THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF VÖLSUNGA SAGA

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I

It has become a cliché in the study of translations that the translator is necessarily an interpreter of the text he or she is translating, particularly if it is a literary text. A translation of a literary text cannot fail to reveal something of the translator’s attitude to the source language, the target language, and the cultures associated with them, and something of how he or she regards the task of translation. But translations also reflect the period in which they are produced, and if a text is significant enough to have been translated several times into a certain language over an extended time span, comparison of the translations may reveal something of the varying reception of the text in the cultural history of the users of that target language.

There are several reasons why Völsunga saga seems to offer a suitable focus for comparative study, at least for someone interested in English translations. Leaving out of consideration the practice of summarising or paraphrasing the saga, which began in 1806 with William Herbert’s summary in his Select Icelandic Poetry and seems to have enjoyed its greatest popularity on both sides of the Atlantic in the four decades before 1914, and also passing over Jacqueline Simpson’s translation of extracts from the saga in Beowulf and its Analogues, first published in 1968 by her and G.N. Garmonsway, Völsunga saga has appeared in complete English translation the manageable number of five times from when Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris first presented their version to the public in 1870. As the second translation (by Margaret Schlauch) appeared in 1930, the third (R.G. Finch) in 1965, the fourth (G.K. Anderson) in 1982, and the fifth (Jesse Byock) in 1990,¹ the intervals between them form a rough geometrical progression, though it would probably be unwise to attach great significance to this or to expect that the appearance of future translations of the saga will continue the pattern.

¹See Herbert 1804–06, II 20–33; Garmonsway and Simpson 1968, 252–264, 276–279; Eiríkr Magnússon and Morris 1870, facsimile repr. 1980; Schlauch 1930; Finch 1965; Anderson 1982; Byock 1990. Quotations from the five complete translations of Völsunga saga are drawn from the editions listed here.
of reducing the interval by half? It should be noted, however, that a Völsunga saga translation by Haukur Böðvarsson and Kaaren Grimstad was announced some years ago, and that although Haukur has died Professor Grimstad intends to complete the project. All five complete published translations are likely to be quite readily accessible. After being republished in several British and American editions before 1914, the Eirikur Magnússon-William Morris version reappeared in 1962 in a cheap paperback edition, with an introduction by Robert W. Gutzman, and this was reprinted at least twice, in 1967 and 1971 (Morris 1962). That the intended primary market was not a scholarly one is clearly indicated by such details as the disappearance of Eirikur Magnússon’s name from the title page, the splendid horned helmet worn by the figure on the 1967 cover, and by the assurance on the first page of the book that ‘From the mist-shrouded world of the Norsemen come these marvellous tales of adventure, vibrant with life and imagination’. A facsimile reprint of the original 1870 version came out in 1980. Schlauch’s 1930 version has had a more subdued bibliographic career, but the American-Scandinavian Foundation republished it in 1949 and 1964, and AMS Press brought out a reprint in 1976. To judge from the 1992-1993 edition of the US listing Books in Print, and the May 1993 CD-ROM version of the British listing Whittaker’s Bookbank only the Finnish version is completely out of print.4

Though all five versions seem to differ somewhat as to the editions of the Old Norse text on which they are based, the task of comparison is simplified by the relatively straightforward manuscript situation. Völsunga saga exists in only one medieval manuscript (Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4to), dated to about 1400, and in paper versions from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries which all directly or indirectly derive from the medieval vellum, though they provide readings of varying degrees of usefulness when the medieval manuscript is illegible as a result of deterioration.

A further reason for concentrating on Völsunga saga is the fact that it is generally classified as one of the fornaldaarsögur, a genre which usually receives far less attention in considerations of English translations from the Old Norse than the Íslendingasögur and konungsögur. Though Völsunga saga is an unusual fornaldaarsaga (and indeed an unusual Icelandic saga) in that many of its principal characters and situations are likely to be quite familiar to educated readers of English encountering it for the first time, thanks largely to Richard Wagner,5 it may be of interest to observe the extent to which an awareness of the fornaldaarsögur as works different from the other genres emerges from the translations.

II

The modern reader who picks up Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Völsungs & Niblings, as Eirikur Magnússon and William Morris called their version, will immediately become aware of the markedly archaic quality of the writing. It is full of words, phrases, and syntactic constructions no longer in general use: particularly striking is the frequent appearance in dialogue of the obsolete second person singular pronouns ‘thou’ and ‘thee’ and of the second person singular verbal inflection ‘–est’. This impression of archaism owes of course almost nothing to the passage of more than a hundred and twenty years since the translation was first published: an anonymous reviewer in The Athenaeum (11 June 1870, 764) described the translation as ‘too elaborately and obtrusively archaic’.

