BmE

Separatum from:

SPECIAL ISSUE 18

Anna Katharina Heiniger (ed.)

Narrative Voices

Options and Limitations in Saga Literature

Published June 2025.

Senior Editors: Prof. Dr. Anja Becker (Bremen) and Prof. Dr. Albrecht Hausmann (Oldenburg).

http://www.erzaehlforschung.de – Kontakt: herausgeber@erzaehlforschung.de
ISSN 2568-9967

Suggested citation for this article:
O'Donoghue, Heather: Creating Time: The Saga Narrator as God, in: Heiniger, Anna Katharina (ed.): Narrative Voices: Options and Limitations in Saga Literature, Oldenburg 2025 (BmE Themenheft 18), S. 51–74 (online).

Heather O'Donoghue

Creating Time

The Saga Narrator as God

Abstract. We often perceive stories in a similar way to our real life: for a moment, man-made time is suspended, and we become part of a divine eternity in which we see the past, present, and future as a simultaneous whole. Boethius referred to this double temporality as *totum simul* (›all at once‹). The narrators of the Old Norse *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas) also adopt a *totum simul* perspective. In this way, they control both the narrative itself and the experience of the audience. The narrator thus actively shapes and curates the time of narration, a concept which Ricœur studied intensively. Despite their omniscience, the saga narrators rarely draw attention to themselves, and hardly intervene in a saga in a noticeable way. It is only when we are already familiar with a saga that it becomes possible to see how it has been shaped and directed by the narrator through various means.

The fundamental premise of this piece is that a text – in this case, a saga narrative – not only represents a stretch of time, that is, sets the story in some time frame or historical context, but also creates a stretch of time: that is, put at its simplest, the time it takes for an audience of readers or listeners to experience the narrative, the time the narrative takes up. It is in this sense that we can speak of a narrator, and perhaps ultimately an author, performing the divine act of creating time.[1] The French philosopher and literary theorist Paul Ricœur, in his monumental three-volume work ›Time and Narrative‹, explores this concept of a time constituted by narrative, which he calls the ›third time‹ of narrative.[2]

It is conventional to distinguish two opposing concepts of time. On the one hand, there is cosmological time, what Aristotle calls ›the time of the world‹, that is, time as measured by the detached and impartial movements of the cosmos – the sun measuring the passing of our days, the moon measuring our months, and so on. On the other hand, there is phenomenological time, time as experienced by the human mind: essentially, how it feels to live in time, which may seem to pass more slowly, or faster, or even, in times of drama or emergency, to stop altogether.[3] As an account of phenomenological or internal time, we might take St Augustine's celebrated meditations on the nature of time in Book XI of his ›Confessions‹. For Augustine, famously, this human experience of time renders the concept of time itself an inexplicable logical impossibility. Faced with what Ricœur calls an *aporia* in our experience of time – the past is no longer in existence, the future is not yet in existence, and the present has no duration, but is always already over – Augustine articulates the concept of the ›time of the soul‹, which comprises memory, expectation, and the present moment of attention.[4] This might be contrasted with an Aristotelian view of time that is measurable and has an existence independent of human consciousness – the ›time of the world‹.[5] But I want here to focus on another, linked, distinction, which rests not on how human time is defined (or not), but on what it is like to see it from the outside, on the one hand, and the inside, on the other.

There are two very different perspectives on human time, one supposedly divine and the other recognizably mundane. According to Boethius, God's perspective on human time allowed Him to apprehend human time as a whole, with its past, present, and future all co-existing at the same time: *totum simul*. Ricœur describes God's knowledge of the world as a perspective from which »the successive moments of all time are copresent in a single perception, as of a landscape of events«.[6] But for humans, living in time means that we may remember the past and live through the present, but the future is yet to take shape, and its shape is unknown to us. Somewhat

similarly, pre-human time is beyond our understanding, and furthermore, we cannot separate ourselves from time, to step outside its passage, as it were. The idea I want to work with here is that what Ricœur calls the third time of narrative allows us as the audience to apprehend the time produced by narrative from both a human and a quasi-divine perspective. In our engagement with any literary narrative – the process of listening to or reading a text – we can view the stretch-of-time-that-is-a-narrative either externally, as a discrete entity, or live through it and in it. This theory of Ricœur's is characterised by William Dowling (2011, p. 11) as the »double temporality of narrative«. We can apprehend the whole text as a piece of time, with its own past, present, and future existing simultaneously, and separable from its surroundings, either physically, in the shape of a book or manuscript, or conceptually, as a story we already know. This is easiest to understand if we think with the physical model of a book: its opening chapters and concluding pages are always there, between its covers. And just as Augustine imagined human time as nestled in and surrounded by God's eternal timelessness, so we can envisage a physical book or a finite story as part of, but readily separable from, its context in what we know as the ›real world‹. But when we pick up a book, or sit down to listen to a story, we can experience the third time of the narrative completely differently: we can live through the stretch of time represented by the text, much as we live through life itself, remembering what has passed, living in the present moment, and not knowing – but perhaps anticipating or speculating on – the future. Augustine re-figures the three logically impossible divisions of human time in ways that very distinctly recall the process of engaging with a narrative: as memory, attention, and expectation. Our present moment of attention is always on the move, making its way through the text like the dot on a karaoke screen.

