has been worked and transformed and bound into a codex to become the surface upon which the story is written. The author is signalling his presence to that part of his audience that is capable of discerning it.

In his *Edda*, Snorri theorizes the use of puns when he writes about *ofljóst*, how some words mean two things or more, and how it can be used to express in a veiled way what one intends to say (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1900, 147). It is quite unlikely that a noble king, albeit a deposed and blinded one, should have spent the last year of his life in a small farm such as Kálfskinn, which probably means the slope of the calf and not its hide. “Kinn” is a rather usual name for a slope in Northern Iceland and place-names are often constructed by associating geographical features with animals, for example Hrútfell, Svínavatn, Álf-tanes, etc. However, the story told by Snorri has had such an impact on later inhabitants of the area, that a grave mound from the pagan era close to Kálfskinn is now called Hrærekshaugur and the local Lions Club has put up a sign telling the story of the only king to be buried in Icelandic soil (*Heimskringla* II 1945, 128).

This leads to another aspect of the space of literature in medieval Iceland. Stories from the sagas, some fictional, as this one probably is, while others are more or less historical, now shape our perception of the landscape of Iceland (Barracough 2012). The art of story-telling cultivated by those who played the field of literature in Iceland, and of which we have the result in the manuscript tradition, contributed to creating a shared mental space which was not the same as the real physical space in which the story-tellers and their intended audience evolved. It was a collective imaginary space, which they had inherited from previous storytellers, but which, as their art developed, became more complex and elaborate.

## A collective imaginary space

This imaginary space reflected to some extent the world-view of medieval Icelanders. The countries closest to them were those of the North Atlantic, with particular prominence given to Norway, but, at a greater distance, the rest of Christian Europe. Other places in the known world were also the object of literary representation, as well as some belonging to a realm of the imaginary which was more or less shared by all Europeans. All these spaces were invested with different types of stories: king's sagas, sagas about the closest neighbours, knight's sagas, sagas of holy men, sagas from the Bible, or legendary sagas about Northern or Germanic heroes. Many have commented on the fact that the categories of sagas, sometimes reflected in manuscript collections but at other times in the scholarly traditions, seem to embrace these spatial criteria, with time being another classifying factor (Nordal 1953, 181).

Each of the genres—and this is important—also represents the projection of a shared subjectivity onto these different space/time complexes constructed by literature. I believe that the main contribution of my book on *The Matter of the North* was to propose a method to show how the sagas I studied, though they were set in a distant past far away from the reality of contemporary Icelanders, also reflected some of the concerns that wracked their society in the thirteenth century. Authors and audience were communicating about them—consciously or more probably unconsciously—in the stories they told (Tulinius 2002, 186).

With the advent of the *Íslendingasögur* as an art-form, Iceland during the Settlement to Conversion period becomes a chronotope—to use Bakhtin's concept—onto which this collective subjectivity is projected (Tulinius 2000 and 2012–2013, 20). Adjusting the lens of literature on the home space is in itself an interesting development. The first Icelanders are being given a certain status. Their story is worth telling and it is interesting to relate this to the simultaneous appearance in Iceland of an independent field of literature.

The new imaginary space-time—or chronotope—of the *Íslendingasögur* has many characteristics that sets it apart from the others. It stands much closer to the physical and social reality of the author and audience. It is also intimately linked to issues of identity, as the stories are about people who are not only in many cases ancestors of prominent contemporaries. They are the founders of the very society in which authors and audience live, with the added complication that the first Icelanders occupy, in the eyes of their Christian descendants, an ambiguous position as pagans (Tulinius 2000, 256).

Communicating with stories about the first generations of Icelanders who lived in a period of foundation and conversion is risky, because so many things are difficult to express about people who are so close. Their ambiguity is so like



that of living people. They are an enigma as we are to ourselves and each other. One comes dangerously close to the unsayable. The greatest of the *Íslendingasögur* represent ambiguity with consummate art, staging thereby the enigma of human behaviour. It suffices to think of the many unsaid things in these sagas, the questions never explicitly answered: Why can it never be said aloud that Kjartan in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not his father's son? Why can't Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir tell whom she loved most but treated the worst? Why won't Njáll admit to Flosi that it was he that put the silken veils and dainty little boots on the mound of silver offered in compensation for Höskuldr's death? What does Grettir see in Glámr's eyes? (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 155; *Laxdæla saga*, 228; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 313; *Grettis saga*, 121–122) What, finally, is happening inside Egill's grotesque head, as he sits across the fire from King Athelstan, fiddling with his sword and twitching his eyebrows (*Egils saga*, 143)? We will never know, but we won't stop wondering about it because it leads into a space which is the domain of the unsayable: the space of literature.

