

# Saga Reflections in Karen Blixen's Texts (with Focus on *Grjotgard Álvesøn og Aud*)

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Feeling quite an intruder in this honourable assembly of experts of the Viking age, I will start by quoting a person who stands closer to my own field of research, namely Jorge Luis Borges, one of the key figures in modern Western literature. In his book *Old Germanic literature*, he writes:

Among ancient Germanic literatures, the Scandinavian is beyond comparison the richest and the most manifold. The first texts written in England and Germany have value because they announce, or we make us believe that they announce what would be written later: Milton's glory casts light backwards on Cynewulf and the Song of the Nibelungs anticipates Richard Wagner. But the Old Norse literature possesses value in itself and those who study it can safely look away from Ibsen and Strindberg.<sup>1</sup>

Although a professor of literature, Borges was no real specialist in sagas and his book is written more from a fiction writer's perspective. Yet most of us will probably agree with his idea of the autonomous value of the Old Norse heritage and vast possibilities it offers for researchers. As it does for authors of fiction: for hundreds of years, the classical Norse literature has served as an object of inspiration, imitation and transformation for Nordic writers. And if those interested in

<sup>1</sup> Orig. *De las antiguas literaturas germánicas la más compleja y rica es incomparablemente la escandinava. Lo que al principio se escribió en Inglaterra o en Alemania vale porque prefigura, o porque imaginamos que prefigura, lo que se escribiría después; la fama de Milton ayuda a la fama de Cynewulf y el Cantar de los Nibelungos anuncia a Wagner. En cambio, la antigua literatura nórdica vale por cuenta propia; quienes la estudian pueden prescindir de la evocación de Ibsen o de Strindberg.* (Borges 1951: 76)

sagas might forget Ibsen and Strindberg, to study Ibsen or Strindberg without at least minimal knowledge of Old Norse literature is hardly possible, for one would risk missing something very important in their work. Both Strindberg and Ibsen,<sup>2</sup> just like many Nordic authors before and after them, such as Adam Oehlenschläger, Selma Lagerlöf, Sigrid Undset, Johannes V. Jensen, Halldór Laxness, William Heinesen, Torgny Lindgren, Herbjørg Wassmo, Svava Jakobsdóttir, Einar Már Guðmundsson and lots of others, borrowed from sagas and Eddas motifs and stylistic devices and replayed them in their own artistic key.

The Danish author Karen Blixen (1885–1962) is no exception in this respect. Allusions to “Gylfaginning” and “Völuspá”, paralleling, albeit often ironic, of female characters to saga women or valkyries (for example, Miss Malin in “The Deluge of Norderney” or Ehrengard in “Ehrengard” respectively), the intellectually cool narrator, showing little emotional involvement with the characters’ fates that she relates, insertion of verse into the narrative, expression of a character’s emotional state through changes in his / her physical appearance rather than explicit psychologising – all these aspects can be studied as reflections of Old Norse literature in Blixen’s authorship.

Thus it is surprising, that despite these affinities and despite ample cases of Blixen’s play with Biblical and classical plots,<sup>3</sup> there is only one story that is an explicit “remake” of a saga narrative. And this story is “Grjotgard Álvesøn og Aud”.

The text, which has never been fully completed, was written when Blixen was in her twenties. It was first published in 1962, shortly after the author’s death, based on a typewritten copy by Blixen’s brother Thomas.<sup>4</sup> A somewhat different version was published in 1985 in *Blixeniana*, the publication of the Blixen society, based on a manuscript from

2 One can refer here to *The Folkunga Saga* by Strindberg, or *The Vikings at Helgeland* by Ibsen, to mention just a few examples.

3 Consider, for example, transformations of “The Dead” by Joyce in “Babette’s Feast”, “Ball-of-Fat” by Maupassant in “The Heroine”, “The two Baronesses” by H.C. Andersen in “A Country Tale”, “The Seducers’s Diary” by Søren Kierkegaard in “Ehrengard” or the naughty recount of the escape of the Holly Family to Egypt in “The Deluge at Norderney”.