From this brief exploration of the experience of a saga audience, I want now to turn to the role and stance of the saga narrator, crucial factors in our understanding of how the authors of family saga narratives create their

third time. This brings us to Wayne C. Booth's classic analysis of fictional narrative, ›The Rhetoric of Fiction‹ (1961). Chief among the techniques Booth collects under this head is the assumption of omniscience by the author, most obviously manifested by accounts of what characters are thinking and feeling – an illusion of privileged epistemic access, which cannot normally be known in the real world outside a fictional narrative.[7] Another major topic that might be included under the heading of fictional rhetoric (although the terminology varies from theorist to theorist) is focalisation – relating the narrative from the perspective of one of the characters in it (Genette 1980; Genette 1988). This, too, entails privileged epistemic access, and again offers the audience more information than could be known in a real world, although some of it might reasonably be surmised. The most prominent structural technique in fictional discourse is the transformation of *fabula* (the order in which events would have taken place if they had happened in a real world – roughly speaking, chronological order) into *sjuzhet* (the order of events as presented in the narrative itself). Other stylistic techniques include what Mieke Bal calls ›colouring‹ – the way an author guides reception of the text through, for example, telling adverbs – or more overt authorial comment on the narrative (Bal 2009, pp. 18 and 48).

Family saga narratives are strikingly low on all these characteristically fictional devices, although, by the same token, any deployment of what might collectively be known as the rhetoric of fiction is concomitantly significant (O'Donoghue 2004, pp. 34–36; O'Donoghue 2021, pp. 150–151). This does not of course mean that their substance is historical, rather than fictional, but only that their narrative mode is more like that of history than that of fiction. It also means that even without the withholding of crucial pieces of information, the saga reader or listener's present moment of attention is unusually under-informed. The reader or listener may learn more as he or she passes through the time of the narrative, but even at the end of the narrative, when a revelatory denouement might be expected, some

knowledge may remain unrevealed, as we shall see.[8] But the paradox of family saga narrative is that it scores very highly on narrativity – that is, readability, or the audience's engagement with the story and the ability and eagerness to follow it. I shall argue here that maintaining an audience's imperfect knowledge about character and event through the third time of narrative is a crucial aspect of the evident and even compelling narrativity of family sagas.

Family saga narrators are always extradiegetic, that is, they stand outside the story they are telling, and thus outside the time they are representing and creating. Like a Boethian divinity – but, importantly, rather unlike a conventional storyteller – they do not openly warn their audiences of what may be about to happen, and only on very rare occasions do they openly comment on their own narrative.[9] And yet, like our Boethian divinity, saga authors do know what is about to happen, and can see the stretch-of-time-which-is-a-narrative as a whole, from beginning to end.[10] My primary interest in this piece will be the degree to which saga narrators betray, reveal, or flaunt this quasi-divine knowledge of narrative future time, and how they offer or withhold information about it. But I want first to clarify what I will take ›saga narrator‹ to designate.

It is conventional, in literary criticism, to distinguish between the ›real‹ author of a text – the flesh-and-blood historical person, such as Charles Dickens or Mick Herron – and the narrator of the text, the voice we as listeners and readers hear in our heads telling the story. I have never found this to be a useful distinction in saga studies. The extradiegetic narrator of the saga is not part of the story, and so not a fictional personage created by the saga author (unlike, say, David Copperfield). There is, furthermore, very little sense of an individual personality attaching to the voice we hear transmitting the story to us. And the ›real‹ flesh-and-blood author is anonymous and irrecoverable, and so hard to imagine or to distinguish from the narrator. Ricœur's definition of a narrator, the »projection of a unifying consciousness existing independently of the words on the page«, whom we

identify as the »abstract unity of consciousness« transmitting the story to us, is especially useful here (Dowling 2011, p. 97). I will use the familiar terms ›saga author‹ and ›saga narrator‹ more or less interchangeably, the former when fundamental issues about the narrative are being discussed, the latter when it is more a matter of the style or a detailed focus on the actual mechanics of the telling.

The saga author has a stance very like the Boethian *totum simul* perspective on the time that is the saga text. They know at the beginning of the saga what its end will be. This is partly because they are creating the text; the saga author has control over it as its author. But there may also be some aspects of the story which are known because they are historical fact or established, incontrovertible tradition, and not the fictional creation of the saga author: Njáll was burnt inside his farmhouse, for example, as, we may assume, many people knew then, and readers know now. So we have another crucial distinction to draw: between those who know the story – the narrator, and those who are already familiar with some version of this saga, or the events it may be based upon – and those who are experiencing it or hearing about it for the first time. What particularly interests me about the duality is the stark contrast between the two in terms of the reader or listener's knowledge of event or character in the narrative. The *totum simul* allows for full knowledge of whatever is contained in the narrative as a whole. In almost all cases, this is what the author of the narrative knows.[11] First-time readers or listeners can envisage – and may actually look forward to – being in this position in due course, but will not actually occupy it until they come to the end of the narrative. Moving through the narrative on the present moment of attention, then, the first-time reader or listener will be moving in a state of what Ricœur (1984, pp. 70–87) calls imperfect or unfulfilled knowledge. Clearly, this knowledge is primarily imperfect because the end of the narrative has not been reached. But knowledge may also be imperfect because the author or narrator is withholding knowledge

that a reader or listener might otherwise expect to have at some particular stage in the narrative.