But though never universally accepted, the approach adopted by Eirikur Magnússon and William Morris reflected an attitude to translating ancient and medieval texts which was widespread at that time. An archaic style was felt to add dignity to a translation, to demonstrate proper respect for the text being translated. More importantly, it was felt to emphasise the remoteness in time of the text’s composition, and to replicate in some degree the experience which a fluent reader of the source language in modern times would experience in confronting the original. Writing in 1902 W.G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson summed up the approach by means of an analogy:

Now in copying an old picture one may try to restore it,—to make it look as it did to contemporaries when the colours were fresh; or one may take it as we find it now. It is always dangerous to restore. We have not the contemporaries’ eyes to see it with, even if we were successful in

Kaaren Grimstad, letter to the writer, 24 September 1990.

3See Hallóðr Hermannsson 1912, 44–47; 1937, 64–65; Fry 1980, 104–105. Bibliographical information about English language translations, paraphrases, and summaries can be found in these works and Acker 1993, 102.

4Hisarlik Press has published Byock’s translation in an unaltered reprint, which is actually dated 1993 although Bookbank incorrectly lists the date of publication as November 1992.

5The extent of Wagner’s knowledge of Völsunga saga, and when he acquired this knowledge, are not straightforward matters. See Magee 1990, esp. 13, 18–19, 30, 44–49, 56, 60–61, 153–154.
reproducing the old-fashioned handiwork. So in translating a Saga, we cannot hear it read or said by the ancient Saga-teller, nor put ourselves in the place of his mediaeval audience. It is impossible to treat it as a contemporary narration. Part of the charm they found in it is gone; another charm has come to it from its faded age and coated varnish of antiquity, through which the human nature still shines, attracting us to our kin of long ago. (Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1902, 21)

‘Our kin of long ago’ is significant here, for there was an additional argument for using old vocabulary and old grammar when translating the Icelandic sagas that did not apply to Greek and Latin texts, and of this William Morris and his disciples were very aware. Old English was far more similar to Old Norse than Modern English is, and by imitating older forms of English and using where possible Germanic words rather than their Romance equivalents the translator could stress the ancient link between the English-speaking peoples and the Scandinavians. One could also take over into English far more of the vocabulary and the grammatical constructions to be found in the sagas, arguably thus giving the English-speaking reader a better idea of what the Icelandic text was like.

Writing after Morris’s death Eirikur Magnússon stressed this point:

As to the style of Morris little need be said except this that it is a strange misunderstanding to describe all terms in his translations which are not familiar to the reading public as ‘pseudo-Middle-English’. Anyone in a position to collate the Icelandic text with the translation will see at a glance that in the overwhelming majority of cases these terms are literal translations of the Icel. originals, e.g. by-men—byjar-menn = town’s people. (Eirikur Magnússon 1893–1905, IV vii–viii)

In his ‘Introduction’ to the 1962 reprint Robert Gutman offered as part of his defence of the translation the argument that it was a characteristic product of its era:

His [Morris’s] language, rich and varied, was Victorian, of an age that in general admired the opulent, the intricate, and the ornate, as witness the great creations in architecture of Pugin and the full-voiced diapason of Ruskin’s almost Biblical prose. Is Morris to be reproved because he spoke in the accents of his era? The forms he chose accord with the subject matter; the archaisms he introduced help achieve tone. The old Norse poets sought atmosphere by the very same means; it is interesting to observe in the ancient skaldic lays the use of already obsolete words. (Gutman in Morris 1962, 79)

William Morris might not joyfully have accepted every point in this defence, but doubtless he did believe that his choice of vocabulary accorded with the subject matter, and that the archaisms helped establish an appropriate tone. It is worth stressing, however, that similar methods were used in the many other translations from the Old Icelandic on which he and Eirikur Magnússon collaborated, including their versions of Heimsþingla and such Islendingasögur as Bandamanna saga, Eyrbyggja saga and Heiðarvíga saga (Eirikur Magnússon and Morris 1891, 1892). Indeed their Völsunga saga translation, an early work, probably presents a comparatively mild example of their style. There is no evidence that they saw an archaic style as especially appropriate to a saga of heroes and supernatural beings set in a very remote past. The same style was considered appropriate for accounts of eleventh-century Icelandic farmers and twelfth-century Norwegian kings.

