

TORFI H. TULINIUS  
(University of Iceland)

*Re-writing the contemporary sagas.*  
*How several modern novelists use Sturlunga saga*

*Summary.* This article studies four recent novels which all belong to the genre of historical fiction and which all use “sagas of contemporaries” as sources, i.e. accounts of real events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries written down by contemporaries. Issues of literary technique are discussed as well as the ethics of transforming real persons who lived in the past into characters in a story. It is argued that though authors are free to do what they want, a claim can be made for literary value on the basis of the care with which they treat their sources as well as the respect they show for the memory of individuals from the past. Various techniques of writing are discussed and evaluated depending on how well they succeed in bringing to life the distant past, avoiding anachronism as well as meeting the ethical standards argued for in the article.

The literature of medieval Iceland is incredibly diverse for such a small population.<sup>1</sup> Not only are there different forms of poetry on a variety of subjects. There are also works of history and about different types of knowledge: grammar, law, and mythology. In addition there is a great variety of narrative literature or what we call *sagas*. Legendary sagas tell us mythical-heroic tales of Viking warriors from the distant past of the Nordic countries. King’s sagas give us an overview of the history of Norway and Denmark from mythical times to the thirteenth century. There are sagas of bishops, of saints, of knights. The greatest – or at least the most famous – of the sagas are the so-called Sagas of Icelanders, stories written in the thirteenth and fourteenth century but which take place in the period from the discovery and settlement of Iceland in the late ninth century until the country was converted to Christianity in the year 1000. Some of these sagas are to be counted among major works of literature: *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga* or *Laxdæla saga*.

Finally, there is one group of sagas, which are particularly hermetic to modern readers. They are the so-called contemporary sagas; sagas written in the

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<sup>1</sup> The population during the period in which the flowering of the medieval literature occurred is estimated by historians to have ranged between thirty-five and seventy thousand. See Gunnar Karlsson (2000: 44-51).

thirteenth century and which describe contemporary events. They are of different types. Some of them focus on a given character, a real person who lived at a certain time and who played an important role in Icelandic society for a given period. Others are more occupied with the history of a family or concentrate on a particular series of events. Most of them were collected together into one compilation in the early fourteenth century, called the *Sturlunga saga*.

“Sturlungar” is the name of a family that rose to prominence in Iceland during the first half of the thirteenth century, a period in which Icelandic society was undergoing transformations that would lead to the country becoming formally a part of the kingdom of Norway in 1262 to 1264. The compilation focuses on individuals of this family, for example its founder Sturla Þórðarson, and his three sons, among which the youngest, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), is the most famous, not for his political activities in thirteenth century Iceland, but for the literary works which he is credited for having written.

The picture of Icelandic society given by the *Sturlunga saga* is both vivid and complex. The times are interesting, mainly because there are difficult issues of power which are dealt with through politicking, legal maneuvering and by the use of force. Also, the members of the Icelandic upper class, which are literally at each other’s throats during the period, are all more or less related. This gives the struggle for power an even more tragic flavor. Finally, this is the period in which Icelandic medieval literature flourished and even though very little is said of it directly in the *Sturlunga saga*, there are different signs which tell us not only that the fight for power went on in a highly literate culture but also that this literature was intimately related to other aspects of the life of Icelandic lay aristocrats of the thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Despite all of this, and a certain number of memorable characters that are portrayed in *Sturlunga saga*, writers have rather little used it after the novel became the principal literary form in the nineteenth century. The sagas of kings and, even more, the sagas of Icelanders have been rewritten or used as models for novelists, for example *Njáls saga*, like Jón Karl Helgason studies in his contribution to this volume, or *Hrafnkels saga*, as Massimiliano Bampi does in his. The explanation for this is the sheer mass of the *Sturlunga saga* text, the number of its characters as well as the complexity of its narration. Also, the fact that it is a compilation of several sagas, which are sometimes fragmentary, makes reading the saga even more complicated. Last but not

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<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between literature and society in thirteenth-century Iceland see Tulinius (2004).

least, the authors are telling of events that took place in their lifetimes. Therefore they assume that the audience already knows a great deal of background information, which of course is not true for modern day readers.

