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PROPOSAL

Lögheimili sannleikans, the Citizenship of Truth: a Barfieldian reading of Ari the Wise.

In this paper I shall attempt to apply Owen Barfield's account of the evolution of human cognition – his linguistic and semiotic view of the evolving nature of reality – to Ari's concept of truth (“Hafa skal það er sannara reynist”). Barfield, who shares many of Ernst Cassirer's thoughts on the origins of language and myth, assumes that major changes, not only in man's world-view but – integrally – in the nature of reality itself, have occurred and are now occurring in the history of Western thought. I shall connect these ideas with those of Walter Ong, Ellis Havelock and others on the changes in human society that follow from the shift from oral to literary cultures. This approach will entail a location of Truth at the centre of the tension between Home and Elsewhere in the Icelandic sagas (cf. Pétur Knútsson 2006), and will build on my (2008, forthcoming) evaluation of our pitfalls of understanding when we read medieval Icelandic.

This contribution will follow the theme of the conference in its focus on the concepts of “home” and “correctness” in the topology of the settlement of Iceland.

START HERE

The Citizenship of Truth: a Barfieldian reading of Ari the Wise.

Lögheimili sannleikans¹

¹ I would have preferred to retain the Icelandic title of this paper, *Lögheimili sannleikans*, which means the legal residence, the officially authorized home of truth, because I shall be trying to make a case for locating the concept of narrative truth as it appears in the Icelandic sagas in a sense which is as much topological, as it is sociological and grammatological. (Grammatology is the study of writing systems). The concepts signified by the related terms *heima* ‘home’, *heimili* ‘abode, residence’, and above all *heimild* ‘authority, licence’ are all essential to this attempt.

We are all more or less attuned to the basic problem of translation: the unstructured, inchoate nature of what we call reality and the various and variously clumsy attempts made by different languages to pretend that reality is structured and even logically so. In other words, the reality of one language is not the reality of another. Although the post-post- poststructuralists have been telling us for years that language is all and only about translation, we sometimes miss this point when reading texts in languages so like our own that we think we understand them; especially languages spoken by people no longer living who cannot come back and explain what they mean. Modern Icelanders read the Icelandic sagas with a happy disregard for the fact that they are written in a language spoken by a people who lived in a world long, long ago, under skies very different from our own. We read the old words as if they referred to our concepts – words like *sannleikur* (truth) or *heimild* (sanction/authority). In a recent article I have examined medieval Icelandic and Latin terms for ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, and shown that they have quite different meanings from our modern ones, and that we radically misinterpret them if we ignore this difficulty, and probably misinterpret them to some extent in any case.

This is one aspect of my paper today, and I shall focus on Ari the Wise’s famous dictum in the preface to his *Íslendingabók*, his injunction to the reader to disregard what he has written, if a better truth should come to light:.

En hvatki er missagt er í fræðum þessum, þá er skylt at hafa þat heldr er sannara reynisk
And if anything is misrepresented in this study, it must be replaced by whatever proves to
be the truer account.

This preface, as Sverrir Tómasson has shown, conforms to all the best rules of medieval preface-writing, and the proviso about better truths is commonplace for such prefaces; and indeed we recognise these sentiments, and find them surprisingly modern. So much so that we rarely hesitate over the idea of “a better truth”; although of two truths, can one be truer than the other? It doesn’t seem to worry us much that Ari had not said *Skylt er að hafa það heldur er satt reynist* ‘it must be replaced by whatever proves to be the true account’ – he was not admitting that what he wrote might prove untrue, but simply that the future might find truer things to say about it. We easily accept that Ari’s idea of truth does not seem to be binary, either true or false. And this is because although we understand and often deal with binary truth today (horizontal or not, overdrawn bank account or not, right of way or not), we still feel in practice that truth lies on a sliding scale, with some things truer than others, and that the binary if-and-only-if truth of logicians and fundamentalists belongs to a different plane of existence where there’s not much of great importance going on.