4 Blixen 1962.

Blixen's own hand.<sup>5</sup> I will refer to the latter version in my analysis, since the former one, as the editors of *Blixeniana* claim, might contain Thomas Dinesen's own contribution (Lasson 1985: 13). It is possible, however, that some differences in the two versions are due to Blixen's own rework of the story, if she, for example, considered its publication later in her career.<sup>6</sup> The *Blixeniana* version does exhibit traits of Blixen's mature writing: elaborate syntax and also so typical of Blixen semantic ambiguity resulting in difficulty for the reader to (re)construct the fabula behind the *szužet*, i. e. to answer the question what "really" happened in the story. Yet another typical trait would be the art of storytelling as the ultimate topic of the text and a sense of narrative pleasure encoded therein.

The plot of "Grjotgard Álvesøn og Aud" is based on a series of episodes from "Saint Ólaf's Saga" which is part of *Heimskringla*, the history of Norwegian kings written, as most sources agree, by Snorri Sturluson. These episodes relate the feud between the landlords of Egg and King Ólaf which indirectly leads to the climax of the saga – Ólaf's death at the Battle of Stiklarstath.<sup>7</sup> This storyline starts around the middle of the saga (Chapter 106) when we are told about Olvir of Egg, the leader of farmers who kept sacrificing to heathen gods, despite the king's effort to convert them to Christianity. Ólaf had him captured and executed, as this was his way to spread the new faith in Norway. Olvir's good looking and rich widow Sigrith was then married by Ólaf to one of his men – Kálf Árnason, who later turned away from the king and even took part in his killing.<sup>8</sup> As the text implies, Kálf did it on Sigrith's demand to avenge the killing of the two sons – Thórir and Grjótgarth – she had had with Olvir (Chapter 183).

Thórir's death is recounted in one of the most artistic episodes of Snorri's saga, containing a dramatic dialogue in which the king and

5 Blixen 1985.

6 Unfortunately, the editors of *Blixeniana* do not provide any information about the possible dating of the manuscript that they have published.

7 The English transcription of Old Norse names and place-names is taken from Lee M. Hollander's translation, see Snorri 1964.

8 Snorri's text does not state explicitly whether it was Kálf Árnason or his namesake who stroke the fatal blow, but Kálf Árnason's participation in the battle of Stiklarstath is beyond doubt (see Chapters 223–225 and 229).

Thórir try to outwit each other (Chapter 165). King Ólaf is staying with his men at Thórir's farm. Thórir is now eighteen, a handsome strong man and a wealthy landlord. He gives Ólaf a royal treat and everyone is happy till Ólaf talks to one of his men – Dag, whom he believes to possess clairvoyant powers. Dag claims that Thórir has received payment from the Danish King Knút for promising to kill Ólaf. The proof of that, Dag says, is the golden ring that Thórir is wearing on his right arm. Thórir is unmasked under the dialogue with the king – a brilliant example of Snorri's understatement technique:

“How old a man are you, Thórir?”, asked the king.

“I am eighteen years old”, he replied.

The king said, “A big man you are for your age, Thórir, and a fine fellow.” Then the king put his hand around Thórir's right arm and stroke it above the elbow.

Thórir said, “Gently, sire! I have a boil on my arm.” The king held on to his arm and felt something hard underneath.

The king said, “Haven't you heard that I am a healer? Let me see that boil.” Then Thórir saw that it would not do to conceal it any longer and took off the ring and showed it to the king. The king asked whether it was a gift from King Knút. Thórir said he would not deny it. (Snorri 1964: 455–456)

Thórir is executed the next day and the next chapter briefly tells of his brother Grjótgarth who sets out to avenge Thórir's death by attacking the king's property and people, but is killed one night in a fight with Ólaf's men.

These are the events that constitute the main frame of reference for Blixen's text and are incorporated in it without considerable alteration. Blixen does not change the outcome of the events, nor does she distort the family relations. Blixen's Tore (= Thórir) and Grjotgard (= Grjótgarth) are also brothers, whose father Álve (= Olvir) has been executed by King Olav (= Ólaf).<sup>9</sup> Tore also receives the king in his home in Blixen's text. Here too, the king has Tore killed after having

<sup>9</sup> The names are spelled here as they appear in the Danish text by Blixen.