So, as I have explained, I want to look at how much *totum simul* knowledge the saga author decides to share with the reader or listener, not forgetting how much difference there might be between the experience of those who know the story – the author, and an audience informed at least to some extent – and those readers and listeners who are living through the time of the narrative for the first time.

One final point: the saga author's quasi-divine perspective on the narrative is not the only privileged knowledge they have. As we have seen, as omniscient narrators, they ›know‹ – or choose – not only what will happen, but also what motivates their characters, and what their characters are thinking, simply because these characters are to some extent their own creations. In literary criticism, the term ›omniscient narrator‹ tends to be used of narrators who actively and habitually (and sometimes annoyingly!) display this privileged epistemic access to the inner lives of their characters. But the conventional wisdom is that saga authors do not intervene in the narrative to pass comment on the text or tell us what characters are thinking. So what we are dealing with here is omniscient narrators who nevertheless tell the story as if they know no more than anyone else what will happen or what characters think. The result of this is that the experience of the audience can be surprisingly like how real-world people live through real-world time, not knowing what is about to happen, or what those around them think, privately, about it.

Now in fact, most saga authors do betray their omniscience, but in fascinatingly oblique ways. For example, they may displace judgements on to other characters in the story, using formulations along the lines of: »Everyone thought this was a bad thing to have done«; «She said that no good would come of it«. This in itself is a very rewarding and revealing area of study, but it is not my primary concern here. There are also some extremely interesting examples – in ›Hrafnkels saga‹, especially – in which the saga

author does tell us what characters are thinking, to extraordinary effect; I have argued elsewhere that this decisively and dramatically controls and suppresses audience speculation about character and event, which is more usually encouraged by saga authors, in the distinctive absence of narratorial comment or explanation.[12] But what I am interested in here are the effects created when omniscient narrators withhold from their audiences matters of fact that, because of that actual, if unexpressed, omniscience, they could have known, and might therefore have revealed. And as we shall see, this act of withholding information may have the effect of drawing the audience into speculation (and, although I hate to speculate about actual saga-age audiences, possibly even discussion and argument). This withholding strategy also raises the question of how an audience familiar with the events of the saga may respond differently to an audience hearing a version of it for the first time. The difference in response is particularly important in saga narratives, because of the high likelihood that an audience will be familiar with the outlines of saga stories. This is partly due to the degree of historicity in the events related, and partly because of what we (as modern scholars) usually assume to be a high degree of familiarity with the material of saga narrative – fictional and/or historical – amongst a medieval Icelandic audience. It is perhaps worth noting here that family sagas are not novels, whose very name alludes to the new fictions from which they are made, even though they seem to resemble novels in being extended naturalistic prose narratives about people in society. In fact, not only the events, but also the characters, topography, *mores,* material culture, and indeed fictional rhetoric of family sagas are likely to have been familiar to medieval Icelandic audiences.

I propose to focus on three questions, two from ›Laxdœla saga‹ and a third from ›Gísla saga‹:[13]

1. Who is the mysterious female slave Höskuldr buys?
2. Who stole Hrefna's headdress?
3. Who killed Vésteinn?

Although the first question is ultimately answered in the narrative, the narrator never provides an answer to the remaining two. But my interest is not to suggest answers to these questions, but rather to explore firstly how the saga narrator contrives to manage the narrative in a way that avoids answering these questions, and then, perhaps more intriguingly, to explore the effect of not telling us, with, as I have said, an eye to how our experience may change if we already know the story.

1. Who is the Mysterious Slave Höskuldr Buys?

In chapter 12 of ›Laxdœla saga‹, we see Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson at a big trading market associated with a royal assembly in Norway. Looking around with a group of companions, Höskuldr stops at the imposing tent of a Russian merchant called Gilli. Interestingly, this episode is focalised through Höskuldr: *sá hann tjáld eitt* (ÍF 5, p. 22; ›he saw a certain tent‹) and entered it, and when the curtain is drawn back, *Sá Höskuldr, at tólf konur sátu fyrir innan tjáldit* (ÍF 5, p. 23; ›Höskuldr saw that twelve women were sitting inside the tent‹).[14] He carefully scrutinises one of the women Gilli has on sale. As is often the (unremarked) case in family saga narrative, the saga author is not simply describing the scene in the narrative voice, but rather telling us what Höskuldr himself observed. Although such internal focalisation is usually understood as affording us an artificially extended viewpoint, in some cases, our view is actually restricted if the character is blinkered or unreliable in judgement, because the narrative is limited to his or her perception of what is happening. There is also an interesting physical limitation: we can only see what one individual might have in visual range. In this episode, we are drawn right into Gilli's tent via Höskuldr's individual visual perspective, but the degree to which we can trust the situation as focalised through him naturally depends on the degree to which we trust him as a character. And Höskuldr is not an exemplary protagonist, as we shall see from what follows.

