

The Cultural Reconstruction



of Places

■ Edited by Ástráður Eysteinnsson

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Home, Home in the Dales

The Dialogism of Toponymy in Laxdæla saga

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*Uton wé hycgan hwær wé hám ágen
and þonne geþencan hú wé þider cumen*
The Old English Seafarer

'Not why do I write, but where am I writing? The question of place is usually regarded as contingent, merely contingent, a circumstance that in no significant way impinges on the writing.' This is how Charles Lock begins his essay on 'The Writing of Elsewhere'¹ and I quote it here since although our circumstances are dissimilar, we are both subject to the same constraints. Lock is writing in Copenhagen, on Nigerian themes, to be published in Canada, and he is struck by the lack of contiguity between his writing surface and the geographies of his material. I encounter a different topology: my computer screen, my paper, is contiguous with Iceland, and Iceland is contiguous with the saga that I shall be referring to, and this topogrammatology is crucial to my topic, to my topos, and to my grammar.

For we have a problem when discussing textuality in Iceland: a hackneyed, universal problem perhaps, but not a trivial one that we can afford to ignore. It is this: there are untold places on this island, most of them little places, familiar hillsides and small vistas, whose beauty and power is completely beyond the reach of language. They are extratextual and extralingual; their silence is punctuated by the call of the plover. And so how do we get them into our texts?

Through toponymy of course: the naming of places and the creation thereby of indices to extratextual reality. This is a remarkable manoeuvre, a method of mapping physical terrain into a text while leaving the text intact, untouched by wind and rain; we understand this movement when we become literate, and very

¹ Charles Lock, 'The Writing of Elsewhere: Nigerian echoes and reflections' in *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire* 21:41–42 (2004), pp. 177–193 (p. 177).

soon forget that it is a manoeuvre at all. The name Helgafell,² the Holy Mount, is not open to discussion, it brackets off as inadequate a whole encomium: you have to go there, in all seasons and weathers, to know its unspoken name, and listen to the silence—or rather the absence of language—which alone establishes Helgafell. The text—in our case *Laxdæla saga*³—is full of hints and indications towards this silence, expressions of human motions and emotions grounded in the named places. Yet in spite of their restless gestures towards the outside, these names work primarily within the text, structuring the narrative; they are intratextual rather than extratextual. This is one of the fundamental linguistic aspects of the dialogic between Me and the Other. To quote Charles Lock again: ‘Writing marks space, and creates the very idea of distance’.⁴ The space is marked by terms such as *home*, *here*, *outwards*, *east* and *south*, deictics which appear to have a single locution and a single location: that of the speaker. But what is *home* to you is way down the valley for me. We are two Others whose *homes* belong to different bodies: we reach out in fascination to speak and discover each other. In Iceland, although the distances between farmsteads are usually far greater than among the copses and hedgerows of Europe, you may stand on your doorstep and survey all of your neighbours. No traveller arrives unawares: you have watched her approach for many kilometres. The Other moves always in full sight, and in the present time—distance and chronology arise only in writing.

The Icelandic family sagas are impressively topographical texts. They might aptly be called the Home Sagas, for they purport to deal with events which happened at home in Iceland, albeit with a North Atlantic backdrop, or at home in this or that area of Iceland, or this or that homestead. The term *home* resonates as the centre of the Otherness of each protagonist. Compare them to earlier epics: who can draw up a map of the wanderings of the brothers in search of their valkyrie brides in *Völundarkviða*?

Austr skreið Egill at Ölrúno
enn suðr Slagfiðr at Svanhvíto
en einn Völundur sat í Úlfdöloom

(Egill glided eastwards for Ölrún
Slagfiður south for Svanhvít
But Völundur sat alone in Úlfdalir)⁵

2 There are several hills or small mountains with this name in Iceland, many rising from fairly low-lying land and framed by a horizon of higher mountains. Our Helgafell is on the north side of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, just south of the town of Stykkishólmur.