Victorian translators of Old Norse material frequently provided copious editorial material, but here Eirikur Magnússon and Morris were sparing in this regard: the ‘Preface’ runs to only six pages, and there are less than two pages of notes. The edition, they claim, is directed ‘to the lover of poetry and nature, rather than to the student’ (Eirikur Magnússon and Morris 1870, v). They do, however, provide an extensive selection of translations from the Poetic Edda, most of them treating of subject matter dealt with in the saga, though at least two pieces won inclusion primarily because they appealed to the translators (Eirikur Magnússon and Morris 1870, vii, x). Some of this verse is inserted in the body of the saga translation where, of course, it joins translations of verse found in the medieval saga manuscript. Like many other Victorian editors and translators they did not have the reverence for the integrity of the manuscript versions of medieval texts which has dominated much twentieth-century scholarship.

The 1870 translation was in every sense a pioneering effort, published just before the 1874 Cleasby-Vigfússon An Icelandic–English Dictionary. It contains a number of inaccuracies, turgid and obscure passages, and passages which bring an inappropriate smile to the modern face (‘Why art thou so bare of bliss? this manner of thine grieveth us thy friends; why then wilt thou not hold to thy gleesome ways?’, ch. 24, 82). But the reader can sense that this rendition of ‘the best tale pity every wrought’ was a labour of love, and indeed the performance of a sacred duty, ‘for this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks’ (Eirikur Magnússon and Morris 1870, xx, xi).
Margaret Schlauch published her The Saga of the Volsungs in 1930, soon after the midpoint of that twenty year interval between the World Wars which seems to have yielded only a modest crop of major English translations from the Old Norse. Archaisms still had its supporters: E.R. Eddison argued quite passionately in favour of old-fashioned language in an essay, 'Some Principles of Translation', appended to his translation of Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar, published that same year (Eddison 1930). But an alternative view urging that the sagas be translated into an undamaged contemporary prose was gaining ground, having been strikingly exemplified in 1925 by the Laxdaela saga translation of the noted economist Thorstein Veblen (Veblen 1925).

Whilst proclaiming her admiration for the Eirikur Magnússon-William Morris translation and declaring it 'essentially accurate', Schlauch complained that 'the excessively archaic language he [Morris] chose to employ, out of very respect for his original, is unfortunately all but incomprehensible in places'. Her declared response was to employ a 'slightly archaic style', attempting 'to avoid any expressions not immediately understandable to a modern reader', and she adds: 'I have confined most archaic locations to the dialogue' (Schlauch 1930, xxx-xxxii).

The result is a translation which often does have a decidedly archaic flavour, particularly in its direct speech (for example, 'Who art thou that ridest into this burg, where none may enter save by the leave of my sons?': ch. 26, 121). It is a style markedly in contrast to that for which Schlauch herself argued forcibly twenty years later when she translated Bandamanna saga and Droplaugarsona saga, and moreover one which she at least partly rejected in reviewing the Finch translation of Völsunga saga in 1967: 'I may say that I now question the Biblical archaisms (morphological rather than lexicographical) which I introduced into my own translation of the saga back in 1930' (Schlauch 1967, 208, a review of Finch 1965; also Schlauch in Scargill and Schlauch 1950, 54).

The reason for the use of archaisms in 1930 was Schlauch's conviction that 'even to the Sagaman it [Völsunga saga] was a tale of remote, ancient days, of gods and demigods and half mythical kings' (Schlauch 1930, xxxi). A very similar attitude was held at that time by E.V. Gordon, probably England's most distinguished Old Norse scholar then active. In introducing Stella Mills's 1933 translation of another of the fornaldrarsögur, Hroðf's saga kraka, he remarked:

One considerable risk was taken by the translator, but she is justified by the result. The translation includes many archaic forms and idioms, though it is free from any taint of Wardour Street, where so many false antiques were sold. The habit of heavy archaisms has in the past given a very misleading impression of Icelandic style. Saga-tellers and saga-writers had nothing equivalent: they used the language of their own time, almost the language of everyday use. In this translation the mild archaisms is not misleading. Hroðf's saga tells of events of ancient days (the sixth century), and the fourteenth century author was fully conscious of the antiquity of his matter. The flavour of archaism is just what is needed to express this consciousness. (Gordon in Mills 1933, xii)

In 1950 Schlauch was still prepared to state that an archaic translation style might be defensible for the 'mythical-heroic sagas', that is, the fornaldrarsögur (Schlauch in Scargill and Schlauch 1950, 54).