Höskuldr challenges Gilli to provide him with anything he might want to buy, and, when invited to elaborate, specifies a slave woman. Gilli implies that Höskuldr does not really want a slave woman, but is only showing off in front of his companions, making himself look impressive by asking for something the trader does not have. Their conversation is completely unmediated by the saga author, so it is left to us to judge whether Gilli's interpretation is unfair, or whether Höskuldr is indeed just showing off. Höskuldr is not a wholly impercipient character: he judges the woman he is scrutinising to be good-looking in spite of her shabby dress, and spots at once that the price Gilli is asking is extortionate. He is not completely the innocent abroad. Nevertheless, our confidence in Höskuldr's judgement is at least a little shaken by Gilli apparently calling his bluff, and their next exchange increases any doubts we might have. Gilli offers Höskuldr a cheaper slave woman, but Höskuldr – perhaps stung by Gilli's insinuation that he is not rich enough to buy the woman he has taken a fancy to – ignores the offer and waves his purse in the merchant's face. In response, Gilli warns Höskuldr that the woman cannot speak. Höskuldr again ignores Gilli and simply presses him to weigh the silver in his purse. We may read this as Höskuldr's fixation with proving that he is a man with enough money to buy even the most expensive slave woman. But the saga author leaves us with an important question unanswered: why has Gilli put such a high price on her if she cannot speak – a failure that Gilli himself calls a major flaw? Neither the saga author nor his focaliser Höskuldr – his narrative stand-in – addresses this.

It is also rather difficult to read a moral dimension to this episode – as is often the case with saga narratives. It is hard to know what a contemporary audience might have thought about a married man like Höskuldr buying, and sleeping with, a slave woman. Any disapproval we might feel may be simply anachronistic. The issue is not raised explicitly at this point in the narrative, and indeed we might even have forgotten about Höskuldr's wife Jórunn back in Iceland, were it not for Höskuldr's ostentatious action

in dressing the slave woman in some fine women's clothes from a chest – surely clothes he planned to take back to Iceland for his wife. But the appearance of the slave woman in rich clothes serves another purpose. The saga author now presents the slave woman not from his own or from Höskuldr's perspective, but in the displaced judgement of public opinion: *var þat ok allra manna mál, at henni semði góð klæði* (ÍF 5, pp. 24–25; ›and everyone said that fine clothing suited her‹). This is of course a significant, if oblique, clue to her identity – she does not look like a slave woman in fancy dress – but the saga author manages to avoid intruding with his own opinion, while maintaining Höskuldr's ignorance. We – if we are a first-time audience – are kept in a tantalising state of what Ricœur calls imperfect knowledge. It is not until later in the saga that the identity of Höskuldr's mysteriously over-priced slave woman is revealed. The information is withheld by means of Melkorka's elective mutism – her refusal to talk. This contrivance is played off against the clues about her real identity, which are carefully placed in the narrative. The pleasure is different, but perhaps not less, if we know the story in advance; we can enjoy knowing more than some of the characters, and sharing the knowledge of others – in this case, Melkorka – who are empowered by their control of silence. A first-time audience shares Höskuldr's ignorance; those who know the story share what has not been expressed in the diegesis: the superior knowledge of Melkorka.

We are never told why Gilli priced Melkorka so highly. Perhaps he knew her real identity (and would have disclosed it if Höskuldr had asked, rather than being distracted by showing off how much silver he had). Perhaps he wanted to keep her for himself – or not give her to this Icelandic show-off. Perhaps the saga author expected his original audience to know the answer, and felt he did not need to spell it out. Perhaps he simply forgot to tell us. I am well aware that speculation about what is not stated in the narrative contravenes the usual literary critical strictures laid down by most narrative analysts.[15] But I would argue that precisely because of the saga author's

withholding of knowledge, such speculative responses are not only justified, but even required. I would argue that this implicit invitation to speculate is a consistent and characteristic feature of family saga narrative, and part of the way the audience is drawn in to engage with the narrative in the absence of the conventional rhetorical devices of fiction. The sheer volume of unanswered questions throughout family saga narrative strongly suggests that keeping the audience in a state of imperfect knowledge by withholding crucial information is a purposeful literary technique in the Icelandic family saga, whether as a device for enlisting audience engagement or as an aspect of emplotment.

Before leaving the story of Melkorka, it is worth noting that although the revelation to Höskuldr of her real identity and history, as a beautifully crafted narrative scene, constitutes a sort of closure, it nonetheless does not actually bring this particular storyline to a conclusion. The narrative continues with Höskuldr in turn revealing Melkorka's identity to his wife Jórunn, the tension it creates in their household, and ultimately the birth of the character on whom the saga narrative focuses as its dominant protagonist, Melkorka and Höskuldr's son Óláfr. The onward progress of the narrative – like life – continues, and is not tidied away like a plot.

2. Who Stole Hrefna's Headdress?

I want now to consider another instance in ›Laxdœla saga‹ of knowledge conspicuously withheld by the saga author.[16] Before Kjartan Óláfsson travels to Norway with his foster-brother and cousin Bolli Þorleiksson, in chapter 40, he quarrels with his prospective bride Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who accuses him of having made the decision to go abroad too hastily, and is evidently angry that he has failed to consult her. He promises to do anything else she might want, and at once she asks to go abroad with him, which he flatly refuses. He asks her to wait three years for him, but she will not promise. The narrative silence that hangs over the eventual outcome of

Kjartan's trip to Norway – essentially, his failure to return within the three years and, more especially, his failure to send a message back to Guðrún to explain or excuse his delay – prompts us to supply some speculation of our own about Kjartan's double shortfall. Perhaps he was, as Bolli accuses him, distracted by his relationship with the beautiful Princess Ingibjörg, and did not want to tell Guðrún about it. Perhaps, irritated or ashamed by Bolli's jibe about his relationship with Ingibjörg, he chose not to entrust Bolli with a personal message for Guðrún. Perhaps he is simply too proud to concede to an obligation to which Guðrún herself has refused to agree. Without the guiding voice of the narrator, Kjartan's unspoken motivation remains a matter for speculation – part of the characteristic reading or listening experience of saga narrative. This is not the kind of withheld information that, over time, we will get to know; it will remain an unarticulated subtext. Our interpretation of Kjartan's silence will depend on, or form, our view of his character, something that, in other literary genres, we might expect an author to suggest to us or guide us to, either at the time or in due course.

