

THE FOURTH HERMANN PÁLSSON LECTURE (2008)

**‘Gigantic grandeur’ or ‘Odd,  
boring, morbid and obscene’.  
Aspects of the Reception of  
Scandinavian Literature in Britain**

*Peter Graves*

IT is a great honour and a great pleasure to have been invited by the Scottish Society for Northern Studies on its Fortieth Anniversary to give the Fourth Hermann Pálsson Memorial Lecture – the only thing that could have made the pleasure greater would have been to see Hermann sitting in the front row. The first time I met Hermann was, I think, in the spring of 1970 shortly after I had taken up a lectureship in Swedish in Aberdeen – one of my duties there was to teach the then still compulsory courses in Old Norse and History of the Scandinavian Languages. We heard of a saga conference being held in Edinburgh and I and a number of my students came down for it – it was held in a country house setting somewhere near Dalkeith but not, I think, Newbattle and it might, indeed, have been under the auspices of this society. I met Hermann there and what sticks in my mind from the day was a ding-dong exchange between Hermann and, I think, Peter Foote in which, in order to support some issue that now eludes me, they sliced increasingly obscure saga references back and forth across the net for what seemed like hours. That was a memory skill Hermann retained to the end: whether you were talking about modern politics, literature or personalities, there was always a saga reference to fit – and the modern example usually came off worst. And that issue of modern relevance came through in his translations – he had little time for Victorian romanticisation, William Morris made him cringe, and he insisted that sagas should read as modern and relevant, particularly ethically relevant, to a modern audience just as he considered they had been to a medieval audience. Shortly after the Scandinavian departments in Aberdeen

and Newcastle were axed and reformed in Edinburgh in 1987, Hermann retired from his post as Professor of Icelandic Studies and did us the honour of becoming our Honorary Fellow. Honorary may be the title but it hardly covers the active friend and colleague he became to us over the following years: it goes without saying that he brought us a great deal of scholarly prestige, but he also brought warmth, friendship and humour. We still miss him.

The question I want to ask in this paper is one of those deceptively simple ones that proves to have many and sometimes contradictory answers. Why does literature get translated and, related to that, how is it received once it reaches its host culture? In other words I want to look at Scandinavian literature translated into English in the light of what James S. Holmes labelled *Function-oriented Descriptive Translation Studies*. Holmes's seminal and prescient paper, presented in 1972 – happily from our point of view he presented it in Copenhagen though he was an American based in Amsterdam – both mapped the discipline of Translation Studies and, indeed, stabilized its name, thus saving us from such ghastly neologisms as 'translatology' and 'translatistics'. In Holmes's own words the branch of the discipline he called:

Function-oriented Descriptive Translation Studies is not interested in the description of translations in themselves, but in the description of their function in the recipient socio-cultural situation: it is a study of contexts rather than texts. [It pursues] such questions as which texts were (and, often as important, were not) translated at a certain time in a certain place [...]. (Holmes 1972: 185)

This branch of translation studies has, in fact, been one of the most active and productive areas over the last twenty years or so, ever since what has been called 'the cultural turn' in translation studies took place. It has moved the discipline on from debates going back to Cicero in 49 BC about literal and free translations or the more sophisticated modern versions of those ideas in various theories of equivalence: which is not to say that notions of equivalence do not remain central both to the theory and practice of translation.

To return to the context: if we look at the push/pull factors that determine whether a particular text or body of texts is transposed from a source culture to a target culture, it is in most cases the pull factors that have dominated:

cultures resort to translating as a major way of filling gaps, whenever and wherever such gaps manifest themselves [...] In other words, the starting point is always one of a certain deficiency in the [target culture]. (Toury 1995: 138)

