

Even-Zohar, Itamar 1999. "The The Complete Sagas of Icelanders in English Translation".
(Published in Icelandic under the title "Heildar tgáfa Íslendingasagna á ensku". *Skírnir* (Tímarit
hins íslenska bókmenntafélags), 173 ár, Vor 1999, pp. 209- 214.

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ITAMAR EVEN-ZOHAR

The Complete Sagas of Icelanders in English Translation (Review)

The Complete Sagas of Icelanders I-V

General Editor: Viðar Hreinsson

Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing Ltd., 1997

This is an impressive enterprise which deserves a wholehearted acclaim. For the first time in the history of saga translations, at least the English language reader finally may get a fair chance of obtaining a better notion of the richness and variety of mediaeval Icelandic literature. The uniqueness and the great achievements of this literature, still not sufficiently recognized in standard "histories of World literature" now become, through this endeavour, much more tangible. It is definitely a noteworthy contribution to promoting the recognition of Iceland's unique riches worldwide.

The editors of this collection have invested much work, and on a very professional level, in handling various aspects of this production.

First, they decided to make the collection as variegated as possible. Thus, the somewhat homogeneous impression of Icelandic saga-writing, created no doubt by the impact of the great sagas – Njála, Laxdæla, Egla – now gives way to a more seasoned mixture, displaying a variety of moods, tragic and comic, humour and satire, playfulness and manifesting deep understanding of human nature, narrated and characterized with a wealth of techniques and stylistic tools. Although other collections of saga-translations into English already presented many of the sagas included, yet the inclusion in one series of volumes creates the fresh polyphonic impression. Moreover, few texts seem to have been translated for the first time, especially the shorter ones.

Second, they decided to try and render the Icelandic texts much closer to the original than has been attempted hitherto. On the most elementary level that has meant rendering the integral text without omissions, such as the genealogical descriptions, almost traditionally considered in the prevailing English translations as "unnecessary." On the more complicated levels, one can note an attempt at not following the prevailing English norms of saga translation. According to these

norms, everything considered "difficult" has been avoided, to be replaced by standardized paraphrasing. For example, metaphorical language has persistently been replaced by standard expressions. So have been great many stylistic devices, which make the Icelandic texts so flexible and attractive. In contradistinction, in this new enterprise, there is an earnest attempt at coping with the difficulties by finding solutions which would be both closer to the original and yet acceptable to "the English reader." Also, some effort has been made to unify the English renderings of recurrent items in the repertory of devices, recognizable to any Icelandic saga-reader (and which have partly persisted into modern Icelandic literature), such as "X hét maður," ("X was the name of a man") or "N er þar mál til að taka" ("it is now the time to tell about x"). These attempts have, however, been only partially successful (although the editors believe otherwise).

In translating the poetics materials, i.e., the various genres of *visur*, again, a bolder policy has been adopted. Consequently, many of the *visur* are no longer made simple and "flat" as in the prevailing translations. The elaborate nature of the poetic language can thus be somewhat sensed by an English reader in a way closer to that of an Icelandic reader. The clarifications added also make it somewhat similar reading to modern Icelandic editions.

Finally, the editors have added useful introductory notes, and a helpful glossary of recurrent terms, which has made it possible to use precise terms and avoid circumlocutions. The notes and glossary are in most cases precise and faultless – no wonder, since among the editors one finds first-rank connoisseurs of Icelandic literature.

As with any enterprise of such a magnitude, there are always various points where one may disagree with the editors. Some are of a minor, others of a major scale. Among the minor points, the classification of the sagas into thematic groups seems quite pointless, even derogatory for the sagas. One can fully understand the editorial need to divide the materials into separate volumes, but the titles of these volumes are pretty ridiculous in view of the rich and variegated nature of each text, which defies any univocal grouping. So are the charts at the beginning of each volume, as well as the somewhat pompous introductions by State and establishment personae. Indeed, the sagas need no such classifications, charts, and State-ownership declarations. These may even deter many readers rather than encourage them. I was told that the Leif Eiriksson publishing house is now preparing a new edition with the texts separated into smaller volumes. It therefore seems useless to waste much energy here on further developing these arguments.