Before Kjartan leaves Norway for Iceland, Princess Ingibjörg gives him a lavishly decorated gold headdress, instructing him to offer it to Guðrún as a wedding gift (ÍF 5, p. 131). We have not – until now – been told that she knows about Kjartan's informal betrothal to Guðrún. Kjartan and his friend Kálfr duly return to Iceland, and on arrival, Kálfr tells his sister Hrefna that she can have anything she likes from the goods he has brought back from Norway; Kjartan tells his sister Þuríðr the same. But the weather suddenly turns bad, and the two men are urgently called away to make their ship secure. At the very moment of their return to the farm, Hrefna has discovered and is trying on the golden headdress. When Kjartan sees Hrefna in the headdress, he remarks that it suits her, and that perhaps he should own both the headdress and the woman.

Whilst these two moments of chance coincidence – the men being called away, and returning just as Hrefna has donned the headdress – give the narrative a degree of drama and immediacy, they are not strictly necessary

for the furtherance of the sequence of events in the saga. Nothing could be more natural – inevitable, even – than for Kjartan to marry the sister of his best friend, given that Guðrún has apparently rebuffed him by marrying Bolli. But now the headdress is a potent symbol of Kjartan's betrayal of Guðrún, and her jealousy of Hrefna.

Kjartan duly marries Hrefna, and at a feast at his father's farm, Guðrún, again by chance coincidence, hears Kjartan organising the seating at the feast so that Hrefna will be placed in the seat of honour – a place which Guðrún felt to be rightfully hers. The attention here is sharply focused on Guðrún and Kjartan: *Guðrún heyrði þetta ok leit til Kjartans ok brá lit, en svarar engu* (ÍF 5, p. 139; ›Guðrún heard this, and looked at Kjartan, and changed colour [i.e. flushed], but makes no comment‹). Again, this tense scene has no actual causal function; Guðrún might just as well have got to hear from someone else that Hrefna had been given the high seat, or even found out when the guests sat down to the feast. But by creating another moment of coincidence, the saga author has directed our attention to the private – and again, unspoken – relationship between Kjartan and Guðrún.

Similarly, the next day Guðrún asks Hrefna to put on the headdress. Again by chance, Kjartan happens to be passing, and forbids his wife to wear it. We can speculate about why Guðrún wants her rival to wear the headdress, but we are not told. But the next day, Guðrún asks Hrefna to show her the headdress in private. This is a significant violation of Kjartan's prohibition: he has told Hrefna not to wear the headdress because he does not want it to be regarded as *augnagaman* (ÍF 5, p. 140; ›something for people to gape at‹). Hrefna shows Guðrún the headdress, however, and Guðrún looks at it but says nothing. Shortly after, Hrefna is urged by Kjartan's mother to take the headdress to a return feast at Laugar, where Bolli and Guðrún live. The headdress is carefully stored away when they arrive, but the next morning, it has disappeared.

Of course, although we are not told who stole the headdress, the identity of the culprit is obvious. Guðrún has made plain her jealousy of Hrefna. She

has not commented on the excellence of the treasure, nor expressed any wish that she had it, but we do not need any explicit acknowledgement of this to identify her as the culprit. We might note that in asking to see the headdress, she has also conveniently found out exactly where it was kept. She unhelpfully and unconvincingly suggests that maybe Hrefna left it at home, or lost it as she travelled to Laugar – even though the saga author specifically states that the headdress had gone from the place in which Hrefna had put it. Finally, in an indirect confession, she alludes to the possibility that someone from Laugar may have taken the headdress, but that in doing so, they have only taken back what properly belonged to them, and furthermore that she herself is pleased that Hrefna has been deprived of it. Significantly, however, no one accuses Guðrún of the theft, and although we are not told directly by the narrator what became of the headdress, *þat höfðu margir men fyrir satt* (ÍF 5, p. 144; ›many people believed‹) that Guðrún's brother Þórólfr burned it on his sister's instructions. The saga author has again displaced what would otherwise be authorial judgement on to what is claimed to be popular opinion.

Before moving on to my final example, it may be worth pausing to summarise the various effects of these two rather different narratorial silences. There is no open indication in the saga of Melkorka's identity until the narrator reveals it. By contrast, it is made perfectly clear who has stolen the headdress. One might also note that there is no other obvious suspect. We do not need to be told who the culprit is, but the narrator nevertheless withholds the information. Possibly, using this narrative silence protects the saga author from making a direct accusation against a figure with whom some of his original audience might have had ancestral kinship. And yet silence is maintained about a number of issues throughout the family sagas (Aune 2015; O'Donoghue 2005, pp. 36–179; O'Donoghue 2021, pp. 153–182). I would argue that, through these carefully maintained silences, the saga author is putting his audience in the same position as the characters in the narrative. Like Höskuldr, we do not know who the overpriced slave

woman is until the revelation later in the narrative. And like the guests and hosts at Laugar, we know very well who has stolen the headdress, but the culprit is not named, either in the storyworld or by the narrator. In effect, we are living through the third time of narrative along with the characters, sharing their own imperfect knowledge and experiencing the passage of events with them. But in the first instance, the information about Melkorka's identity is only withheld for a time, so there's a big difference in the experience of those who do not know the story and those who do. As I have said, those who do not know the story will experience the familiar literary pleasure of revelation, a key element in emplotment, while those who do can enjoy watching or hearing about Melkorka's power over Höskuldr, and knowing more than he does about what is going on. In the second instance, our knowledge is never explicitly perfected, so it does not matter how many times we hear or read the story; our response is the same.