Clearly, such gaps, such needs, in a target culture can be of many different kinds. They may be purely literary – the fact, for instance, that a new and revolutionary literary movement exists elsewhere and introducing it is felt desirable: translations of Ossian into Swedish were instrumental in bringing Romanticism to Sweden. Such needs may also be political or ethical or, indeed, straightforwardly commercial. And it should not be forgotten that they can also be – and frequently are – simply personal: when I translated Jacob Wallenberg's *My Son on the Galley* it was because of my own enthusiasm for eighteenth century *voyages comiques* and a conviction that this Swedish example was one of the best. Similarly Neil Smith's wonderful recent translation of Hjalmar Bergman's *Memoirs of a Dead Man* was done from a conviction (which I share) that this greatest of twentieth-century Swedish novelists should be known in the English-speaking world: the English-speaking world thinks different and has not bothered to review it. What follows does not claim to be any kind of coherent historical account of the transmission of Scandinavian literature into English – that still waits to be done – rather I want to offer a few case studies of what I see as some of the whys and why-nots of transmission. I shall focus mainly on three areas: firstly, saga translation or, more accurately, the translation of medieval Scandinavian material, particularly during the nineteenth century; secondly, the period 1900 to 1940, concentrating in particular on the figures of the Norwegian Knut Hamsun and the Swede Selma Lagerlöf; and thirdly, on the 1950s and 1960s, where the focus will be on the Norwegian writer Agnar Mykle and his English translator Maurice Michael. So you will immediately be aware of the huge gaps: nothing about Ibsen, nothing about Strindberg – though quite a lot of what I say about Hamsun and Lagerlöf would, I suspect, be relevant to them – nothing about Hans Christian Andersen, nothing about children's literature, though much needs to be said about it. And nothing about the avalanche of crime fiction from Scandinavia in the last ten years, much of which may remind us more of Chicago and Los Angeles than the rather gentle Scandinavia we know. I suspect the Icelandic tourist board calls urgent damage limitation meetings every time Arnaldur Indriðasson brings out a new novel.

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It's always good to have a date and a place to start with and there is little to beat the year 1759 and the place Moffat, because it was on the bowling green in Moffat in 1759 that the Edinburgh dramatist John Home met the young James Macpherson and encouraged him to publish his Ossianic verses. We can, if we like grand simplifications, date the European Romantic movement

from there. Within little more than a decade Ossian was the rage of Europe and we find, for instance, the Swedish poet Thomas Thorild exclaiming ecstatically:

Thus were you, O Ossian; raise me up, celestial agitation!  
OSSIAN, king of the Bards! before whom nature stands obedient.  
Ah! before whom Homer disappears and Voltaire is as nothing!  
Milton opens his wings, becomes dizzy and cannot come up with you!  
Who can follow you, BARD? Your harp echoes back from the stars  
Together with those of the Immortals! The eternal harmony of the  
Heavens  
Falls silent in amazement. O Ossian, Ossian!<sup>1</sup>

Part and parcel of the growth of Romantic movements both in Scandinavia and in Europe as a whole, but especially Britain, was the awakening of interest in the Scandinavian past and in Old Norse literature. It's almost certainly an exaggeration to suggest that Ossianism was the stimulus to the growth of Nordicism – though Thomas Percy stated it was the success of Ossian that encouraged him to publish his 'runic' pieces, as he tells us in his preface: 'It would be as vain to deny, as it is perhaps impolitic to mention, that this attempt is owing to the success of the Erse fragments'. Initially anyway, Nordicism and Ossianism went hand in hand, two sides of the same coin but with Ossianism appealing perhaps to the more tearful, handkerchief-wringing section of the audience for the heroic past. Thomas Percy's translation *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry translated from the Islandic Language* (1763) has traditionally been regarded as the starting point for British interest in Nordic matters, though it's possible to push things back from there. And once started, Nordicism soon outpaced Ossianism and well before the end of the 19th century translations from Old Norse had become a flood, a flood that was accompanied by imitations, retellings, children's versions, endless journals of travels to Iceland, place-name studies, antiquarian volumes, a full and wonderful account of which has been given by Andrew Wawn in his magnificent *The Victorians and the Vikings*. John Kennedy, in his recent book *Translating the Sagas*, asks why these things have been translated in their dozens for the last two hundred years and, of course, he comes up with numerous reasons, all valid in one way or another at one period or another and many of them operating simultaneously. One of his suggestions is headed 'Translation for reasons of nation and race' (Kennedy 2007: 12). Perhaps the most extreme example of reasons of nation