Like the 1870 translation, that of Margaret Schlauch does not seem directed towards the student. There is an informative but not technical introduction, and a very brief bibliography, but no indexes or notes on the translation text. The volume does usefully provide what is still the only complete English translation of Ragnar saga loðbrókar, a work appearing virtually as a continuation of Völsunga saga in the medieval manuscript, though only tenuously linked to it in its characters and subject matter. There is also a verse translation of the relatively short Krókonuf.

The third translation of Völsunga saga, by R.G. Finch, appeared facing the normalised Old Icelandic text in one of the few volumes published in the brave but short-lived series Nelson's Icelandic Texts. Despite what one might expect, however, the translation was not a minor part of the edition, or a literal and unlitery crib designed to assist students make sense of the Icelandic. Professor Finch's version reads fluently: indeed one reviewer complained that occasionally it 'sacrificed accuracy for fluency, and that is a step along the primrose path' (Page 1967, 280).

Finch attempts 'to provide an English version as free as possible from unnecessary archaisms'. While accepting Schlauch's argument that 'even to the Sagaman it was a tale of remote ancient days', he rejected the view that it was appropriate to signal this by self-consciously old fashioned language: 'there can be little doubt that the legendary heroes were as real to the people of the mediaeval North as those of the more immediate past, and the compiler of Völsunga saga aims at presenting his poetic
material in straightforward saga style and language' (Finch 1965, xxxix).

It would be hard to argue that in adopting a fluent, modern, slightly colloquial prose style Finch was not in accord with the translating spirit of the times, or at least a major strand within it. The aim of the enormously popular Penguin Classics series (which produced four volumes of Icelandic saga translations as part of its large output in the 1960s) was to provide the reader with translations which lowered the barriers of time and place, rendering even poetic texts like The Iliad and The Aeneid into prose which could be read almost as easily as a conventional twentieth-century novel. Whereas Victorian translators like Morris had tended to emphasise the 'otherness' of what was being translated, the aim now often was to make it as accessible and enjoyable as scholarly integrity permitted.

There were dissenters, of course. Hedin Bronner harshly denounced the 1960 translation of Brennu-Njáls saga, by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, stating that the translation

simply is not a saga. The terseness, the dignity, the stylistic range between fire and ice, have been replaced by a chatty and pedestrian prose [...]. And when allmikit lígnumðr (great lawman) is rendered as 'outstanding lawyer', it is a Hollywood courtroom melodrama rather than the Alþingi tragedy that looms before us. (Bronner 1962, 318)

Perhaps fortunate in that he was working on a less exalted original Finch did not encounter criticism of this severity, though it is certainly possible to point to occasions when the tone of middle class modernity jars. One example comes toward the end of the saga, when King Atli reproaches his wife Guðrún, who after slaughtering their children and serving them to him as food has now taken part in fatally wounding him. The Icelandic reads (in Finch's own edition): 'ok þjá sværu léztu opt með gráti sitja' (ch. 40, 73). It may not be a particularly successful touch in the original, but Finch's 'and you often had your mother-in-law in tears' (p. 73) seems to strike the wrong note of bourgeois domesticity. Even Eiríkur Magnússon and Morris's 'and thy mother-in-law full oft thou leseth sit a-weeping' (ch. 39, 153) and Schlau's 'and thou hast oft given my mother cause to sit weeping' (ch. 38, 173) seem less incongruous.

Notwithstanding its very readable translation Finch's volume is provided with the kind of apparatus traditionally associated with scholarly editions of medieval texts, and seems directed at an academic rather than a popular audience. The level of the material suggests an attempt to meet year or two, rather than those of experienced Old Norse specialists who could doubtless produce their own translation.

It has been suggested in examining the first three translations of Völsunga saga that they were in large measure products of their times. With George K. Anderson's 1982 translation the situation is somewhat different. It is a posthumous publication, having been seen through the press by Geoffrey Russom after Professor Anderson's death in January 1980 at the age of seventy-eight. George Anderson had a long and distinguished career as a specialist in Old and Middle English literature, and according to T.M. Andersson, he 'developed a strong interest in Norse literature toward the end of his life' (Andersson 1983, 841; also Russom in Anderson 1982, 9).