And finally, I think it is quite remarkable that in both of these instances, the saga author has re-worked the same narrative dynamic: male travellers to Norway returning to Iceland with rich female attire that ends up with the ›wrong‹ woman. The apparent naturalism of saga narrative, which an audience is steered towards accepting largely because of the way saga narrators recount their stories in matter-of-fact, non-novelistic, and apparently self-effacing style, in fact disguises a very high degree of artifice, thematic echoing, and what I have elsewhere called *figura* (O'Donoghue 2018).

3. Who Killed Vésteinn?

There is, as I have said, only one suspect in the case of the stolen headdress. But in ›Gísla saga‹, there are two prime suspects for the killing of Gísli's brother-in-law Vésteinn, and again, the saga author creates a careful and highly effective balance between withholding and disclosing the identity of the killer. We are never told whether it was Gísli's brother Þorkell or their brother-in-law Þorgrímr who killed Vésteinn, and in this case, there is no

obvious inference to be made about which of the two was the culprit. In ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, we are casually and openly told in passing that Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn (ÍF 4, p. 20); that Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn; it is tempting to suppose that the author of ›Gísla saga‹ has by contrast purposefully maintained a non-committal stance in order to create the kind of imperfect knowledge I have been discussing so far.[17] I shall therefore look particularly closely at how the saga author creates and maintains the uncertainty, and what effect the non-disclosure of the culprit has, both inside and outside the storyworld.

The killing of Vésteinn is presented from the outset as being so inevitable as to be predestined. Everybody predicts trouble every step of the way. Gísli resigns himself to the apparent inevitability of some unspecified fate: *ok þat mun fram koma, sem auðit vera* (ÍF 6, p. 34; ›and whatever is meant to happen will happen‹). When Vésteinn returns to Iceland from abroad, he makes his way to Gísli, but hearing of Vésteinn's arrival, Gísli sends out an agreed warning – one half of a coin – and the saga author elaborately demonstrates the truth of what Gísli has maintained about fate: that it cannot be averted. Vésteinn at first narrowly misses the messengers with the token – but is delayed on his journey, and they manage to catch up with him and present the half-coin. Vésteinn, however, is fatalistic in his turn: he says that if they had met him the first time, he would have heeded the warning, but ›*nú falla vötn öll til Dýrafjarðar*‹ (ÍF 6, p. 40; »now all waters flow down towards Dýrafjörðr«), and he continues on to Gísli. Three times along the way, he is warned of the danger, even though there has been no indication that violence is being planned. It is notable that there have been no direct threats, insults, or skirmishes, just a heavy and unshakeable sense of tragedy ahead.

It has only very recently occurred to me that insistently blaming Vésteinn's death on fate, instead of providing a specific motivating incident, is another contrivance for concealing the identity of the murderer: no spe-

cific motive, no evident suspect. The saga author next produces a conspicuous silence: Gísli refuses to tell anyone what his recent nightmares have been about. And then Vésteinn is murdered in his bed; the grammatical structure of the subjectless sentence allows the narrator to describe the killing without giving the least hint about the identity of the killer: *Nú er gengit inn nökkut* (ÍF 6, p. 43; ›now [the farmhouse] is entered somehow‹).

The obvious suspects are either Þorgrímr or Þorkell. As we have seen, Þorkell's jealousy of Vésteinn would provide a motive, but without any intervening move or threat from him, the connexion to overhearing his wife's early fondness for Vésteinn seems a tenuous one. Gísli's wife Auðr urges a cowardly slave to pull the lethal spear out of Vésteinn's body, and she might have had some legal reason to do this; the narrator claims that at the time the person who withdrew a weapon was obliged to take on the revenge (ÍF 6, p. 44). Gísli claims he learned the identity of the murderer in his bad dreams – so any vengeance taken by Gísli would reveal that identity; perhaps Auðr realises this and that is why she wanted the slave to be legally committed to take vengeance. Certainly, Gísli shows that he knows it was one of the two, Þorkell or Þorgrímr, for he immediately sends his foster-daughter over to Sæból, the farm they share; she reports back that the men in the household are all fully armed and on the alert – just as, Gísli says, he expected. But only Þorgrímr speaks: to ask for news that, we must presume, he already knows. When he is told of Vésteinn's death, Þorkell wryly implies that this is not news – *›Tíðendi myndi oss þat hafa þótt eina stund‹* (ÍF 6, p. 45; »There was a time when we would have regarded that as news«) – but stops short of admitting that he already knows; he could conceivably be referring simply to the generally accepted fateful inevitability of what has happened.