In the year 1988 a new edition was published of the *Sturlunga saga* in Reykjavík.<sup>3</sup> This edition not only made the text accessible to a whole new group of readers, since the previous one was from 1946. The new edition was also equipped with indexes, genealogical charts, maps, diagrams and all kinds of useful information, opening up to the reader the extremely interesting world of the Sturlung period. This was a collective endeavor of a team of scholars working with an ambitious editor and was commercially successful. It also had quite an impact on novel writing in Iceland, as I will now explain. Indeed, in the nineties and onwards, a series of historical novels were published by three Icelandic novelists and one Norwegian, that staged characters and events from the *Sturlunga saga*. I am sure that – at least for the Icelandic ones – this would not have taken place if the aforesaid edition had not drawn their attention to this wonderful historical source and made it accessible to them. I would like to consider these four novels from the perspective of issues I believe important for our subject, the “rewriting of medieval literature”.

First, I will take a look at the literary technique. The four authors are writing at the end of a period of extraordinary inventiveness in the art of telling stories. The tradition of the modern novel puts at the disposal of the writer an incredibly diverse array of narrative techniques. I will look at each of the novels and what techniques of the modern novel the authors use to make these long dead characters come to life. Then I will go on and relate this to some ethical questions. Does it matter how the authors treat the events and characters of the saga, if the events really took place and the characters were not characters but persons of flesh and blood who once breathed the same air we breathe and walked on the same volcanic soil Icelanders walk on today? In other words, does the fact that *Sturlunga saga* is not a medieval work of art but of history put some limitations on what the authors can do?

My opinion is that texts such as *Sturlunga saga* have a different status from more fictional texts such as *Njáls saga* or *Hrafnkels saga*, and even more so, legendary material such as *Beowulf* or the *Nibelungen* material. In the former, we are dealing with real people – albeit alive eight hundred years ago – which left a vivid account of themselves. We owe it to them to give them as much space to exist outside of our definitions, our preconceptions, our cli-

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<sup>3</sup> Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.* (1988).

chés, as we can. This applies not only to the writing of literary fiction but also to those of us who are trying to write the fiction of history. At the same time – and this is the paradox in which we live, novelists, historians and readers – these long dead people can only exist through the fictions we create.

I believe that the only way to deal with this paradox is by creating what could be called a dialogic text. By that I mean that the author is conscious of the fact that he is necessarily subjective in his perception, and therefore rendering, of the past material. This subjectivity must be made apparent since it cannot be avoided. But at the same time the author must show the utmost respect for what the sources he is working on tell him. Dialogue with the past must be his aim, rather than imposing his view of it to his readers.

It is obvious that I have some strong opinions on this subject that I know are debatable. I believe, however, that I can substantiate them through an analysis of the four novels under study. I will begin by presenting each of them and addressing the two issues, literary and ethical.

### 1. *The Little Horse*

I will start with the Norwegian one. Its title in the original language is *Den lille hesten*, the little horse, and the novelist's name is Thorvald Steen (b. 1954). He is quite a successful author in Norway, especially in the field of the historical novel. His first novel, *Don Carlos*, was about Charles Darwin and took place in the nineteenth century. His second novel was about a Norwegian king's trip to Constantinople around the year 1100 and drew on the medieval Icelander's, Snorri Sturluson's, chronicle of the kings of Norway, better known as *Heimskringla*. This brought his attention to the character of Snorri Sturluson who as a cultural figure is equally important for Icelanders and Norwegians, but not for the same reasons. In Iceland, he is remembered as a great author, but also as an ambiguous figure, ready to subject himself to the Norwegian king to further his own ambitions instead of defending Iceland's sovereignty. For Norwegians, he is known as the great historian whose work *Heimskringla* is at the core of their national identity.