Another disturbing detail is the seemingly bold decision to keep the Icelandic names intact. This, I'm afraid, does not contribute to a closer understanding of the original, in view of the morphological similarity between English and Icelandic. A bolder policy should be adopted in the revised version, one which will eliminate once and for all the misunderstandings about the Icelandic names. As there are no surnames in Icelandic culture, "Eiriksson" should have long ago been

translated as "Eric's son" (or Eirik's son). Otherwise, one is likely to get again and again those irritating texts (such as published by Parks Canada for the L'Anse aux Meadows site, or on the Website "Leif Eiriksson Home Page"), where a certain gentleman called "Ericsson" (no first name) does this and that. Still worse are such names as "Thorbjarnadóttir" which may not even be understood by a regular English reader as related to a certain fellow Thorbjörn – you need to know Icelandic grammar to make the connection! Beside the inadequacy and opaqueness of these Icelandic forms, curiously the editors here show a strange double standard in terms of *their own culture*. For from very early on, Icelandic culture has been translating names of people and places. When the old Hebrew sagas (still ridiculously called "The Old Testament" in Icelandic and other languages) are read in Icelandic, Hebrew patronymics are *translated*, not *transliterated*, into Icelandic. If an Icelandic should happen to talk to an Israeli about "Nersson" and "Davidsson" instead of "Ben Ner" and "Ben David," their Israeli interlocutor would not know who are referred to by these names. Almost all geographical names on the globe have an Icelandic form (from "Gyðingaland" to "Nýfundnaland"), and yet the editors decided to keep the full Icelandic names (except for the most obvious suffixes), although the meanings of the names are often quite important, or at least give a clearer local colour, to various estates, animals, rivers, hills, and estuaries.

Yet another debatable feature is the modernization of the text by extracting the repliques from the narrative flow. As is well known, this has by now become the Icelandic norm. It was introduced, if I am not mistaken, by Halldór Laxness in his epoch-making editions of the sagas. Laxness wanted to expropriate old Icelandic literature from philologists and antiquaries and bring it closer to the modern reader, already accustomed to new editorial models. However, it is debatable whether this modernization conforms to the poetics of the saga narrative, where so often *replique*, reported speech, *style indirect libre*, and summarizing narration are intertwined. Such a poetics can be found in other literary traditions, old and new. For example, this is what characterizes the prose of Heinrich von Kleist, and no modern edition of Kleist would even dream of adopting an extraction policy! Of course I am familiar with the arguments about the scarcity of parchment and the lack of redactional norms in the manuscript era. But the modern separation between reported speech and narrative is nevertheless an innovation, and saga editions should have followed the separation model with some moderation. The *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* enterprise could have followed *Íslenzk Fornrit* in this matter more than the modern Svart og Hvít edition.

However, these debatable decisions can easily be corrected, if the editors set their mind to do that in the revision now under preparation (I am told). There are, however, problems of a major scale, which are not easily soluble, and which only partly depend on editors' and translators' personal decisions. However, even here, given the massive impact of this new translated corpus, there are a number of aspects which can be dealt with by the editors.

The first major problem is the problem of the original text. The editors, fully aware of the intricacy of the question, have attempted to solve it by choosing for each saga the version they deemed most appropriate from their point of view. In Icelandic culture, the synthetic redactions of saga texts is still the prevailing norm. One can therefore argue that it would make no sense for non-Icelanders to access the Icelandic sagas in versions with which the Icelanders themselves are not familiar. Therefore, until the norm changes in Iceland itself (which I hope it eventually does), translations can only follow texts accepted in Iceland. I wish, however, that the point should be more openly discussed and presented to the English reader, and that some notion of the differences between the redactions be brought forth in some form, perhaps in a postscript to those texts where this is most relevant. More importantly, the translators, especially those of the most relevant texts, should have been more aware of the problem.

Hiding the problem sometimes leads, I am sure without the editors being aware of it, to misleading information. For example, the introductory note to *Njal's Saga* states that the translation follows the edition of Íslensk Fornrit which is "based on the fourteenth-century vellum manuscript Möðruvallabók." Such a phrase should not have occurred in such a professional publication in the year 1997, since everyone on the editorial board knows fully well that Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has taken great liberties with the text of Möðruvallabók, making numerous and significant deviations from it, most notoriously without reporting. Lamentably, at least in my view, the new English translation of *Njal's Saga*, in spite of its bolder translational qualities, still renders a rather problematic synthetic modern text.