Þorgrímr responds in a dignified and apparently wholly proper way, calling Vésteinn's death a great loss, and helping with the funerary rites (ÍF 6, p. 46). Is this astonishing hypocrisy? Most remarkably in the narrative, we are told that he sits and talks with Gísli beside the gravemound, and

they both agree that it is *allólíkliga, at nökkurr viti, hverr þenna glœp hefir gört* (ÍF 6, p. 46; ›highly unlikely that anyone will know who committed this crime‹). Is this a covert agreement to let the identity of the murderer lie? In the absence of open naming of the perpetrator, we are left with Gísli's claim to know, and he makes it clear to his brother Þorkell that he knows. Þorkell asks how Gísli's wife Auðr is taking the loss of her brother. Why does he want to know this? In the narrative itself, Gísli makes it clear what an inappropriate enquiry this is: ›*Opt spyrr þú þessa, frændi* [...] *ok er þér mikil forvitni á at vita þetta*‹ (ÍF 6, p. 47; »You keep asking this, brother [...] and you are very curious to know [the answer]«). Does Þorkell perhaps keep on asking because he needs to know whether Auðr, as the only possible witness to Vésteinn's death, has revealed the identity of the intruder, and accused him of the murder?

All these unspoken – and, in fact, unsayable – resentments and suspicions are ostensibly set aside when Þorkell and Gísli agree to behave as if nothing has happened. Is this because it is in both their interests that Þorkell should not be revealed as the murderer? A subsequent ball game is a symbolic rehearsal of the murder and due vengeance sequence. Gísli brings Þorgrímr to the ground with a vicious tackle, and Þorgrímr fixes his gaze on Vésteinn's burial mound and recites two lines: ›*kannkat þat lasta*‹ (ÍF 6, p. 50; »I cannot find fault with that«), the implication being ›I'm not sorry‹. Gísli then knocks Þorgrímr to the ground and repeats the same phrase. This is structured as and looks like a perfect tit-for-tat exchange, but in fact, there is no actual admission or accusation of guilt. Þorkell rushes in to defuse the situation, but this could be because he does not want an escalation which might in the heat of the moment lead to the revelation of either himself or Þorgrímr as the murderer. In the end, Gísli does murder Þorgrímr, but after their increasingly acrimonious dealings, this does not completely convince as unequivocally revealing Þorgrímr as the killer. Finally, much later on in the saga, the sons of Vésteinn carry out a bold re-

venge attack on Gísli's brother Þorkell (ÍF 6, pp. 90–91). Does this implicitly identify Þorkell as Vésteinn's murderer – an identification Gísli could never openly make, because after all, the fraternal bond, however fragile, is ultimately sacrosanct?

There have been several attempts by saga scholars to make a case for one or other of the two suspects as being the culprit. My interest here is not to identify the culprit, but to consider how and why it is that his identity is withheld from the saga audience. What is very clear is that the saga author has gone to a great deal of effort to create and maintain ambivalence. What is the effect withholding the identity of the murderer? Most obviously, the saga author is again engaging the audience in speculation about the narrative and the motives of the characters in it. Knowing the story in advance only deepens our connection with it, since, as with the story of Hrefna's headdress, there is no revelation. The saga author takes us deep into the third time of narrative, forcing us to slow or even halt our forward movement through its time, and to reach further into the complexity of the characters' interrelationships. And as with the scandal of Hrefna's headdress in ›Laxdœla saga‹, we can experience from the characters' perspective the social and psychological necessity of silence – of not making open accusations, but living with suspicion and doubt, rather than bringing matters to a head, from which there may be no return. I would like to propose a thought experiment: imagine a narrative which identified either Þorkell or Þorgrímr as the murderer. Significantly, it hardly matters to the course of the narrative which of them is named. The psychological depth of the narrative is reduced either way once the implicit invitation to speculate is removed. I would argue that the saga author's aim here is to convey the experience of living in a tightly-knit – as I have described it elsewhere, over-bonded – community (O'Donoghue 2005, p. 142), in which theft or murder is such a dangerous threat to society that its perpetrators cannot be named. For the narrator to break the silence would be to cut off the saga audience from that experience, to present it from the outside.

So, to return to Ricœur's double temporality, readers or listeners may imagine a saga narrative as a block of time, presented as a *totum simul,* but they may also experience the passage of this third time along with the characters. Ricœur calls this process »a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit a world foreign to us« (Ricœur 1984, vol. II, p. 149). Further, this third time of narrative provides a decidedly collective experience – it is always available, and ideally it causes a sort of alteration of consciousness – a gradual or sudden insight into what the world looks like to others, and an insight that will stay with us (Dowling 2011, p. 51). For an original Icelandic audience, living through the third time of saga narrative must have created a sense of extraordinarily close engagement with their forebears, and even today, the distinctive narrative strategies of the *Íslendingasögur* seem to bring us very near to figures from a distant past.

Notes

1 What follows here is based on ideas explained more fully in my book ›Narrative in the Icelandic Family Saga: Meanings of Time in Old Norse Literature‹ (2021). The analyses of three family saga episodes are taken from chapter 5 of that book ›Withheld Knowledge‹ (pp. 153–182).

2 Paul Ricœur developed his theories of narrative time across three volumes entitled ›Temps et Récit‹ (1983). All three volumes were translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer as ›Time and Narrative‹ (1984). All references in this piece are to that translation (Vol. III, p. 245).

3 In a very useful short piece on time in saga literature, Carl Phelpstead considers other more recent concepts of time, such as Einstein's theory of relativity. See his chapter entitled ›Time‹ (2017).