talked to Dag – an act that provokes Grjotgard's revenge. So in general, Blixen's story seems to respect the rules of good reading that Umberto Eco (2004) describes in his article "On Some Functions of Literature" in which he further develops his concept of the limits of interpretation. Eco speaks of the paradox of great literature: although fictive, it is in possession of truth that is much more difficult to deny than it is in the case of historical facts. It is possible that one day a proof is found that will change our knowledge of the circumstances of Napoleon's death, but Sherlock Holmes will forever remain a bachelor, as it is absolutely true that Hamlet never marries Ophelia, and who can respect those who claim otherwise? A good interpreter, Eco insists, won't dare to violate the truth of "great narratives" in which people have invested their emotions and which make us understand that things don't develop the way we want, but follow their own, albeit sometimes tragic, course: "The function of unchangeable stories is precisely this: against all our desires to change destiny, they make tangible the impossibility of changing it" (Eco 2004: 14–15).

With the original story line left unaltered, Blixen's text demonstrates awareness of this basic function of literature, as well as respect for the narrative in which Nordic people of many generations have made their emotional investments. Yet, I wouldn't bother you here with an analysis of a text if it was nothing more than a respectful repetition of the "factual" truth of a story already known. "Grjotgard *Ålvesøn* og Aud" deserves the reader's attention, because Blixen imagines between the lines and episodes of the saga, slightly alters some of its details and creates her own story with its own dramas and its own ideology.

The very first sentence of Blixen's text, which contains an obvious allusion to the saga written by Snorri, announces a new perspective: 'A tale written down by a chieftain is also being told by a slave.'<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to her precursor, Blixen introduces into the story an intradiegetic first person narrator. It is Grjotgard's slave Finn, who through a series of flashbacks (a method seldom, if ever, encountered in saga literature) relates the events surrounding Tore's death. Part of his

10 Orig. *Et Sagn, som er nedskrevet af en Høvding, fortælles ogsaa af en Træl.* (p. 52)

recount, namely the king's stay at Tore's place (including the dialogue), is a direct borrowing from the saga, yet Finn also tells of events which might have preceded and followed this episode and which are not mentioned in Snorri's text. The explicit narrator's presence in the text has an ambiguous effect. On the one hand, it creates the illusion that we are going to hear a more truthful story than that presented by its precursor. Finn tells of events that he has witnessed, while Snorri, as we know, writes his story down more than 100 years after the events took place. On the other hand, Finn is a story-teller who tells fairytales to children, and who, as we are told, 'creates where he forgets.'<sup>11</sup> So the figure of this unreliable narrator telling a fragment of Norwegian history seems to be a metafictional suggestion that the true representation of history is hardly possible, since we cannot approach history other than through someone else's narrative.<sup>12</sup>

Another change on the level of the narrative structure in "Grjotgard Ålvesøn and Aud" is the rearrangement of *dramatis personae*. In the saga, Grjótgarth is presented very briefly in an episode developed with much greater narrative economy and less stylistic finesse than the preceding one about Thórir. In Blixen's text, he becomes a title character on whose fate the story is focused. First of all, Blixen supplies her Grjotgard with a CV. We are told that he has been away on a Viking raid for two years, doing nothing at the moment (a fact that annoys both Finn and Grjotgard's households), but is secretly planning to go to Denmark to see King Knut, King Olav's greatest enemy (p. 58). Grjotgard is also granted an existential condition: situated somewhere between two cultures, the heathen and the Christian, he belongs to neither of them. He carries revenging his father's death, but cannot forgive it either. And then finally, Blixen sets this character in an emotional relationship to other characters, first of all to his brother Tore. With the help of numerous dialogues that Grjotgard enters in Finn's recount, we find out that he is bearing a grudge against Tore. One of the reasons for this rift is

11 Orig. <...> *havde han glemt noget, digtede han det.* (p. 55)

12 This implication is reinforced by the incorporation into Finn's story of yet other narratives – that of Groa, the female slave in Aud and Tore's house, and that of the messenger, both of whom witness the events taking place in Tore's house where Finn himself was not present.