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1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

and race being adduced as justification for translating Norse material is that given by William and Mary Howitt's *Literature and Romance of Northern Europe*, published in 1852, the first full history of Scandinavian literature to be published in English. The work is in excess of nine hundred pages and about one third of the Howitts' text is made up of translations, with about a quarter of the whole being devoted to the Old Norse period.

The Howitts begin by expressing their 'surprise at the comparative ignorance which has prevailed in this country of the literature of a people so allied to us by race and tone of mind as the Scandinavians' (Howitts 1952: I, v). A little later they write:

[W]e scarcely knew that Scandinavia existed, much less that it still abounded with the most striking resemblances to our own country and people, and that it not only possessed a rich modern literature [...] but that it contained also an ancient literature, which though exhibiting but the relics of past greatness, presented fragments of a gigantic grandeur inferior to nothing which Greece or India has to show (1852: I, 14).

It is against 'those fragments of a gigantic grandeur' – Old Norse literature – that the Howitts measure all else.

*Literature and Romance* is an overt exercise in the construction of an English identity and in the legitimization of Empire with the assistance of Scandinavia and Scandinavian literature. The opening passage firmly sets the tone of the project: 'Amongst the many wonders of the world, there is none greater than the blindness of the writers of this and other countries to the transcendent influence of the blood and spirit of ancient Scandinavia on the English character' (1852: I, 1-2). The Howitts proceed next to demonstrate that the 'undying vigour and impulsive qualities' that have led to the rise of the British Empire should not be traced, as they commonly are, to the Anglo-Saxon heritage – a race which 'far from showing themselves an enterprising and progressive people, notoriously degenerated' (1852: I, 3). Indeed, had the British not had more energetic antecedents than these, they might have expected to find themselves in 'the same condition of political slavery in which forty millions of Germans continue to this day'. That not being the case, however, they argue that 'it is not to Germany but to Scandinavia, that we owe those infusions of strength, enterprise, and that spirit of dominion and colonization which have made us what we are' (1852: I, 5). Quoting approvingly and at length from Samuel Laing's introduction to his translation of Snorri's *Heimskringla* (1844) – and, of course, it's largely from Laing that the Howitts derive their ideas – they conclude: 'All that men hope for of good

government and future improvement in their physical and moral condition – all that civilized men enjoy at this day of civil, religious, and political liberty – the British constitution, representative legislature, the trial by jury, security of property, freedom of mind and person, the influence of public opinion over the conduct of public affairs, the Reformation, the liberty of the press, the spirit of the age – all that is or has been of value to man in modern times, either in Europe or in the New World, may be traced to the spark left burning upon our shores by these northern barbarians'. And to make their message quite unequivocal, they add: 'If ever "the child is father of the man," the Scandinavians were fathers of the English' (Howitts 1852: I, 10). A clear corollary, of course, to such views of racial ancestry is the assumption that Old Norse literature is at least as much a part of the English heritage as it is of the Scandinavian. It is not without its humour that the Howitts proceed to castigate Friedrich von Schlegel for 'the convenient logic' which leads him to make precisely the same claim on behalf of the Germans: 'That is pretty well,' they write of his judgement that the Edda is equal and in some respects superior to Greek mythology, 'but we must still claim the Edda for *our* [their italics] ancestors, the Scandinavians, who, though a cognate race with the Germans, were never their ancestors' (1852: I, 97).