4 For Ricœur's exhaustive analysis of Augustine on time, see ›Time and Narrative‹ Vol. I, chapter I, ›The Aporias of the Experience of Time: Book II of Augustine's Confessions‹ (pp. 5–30).

5 ›Time and Narrative‹ Vol. III, Section I, ›The Time of the Soul and the Time of the World: The Dispute between Augustine and Aristotle‹, pp. 12–22). For an account of Aristotle's views on time in his ›Physics‹, see Coope 2005.

6 For Ricœur's views on Boethius's *totum simul*, quoting the work of Louis O. Mink, see ›Time and Narrative‹ Vol. I, p. 160 ff.

7 For a fascinating exploration of the religious concept of privileged epistemic access and its application to the literary detective story, see Carney 2014.

8 ›Withholding‹ and ›revealing‹ are not ideal terms to use, since they presuppose the existence of a prior reality, while in a fictional or semi-fictional narrative, all may be invented. What the author is actually doing is creating an item of non-knowledge. But the clumsiness of the resulting formulae makes otherwise unsatisfactory terms preferable.

9 In marked contrast to, for example, the poet of ›Beowulf‹, who frequently alludes to a usually doom-laden narrative future. Open negative foreshadowing is also quite common in the Middle High German ›Nibelungenlied‹.

10 Unless you believe (as I do not) authors who claim not to know what will happen to their characters, or how the story will end.

11 See note 10.

12 I discuss both of these issues in ›Narrative and the Icelandic Family Saga‹, in the chapter entitled ›The Voice of the Silent Narrator‹.

13 These two sagas are both family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), and as such are naturalistic accounts of society in the Saga Age, that is, the lives of the first few generations after the settlement of Iceland in 870. ›Laxdœla saga‹ follows the fortunes of several Icelandic settler families who jostle for power, prestige, and prosperity. Rather differently, ›Gísla saga‹ focuses more narrowly on its antihero Gísli, who murders his sister's husband in revenge for the killing of his wife's brother, Vésteinn, and is sentenced to live as an outlaw in Iceland.

14 All further references to this and other family sagas are to Íslenzk fornrit editions, as specified. Translations are my own.

15 Speculation most famously mocked by L.C. Knights in his essay (1964).

16 For a useful account of the theory of conspicuous silences in narrative, see Ruth Rosaler 2016. It is worth attending to a distinction in saga narrative between instances in which the narrator explicitly draws attention to the act of withholding, and unremarked omissions. In Rosaler's work, any silence evident to the reader is designated as conspicuous.

17 Sagas often deal with the same stock of narrative material and historical events. In the case of ›Gísla saga‹ and ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, both sagas mention Þorgrímr's son, Snorri goði, in some capacity, and both sagas relate to the same event. It is not possible, however, to establish a chronological priority. The absolute dating

of surviving versions of family sagas is almost impossible, with even relative dating being uncertain because of the unknowability of the possible oral versions of sagas. My suggestion here is that some story – oral or written – about who killed Vésteinn was in existence, and that the author of ›Gísla saga‹ chooses to retell it while withholding the identity of the killer, unlike the author of ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, who choose to reveal it.

References

Primary sources

ÍF 4 = Eyrbyggja saga, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Reykjavík 1935 (Íslenzk fornrit 4).

ÍF 5 = Laxdœla saga, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Reykjavík 1934 (Íslenzk fornrit 5).

ÍF 6 = Vestfirðinga sögur, edited by Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík 1943 (Íslenzk fornrit 6).

Secondary sources

Aune, J. E.: Silence and Power: Silence in ›Egils saga‹, ›Laxdœla saga‹, and ›Njáls saga‹, unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Madison), Madison 2015.

Bal, Mieke: Narratology, 3rd ed., Toronto 2009.

Booth, Wayne C.: The Rhetoric of Fiction, Chicago 1961.

Carney, James: Supernatural Intuitions and Classic Detective Fiction. A Cognitivist Appraisal, in: Style 48:2 (2014), pp. 203–218.

Coope, Ursula: Time for Aristotle. ›Physics‹ IV.10–14, Oxford 2005.

Dowling, William C.: Ricœur on Time and Narrative, Notre Dame 2011.

Knights, L. C.: How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism, in: Knights, L. C.: Explorations. Essays in Criticism, Mainly on the Literature of the Seventeenth Century, New York 1964, pp. 15–54.

O'Donoghue, Heather: Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Short Introduction, Oxford 2004.

O'Donoghue, Heather: Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative, Oxford 2005.

O'Donoghue, Heather: Figura in ›Njáls saga‹. The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture 2018, in: Saga-Book 42 (2018), pp. 156–158.

O'Donoghue, Heather: Narrative in the Icelandic Family Saga. Meanings of Time in Old Norse Literature, London 2021.

Phelpstead, Carl: Time, in: Ármann Jakobsson/Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, Abingdon 2017, pp. 187–197.

Ricœur, Paul: Temps et Récit, Paris 1983.

Ricœur, Paul: Time and Narrative, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago 1984.

Rosaler, Ruth: Conspicuous Silence. Implicature and Fictionality in the Victorian Novel, Oxford 2016.

Author's Address:

Heather O'Donoghue
Linacre College, University of Oxford
St Cross Rd
Oxford
OX1 3JA
United Kingdom
e-mail: heather.odonoghue@linacre.ox.ac.uk