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Home, home in the Dales: the dialogism of toponymy in *Laxdæla*.

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

By toponymy of course, the naming of places and the creation thereby of indices, pointers to extratextual reality. This is a remarkable manoeuvre, a method of mapping reality into a text while leaving the text intact, untouched with reality; we come to understand this movement when we become literate, and very soon forget that it is a manoeuvre at all. The name Helgafell, the Holy Mount, is not open to discussion, it brackets off as inadequate a whole encomium: you have to go there, in all weathers, to know what it means, and listen to the silence—or rather the absence of language—which alone expresses the meaning of Helgafell. The text—in our case *Laxdæla saga*—is full of hints and indications towards this silence, expressions of human motions and emotions grounded in the named places; but the names themselves are not essentially extratextual indices, for they work primarily within the text, structuring the narrative; they are intratextual rather than extratextual. And it is as intratextualities that they sustain one of the fundamental linguistic aspects of the dialogic between I and the Other: “Writing marks space, and creates the very idea of distance” to quote Charles Lock in a recent essay.¹ The space is marked by terms such as *home*, *here*, *outwards*, *east* and *south*, terms which appear to have a single locution and a single location: that of the speaker. What is *home* to you is way down the valley for me; we are two Others who can nevertheless speak together.

The Icelandic family sagas are impressively topographical texts. They might aptly be called the Home Sagas: 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*: Egill glided eastwards for Ölrún? Eastwards is good, but from where and how far?² Or take

¹ The Writing of Elsewhere’: Nigerian echoes and reflections’ in *Literary Research/Recherche littéraire* (2004)

² *Völundarkviða* 4-5:
Austur skreið Egill at Ölrúnu
en suður Slagfiður að Svanhvítu

Beowulf: no easy task to map out the path from Heorot to the hellish lake on the moors which was home to Grendel; the description is vivid enough, but we are hard put to locate it in modern Denmark. Or Homer: aren't we still looking for Troy? 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 unusable: the place names have become twisted by time, the directions have changed, the boundaries shifted, the modern Ordnance Survey maps triangulate a different landscape. — And yet in the Icelandic sagas the events can usually be followed on a modern map, step by step, farm by farm, and the same names now scroll down the GPS screen. Follow the valley up three farms, turn right at the waterfall, strike north-east up the hillside and there is the knoll where the brothers lay in ambush.

So where is home, when it appears, as it so often does, in *Laxdæla saga*? Which voice speaks the word? A text is pegged down into its geographical or textual environment with voices speaking names, naming places, or plucking chords in other texts: these are its intratextual, extratextual and intertextual indexicalities. 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, just as with a citation from another text, the question must arise: who spoke? who indicated this connection? I want to use as an introductory example an intertextual linkage 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 solid account of the Irish element in the early settlement history of Breiðarfjörður and the Dales. The non-eponymous heroine of the saga, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir (none of the Icelandic sagas are named after women) is surrounded by Irish names and characters; she is fatefully betrothed to a man of Irish extraction whose father was bilingual in Irish and Icelandic; 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 which she is unwilling to answer: which of the men in her long and turbulent life she loved most. Being pressed, she replies by quoting a ninth-century Irish poem: *To him was I worst whom I loved best*. As I have shown in a recent article³ 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 'Liadan's Lament'; Liadan was a nun and a poet, and the story of her life parallels Guðrún's in several significant ways. My question here is: where is the intertextual index in this passage? What element of the text points to the Irish poem? Who speaks it? Whose voice makes the connection? 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

en einn Völundur sat í Úlfdöllum

³ Pétur Knútsson, 2003. Þeim var ek verst: Liadan og Curithir í *Læxdælu*. *Ritið* 3, Hugvísindastofnun HÍ

question expressly cues Guðrún's answer, as if he knows in advance both the answer and the quotation, *an ro carus ro cráidius* 'he whom I have loved I have tormented'. Why then does the writer of the saga have him ask the question? For anyone who knows the Irish connection the narrative is painfully contrived at this point. Crucially, however, it seems that readers over the centuries have not been aware of the Irish connection, and for them the narrative is *not* contrived, but instead a powerful dialogue between mother and son which encapsulates the central enigma of Guðrún's life, and structures the saga with a masterly final flourish. It seems most likely that this was the writer's intention, and that he/she was also unaware of the Irish source. But then we have to ask, which 'writer' are we talking about? Our text is written some 200 years after the events it purports to describe, and Irish is no longer a living language in Iceland; at what stage in its prehistory was the Irish connection made? Which of these forgotten story-tellers, if not Guðrún herself, was actually quoting the poem, perhaps in the original Irish, to an audience who knew it? Clearly the proliferation of narrators and audiences has already occurred with the movement from the oral to the literary. The Icelandic sagas are multi-voiced from their inception.