As has already been said, we know a lot about Snorri, who is one of the main protagonists of *Sturlunga saga*. Indeed, the saga tells us his date of birth, where he was brought up and about many of the main events in his life, such as his wedding, his children, when and sometimes how he acquired various

parts of his domains, his travels abroad, his dealings with other chieftains and much more. It also describes the circumstances of his violent death. Steen's novel concentrates on the five final days of his life. Historical sources don't tell us what exactly happened during those days and Stein feels free to weave his own plot into them, on the basis of other elements of Snorri's biography. He does this by using a narrative technique that focalizes, though not exclusively, on Snorri's consciousness. He is walking around his estate, trying to write, talking to people. Mostly, however, he is thinking about the past. In order to do this, Steen invents a narrative voice, that of Snorri, which is engaged in a sort of interior monologue, however in the third person. Through these meandering reminiscences, the author describes Snorri's relationship with his unruly son Órækja and invokes scenes from the past, most of them invented, to substantiate his interpretation of the young man as a deeply disturbed character. He invents a mistress for Snorri called Margrét. Finally, he imagines that Snorri is trying to write a self-justificatory book where he defends himself against the accusations of his enemies, not only in Iceland, but also in the rest of medieval Europe.

At the same time, things are happening around Snorri that will eventually lead to his death, though he does not realize this. He is aware of some of these events but not of all. The latter are told in a conventional third person narrative. The most surprising of these – and this is totally invented by Stein – is that Pope Gregory IX is trying to get in touch with him in order to ask him to unite Norway and Iceland and lead a crusade to the Holy Land. However, Snorri's enemies in Iceland intercept the messengers and Snorri dies without knowing anything about this.

*Den lille hesten* is in many ways a well written and interesting novel. It uses the medieval sources quite extensively and usually accurately as far as individual events taken from them are concerned. However, it does not satisfy me, neither as a reader of novels or as a connoisseur of the contemporary sagas and the historical research that has developed around them. As a novel reader, I find the inner monologue rather primitive. It is often just a retelling of events disguised as a monologue. Consequently it makes too many assumptions based on a poorly informed picture of Snorri's times. Therefore the author becomes quite often guilty of anachronisms. The major one has to do with the way he constructs Snorri as an author. He transposes, barely changed, the literary world of the last two or three centuries, in which books are published in vernacular languages and authors can rapidly achieve an international readership, to the medieval world where books are painstakingly copied by hand and where there is no such thing as publishers or even

a reading public in any way comparable to what we know today. In short he views Snorri through very recent ideas of what it is to be a writer and of his role within society.

This is the basis for Thorvald Stein's idea of Snorri's international reputation that could make it plausible for him to be asked to play a role in European affairs. There is nothing to substantiate this in what we really know of Snorri's life. Indeed, all of it is very unlikely, since there is no evidence of Snorri or his works having traveled outside of the Nordic world during his lifetime and no obvious reason for foreigners to this world to take an interest in works such as *Heimskringla* or *Edda*. An important basis for the plot of *Den lille hesten*, i.e. the idea of Snorri intending to write a self-justificatory work of fiction aimed at an international reading public, is therefore highly improbable for the least. To my mind, this undermines the relevance of the book as a historical novel.

This brings me to the ethical issues I mentioned earlier. What could be the *raison d'être* of a historical novel? To put it differently, why write stories about people and events that really existed in the past, when you have history? The reason must be that the novel form brings us some kind of increased understanding of events and people of the past in ways not available to historians. Novelists have at their disposal narrative techniques, which enable them to bring them to life in the minds of readers. In addition, they can use their imagination in a less restrained way than historians, and invent scenes and episodes, even characters or events, that did not actually happen. In my opinion this can foster an increased proximity, and therefore an understanding, of the past. One condition must be fulfilled, however, and that is that the author's inventions be historically plausible. This has to do with the ethics of the relationship between author and reader: the implicit contract between reader and author of a historical novel is that the latter give as well-informed representation as possible of the period in which he sets his action. Why else should he write historical novels and not fantasy?