3 The standard edition is *Íslensk fornrit*, vol. V, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934).

4 Lock, ‘The Writing of Elsewhere’, p. 177.

5 *Völundarkviða* 4-5. I quote with a slight change of format from *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex*

The space marked out here is not physical or geographical, but an inner space, within the boundaries of the text and of the mind: we do not know the geographical location of Úlfdalir. Or take *Beowulf*: no easy task to map out the path from Heorot, the high-gabled hall of the Danish king, to the hellish lake on the moors that was home to Grendel. The description is vivid enough, but it tallies poorly with the site in modern Denmark. Owen Barfield would say that these are *participated* spaces, alive with our own thoughts and the creatures that inhabit them; it was not until we began to learn to step back from our perceived phenomena, to clothe them in an independent existence,⁶ that we could map them into written space, distanced and vectored on the parchment. Even the expressly topographical charters of the Anglo Saxons, for example the 8th-century charter from my home territory in Sussex which establishes the holdings of the Canons of Malling in a plodding legal macaronic of Latin and Old English, is largely inscrutable: the place names have strayed and become twisted by time, the directions have changed, the boundaries shifted, the modern Ordnance Survey maps triangulate a different landscape.⁷

Possibly the medieval Icelanders were more ready—in their daily concern for time and distance, their chiselled horizons, their yearly trek to the parliament at Þingvellir, their close understanding of the North Atlantic and its weathers that had brought them to the island—to calibrate and externalize immediate distance. Whatever the reason, events in the Icelandic sagas can usually be followed on a modern map, step by step, farm by farm, with the same names now scrolling down our GPS screens. Þórhalla málga (‘the talkative’) asks Kjartan: ‘Which way will you ride?’ and Kjartan answers: ‘I’ll take the road west through Sælingsdalur and back by way of Svínadalur.’⁸ We know exactly his route north, which he calls west as local people still do, over Sælingsdalsheiði to Skarðsströnd. On the way back, on the fatal Thursday of Easter Week, he travelled what is now the main road south, down Svínadalur to the ridge where the brothers lay in ambush. ‘And when they had passed south of Mjósyndi (‘Narrow Passage’) where the valley starts to widen out, Kjartan told Þorkell

Regius, I. Text, ed. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1962), p. 117. Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

6 Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (London: Faber and Faber Publishers Ltd, 1957); see also Barfield’s essay ‘The Rediscovery of Meaning’, in *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985; first edn 1977), pp. 11–21.

7 Mary S. Holgate, ‘The Cannons’ Manor of South Malling’ in *Sussex Archeological Collection*, vol. LXX (1937), pp. 182–195.

8 ‘Hon spyrr: „Hverja skaltu leið ríða?“ Kjartan svarar: „Ek mun ríða vestr Sælingsdal, en vestan Svínadal“’ (*Laxdæla saga*, pp. 147–148).

and his men to turn back'⁹ and Kjartan and the smaller party rode on into the ambush. We can drive down Svínadalur today using *Laxdæla saga* as a travel guide.

So where is home, when it appears, as it so often does, in the saga? Which voice speaks the word? *Laxdæla saga* is pegged down into its geographical and textual environment with voices speaking names, naming places, and creating indices, nodes of reference: these are firstly intratextual, structuring the text from within; secondly intertextual, plucking chords in other texts; and thirdly extratextual indices, mapping the narrative into a physical terrain which is also physically contiguous with the original writing, the calf-skin manuscript and the ink made from *sortulyng* berries. A proliferation of voices within the text will inevitably cluster around any index: as soon as the reader registers the connection with a farm on a hillside, or to another text, or to the same place name on the page before, the question must arise: who spoke? Who indicated this connection?