Tore's becoming friends with their father's killer. This can be concluded from Grjotgard's answer to Finn's question why he is not at his brother's farm when the king is there:

"I am not there for two reasons," <...> "First, because I am no friends with King Olav. I was twelve when he had my father killed at Egge; he is not likely to think that I've forgotten that as well as Tore. The king doesn't know either if I am just as good a Christian as my brother."<sup>13</sup>

Of the second reason, Grjotgard tells almost nothing ("The second reason is that I don't like being at my brother Tore's place"<sup>14</sup>), but Finn's words help us to understand that it is jealousy: 'You don't like to be there in the morning, my lord, and you don't like it much to be there at midday, but least of all you like it, when the bedtime approaches <...>'.<sup>15</sup>

While Grjotgard was away on a Viking expedition, Tore, as we find out, married Aud, a girl whom Grjotgard had loved. Thus Blixen creates in her text an additional semantic field of the two brothers' discord, introducing a love triangle as one of its elements.

Aud does not exist in "Saint Ólaf's Saga" (we are only told that Thórir was married, and that the marriage made him rich).<sup>16</sup> Blixen not only invents this character, but also makes it the key agent in the development of the narrated events. As we already know, Aud is one of the reasons for the two brothers' alienation. It is also her who incites Grjotgard's revenge when he comes to Tore's place after having received Aud's message of his death:

13 Orig. „Jeg er ikke med af to Grunde” <...> „Først fordi jeg ikke staar mig godt med Kong Olav. Jeg var tolv Aar, da han lod min Fader dræbe paa Egge; han tror nok ikke, jeg har glemt det saa godt som Tore. Saa ved Kongen hellerikke, om jeg er saa god Kristen som min Broder.” (p. 56)

14 Orig. „Men den anden Grund er det, at jeg ikke synes godt om at være hos min Broder Tore.” (p. 57)

15 Orig. „Du synes ikke saa godt om at være der om Morgenene, Herre, og du synes ikke meget godt om det om Middagen, men mindst synes du dog om det, naar det gaar mod Sengetid <...>.” (p. 57)

16 Snorri 1964: 454.

<...> “in his own farm he was killed, in his own house! I have sat here and heard them shout for revenge, your kin and mine.<...> Thank you, Grjotgard, for I know now, I will get my revenge.”<sup>17</sup>

The active role Aud plays in the story is not, however, limited to the two things just mentioned. There are implications in the text that she, paradoxically enough, plays a role not only in the events invented by Blixen, but also in those that are borrowed directly from the saga, i. e. Tore’s unmasking and death.

The idea that Aud was the actual reason for Tore’s death is first proposed by Grjotgard. This happens at the very end of the story, when Grjotgard and Aud finally meet again besides Tore’s body and exchange obscure mutual accusations:

Grjotgard said: “It’s not sure, if you have to thank me, Aud. Would you like to know what I was thinking while riding here? It was that you are guilty of Tore’s death more than anyone else. <...> Hadn’t Tore had you in his house, he would have never betrayed the king.”

“I did not advise him”, said Aud. “Yes, you did, Aud,” said Grjotgard, “I had known him before you knew him; I know there was somebody behind him, otherwise he wouldn’t have done that. Were you a man, I would kill you.”<sup>18</sup>

I will shortly come back to the interpretation of Grjotgard’s words and of Aud’s role in Tore’s death, but let me first quote Aud’s reply:

17 Orig. <...> „i sin egen Gaard er han blevet dræbt, i sit eget Hus! Jeg har siddet her og hørt dem raabe om Hævn, din Æt og min. <...> Aa, du skal have Tak, Grjotgard, for, at jeg ved nu, jeg faar Hævn.” (p. 69)

18 Orig. Grjotgard sagde: „Det er ikke saa sikkert, at du skal takke mig, Aud. Vil du vide, hvad jeg tænkte, mens jeg red herover? Det var, at mest af alle er du Skyld i Tores Død.” <...> „Havde Tore ikke haft dig i sit Hus, saa havde han aldrig sveget Kongen.” „Jeg raadte ham ikke,” sagde Aud. „Jo, du raadte ham, Aud”, sagde Grjotgard, „jeg har kendt Tore, inden du kendte ham; jeg ved det nok, at der har været nogen bag ham, eller havde han ikke gjort det. Hvis du var en Mand, saa vilde jeg dræbe dig.” (p. 57)



<...> “you let me hear that I have caused my husband’s killing; now I will tell you, that you are guilty in your brother’s death.” <...> “It’s true, Grjotgard <...> I know how he lay awake at night, when he had heard about your reputation in daytime. He never had another thought, I know it best.”<sup>19</sup>