Following blindly some synthetic version with its modern interpretations may sometimes unnecessarily and unjustifiably deter a translator. In *Njal's Saga*, the translator too readily followed the explanation that "the second half of the visa" reportedly said by Skarphedin "after his death" (Chapter 130) "has not been satisfactorily interpreted", and consequently simply decided not to translate it (the learned remark that it "does not quite fit the context" is quite out of place). The visa may indeed be unclear, yet it should have been translated. How and why I hope to be able to explain in a separate article.

The second, and obviously the greatest problem, has remained that of the translation. Although a remarkable step forward has been made, and for which this enterprise *does* deserve acclaim, it still leaves much to be desired. The discrepancy between the original and the English renderings is often still of a considerable weight. However, perhaps very little can indeed be done even by well-intended Icelandic editors and a group of dedicated translators. The problem lies in the very nature of the activity on the one hand, and the state of the English literary tradition on the other. In an old paper of mine ("The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem", republished in [*Polysystem Studies*](#), 1990, s. 27-44) I formulated the principle which governs the behaviour of translations in matters of introducing deviations (or innovations) into a domestic repertoire (the set of usable items): when translated literature occupies a

peripheral position in a literature, whoever the translator might be, only established repertoire is adopted. So what a Virginia Woolf or a William Faulkner can do with the English repertoire, including every thinkable liberty and frivolity with the "English language," no English language translator can do. And since translation ceased to play a major role in English literature such a long time ago, the modern English tradition has not elaborated wealth, flexibility and openness towards other literatures and cultures. Indeed, although there is no problem with the "language" *per se*, English has proven itself to be one of the most inadequate tools for truly international usage. If ever the sagas are translated from this English version into some other languages (a common practice in not few literatures), the outcome may be quite unsuitable.

In order to achieve bolder saga translations into English, perhaps one would need a different literary environment in the English speaking world, a new group of writers with the capacity of handling innovation in translations. Nevertheless, until and if such a group ever emerges, even humbler translators and dedicatedly learned editors can pay here and there some more attention to the *literary* qualities of the sagas, to their unique voice.

In the first instance, one should try and avoid unnecessary standardization. For example, although it may be an automatic decision for an English textmaker to replace "said" by "reported" or "retorted", self-discipline can easily be exerted to prevent such replacements.

Secondly, and more importantly, instead of reading the sagas through the prism of models of grandeur and the predilection for "repliques bien faites", and instead of suspecting every irregularity as "an accidental error" by some "copyist" which therefore need be standardized, it might well pay off to place some more trust in the talent, creativity and ingenuity of these mediaeval writers and editors, and therefore render their texts with more attention. Although there is no real room in such reviews for lengthy analyses, a simple example may be required.

In *Njála*, there is a scene, Chapter 11, where Hallgerdur expresses her vexation with the lack of food in the home of her first, undesired husband. In her anger, she says to Thorvald: "Ekki fer eg að því þó að þ hafir svelt þig til fjár og faðir þinn." This is apparently an irregular sort of sentence, so the translator (endorsed by "editors," "Icelandic Readers", "English readers", and "Consultants" [see p. XXV]) – and not exceptionally for his tradition – standardizes it as follows: "It's none of my business if you and your father starved yourselves to save money." Message correct, so what is wrong? What is wrong is that in the English, what you have is a calm lady making a well-formulated statement, fully in control of the situation, and of the necessary grammatical congruence: "if you and your father ... yourselves." But this is not the original Hallgerdur speaking here, an infuriated young woman who is engaged in a verbal quarrel, shouting a bit incoherently, but perhaps in a way so characteristic of domestic fights: "What do I care [this would seem more adequate than "none of my business"] if you starved

yourself for money!... and your father!" The phrase "and your father" is clearly a post-meditated little supplement, in contradistinction to the English pre-meditated well-prepared "communiqué", in the style of the "replique bien faite" – the well-rounded utterance. This mediaeval scene is so "modern," so psychologically and scenically convincing; the ear of the writer is so attentive here to colloquial speech. One need only listen to it. And *Njála*, perhaps more than other sagas, but not exclusively, is replete with such cases. I would very much hope that the revision under preparation do not miss the rare opportunity to render these ingenuities with more attention and care.

The *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* are definitely a remarkable step forward; one more step is still feasible.

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