I would also argue that there is an ethical relationship with the people described, i.e. that the author must also commit to giving as honest a picture of these long dead people as he can. I do not believe he does this in the case of many of the characters. This is perhaps the most blatant in the case of Órækja, Snorri's son. In exploiting this character, Stein uses information from *Sturlunga saga* that there was considerable conflict between father and son. However, though the real Órækja often created trouble for himself and sometimes for his father, he was far from being the brute that Stein portrays.

Though his picture of a painful relationship between father and son is not without interest *per se*, it has no relevance to that which existed between the real Órækja and Snorri.

Even though they lived almost eight centuries ago, it can be considered an ethical duty not to deform their image, and project onto it preoccupations – and even less the preconceptions – of the present. The image Stein creates of them is his fabrication and one can ask oneself why he did not simply develop fictional characters if he wanted to explore a difficult father-son relationship rather than exploiting events from the lives of real persons as he does in *Den lille hesten*.

## 2. *The Rejoicing of Our Enemies*

The next novel is by the Icelandic novelist Einar Kárason (b. 1955). He is a successful writer in Iceland and quite a few of his works have been published in foreign translations, mainly into the Nordic languages and German. This is true of the novel under study. Its title, *Óvinafagnaður*, translates literally as “the joy of enemies” and is used when one party of a conflict plays into the hands of the opposing one by mistakes or because of inner strife. *Óvinafagnaður* also exploits the *Sturlunga saga* material and is indeed a tale of conflict and strife.

It is not Snorri who is in focus but his nephew Þórður Sighvatsson and the main action takes place after Snorri’s death in 1241. A few years earlier, Þórður’s father and Snorri’s brother, Sighvatur Sturluson and four of his sons have been killed in a battle against the same people who planned Snorri’s assassination. During all this period, Þórður has been abroad, serving the king of Norway. In 1242, he returns to Iceland to claim his inheritance but ends up by gaining control over all of the country.

This is a wonderful story of an individual achieving victory against all odds and is full of adventurous events such as a breath-taking pursuit through a snowstorm and a naval battle out on one of Iceland’s larger fjords. All of this material is taken from the saga but the narrative technique used is quite distinctive and unlike that used by the Icelandic medieval authors. Indeed, each successive chapter has a different narrator who is one of the characters of the story. This enables the author to tell his story as a patchwork of different points of view. This is a technique one has seen occasionally in recent years. Examples I know of are novels by André Brink and Graham Swift. How-

ever, it derives ultimately from Faulkner's *Sound and Fury*, one of whom Kárason dedicates the book to.

It was perhaps not a good idea to draw the reader's attention to the American Nobel Prize winner, because Kárason's mastery of the technique pales in comparison with Faulkner's. The older writer creates a unique voice for each of his narrators, a voice which not only shows differences in wording and education, as well as point of view, but also through his mastery of language suggests to his readers the basic emotional composition of each of the characters. The most famous *tour de force* is of course Faulkner's rendering of Benji's voice, the mentally handicapped brother of Caddy, the young and beautiful girl who is the absent center of the novel as a whole.

In the Icelandic novel, each of the narrators does have a distinctive voice. However, the differences do not come through, except in quite a superficial way. This is due to two things, in my opinion. On the one hand, Kárason does not avail himself of opportunities given to him by the resources of the medieval language, using instead modern ways of expressing oneself for his characters. This leads to a flattening out of the differences between modern readers and medieval characters. Indeed, one sometimes does not know whether the characters are from the Middle Ages, from the late twentieth century, or maybe come out of a Western, a point I will come back to later.

On the other hand, Kárason does not use the narrative technique of "stream of consciousness" which was the one Faulkner developed and is of course eminently suited to representing individual subjectivities, be it their particular vision of events or things, their emotional states or idiosyncrasies. Instead, each narrator is just reporting the events as he sees them. Of course, he has his own view of them and expresses his emotional reaction to them. However, it has nothing to do with the mystery of recreating through language the inner life of different subjects that Faulkner masters so well. The use of multiple narrators in *Óvinafagnaður* is therefore more of a gimmick than it serves an artistic purpose. It is a shame because, as we shall see in the case of the next novel under study, the technique of stream of consciousness, though difficult, leads to quite satisfactory results in the writing of historical fiction.