The George Anderson volume is indeed marked by characteristics one is inclined to associate with a labour of love compiled when the pressures of a professional scholarly career have been lifted. It is in fact far more than just a translation of Völsunga saga. Also included are a 'Genealogical Table', 'Notes on the Pronunciation of Old Norse Words', a 'Specimen of Old Norse, with English Translation', an 'Introduction' to Völsunga saga, 167 often lengthy notes on the translation, an extract from Skáldskaparmál with introduction and notes, an extract from Norna-Gests þátrr with introduction and notes, an extended précis of the Nibelungenlied, a short essay entitled 'Two Views of the Nibelungenlied', a 'Synopsis of the Thiridreks saga', a 'Glossary of Minor Characters', a 155 item annotated bibliography, and an Index. We often move far from the text of Völsunga saga; and the commentary often has a chatty, uninhibited quality avoided by most academic writers in their scholarly publications: 'Müllenhofer's approach—for the time and for his country only moderately arrogant—indicates that only professional scholars can know; therefore let amateurs keep away' (Anderson 1982, 246).

But while Anderson sometimes seems inclined to re-fight battles of earlier decades his Völsunga saga translation is, despite some inconsistencies and obscure passages, in a generally clear modern style. Unfortunately, however, it is very often not accurate: T.M. Andersson reported finding twenty-five translation errors in a sample of five pages (Anderson 1983, 841), and anyone comparing the translation with the original text is likely frequently to be dissatisfied by its response to the more difficult passages in the Icelandic.

The reviewers were divided in their reactions to the Anderson volume when it appeared in 1982. It was both praised as making a 'decided contribution to the study of medieval Germanic literature' (Mitchell 1984,
and dismissed as 'the bequest of a learned and spirited colleague' which 'will not find a place in our scholarly libraries' (Andersson 1983, 841). Many errors of detail were noted, and there was an understandable uncertainty as to the audience for which this relatively expensive volume was intended: Russom in his 'Foreword' had rather unhelpfully suggested a mixed audience of 'scholars, students and general readers'. Stephen A. Mitchell in *Scandinavian Studies* concluded his review by observing: 'the sad truth is, we still need a reliable, inexpensive translation of V[ölsunga] saga' (Mitchell 1984, 174).

**VI**

Jesse Byock's 1990 translation, available in paperback as well as in hardcover, is clearly an attempt to provide what Mitchell considered desirable. It is the only one of the five translations volumes to focus on presenting an English version of Völsunga saga, without also providing extensive translations from other works or an edition of the Icelandic text. Byock's book should not intimidate the non-specialist reader as, for different reasons, Finch's and Anderson's are in danger of doing: his introduction is clear and non-technical, and though there are 110 notes on the text, 85 of these are three lines or less in length.

Byock announces in his 'Note on the Translation' that he has consulted the four earlier translations of the saga, and he acknowledges: 'Although frequently disagreeing with their interpretations of the text, I have found all four works useful in the preparation of this translation' (Byock 1990, 31-32). One suspects that most competent translators follow a similar procedure, though only rarely is it acknowledged as openly as here. It is hard not to be in broad agreement with the remarks of Donald Frame, the distinguished translator from the French who died in 1991:

> I strongly favor regarding translation, like scholarship, as a cumulative undertaking, and therefore borrowing—or stealing—whenever you see that you own best solution to a problem is clearly inferior to someone else's.

Before translating for publication, of course, the translator must have grounds for believing that he or she 'can markedly improve on all existing translations, and do that without anthropologising (combining everyone else's best parts)' (Frame 1989, 82–83).

Byock could not be accused of being an anthologist: his translation, though in a clear, generally modern idiom like those of Finch and Anderson, is clearly his own. He does not wholly eschew archaisms—there are some quite striking examples, such as Sigurðr's salutation of Brynhildr: 'Be greeted, lady. And how do you fare?' (ch. 25, 74). M.J. Driscoll, though identifying some possibly questionable usages, refers in his review of the translation to its 'nice balance between the archaic and the conversational' (Driscoll 1992, 306). Most students and 'general readers' will probably find it the most useful and accessible English version of the saga, and it seems in general very accurate, though someone attempting to understand the Icelandic may welcome having available also a copy of Finch's translation, which is sometimes more literal.

**VII**

In this short essay detailed comparison of the five translations must necessarily confine itself to a few short passages, albeit that this carries the risk of unfairness in selection and injustice to one or more translators. In an attempt to exhibit the range of each of the five translations four different kinds of passage have been chosen here: a narrative passage, a descriptive passage, a sample of direct speech, and a stanza of verse. The Icelandic text in each case is quoted from Finch's edition (with the substitution of ö for the older form of the letter, in accordance with the practice throughout this volume). The chosen passages are not cases in which translators are likely to have used significantly different versions.