Nevertheless, we would be wise to assume that Ari's *sannara reynist* may need a modicum of translation into Modern Icelandic – if only because a lot of time has passed since he wrote, and words and, even more bewilderingly, concepts, evolve, sometimes astonishingly quickly. To give an idea of this difficulty, we might note that this last sentence of mine would have had a different meaning for Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the beginning of the nineteenth century – for Coleridge the verb *evolve* had the primary meaning ‘unfold, flower, grow’, rather than our idea of qualitative change).² How much greater might be the change of a concept such as ‘truth’ since the fourteenth century?³

Owen Barfield, whose comment on the concept of ‘evolution’ I am borrowing here, observes that linguistic archaeology, the digging into words to uncover their older and hidden layers (not quite the same thing as etymology), is a good approach to the question of the *evolution* of human cognition. Barfield unravels words to show that the further we go back the more metaphorical they become: and this is something which has often been done before. Barfield quotes Anatole France's famous example of the sentence *Mon âme ...* and shows its original meaning to be ... on the bushel. But this is where Barfield strikes out on a different path from most other commentators. The usual view is that this use of metaphor arose when mankind started to think abstractly, and needed words for concepts like *soul* and *inspiration*. The idea seems to be that mankind suddenly

² Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*.
Darwin 1809-82, *Origin of Species* 1859; Coleridge 1772-1834
Goethe 1749-1832

³ Owen Barfield has pondered this deeply and written about it in a number of books and articles which make quite extraordinary reading. Some of us may remember his 19xx book *History in English Words*, which is often set as background reading by the more sober and traditional professors of the history of the English language, who haven't bothered themselves to read the whole book and don't realise what a bombshell they are planting in their courses. Some of Barfield's other books, such as *Poetic Diction*, *Saving the Appearances*, *Worlds Apart* and *History. Guilt and Habit*, are more obvious assaults on our fundamental physical concepts. For those who are interested (and part of this paper is aimed at getting people interested), his collection of essays *The Rediscovery of Meaning* is probably a good entry-point into his thought; and I should also say that those of us who lean towards the philosophies of Goethe and Coleridge and Rudolf Steiner, will find Barfield a joy to read. For those of us who aren't philosophically minded, I can also recommend Barfield as one of the most brilliant stylists of the twentieth century. If there are such things as shock and suspense in academic writing, then Barfield knows how to present them.

became poetic and the trick of metaphor was hit upon. This belief hinges on the assumption that mankind had already evolved a complex language to deal with the external world of food and tools and nature, before he needed to express internal states such as desire and fear, or began to wonder about his place in the world. Barfield finds this assumption untenable: he does not see primitive man as starting out as a prosaic observer of nature, and he does not see language evolving as a tool for manipulating such observations. Before human consciousness emerged, non-human and non-conscious man was simply part of nature. Thought, along with man himself, emerged from nature itself. Early man was one with nature: the wind in the trees and the breath in man's lungs – the original combined meaning of the Latin word *anima* – were one and the same concept, and needed only one and the same word. The history of human consciousness is of our gradually unravelling ourselves from the rest of the natural world, so that concepts such as *anima* have become splintered into two or more meanings as we start to see breath and spirit and the wind in the trees as different phenomena. Myth, for Barfield as for Cassirer, is not the later invention of a civilisation struggling to explain the world; myth represents these first stirrings of human thought, as old as, and with the same roots as, language itself. Today we tend to use the word *myth* to signify an untrue belief, which is a pity, since myths are the first truths, the earliest half-human thoughts. Metaphor is simply the natural result of this divorce between man and nature; and it is an ongoing process, one that is not yet fully complete today, as I hope to show.

Barfield's contention goes on from here to suggest that if we think further along these lines we will see that an account of the evolution of human consciousness must also be an account of the evolution of the natural world. Sadly, I cannot follow up this thread here, although it is the kernel of Barfield's thought. Instead I want to combine his ideas with those concerning the momentous changes in human society, and thereby in human consciousness, that occurred with the transformation from an oral to a literary culture. Here I shall follow writers such as Walter Ong and Ellis Havelock, to name but two.

And here is where Ari the Wise comes in, living as he does in the transition period between oral and written Icelandic literature. As Walter Ong emphasises, our very terminology obscures the momentous nature of this change, since when Ong wrote he had to coin the term *orality* for what had been called *oral literature* or even *pre-literate literature*. This lack of a term is symptomatic of our lack of understanding of oral culture: we who are now literate find it very difficult to visualise a complete lack of written documentation as anything other than a lack – but of course it wasn't a lack, but a complete and satisfactory state of affairs, and by no means an impediment to culture and civilization and the fine arts.⁴

⁴ Ong's characteristics of oral societies: 1-9 (?)