Before leaving Kárason's novel, however, a few words are necessary about the ethical dimensions of his attempt to rewrite the particular part of *Sturlunga saga* that tells of Þórður Sighvatsson. First, he does not seem to rely so much on the original text as on a re-telling of the story by an Icelandic writer

of history, Ásgeir Jakobsson.<sup>4</sup> This leads him to make serious historical mistakes that are detrimental to his story, not only because of the deformation they bring to the lives of real people, but also because they allow stereotypes to replace reality. Two examples illustrate this: Þórður is portrayed as a recovering alcoholic. There is absolutely nothing to substantiate this in the medieval sources. However, there is a tradition dating probably only from the nineteenth century concerning his drunkenness. Kárason seizes this opportunity to inscribe Þórður's unlikely victory over his enemies in the well-known western movie stereotype of the alcoholic hero who sobers up and defeats his enemies. This does not add any substance to the character of Þórður. Indeed, being a stereotype he becomes less interesting as a character in a novel.

The same goes for Þórður's mother. For some reason, Kárason chooses to describe her plight after her husband's defeat and the killing of most of her sons as becoming that of a beggar woman, wandering from one part of the country to another. Not only is this not in conformity with what the sources tell us, but the mere idea of it reveals a serious lack of understanding of the society in which the people of the period evolve. Indeed, a person of the stature of Þórður's mother would never have been left without any means of subsistence. She was a part of the aristocracy, a close relation of many of the most powerful men in the country. The society would never have allowed that she has to beg in order to survive. The truth is that, after the death of her husband and four of her sons, she was given a large farm for her and her retinue.

Here Kárason is also being tempted by easy stereotypes. The wandering mother is a motif from modern Icelandic literature best illustrated by Halldór Laxness's *Iceland's Bell*. Of course, borrowings such as these are not grave offenses and are not only to be expected but quite legitimate when writing fiction. Historical fiction must however both be good history and good fiction and *Óvinafagnaður* is quite lacking in the former respect.

### 3. *Cantilena nell'erba*

Thor Vilhjálmsón's *Morgunþula í stráum* (Italian title: *Cantilena nell'erba*) is of quite a different caliber. Vilhjálmsón was born in 1925 and has been one of the most important Icelandic writers for decades. This particular novel received the Icelandic literary prize in 1999. Here, the central charac-

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<sup>4</sup> Ásgeir Jakobsson (1988).

ter is Þórður's older brother, Sturla Sighvatsson. This nephew of Snorri Sturluson is one of the most interesting figures of the thirteenth century. He is an aristocrat and has many personal characteristics that enable him to fit well into the ideal image of a leader in that period. He is handsome, knows how to use his weapons and is not afraid to wield them. He is also a good leader of men. In addition, he seems to apply himself to conforming to the way of life of the medieval aristocrat. Like his uncle Snorri, he also has a taste for literature. Indeed, the mention that is made in *Sturlunga saga* of Sturla having Snorri's books copied for his own use is the only contemporary testimony we have of Snorri's literary activities.<sup>5</sup>

Like his uncle, Sturla knows how to behave at a royal court, and like him he ingratiates himself with the Norwegian rulers, when he stops in Bergen on his way to Rome. King Haakon, who is of roughly the same age as Sturla, honors him with his friendship and also assigns him the task of getting Iceland under royal control. Sturla attempts to achieve this aim, but in order to do so, he must use force to coerce other members of the aristocracy, among them many of his close cousins, who are unwilling to submit to his authority.

Snorri is the first to suffer from Sturla's ambition, because Sturla leads an army of over a thousand men into his domain, driving Snorri away and castrating Snorri's son Órækja. Father and son end up fleeing to Norway. Then Sturla tries to force Gissur Þorvaldsson, the leading chieftain of the southern part of Iceland, to swear submission to him. The result is that Gissur turns against him with all his might. Allying himself to Sturla's main competitor for power in the North, he attacks Sturla and kills him, his father and three of his brothers in the already mentioned battle of Örlygsstaðir.