As an introductory example I shall use an intertextual index which is not essentially topographical, apart from the fact that it connects Iceland and Ireland in a rather striking way. We should be reminded that the Irish connection in *Laxdæla saga* is particularly strong; the saga begins by giving a close account of the Irish element in the early settlement history of Breiðafjörður and the Dales. Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, the aneponym of the saga, the central figure who, being a woman, cannot have her saga named after her, is surrounded by Irish names and characters; Irish was still a living language in the Dales where Guðrún grew up. Towards the end of the saga she is asked a question by her son Bolli that she is unwilling to answer: which of the men in her long and turbulent life she loved most. She finally replies by quoting a ninth-century Irish poem: *To him was I worst whom I loved best*. The wording of this reply is a close sound—and sense—translation of a couplet from the poem, which has survived and is known as 'Líadan's Lament'. Líadan was a nun and a poet, and the story of her life parallels Guðrún's in several significant ways.¹⁰

My question here is: where is the intertextual index in this passage? Who speaks it? Whose voice makes the connection? The manuscript does not of course use quotation marks, and in fact modern editors with their passion for punctuation are often hard-put to place the quotations marks in medieval

9 'En er þeir Kjartan váru komnir suðr um Mjósyndi ok rýmask tekr dalrinn, mælti Kjartan, at þeir Þorkell myndi snúa apr' (p. 151).

10 For a fuller discussion of the connection between *Laxdæla saga* and the Irish sources, and bibliography, see Pétur Knútsson, 'Þeim var ek verst: Líadan og Cuirithir í Laxdælu.' *Ritið: Tímarit Hugvísindastofnunar Háskóla Íslands*, 3:3 (2003), pp. 153–162.

Icelandic prose, which shifts easily between direct and indirect speech in mid-sentence. In this case it is clear that Guðrún speaks the words of the poem, but the linkage with the Irish does not start there, since her words also echo Bolli's question: whom did you love best? Bolli's question expressly cues Guðrún's answer, and so for anyone who knows the Irish connection the narrative is painfully contrived at this point. This seems to indicate that the writer of the saga did not sense the connection; indeed, it has remained unrecognised over the ensuing centuries. But there again, which 'writer' are we talking about? Our text is written some 200 years after the events it purports to describe—at what stage in its prehistory was the Irish connection made? Which of these forgotten storytellers, if not Guðrún herself, was actually quoting the Irish *an ro carus ro cráidius*, 'he whom I have loved I have tormented'? Clearly the proliferation of narrators has already occurred with the movement from the oral to the literary. The Icelandic sagas are multi-voiced from their inception.

The physical speaker has a single voice. There is of course a potential—even essential—splintering of voices in all spoken language, both harmonic and cacophonous. The words may go one way, and the intonation another—an effect exploited by Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*: 'This is a fine country to live in!'—a sentence whose double meaning needed repetition in the film, with two different intonations, since spoken intonation patterns can hint at but not itemize ambiguities. How then do we read aloud an intertextual or an extratextual index? What is the unreal intonation, the unspeakable intonation (Charles Lock's term, cultivated from Bakhtin),¹¹ which denotes *style indirecte libre*, that feature of novelistic discourse that informs *intratextual* indexicality, the invagination¹² of the text upon itself, the telling symptoms of Bakhtinian dialogic? The same question arises when we consider the intertextual and extratextual linkages that peg the text into its constitutive environment: the other texts, and the other places, which give our text meaning. How do we read aloud these perilous place-names? Whose voice calls them 'home'?

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, in his introduction to the 1934 edition of *Íslenzk fornrit V*, spends some time, as editors were expected to do in those days, looking for the author. He notes (pp. xxxiv–xxxv) that the writer of the saga (*söguritarinn*, a term which can also mean 'scribe') appeared to be very fond of Hjarðarholt, speaking of the farm in glowing terms. Sveinsson sees him (we

11 Charles Lock, 'Double Voicing, Sharing Words' in *The Novelness of Bakhtin*, ed. by Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001), pp. 71–87.