We have, by definition, no records of an oral corpus of learning and poetry; records are kept only by literate cultures. Our knowledge of orality is at best second hand, usually even more remote. Early 12th-century Iceland of course knew writing, but only in foreign languages – mostly Latin, but also some Old English. Icelandic society was what Ong calls artisan-literate, writing being specialist knowledge with a degree of professional secrecy. The advent of vernacular literacy in Iceland, as elsewhere in Europe was initially very small-scale, and development was slow, so that of the characteristics of oral culture were at first largely retained. Some of them have not yet disappeared from our writing.

Today, good writing is either innovative, or stale; Hamlet’s answer “Words, words, words” speak to us only of stagnation and decay. But an oral society has no time for innovation; where the cultural heritage of a civilization depends on collective memory, the main function of all art is to establish and maintain this memory. Poetry and narration are concerned first and foremost with ideas and events that the hearers already know and wish to be reminded of, and on which their common social identity depends. These are the shapes of formulaic Germanic poetry wherever it appears, and medieval prose shares this characteristic to a large extent. We need only remind ourselves that nearly all readings of the Icelandic sagas since the very beginning and up to the present day are performed by those who already know the story, and are polishing their knowledge of the small details. Only children came new to the sagas, as they came new to everything. Narrative was by definition history, and like religious, philosophical, grammatical, legal and social writing it was aimed at saying in the best possible way what everyone wanted and needed to hear. Saxo Grammaticus, writing in Latin prose at the turn of the 13th century, tells of the Norwegian adventurer Ericus at the Danish court of Frotho, and portrays him as a champion of renowned eloquence. (*Gesta* V. II. 10). But Saxo’s idea of eloquence is clearly not ours, for Ericus’s speeches are composed almost entirely of formulaic cliché—they are nearly unbroken strings of proverbs. The function of eloquence in oral society is to reaffirm the established order and the common social identity, not to surprise and delight with original thought as it is today. **qq ?later:More significantly, there is a close relationship between eloquence and propriety of what is said and its truthfulness. *Heimskringla* 1.9 (*Ynglingasaga* kap 6) says of Óðinn that *hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at öllum er á heyrði, þotti þat eina satt* – ‘He spoke so eloquently and fluently that all who listened considered his words to be the simple truth’. For Óðinn’s listeners, the truthfulness of his words was confirmed by their appropriateness.**

This then is the setting of Ari’s *Íslendingabók*, and his plea for better truth. Ari is writing what his readers want him to write; and we know who his immediate readers are since he names them: bishops Þorlákr and Ketill, and the priest

Sæmundr. We might reasonably ask what it might have been that these venerable gentlemen would want him to write? Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's answer is that they wanted a firm justification for the property rights of the landed classes, the patrons of the Church. He convincingly presents Ari's text as a blatant fabrication of the history of the settlement of Iceland,⁵ pointing out that

Við aðstæður í upphafi tólftu aldar var auðvitað ekki unnt án uppspuna að lýsa „eignarnámi“ svo mikillar víðáttu sem alls byggjanlegs lands á Íslandi. (318-9)

There were of course no means available at the beginning of the twelfth century to document without fabrication the “acquisition” of such an extensive area as the inhabitable parts of Iceland. (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1988)

Sveinbjörn's article is a distinctive milestone in Icelandic historiography, for it gives support from a historian's perspective of the reappraisal of the historicity of the sagas that had occurred in the later 20th century in literary studies—although it should be said here that it was not at all Sveinbjörn's intention to support literary theory, which he complained of as appropriating the jurisdiction of the historians on the question of fact and fiction! Nevertheless Sveinbjörn articulates what may be said to be the dominant view at the end of the century, in spite of loud opposition from some quarters.⁶

- (say a few words about the existence today of the opposite view?)

This then is the crux of my problem. The dominant scholarly view today, both of historians and literary critics, is that *Islendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, and the Icelandic sagas are fictional accounts; and we can hardly conclude otherwise than that the writers of these works knew – at least at some level of consciousness – that they were fictional accounts. Historians such as Sveinbjörn Rafnsson make it quite clear that Ari the Wise was consciously fabricating his account. This raises certain unavoidable questions. If a writer of a fabricated narrative actively affirms the authority and truth-value of his narrative, as Ari does, what can be said of his integrity? What can be said of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries such as Snorri who emphasises his knowledge and integrity? (Snorri calls Ari *sannfróður*.)