Thor Vilhjálmsson does not tell a continuous story about Sturla. Instead he chooses to represent individual moments of his life. The novel is therefore a patchwork of fragments. Paradoxically, this brings the characters more to life than more conventional story-telling. The reason for this is probably that human existence is not a continuous narrative, but rather a string of events, moments, thoughts and feelings. We are immersed in these fragments that form our present, and do not live our lives as whole narratives, even if we may believe so. Indeed, one can question whether such a narrative exists. Isn't it just something we create afterwards, or even something we use to deceive ourselves? This might be true of Sturla. He probably constructed a narrative about himself in which he ended as ruler of Iceland. The blow inflicted to his head by his enemy Gissur puts an end to that story.

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<sup>5</sup> Örnólfur Thorsson *et al.* (1988: 329).

Vilhjálmsón knows the medieval sources very well. Instead of having the characters retell the events through interior monologue, as Kárasón does, he uses third person narrative staying however very close to the subjective experience of his main character. The events echo in Sturla's mind as he lives them: a trip on horseback or on a boat, a conversation, a walk through the countryside. At the same time he is also experiencing his environment. Vilhjálmsón's mastery of the literary language serves him well here. He has a strong sensual style and is very good at weaving sights, sounds, feelings, memories, thoughts, fears and desires into a rich textual tapestry which brings his main character to life as a multi-layered and complex human being.

But how does Vilhjálmsón manage to avoid anachronism? Is he dialoguing with the past or is he just mirroring himself (us) in this historical figure? I believe the way he writes brings him much closer to a dialogue than Kárasón. The reason is that he manages to create a suggestive tension between the known and the unknown in Sturla's story. We see this in the way he uses the Icelandic landscape, which we can assume has not changed much since the thirteenth century. The way Vilhjálmsón brings this landscape to life in the consciousness of his characters allows the modern reader to relate his experience with Sturla's, without resorting to putting ideas or ways of thinking into his head which were not plausible for a medieval mind. More important is how he uses our unique knowledge of the diverse literature of the thirteenth century, especially the mythology and the sagas of the pagan past, as a basis for comparisons, metaphors, images, and stories that we can assume fueled the imagination of Icelanders during this period.

But it is important not to forget that they were also deeply religious – much more and in a different way from modern people. Sturla was a medieval Catholic who believed that he would either go to Hell or Heaven, eventually after a time spent in Purgatory. Vilhjálmsón knows this and uses it to develop what he sees as a major event and a turning point in Sturla's life. This is the trip he was forced to undertake all the way to Rome in order to obtain the absolution of the pope for having attacked the bishopric of northern Iceland.

During the pilgrimage, Sturla gets acquainted with the unknown. He is himself an unknown person in the foreign lands he travels through. That is why other people's picture of him – so strong and probably limiting – is no longer there both to guide him but also to contain him and tell him who he is. The road to Rome is therefore a sort of way to the self, but Vilhjálmsón's Sturla

does not withstand the pressure and something cracks in him, even though it is not apparent. When he returns to Iceland he is a changed – and in some ways a broken – man. This is Vilhjálms­son's attempt to interpret what seem to be the contradictions in Sturla's behavior during the last years of his life, when he is trying to submit Iceland to his rule. On the one hand he can be very decisive and sometimes quite cruel in his dealings with those he has to vanquish. On the other he is sometimes undecided and does not act in a way necessary for him to achieve his aims. It is this hesitation that leads to his downfall and Vilhjálms­son and the medieval sources seem to agree on this. The reasons for the flaw in his character have to do with his relationship with his father, in Vilhjálms­son's interpretation of Sturla, but are precipitated by what happens to him during the European trip.