The dialogue ends the story but, as it typically happens in Blixen’s writing, the end does not bring it to closure. Although imagining what is left unsaid in the saga, Blixen creates her own blanks, gaps and indeterminacies, provoking the reader to go on imagining. Grjotgard and Aud talk in riddles: it is obvious that they blame each other for Tore’s death, yet it remains unclear how exactly they think the other could have brought it about. It is also strange that Grjotgard accuses Tore of betraying the king (Olav?), when earlier in the text he blames his brother for forgetting their father’s death and hosting the killer. And yet it seems possible to solve these textual puzzles and make sense of the dialogue as well as the whole story. In the present paper, this will be done by interpreting different hints scattered throughout the story and fitting them into each other, as well as by analysing the allusions and references of the text to the saga.

One can start by saying, that the king whom Grjotgard refers to does not have to be Olav, the king mentioned most extensively in the text. Having in mind his earlier grudge against Tore for forgiving Olav their father’s death, it is more reasonable to think that Grjotgard has in mind King Knut (having heard Aud’s messenger, he knows now that Tore had sworn allegiance to the Danish king, just like Grjotgard was planning to do himself). Thus he seems to be blaming Aud for convincing her husband to break this allegiance and join Olav, in this way delivering him right into the hands of their family’s enemy (‘Hadn’t Tore had you in his house, he would have never betrayed the king’). Aud, in her own turn, does not deny her own involvement in Tore’s death, what she does not accept is the accusation of exercising influence

19 Orig. <...> „du har nu ladet mig høre, at jeg har raadt min Mands Bane; nu vil jeg sige dig, at du er Skyld i din Broders Død.” <...> „Sandt er det dog, Grjotgard, <...> jeg ved nok, hvordan han laa vaagen om Nætterne, naar han havde hørt dit Ry om Dagen. Han havde aldrig nogen anden Tanke, det ved jeg bedst.” (p. 57)

on her husband ('I did not advise him'). At the same time, she claims that the initial reason for Tore's death lies with Grjotgard himself. She indirectly accuses him of taking no action against Olav, at the same time implying that Tore was planning to kill Olav. It is possible to claim so, because earlier in the text we are told by Finn that people regret Grjotgard's passivity and hope that he is planning to join the King of Denmark (pp. 57–58). So this must be the reputation that according to Aud did not let the younger brother Tore sleep at night and forced him to commit the revenge himself. That Blixen's Tore did not forget his loyalty to King Knut and was indeed planning to avenge his father's death is of little doubt, as Blixen changes one small detail in the scene borrowed from the saga: Tore retains the golden ring on his arm (a sign of loyalty), whereas he takes it off in the original text.<sup>20</sup>

It seems, however, that Aud was resisting this scenario, according to which the revenge should be executed by Tore. As we shall see, she had a different plan for which it was even necessary to have Tore killed. There are several things that suggest Aud's involvement in Tore's death: not only Aud's hawkish eyes (p. 59), as a symbolic expression of her untamed and dangerous nature, but also her behaviour during the episode of the king's visit. Aud is described as absolutely undisturbed. Despite warnings about the change in the king's mood, she tells her husband himself to serve the king (p. 65), so, we may guess, he can discover the ring. Another support for the proposition that Aud may have plotted Tore's death can be found in the character of intertextual relations of the episode to its hypotext,<sup>21</sup> i. e. the saga. It follows the narration in the hypotext very closely, tending towards direct quotation, thus we can look for suggestions for its interpretation in the saga. In Snorri's text, there is a great deal of obscurity surrounding the circumstances of Thórir's unmasking. The king is told about Thórir's complot by Dag. Dag informs the king about the ring, which, Dag claims, Thórir does not let anyone see. Shall we believe that Dag knows of the ring because he possesses clairvoyant powers, the way the king believes it? The narrator of the saga seems, however, to be ironic (or at least doubtful) about Dag's

20 Cf. Blixen 1985: 65 and Snorri 1964: 456.

21 An anterior text, which a given text ("the hypertext") transforms. (Genette 1982: 5)

skills and does not share Ólaf's trust in him: the only proof he provides for Dag's miraculous talent is when he in the earlier episode relates how Dag finds the hiding place for property that he himself was accused of stealing (Snorri: 453–454). So a more reasonable explanation for Dag's prophecy would be that he knew about the ring from somebody very close to Thórir, and why could it not be his wife?