The idea of a “space of literature” has been examined from several perspectives in this article: the sociological space allowing the development of the conscious pursuit of artistic excellence in poetry and narrative, its physical manifestation in the hall where stories are told or on parchment (the calf's skin). The different imaginary spaces constructed by medieval Icelanders and that are manifest in the different saga genres have also been mentioned. This imaginary space was constructed collectively and over time. It was also a space of intersubjectivity, in which authors and audiences were communicating, consciously and unconsciously, about what was going on in their own reality, of which some things could be deeply unsettling. This intersubjective space could therefore also be one where authors and audiences were confronted with the eeriness of what Jacques Lacan calls the Real, i. e. that part of reality and ourselves that forever escapes us (Lacan 1982).

In *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot, tells us that literature is about enigma and paradox, the mystery of death and its impossibility, i. e. our fundamental inability to come to terms with it. The myth of Orpheus illustrates this. He wanted so much to bring back Eurydice, but was unable to, because he was human and couldn't resist looking at her. However, Orpheus's song, the advent of the literary object, is an event—singular and momentous (Blanchot 1955, 227–230). Moreover this event takes place within the community, because the poet sings for us. He sings and thus makes his own humanity manifest as well as that of those who listen to him, i. e. their awareness of the limits of their and each other's existence; also, their awareness of this awareness. Literature expresses the solidarity of the living when confronted with the horrors of death. In this sense, it creates community (Blanchot 1955, 182–184).

## Community and fascination

Medieval Icelanders were faced with numerous horrors in their lives. The sources speak eloquently of the maiming, killings and burnings of the Sturlung Age. The saga authors dealt with these traumatic events by producing the marvellous literary treasures that are still appreciated and studied today. Because they are literature, the sagas created a community for whom they meant so much more than can be said. Through the miracle of the manuscripts, the material space that built a bridge across the centuries, all those who study and enjoy the sagas and poetry preserved there belong to this community, united in their love of these old texts. Love and fascination are related to each other, as Blanchot tells us (Blanchot 1955, 25–28). The sagas open up a space of literature, one of endless fascination, for example by the enigma of what is going on inside Egill's head, or Guðrún's, or Gísli's, or Hallgerður's.

As I was writing this paper, a childhood experience came back to me. Half a century ago, in 1964 or 1965, I met Mickey Mouse. I was six or seven years old and my parents had brought me and my brothers to Disneyland. Somewhere inside the amusement park, Mickey suddenly stood before me. I recognized him immediately: his big black eyes and friendly snout. Even at that young age, I knew this couldn't be the "real" Mickey, that he only existed in the world of cartoons and that world wasn't the one I lived in.

Still, here was Mickey in front of me and speaking to me in his familiar squeaky voice, inviting me to come closer. He was only slightly taller than me. I came nearer and peered into his eyes. I was fascinated but suddenly it dawned upon me that these were not real eyes. Instead wire meshing veiled a dark empty space within. Inside Mickey's head I could now distinguish another face, that of a man with fine but aging features, moving his lips, producing the words uttered by Mickey; but no friendly smile on his face, instead an expression of sadness or maybe cold indifference.

I remember a feeling of discomfort, of loneliness, of helplessness, until I realized—and of course I was also prepared for it—that this was an actor—though a disquietingly small one, given his wrinkled face—wearing a costume and the big paper maché head representing the lovable little mouse, who was so much a part of the world I was familiar with.

I see this childhood memory as a metaphor for what the literary art form of the *Íslendingasaga* confronts us with. On the surface, what is depicted may seem familiar. The reality effect is so strong that we believe in its authenticity, as we are tempted to do of the world of the sagas and the characters which inhabit it. It is nevertheless artificial and constructed. It belongs to the realm of art and not of reality. When we look under the surface, for example by following the clue given

by the double meaning or *ofljóst*, for example in the tale of the blind Hrærekr, we come into contact with something more unsettling: the fundamental strangeness and ambiguity of who and what we are. The space inside Egill's head and which I saw inside Mickey's is the same in this respect, the space of literature that Blanchot tells us about and which the sagas invite us to enter.

Later on that same trip to southern California, my parents decided it would be fun to cross the border to Mexico. I was sitting in the back of our car holding my little souvenir from Disneyland. It was a plastic purse shaped like Mickey Mouse's head. There was a zipper under his mouth I could open and stuff my little possessions into: a nickel, a quarter and a couple of silver dimes.

We only intended to take a peek at Mexico and I can't recall leaving the car. I only remember how appalled I was by the filth, the squalor, the ugliness of the border town. My most vivid memory is of a very old man, poor, dirty and disfigured. There was something wrong with his eyes and he held out his hands as he advanced towards me. This demanding figure of despair filled me with wordless horror. At the same time I felt his pain, like Snorri may have felt for Hrærekr. Whether it was out of terror or compassion, I opened up my Mickey's head, emptied it into his hand, and gave away all my treasures. Which I now give to you.

## Literature

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