Vilhjálms­son does a convincing job of bringing Sturla Sighvatsson to life in his novel. It is of course possible to have divergent opinions on the importance of individual events. For my part, I believe that the prolonged conflict between Sturla and his uncle Snorri Sturluson over control of the Dalir district played a more decisive role than that given to it by Vilhjálms­son. One must not forget that Sturla was ready to attack Snorri and kill him in 1229. We are even told of dreams he dreamt that Snorri would be put in his coffin before Sturla, a dream which did not come true. I also believe that one could go even further than Vilhjálms­son in making the inner life of thirteenth-century Icelanders different to that of a modern reader by using their literature. I would include other types of literary works, not only those which give us an idea of the pagan and heroic past, but also the religious literature of which was so abundant in the contemporary culture. He could also have gone further in staging Sturla as a medieval aristocrat. He is still under the influence of nineteenth and twentieth century scholars who tended to view the chieftains of the Sturlung period as ordinary, though rich, farmers and is not sufficiently aware of the recent literature on the layering of Icelandic society during the period.

Be that as it may, Vilhjálms­son engages in a genuine dialogue with the thirteenth century. The dialogue is useful because it changes our view of Sturla, makes him the catholic European he truly was. He also proposes a historically plausible interpretation of his personality. In addition, he tells a story which is of universal value about the dependence of the self on its image in a small society and how that image can be lost when one travels abroad. It says a lot about what it means to be an Icelander.

#### 4. *The Novel of Iceland*

The final novel is by the Icelandic novelist Pétur Gunnarsson (b. 1947). Though little known abroad, he is one of the most influential writers of his generation, having authored ten novels as well as essays and important translations of French literary works. The work I will turn my attention to here is still not fully published. It has been coming out in separate installments, three of which are already out.

It is in many ways the most original of the four novels studied in this essay. Its collective title is *Skáldsaga Íslands* (The Novel of Iceland) and, indeed, the main character is the country, Iceland, beginning with its emergence from the sea as a result of volcanic eruptions and taking us to — one can presume — modern times. The three volumes, *Myndin af heiminum* (The Image of the World), *Leiðin til Rómar* (The Road to Rome), and *Vélar tímans* (The Engines of Time) that have thus far been published have focused on the natural history of Iceland, its settlement, and medieval times.

Gunnarsson seeks the roots of Icelandic history and culture within the larger context of European Christianity. In a break from the traditional view of Icelandic history, he does not hesitate to develop long chapters on figures such as Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, in many ways the ideological founders of Western culture with its guilt-ridden attitude to sexuality and obsessive interest in introspection; or Boethius and his praise of the consoling powers of philosophy. He even goes farther when, in an effort to understand better the character of the twelfth-century Icelandic historian Ari Þorgilsson fróði (the Wise), he makes a point-by-point comparison between Ari and his contemporary, the French theologian and philosopher Peter Abelard. In so doing, Gunnarsson is telling his readers that if they want to understand what the medieval literature has to tell them about the Icelanders of the first centuries after the Settlement in 874, they must make an effort to learn what was going on in the larger European civilization to which Iceland belonged during that period. Indeed, Iceland was in continual contact with the European continent, as the titles of the volumes imply. The worldview of the Icelanders is essentially a European one, especially if one understands this concept as a general way of constructing and perceiving man and his relationship to God, nature, and himself. During medieval times, when Icelanders were Roman Catholic, the center of this worldview was Rome, and everyone was metaphorically or physically on a pilgrimage to that city.

As a novel, *Skáld saga Íslands* is a complex construction. In order to deal with the vast scope of the material, Gunnarsson invents a narrator who chiefly tells the story of Iceland and its culture, but also anecdotes about himself, his childhood, his decision to become a writer, and his job as a sailor on a fishing vessel. He is from the present, he might even be Gunnarsson himself, and it is from his perspective that the reader gains a view of the past. In addition, the narrator speaks to another character in the second person. His name is Máni and we are told more extensively about his childhood and youth. Here one can recognize motifs from Gunnarsson's previous work: the broken marriage of the hero's parents, a love-hate relationship with another, socially superior family, or the summer working on a farm. However, Máni's is a sadder and more forlorn experience than is the case of most of Gunnarsson's heroes. His parents divorce and the three brothers are split up, the oldest going to a boarding school, the youngest to his mother, while Máni, the middle child, lives with his widowed grandmother, a seamstress. As a child, Máni spends a lot of time alone and has no one to help him with his sorrow over his parents' separation, his uneasy relations with his mother's new husband, and a gnawing sense of guilt because he is unable to desist from stealing his grandmother's money to buy toy soldiers. There is a sense of abandonment, not felt in Gunnarsson's previous novels. It might arise from the fact that Máni's mother is the reason for the split because of an affair she has had.