Intertextualities such as these, linkages between texts, serve to peg the text down into its constitutive environment, the other texts which surround it and give it meaning. But there is another environment which structures the Icelandic sagas, an extratextual environment of places and movements. Just as the question Who speaks? must inevitably arise at intertextual references, so it also arises whenever extratextual references are invoked, whenever a voice in the saga, a narrator, one of the narrators, or one of the characters, mentions a place name and calls it 'home'.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, in his introduction to the Íslenzk fornrit edition of 1934, spends some time, as editors were expected to do in those days, looking for the author. He notes (p.xxxiv-v) that the writer of the saga [*söguritarinn*] appeared to be very fond of Hjarðarholt, speaking of the farm in glowing terms. Sveinsson sees him (not, of course, her) as having lived at Hjarðarholt, which thus becomes the topographical centre of orientation of the saga. I am not convinced by his arguments; unfortunately I have only time to discuss one of them in this paper, although I would criticise the others on similar grounds. Sveinsson points out that the phrase *heim í Hjarðarholt* 'home to Hjarðarholt' occurs no less than 8 times in the saga, and more often than for other farms.

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, that is to say 20%; this is a greater frequency than with any of the other place-names. Tunga has 7 times out of 40, (18%);⁴ Höskuldsstaðir twice out of 13 (15%); while Laugar twice out of 34 (6%), and Helgafell, arguably the most central place-name in the saga, the site of Guðrún's grave and later a monastery, is mentioned 38 times, and only once (3%) with the adverb *heim*.

⁴ I do not distinguish as Sveinsson does between the three farms with this name in the saga.

	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* and *heima* 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* where a raiding party rides south into Borgarfjörður to kill Helgi Harðbeinsson in revenge for the death of Bolli, Guðrún's husband. As they approach Helgi's farm, the leader of the party bids his men keep low in the woods: 'I'll go home to the farmstead and spy out whether Helgi is at home' (*Mun ég fara heim til bæjarins á njósn að forvitnast hvort Helgi sé heima*). Another example: 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' (*Lík Kjartans var fært heim í Tungu*); we have to wait for 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: in *Laxdæla* the writer always says *í Hjarðarholti* 'in Hjarðarholt' but *á Höskuldsstöðum* 'literally on Höskuldsstaðir', and the same applies today. Prepositions are idiosyncratically integral to the place names: of two neighbouring towns, Akranes and Borganes on the west coast, one says *á Akranesi* but *í Borganesi*. In the sagas the preposition is sometimes even cited as part of the name, even when it is the thematic subject:

Helgi is in summer pasture in a place called at Sarpur
(*Helgi er í seli sínu þar er heitir í Sarpi*) *Laxdæla* 62

He lived in Bjarnarfjörður at a farm called at Svanshóll
(*Hann bjó í Bjarnarfirði á bæ þeim er heitir á Svanshólli*)
Njáls saga 10

Also:

They landed at an island called Höð, and were put up at a farm called *at Blindheimar*⁵
(þeir komu í ey þá, er Höð heitir, og fóru til gistingar á bæ þann, er heitir á Blindheimi) Egilssaga 65 kafli

The battle with King Haraldur was fought in Rogaland, in the fjorð named *in Hafursfjord*
(Fundur þeirra Haralds konungs varð á Rogalandi, í firði þeim er heitir í Hafursfirði.) Grettis saga 2. kafli.

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; but clearly, as far at least as Laxdæla saga is concerned, this is not so of the monastic seat at Helgafell.

The upshot of all this is that I do not think we can follow Sveinsson in his preoccupation with the author, the father and owner, as Roland Barthes would have said, of the saga. Sveinsson is searching for a monologic text, a text which speaks in the author’s voice and establishes his genius. This quest for an authorial centre obliterates the wealth of shifting centres in the narrative, and their attendant horizons: readerly centres, which proliferate with the textual voices. Some of these are certainly signalled by adverbs such as *home* and *away*. In the Icelandic family sagas we are constantly identifying and re-identifying not only the speaking voice, but also its home; the sagas are both multivocal and multilocal. And since we have already risen to the level of the pun, that most primitive and sacred of tropes, I shall claim that the prime *textual* characteristic of the sagas as a genre is their synthesis of locution and location.

And so we return to the silence of the extratextualities. A stone’s throw north of the church at Helgafell, outside the graveyard proper, there is a single grave said to be that of our heroine Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir. By tradition, 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: we must pay all our attention to the wind whistling in the grasses; the silence of the extratextual is paramount. 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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⁵ As soon as we leave Iceland the topographical uncertainty I mentioned above sets in: Sigurður Nordal (*Ísl. fornrit* II, 1933: 199 fn.) states that Blindheimar is on the island of Vigur, not Höð.