Towards the end of chapter 8 the circumstances surrounding the birth of the hero Helgi Sigmundarson are described in narrative prose which is syntactically quite straightforward but raises questions as to how place names should be treated and what assistance should be provided by way of explanatory notes:

> Ok er Helgi var feðdr, kómu til fürin ok veitit honum formóla ok meðtu at hann skyldi verða alla konunga fræastr. Sigmundur var þá kominn frá orrustu ok gekk með einum lauk í mot syni sinnum, ok hér með gef frá honum Helga nafn ok þetta at naðn festri: Hringstabi ok Sölfpjöll ok sveðr, ok bað hann vel fremjask ok verða í att Völsunga.
> (ch. 8, p. 14)

Eiríkur Magnússon and William Morris provide fully Anglicised versions of the place names in accordance with their normal practice in their many translations, and add a fine alliterative epithet for the sword without any authorisation from the original. They expect the reader to know who the Norns were, eliminate the puzzling laukr and paraphrase naðnfæstr. Characteristically, their translation has an archaic flavour, and it offers somewhat misleading renditions of 'veitit honum formóla' and 'bað hann
vel fremjask’:

And when Helgi was born, Norns came to him, and spake over him, and said that he should be in time to come the most renowned of all kings. Even therewith was Sigmund come home from the wars, and so therewith he gives him the name of Helgi, and these matters as tokens thereof, Land of Rings, Sun-litten Hill, and Sharp-shearing Sword, and withal prayed that he might grow of great fame, and like unto the kin of the Völsungs. (ch. 8, 25–26)

It will be noticed that this translation preserves the tense variations of the original. Margaret Schlauch standardises all forms into the past tense (as do the other three translators of the passage), and she opts for a partial Anglicisation of the place names. She offers no help to the reader likely to be puzzled by the Norns or the leek. Her version is accurate and significantly less archaic in style than that of Eiríkur Magnússon and Morris:

But when Helgi was born the Norns came and prophesied, and said that he would be most famous of all kings. Sigmund was at that time returned from war, and he went to see his son bearing a leek, and therewith he gave him the name Helgi, and likewise these gifts with the naming: Hringstead and Solfell and a sword; and he bade him grow great and be one of the Völsung race. (ch. 8, 66)

In marked contrast to the first two translators Finch offers five explanatory footnotes to his translation of the passage. The reader is invited to consult his ‘Glossary’ for normir and naðnfestr; the meaning and significance of laukr are discussed; Helgi’s role in other literary sources is briefly outlined; and the possibility of identifying Hringstaðir and Solfjöll is considered. Finch’s Anglicisation of the names is confined to the replacement of þjöll by fell; rather inconsistently, he does not deal correspondingly with staðir. Finch permits himself considerable freedom with the original syntax, replacing co-ordinate clauses with subordinate constructions. His style is modern—perhaps jarringly so in ‘get on in life’:

And when Helgi was born, the Norns appeared, and they granted him knowledge of his destiny, saying that of all kings he would be the most famous. Sigmund had just returned from battle, and taking with him some garth he went to see his son, and thereupon gave him the name of Helgi, and his gifts for the occasion were Hringstaðir and Solfell and a sword, and he told him he must get on in life, and be a real Völsung. (ch. 8, 14)

Anderson offers three notes, on ‘Norns’, ‘leek’, and ‘natal feast’—the last term, and the note referring to it, seem to reflect a misunderstanding of naðnfestr, which could literally be translated ‘name-fastening’. He does not discuss the place names and, apart from substituting d for ð, leaves them as they are in the original. This involves use of a form based on the accusative case of Hringstaðir, a practice not repeated when he translates Grindum, the dative case of the place name Grinir, a few pages later (Finch, ch. 9, 17; Anderson, ch. 9, 71). The style of the translation is modern (apart from ‘therewith’) but more faithful to the Norse syntax than is Finch’s version:

When Helgi was born, the Norns came and made him a prophecy. They said he would become most famous of all kings. Sigmund had come home from a battle and went to see his son with a leek, and therewith he gave him the name Helgi and these gifts at his natal feast: Hringsted and Solfjoll and a sword. He bade him have good success and grow as one of the Völsung family. (ch. 8, 69)

Byock provides notes on ‘Norns’, ‘leek’, and the place names, which he renders in the same way as Schlauch, while pointing out in his notes that Solfjöll literally is a plural meaning ‘mountains of the sun’ (p. 115). His style too is modern, apart perhaps from ‘bid’:

And when Helgi was born, Norns came and set his destiny, saying that he would become the most famous of all kings. Sigmund had returned from battle and went with a leek to meet his son. He gave the boy the name Helgi, and as gifts for this name fastening he granted Hringsted, Solfell, and a sword. He bade the child advance himself well and to take after the race of the Völsungs. (ch. 8, 47)

VIII

The practices of the translators in dealing with passages of description are probably best exemplified by examining part of the eulogy to Sigurðr Sigmundarson, the saga’s pre-eminent hero:

Hár hans var brúnt at lit ok fagrt at líta ok fór í stórolkka. Skeggit var þykkt ok skammt ok með sama lit. Hánefjár var hann ok halfríh breitt andlít ok stórbeinít. Augu hans várú svá snór at fár einn þorði at líta undir hans brún. (ch. 23, 41)

Eiríkur Magnússon and Morris lend their version a somewhat heightened, ‘poetic’ quality which is attractive here. The version is accurate, though the other translators have understandably preferred a more restrained substitute for ‘golden-red of hue’:

Now the hair of this Sigurd was golden-red of hue, fair of fashion, and falling down in great locks; thick and short was his beard, and of no other colour; high-nosed he was, broad and high-boned of face; so keen were his eyes that few durst gaze up under the brows of him. (ch. 22, 78–79)
Schlauch's version lacks this exuberance but is admirably clear, modern, and direct:

His hair was light brown and fair to look upon, and it grew in long curls; his beard was thick and short and of the same color. His nose stood high, and his face was broad and large boned; his eyes were so keen, that few men dared look direct beneath his brows. (ch. 22, 110)

Finch also employs a clear modern idiom, but he is a little freer in rendering syntax and meaning than Schlauch:

His hair, which fell in long locks, was brown and handsome to look on. His beard was short and thick and of the same color. He had a high-bridged nose and broad, large-boned features. His eyes were so piercing that few dared look him in the face. (ch. 23, 41)

Anderson's version is quite similar to Schlauch's:

His hair was brown in color and fair to look at and grew in long locks; his beard was thick and short and of the same color. His nose was high, he had a broad face and was large-boned. His eyes were so keen that few dared look under his brows. (ch. 22, 94)

Though stylistically quite different from the Eiríkur Magnússon-Morris version, that of Byock resembles it in allowing itself a few rhetorical flourishes which might be justified as capturing the spirit of the piece better than a more strictly literal translation:

Sigurd's hair was brown and splendid to see. It fell in long locks. His beard, of the same color, was thick and short. His nose was high and he had a broad, chiseled face. His eyes flashed so piercingly that few dared look beneath his brow. (ch. 23, 72)

IX

The following piece of direct speech is spoken to Helgi Sigmundarson by his future wife Sigríðr Hógnadóttir during their first meeting:

'Hógni konungur hefðr heitit mik Hoddbroddi, syni Grammars konungs, en ek hefi því heitit at ek vil eiga eina hann heldr en inn krákuunga. En þó mun þetta fram fara, nema þú hannir honum ok komir i mot honum með her ok nemir mik á brot, því at með engum konungu vilda ek heldr setr búa en með þér.' (ch. 9, 15)

The Eiríkur Magnússon-William Morris version is predictably archaic and verbose, and it is difficult to know what prompted the rather startling alliterative phrase at the end:

'King Hogni has promised me to Hodbrod the son of King Granmar, but I have vowed a vow that I will have him to my husband no more than if he were a crow's son and not a king's; and yet will the thing come to pass, but and if thou standest in the way thereof, and goest against him with an army, and takest me away withal; for verily with no king would I rather abide on bolster than with thee.' (ch. 9, 28)

Schlauch's version, while still displaying archaisms, is markedly simpler and more direct than that provided in 1870:

'King Hogni has promised me to Hodbrodd, son of King Gunnar [sic], but I have sworn that I will no sooner have him than a raven; and yet it will come to pass unless thou ban him and do battle against him with thy host and take me away with thee, for with no king would I rather abide than with thee.' (ch. 9, 68)

Finch's version, while accurate, tends in characteristic fashion to combine slightly formal and slightly colloquial elements:

'King Hogni [...] has promised me in marriage to Hoddbrodd, King Grammar's son, but I have vowed to have him no more than I'd have a fledgling crow as a husband—but it will none the less come to that, unless you stop him and come against him with an army and take me away, for there is no king I would rather make a home with than with you.' (ch. 9, 15)

Whilst not obviously distorting the sense of the passage Anderson is a good deal more free:

'King Hogni has promised me to Hodbrodd, son of King Granmar, but I have sworn that I would as soon marry a young crow as marry him, and yet this will come to pass unless you can prevent him by going against him with warriors and then taking me away, for I have no wish to live with any other king than you.' (ch. 9, 69–70)

Byock allows himself significant freedom with the original syntax—probably more than is usual in his translation. He nevertheless seems faithfully to reproduce the sense of the passage:

'King Hogni has promised me to Hodbrodd, the son of King Granmar. But I have sworn that I would no sooner have him than a young crow. Yet the marriage will take place unless you stop Hodbrodd. Fight him with your army and take me away, because there is no king with whom I would rather dwell than with you.' (ch. 9, 48)
Some thirty stanzas are embedded in the text of Völsunga saga. One of the most famous describes Sigurðr’s ride through the wall of flames to win Brynhildr for his brother-in-law Gunnarr:

Sigurðr Grani
sverði keyrði,
Eldr skloknði
fyrir ðólingi,
logi allr læggisk
fyrir lófgjörnum
Błęki reði
er Reginn átti. (ch. 29, 49)

Though taking some metrical liberties Eiríkur Magnússon and Morris attempt to suggest the original alliteration, and their archaic touches do not seem discordant in a rendition of what seems so clearly ‘heroic’ verse. One might, however, question the translation of ðólingr by ‘king’:

Then Sigurd smote
Grani with sword,
And the flame was slaked
Before the king;
Low lay the flames
Before the fain of fame;
Bright gleamed the array
That Regin erst owned. (ch. 27, 96)

By contrast, Schlauch abandons alliteration and introduces end-rhyme. Her version is the most free of the five translations of the stanza, probably as a consequence of her decision to use rhyme. The stanza retains some power but is in danger of degenerating into doggerel:

Sigurd smote Grani with the touch of his sword;
The fire grew slaked and dim;
The flames burnt low, but the harness gleamed
That Regin had given him. (ch. 27, 126)

Finch elects for alliteration and quite successfully imitates the original in a more modern idiom than that of the 1870 translators:

With sword did Sigurd
spur Grani onwards.
Before the prince
the fire then died.
The flames all ceased

for the seeker of glory,
resplendent the harness
Regin had owned. (ch. 29, 49)

Anderson employs neither alliteration nor rhyme in a version which seems to concentrate simply on conveying the meaning of the stanza in modern English:

Sigurd urged on Grani with point of sword,
The flames slackened before the prince.
All the fire dropped before him eager for praise.
His harness glistened, with Regin has owned. (ch. 27, 104)

Byock, finally, provides another stanza marked by use of alliteration. His achievement at this point is broadly similar to Finch’s:

Sigurd with his sword
Spurred Grani on.
The flames expired
Before the prince,
The fire all fell back
Before the fame-hungry one.
The harness was radiant
Which Regin had owned. (ch. 29, 81)

There may be earlier translations of other sagas which have been totally superseded by more adequate versions and deserve to languish in almost total obscurity. Völsunga saga, however, seems to have been better served across the years by those publishing English versions of it. Though Anderson’s work may be best entrusted only to those with enough knowledge to identify its shortcomings as well as its merits, all five versions have positive qualities, and all are readable. Each reflects an interestingly different approach to saga translation, and with the partial exception of the somewhat anachronistic Anderson version all shed light on the translation philosophy of the period in which they first appeared.

A reader of the five complete translations will find that, with the exception (to a limited extent) of those by Eiríkur Magnússon-Morris and Byock, the English versions eliminate the apparently arbitrary oscillations between present and preterite which are such a characteristic feature of saga narrative. Though no one is likely to propose a wholesale revival of archaisms in saga translation, there is today what seems to be a growing belief that features of saga style such as this tense variation and a syntax which tends to avoid subordinate clauses in favour of series of indepen-
dent ones should be retained in English translations, even if the price is a kind of sometimes jagged English prose which reads rather oddly on first acquaintance. Its supporters believe that such an approach can provide a freshness and energy missing from translations into more conventional English, and that any other approach is likely to destroy important information on the ‘world-view’ of those who created the sagas (Durrenberger and Durrenberger 1992; also Acker 1988, 212). Again, as in Victorian times, there is concern that readers of translations should not readily forget the distance which separates us from medieval Iceland. Though both the economics of publishing and the achievements of the first five versions must severely limit the market for new versions of Völsunga saga in the years immediately ahead, it seems possible to perceive at least one direction likely to be taken by future translators in their task of interpretation.

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