In the second volume, the reader does not encounter Máni again until near the end. Before this encounter, the novel recapitulates narratives from Icelandic contemporary sagas, including the sagas of Icelandic bishops and chieftains. These narratives are exceptional in giving life to characters that are barely sketched out in the medieval sources. The danger of this approach would be to elaborate too much by giving the characters borrowed from the medieval sources feelings, opinions, and sensations that we cannot know they had, and would likely be a mere reflection of our own. Gunnarsson chooses to add as little as possible to his material, but rather to give it life by situating it in its proper contexts, both the Icelandic and the larger European ones. He does, however, allow himself an occasional flight of fancy, inventing for example a meeting between Einar Hafliðason, an Icelandic cleric who we know traveled to meet the pope in Avignon in the fourteenth century, and Petrarca, one of the greatest of the medieval love poets, a meeting which has its counterpoint in Máni's more obscure experiences in the same part of the world six centuries later.

It is impossible to say how this novel will develop in the volumes to come, especially since Gunnarsson has made no declarations about that. One can safely say, however, that he is breaking new ground for the novel as an art form. In this respect it is interesting to note that Milan Kundera, in his influential *Art of the Novel*, mentions that one of the possible ways for the novel to explore in the future is by transcending the limits of the human lifespan [Kundera (1987: 16)]. This is exactly what Gunnarsson does by putting a country, and not a person, in the position of main character.

I also think that he uses the medieval sources in an original way that can serve as a model for historical fiction. First of all, he creates a new understanding of the contemporary sagas and other material he uses by placing them in the broader context of the evolution of culture, especially Western civilization, especially those aspects of our culture which have shaped our relationship with ourselves, our feelings, our sexuality, etc. Secondly, through Máni, the character who is our contemporary, he tells a story in which the themes of selfhood and shame are developed. The context Gunnarsson creates shows that these are not only individual problems but also part of a wider story, that of how Judeo-Christianity has shaped our subjective selves.

From the ethical standpoint I developed earlier, however, the most important aspect of Gunnarsson's novel is the respect with which he treats his sources as has already been described. By doing this he allows the otherness of the medieval material to exist within his own text. In addition, he supplies a contextual framework that allows us to engage in dialogue with the otherness of these long dead people, so different to us but at the same time so much a part of whom we are.

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The Icelandic sagas have been extensively studied as pieces of text as literary and historical documents by generations of saga scholars. Despite its progress and insights in some respects, this scholarly tradition has remained relatively silent on many pertinent and important issues, particularly social and comparative approaches. Another important collection, Sturlunga saga (named after one powerful family) largely concentrates on near-contemporary events from 1230 to 1262 (see ch. 12). This latter collection of fourteen sagas and stories was arranged in chronological order and compiled in one manuscript from early on, around the year 1300. How several modern novelists use Sturlunga saga. 193. MASSIMILIANO BAMPI Revisiting the past: P.O. Sundma; nâ€™s rewrite of Hrafnkels saga Freysgo a. In his article: Re-writing the contemporary sagas. How several modern novelists use Sturlunga saga, Torfi TULINIUS studies four recent novels which all belong to the genre of historical fiction and which all use œsagas of contemporaries as sources. Issues of literary technique are discussed as well as the ethics of transforming real persons who lived in the past into characters in a story. Various techniques of writing are taken into account and evaluated depending on how well the authors succeed in bringing to life the distant past, avoiding anachronism as well as meeting the ethical standar Here's the use case: the createTag (see below) creates something in the database and then syncs the database with redux. So far nothing out of the ordinary. However, notice that if you call createTag directly multiple times, this will co... This saga needs to dispatch CREATE\_TAG and then wait for it to finish before "doing something".