There is one more direct intertextual allusion to the saga in Blixen's text (this time relating directly to Aud's character) that should be mentioned in this argument. By inciting revenge for Tore's death, Aud partly takes over the role performed in the saga by Sigrith, Thórir and Grjótgard's mother. Sigrith demands from her husband Kálf to avenge the death of her first husband and their sons and openly rejoices when Kálf's brother is killed, for now she can expect Kálf to take action: "It is good that you had to bear that from the king, because it is likely that him you will wish to avenge, even though you do not care to avenge the wrongs done to me" (Snorri: 478). Although this parallel does not point directly to Aud's involvement in Tore's death, it suggests that she is at least happy with it.

Aud has a similar goal as Sigrith (to incite Grjotgard to act), but her motives are different, and so is her function in the text. While Sigrith can be said to play the role of the guardian of the honour code that was gradually disintegrating with the advance of Christianity described in the saga, Aud is concerned with something other than the restoration of family honour. She definitely was not planning her husband's death in order to marry Grjotgard: a scenario that would fit a cheap melodrama, but not a text by Blixen with her love of paradox. The key to Aud's motives are to be found in Aud's words to Grjotgard before her marriage with Tore: 'If I were you, I would never let any other man be equal to me.'<sup>22</sup> Just as Sigrith, Aud desires that Grjotgard should take action, but the revenge she calls for seems to be only a means for her to make Grjotgard, the man she loves, a hero. Aud could not accept Grjotgard's passivity, but as Tore's wife she could not incite Grjotgard's action against Olav. Now with Tore dead, she has a right to demand

22 Orig. „Hvis jeg var dig, saa vilde jeg ikke lade nogen anden Mand være lige med mig.” (p. 60)

revenge for her husband and gives Grjotgard a chance to face an opponent worthy of him.

Aud's aspirations, compared to those of Sigrith's, have a somewhat romantically demonic flavour, though her very actions, both explicit and implied, do not contradict the behaviour of saga women. We know of saga women, who could consciously contribute to their husband's death, had they a "good" reason for that (the classical example would be Hallgerd from *Njal's Saga* who spares her hair that could have saved Gunnar's life as she cannot forget the slap on her face, she has once received from him).

This seems to be the message that Aud's character appears to convey: women want to love men who deserve their love, and if men cannot find one themselves women sometimes try to arrange for them a possibility to prove their brilliance. But in order to interpret the message of the whole story, we, of course, have to take into account its narrative situation. It is the explicit narrator Finn who arranges the events into a narrative, so it is important to know what he thinks about the whole affair. There is little doubt that Finn regrets that everything did not go the way Aud had planned. Also he had had great plans about Grjotgard's future, and he is sad to admit to his listeners that his predictions about Grjotgard's meeting with Olav did not come true:

"<...> Sometimes, when many people listen to you, and there's great news in the air, one cannot help seeing great pictures and predicting in a great many words. While one speaks, one believes in what one says, but later finds out, that it was nothing."<sup>23</sup>

Finn does not tell us how it went with Grjotgard's revenge, but he does not need to, for we know it from the saga the factual truth of which Blixen's text respects. Grjótgarth, as Snorri records, suffers a pathetic death: surrounded by Ólaf's men, he rushes out uttering brave words,

23 Orig. „<...> Men sommetider, naar mange Folk hører paa én og der er store Tidender i Luften, kan man ikke lade være at se store Billeder for sig og spaa i mange Ord. Mens man taler, tror man paa det selv, men bagefter ved man nok, det er ingenting.” (p. 67)

but in the darkness directs his sword at the wrong man and is slain at once (Snorri 1964: 457).

Blixen's text allows us to guess what kind of future Finn had imagined for his master instead of this one. At one point of his story, Finn reminds Grjotgard of an episode, when he, being only fifteen, killed the bear which Kalv (= Kálf) had been chasing for days (p. 57–8). Thus he implies that he was greater than the man whom we know as one of the key figures in the scene of the battle of Stiklarstath.<sup>24</sup> It is true, however, that there is a reservation in the saga that Snorri, the historian, makes about Kálf's role in the slaying of Óláf, saying that "Men disagree as to which Kálf [Kálf Árnason or Kálf Árnfinnsson] wounded the King" (Snorri 1964: 515). Yet, Snorri, the story teller, seems to be quite sure that it was Kálf Árnason, since in the very same episode he quotes a verse of skaldic poetry glorifying him.