12 'Invagination' is Derrida's terminology: Jacques Derrida, 'Living On / Border Lines', in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. H. Bloom et al., trans. by J. Hulbert (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 75–176 (p. 97).

note the gender in passing) as having lived at Hjarðarholt, which thus becomes the topographic centre of orientation of the saga. He points out that the phrase *heim í Hjarðarholt* ('home to Hjarðarholt') occurs no less than 8 times in the saga, and more often than in relation to other farms.¹³ The farm Melkorkustaðir is *uppi í Laxárdal* (up in Laxárdalur) and the direction away from Hrútsstaðir is *ofan á Kambsnes* (down to Kambsnes): both these phrases, notes Sveinsson, might indicate directions from Hjarðarholt, although he concedes they could equally well apply to Höskuldsstaðir or Hrútsstaðir.¹⁴

My statistics agree with Sveinsson's. The adverb *heim* ('home') is used in 8 of the 40 times that Hjarðarholt is mentioned in the saga; this is a greater frequency than with any of the other place-names. Tunga has seven times out of 40,¹⁵ Höskuldsstaðir twice out of 13, Laugar twice out of 34, and Helgafell, arguably the most central place-name in the saga, Guðrún's final home and later a monastery, is mentioned 38 times, and only once with the adverb *heim*.

	occurrences	occurrences with 'heim(a)'	percentage
Hjarðarholt	40	8	20%
Tunga	40	7	18%
Höskuldsstaðir	13	2	15%
Laugar	34	2	6%
Helgafell	38	1	3%

These figures seem to be indicative of something, but I do not feel they necessarily refer to the writer's familiarity or fondness for the places concerned. The adverbs *heim* (direction home) and *heima* (at home) have a range of uses quite unconnected to the geographic ego-centre of the speaking voice or even the thematic subject. Adverbs of direction such as *north*, *south*, *east* and *west*, *up* and *down* (the valley), *in* or *out* (the fjord), are regularly added to prepositional phrases of direction or location in the Icelandic of the sagas, and indeed still today. The sagas will say 'They rode west/east to X' or 'He lived south in X'. The adverb *heim* is a member of this class of locative adverbs. A traveller will often ride 'home to' a farm he has never visited before. There is an incident in *Laxdæla saga* where a raiding party rides south into Borgarfjörður to kill Helgi Harðbeinsson in revenge for the death of Bolli, Guðrún's husband. As they

13 'Söguritarinn hefur fest ást á þessu landi [Hjarðarholti], og er það ekki djarflega til getið, að hann hafi einhvern tíma verið þar, eða víst er að minnsta kosti, að honum er tamt að segja *heim í Hjarðarholt*.' (The writer of the saga has become emotionally attached to [Hjarðarholt], and it is no wild guess that he was there at some time; it is at least clear that it was natural for him to say *home to Hjarðarholt*.) *Laxdæla saga*, pp. xxiv–xxv.

14 *Laxdæla saga*, p. xxv, n. 2.

15 I do not distinguish as Sveinsson does between the three farms with this name in the saga.

approach Helgi's farm, Vatnshorn in Skorradalur, the leader of the party, Þorgils Hölluson, bids his men keep low in the woods: 'I'll go *home* to the farmstead and spy out whether Helgi is at home'.¹⁶ When Kjartan is killed, his body is first carried to the nearest farm. The text says that 'his body was carried *home* to [Sælingsdals]tunga';¹⁷ we have to wait until the next chapter before his father Ólafur pá has his body taken *home* to Hjarðarholt. Icelandic place names are notorious for their idiosyncratic choice of prepositions (which has survived into modern Icelandic): in *Laxdæla saga* the writer always says *í Hjarðarholti* (in Hjarðarholt) but *á Höskuldsstöðum* (literally *on Höskuldsstaðir*). In the sagas, the preposition is sometimes even cited as part of the name, even when the name is the thematic subject:

Helgi is in summer pasture in a place called at Sarpur.
He lived in Bjarnarfjörður at a farm called at Svanshóll.¹⁸