Let us compare this with the present. It may seem to us that when an Icelandic politician makes a public statement to the effect, let us say, that there is

⁵ Grein Sveinbjarnar markar tímamót, því hann áréttar með sagnfræðilegum rökum þær bókmenntalegu efasemdir um sannleiksgildi íslendingasagna sem verið höfðu uppi síðan um miðbik 20. aldar. Það er þó ekki svo að hin bókmenntalega nálgun sé Sveinbirni að skapi, honum finnst hún troða sagnfræði um tær í viðleitni sinni til að hefja til vegs og virðingar skáldskapar- og listagildi sagnanna og veita þeim „forgang á undan sögu og sagnfræði og liðnum veruleika“ (324).

⁶ 99

no disagreement within his party as to a certain decision, when it is clear that certain members of his party have pointedly absented themselves from the meeting which made the decision – then we may perhaps conclude that he is lying. We may go on from there to make a distinction between certain types of lie: the blatant, conscious untruth is one, but there are also varying degrees of self-deception, of basing the so-called ‘truth’ on a limited choice of premises, or of discounting certain evident facts on the grounds that they are for some reason inadmissible or incorrectly formulated – or even that it that it would be unseemly, un-gentlemanlike or impolite to mention them. The unconscious desire is of course to stabilize and bring to order the chaos of the present. This we know is a feature of modern political manoeuvring, at least as we know it in Iceland, and I shall be returning at the end of this talk to the feature of inadmissibility in courts of law, of verdicts being passed in disregard of evidence which is deemed to have been incorrectly formulated in the legal process.

I think we should be very wary of assuming that Ari’s *sannara reynisk* might be of this order. Once again, this would be to assume, surely incorrectly, that the values of the late twentieth-century were also those of the fourteenth. One distinct difference immediately comes to mind: when the modern politician manipulates the premises for his statements of truth, he always has to contend with political opponents who see things differently. In Ari’s time, however, there were no such opponents. The voice of the original Norse and Irish settlers is silent, or can only be uncovered by contentious and disputed modern analysis.⁷ Ari’s discourse is still essential oral, and his eloquence serves to maintain the known order –as his words themselves also insist. Ari is committed to *correctness*, just as is the modern politician; in Ari’s day the difference is that there is no rival *correctness* to contend with.

I am of course extrapolating from the present, as I can hardly avoid doing, and if any later extrapolation should turn out to be better, then it should be accepted instead. But there are other ways of dealing with this problem. Analysis of the texts themselves can throw light on their meaning: much for instance can be learnt about the meaning of terms such as *sannleikur* ‘truth’ by studying their contexts in the sagas, and, following Owen Barfield, a lot can be learnt by looking into the etymology of the terms themselves.

A parallel to Saxo’s eloquent hero Eiricus is the Óðin of *Heimskringla* (

- what is the contemporary meaning of heimild? Locution and location, home as a marker of identity; home as the local centre, heimur as the whole centre: multivocal and multilocal

⁷ Pétur KNútsson qq

- finally: how much of this “difference” survives today?
- words such as heimild, concepts such as lögformleg correctness from the time of Njáls saga to the recent trials of the Bónus group
- (correct and kórrétt and kórvilla?)
-

<http://www.ditext.com/sellars/rc.html>

review of language and myth

correct is even more “correct” than ture, as is seen by its comparative forms (Chirac was more “correct” than Zarkosy) – note use of scare quotes)
right-angled, perpendicular, parallel

Importnt that the SEMEME <TRUE> in many languages seems to be bound up with the concept of acceptability: sannur maður. And in this form also it hardly allows of comparison: Þeir voru báðir sannir menn, en X var sá sannari”.

Hver er mismunur á sönnum islendingi og sannri sögu?

sanus sane

sanus has the same effect on sannur as feasible has on fýsilegur

etymologia: sönn merking“ - gr *eteos* sannur – mistranslation

hafa skal – what does this mean?

the contradiction between út til Íslands, heim til Íslands

Phil.4.8. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

de cetero fratres quaecumque sunt vera quaecumque pudica quaecumque iusta quaecumque sancta quaecumque amabilia quaecumque bonae famae si qua virtus si qua laus haec cogitate

John 8.7. It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true., (says Christ)

In the first place, it is hardly sensible systematically to disparage the readerly reality of eight centuries of Icelandic civilization, or to underplay the historical importance of such a reality on

the basis of a different, and yet somehow “more true” reality which was not mooted until fairly recently. If the development of cultures and civilizations is in any way causal, building on past realities, then it is at least as true to say that the any culture’s understanding of its past realities will be of crucial importance for this development

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