Finn, as we remember, is also a storyteller. But it is a strange story he tells, a story that lacks cohesion. Finn starts a tale about Grjotgard and then regresses to fairy tales and gets angry when his listeners ask him to come back to the tale (p. 55). Actually he never brings it to the very end, to Grjotgard's death. With all his hopes about Grjotgard's glorious meeting having collapsed, he seems simply to be lacking material for his art. He is deprived of a possibility to create the story he wishes for and, we may now assume, this is the true reason why he is left to grieve over his master's death forever.<sup>25</sup>

Blixen's story was written at the very start of her career, but its message is so typically Blixenish: life has value only when it can be transformed into art and allowed to enter the common cultural memory. We will later find similar ideas in *Out of Africa*, or "The Sorrow Acre", for example. The message itself may sound trivial or too high-flown for the modern ear, yet the irony of Blixen's texts is that they do not state their message explicitly, but often trick the reader into arriving at simplified conclusions. The very way it is done – through creation of

<sup>24</sup> Also Aud presents Grjotgard with a plan that could have led him directly to the glory at Stiklarstath, had he listened to it. She urges him to seek allies and assemble an army, instead of attacking Olav immediately – the way he wants it and supposedly does, as the episode of his death in the saga suggests. (p. 68)

<sup>25</sup> Orig. *Grjotgards Træl Finn, som aldrig ophørte at sørge over sin Herre <...>*. (p. 52)

a semantically dense and opaque (inter)textual field – can hardly be called trivial and simple.

I will conclude my analysis here by saying that what I just did was to look at the two texts from the traditional intertextual perspective, using the hypotext, i. e. the saga as an interpretative key to open up the semantic contents of the hypertext, i. e. Blixen's story. Often it is also interesting to apply the reversed, the so-called Borgesian model of intertextuality, and speak of the later text as a key to the earlier one.<sup>26</sup> Though I am afraid, this could be considered too far fetched, since "Grjotgard Álveson and Aud" is not a very well known story and Blixen was no great writer when she composed it. And yet, if you read the episodes about Thórir and Grjótgarth in the saga after having read Blixen's text you cannot help concentrating on the things that allowed the engendering of Blixen's story: on the blank spaces of the saga, on things that raise suspicion or somehow do not make sense. On questions like: how is it possible that Grjótgarth was not with his brother if the latter was plotting something, especially when the saga says that he was around in the area, and was Thórir really guilty of the crime he was killed for, or who might have told Dag about the ring if he was not clairvoyant? And although it is nothing revolutionary to say that "Saint Óláf's Saga" is more a piece of art, than history, the reading of Blixen's story raises this awareness even more, since you feel that Snorri's text attracts you by its power to create suspense by what is left unsaid, or is said ambiguously, thus making space for reader's own imagination. Actually professor Vésteinn Ólason in his enlightening presentation yesterday and in his book *Dialogues with the Viking Age*<sup>27</sup> devoted to the narrative specifics of the sagas of Icelanders illustrated the idea, that modern texts lend their reading strategies for reading sagas. They do encourage to study what is implied or is deconstructive alongside with what is explicit and logically sound.

But what is even more important, is that such texts like the one I have just discussed simply make you read sagas. I must confess that

26 Cf. his famous phrase: "Every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future." (Borges 1964: 199–201)

27 Vésteinn Ólason 1998.

my copy of *Heimskringla* was very dusty when I found it, but I am happy that I did it, and I did it because of Blixen's text. But this is only part of the story. I turned to the latter because I knew that our Center of Scandinavian Studies would host a conference on Old Norse culture. So after all, maybe one shouldn't be too arrogant about Strindberg and Ibsen (and one can hardly fail noticing the irony in Borges' words), or Blixen for that matter, because we have here a cycle of mutual dependence: we read sagas to better understand modern literature, but it is modern literature that brings us back to sagas and to a very high extent secures them their sustainable position within the national or even transnational cultural memory. This is no new thing to say (these processes have been dwelt upon by T. S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges and Harold Bloom among others), and as our reading experience shows, it still holds.

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