In the same way, the adverb *heim* is associated with certain farm names rather than others. Referring to the Episcopal seat at Hólar in the North of Iceland the term *heim til Hóla* (home to Hólar) is the normal form, whereas there are other important centres such as Oddi in Rangárvellir or Snorri's Reykholt that do not so consistently attract the adverb *home*. In *Laxdæla saga* this is also clearly the case with the monastic seat at Helgafell.¹⁹

The upshot is that I do not think we can follow Sveinsson in his search for a monologic text, a text which speaks in the author's voice and establishes his virtuosity. Nevertheless, in singling out the concept of *home* he touches on an overriding preoccupation of the saga. While not an authorial centre, *home* represents a multiple principle of identity, of shifting centres in the narrative and their attendant horizons; readerly centres, which proliferate with the textual voices. In *Laxdæla saga*, the home of each protagonist is an essential marker of identity. Nowhere does this appear more forcefully than in Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir's merciless pledge of revenge against the killers of her husband Bolli:

16 'ok mun ek fara heim til bæjarins á njósn, at forvitnask, hvárt Helgi sé heima' (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 184).

17 'Lík Kjartans var fært heim í Tungu' (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 145).

18 'Helgi er í seli sínu þar er heitir í Sarpi' (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 62); 'Hann bjó í Bjarnarfirði á bæ þeim er heitir á Svanshóli' (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Íslensk fornrit* XII, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson [Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954], p. 32). This was also a feature of Old English toponymy.

19 Alliteration is clearly a factor in establishing the formula *heim til Hóla*, but not a decisive one; while it seems to licence *heim í Hjarðarholt* it fails to establish *heim til Helgafells*. Non-alliterative formulae such as *í Dali vestur* are also well established.

Guðrún mælti: „Vera kann, at vér fáim ekki jafnmæli af þeim Laxdælum, en gjalda skal nú einnhverr afráð, í hverjum dal sem hann býr [...].“

(Guðrún spoke: “It may well be that we won’t be able to take an equal toll of the men of the Laxa valley, but someone is going to pay the price, whatever dale he dwells in.”)²⁰

Not ‘whoever he is’, as we would say, but ‘wherever his home may be’. In the Icelandic family sagas we are constantly identifying and re-identifying not only the voices, but also their home: the sagas are both multivocal and multilocal. And since I have again risen to the level of the pun, that most primitive and sacred of tropes,²¹ I shall repeat myself by claiming that a fundamental textual characteristic of the sagas as a genre is their synthesis of locution and location.

And so we return to the silence of the extratextual. A stone’s throw north of the church at Helgafell, outside the graveyard proper, there is a single grave said to be that of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir. Tradition dictates that one must not speak and one must not look back as one ascends the path from the grave to the top of the mount, where one is allowed a wish in the tiny ruined chapel. We understand why we may not speak: the landscape, like our wish, cannot be contained by language. But why not look back? Because while the voice utters speech, it is sight which gives us the text. If we look back we see the Church, the tabernacle of scripture. Its text moves ever outwards, as all texts do, claiming and naming. If we are to elude it, we must take extraordinary steps.

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20 *Laxdæla saga*, p. 177. I cite Keneva Kunz’s fine translation here, from *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), vol. V, pp. 1–120 (p. 91), in order to demonstrate the impossibility of the translator’s task. If we ignore the last three words the sense is plain enough: “someone in every dale will pay the price”. But *einnhverr* in the sagas tends to mean ‘each and every’: the sentence is also trying to say ‘each one of them will pay the price, whatever dale he dwells in’—which contradicts the first part of Guðrún’s sentence. The anacoluthon is part and parcel of the monumental quality of Guðrún’s words.

21 For the sacred nature of the pun, see for instance Michael Holquist’s ‘Why is God’s Name a Pun?’ in *The Novelness of Bakhtin*, pp. 53–69.

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