The Howitts and those like them throughout the nineteenth century, then, were actually appropriating Old Norse literature, bringing it back in their terms to its proper home, and I think the success of their smash and grab raid is still with us. I would go so far as to suggest that, like the Bible, like HC Andersen, like Ibsen, like Tolstoy, Old Norse literature is no longer perceived as translation and has become a part of the English-language canon. And no one in the twentieth century did more to ensure that Icelandic literature remained firmly nailed into the English-language canon than Hermann with his twenty-one or so translations. The Magnússon-Pálsson *Njal's Saga* in Penguin Classics had sold over a 100,000 copies by 1990 – I doubt if any other medieval text comes near it. Where's your *Beowulf* now, we might ask?

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To the British literary public in the first decades of the twentieth century, if we ignore Henrik Ibsen – already well on his way to becoming the English playwright Henry Gibson in spite of initially being greeted as 'odd, boring, morbid and obscene' – and if we pretend that the Icelandic sagas did not exist, there were just two Scandinavian writers that mattered: Knut Hamsun and Selma Lagerlöf. Writing of Lagerlöf in 1920, the *Times Literary Supplement* could say:

There is no one to question that Selma Lagerlöf stands among the few great novelists left alive in Europe [she] is the acknowledged matriarch of Swedish prose. This universal reverence for her genius is doubly supported, first by her exquisitely pure and animated style, and secondly by the ingenuity with which her stories interpret the concealed mysticism of the Swedish character. (TLS 23 December 1920)

A few years later Arnold Bennett, writing in the *Evening Standard* and voicing his dislike of the modernists, stated: 'Incomparably the greatest Continental novelist is Knut Hamsun, and Hamsun belongs to the old brigade' (*Evening Standard* 2 December 1926). H.G. Wells had gone even farther in his praise of Hamsun; while discussing the canon of world literature needed to save culture after the carnage of the Great War, he argued that only two novels in world literature were up to the task:

It seems to me that Tolstoi's *War and Peace* and Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* are books on an almost Biblical scale, that they deal with life so greatly as to come nearest to the idea of a universally inspiring and illuminating literature which underlies the idea of the Canon. (Wells 1921: 124)

Now the trajectories along which Lagerlöf and Hamsun had reached this zenith by the early 1920s could hardly have been more different. In spite of some distinctly 'iffy' service by her translators, the originality and, indeed, the peculiarity of Selma Lagerlöf's genius were recognised from the start. Writing of *Gösta Berlings saga*, her first novel and, in 1898, the first of her works to be translated, the anonymous reviewer in *The Academy* suggested:

[I]t is too long, it is often tantalising, and it is not too well translated [but it] is a novel of a totally new kind [...] not only is the author a sentimentalist and hero-worshipper, he [*sic.*] is a poet, too, and a romanticist, and he is filled with sympathy and compassion for the weak no less than with joy in revelry and courage. (*The Academy* 1899: 335)

The warmth of that initial welcome grew with the volumes that followed. *The Miracles of Antichrist* (1899):

abounds with good things and is inspired by a cautious optimism' even though it does reveal 'that lack of humour which is characteristic of nearly all contemporary Swedish fiction. (*Athenaeum* 1899: 318)

A reviewer of Lagerlöf's *From a Swedish Homestead* comments in passing on talent without discipline but then proceeds with admiration:

[B]ut there is a mind at work all the time, and a very beautiful mind too, rich in love and pity for weak human nature. Were we allowed but one adjective for this collection of stories and parables, we should stand by the word beautiful. (*The Academy* 1898: 306)

A reviewer writing for *The Academy* in 1903 on Jessie Brochner's translation of *Jerusalem* is awestruck:

A reader of *Jerusalem* would hesitate to call it a novel: the word would sound like an affront. This Swedish work of the imagination is unquestionably not of deliberate manufacture. Vision and intuition went into the making of it, and though they did not make the whole they stamped upon it the mark of genius. (*The Academy* 1903: 233)

*The Times Literary Supplement* is hardly less enthusiastic in its evaluation:

The language is that childish simplicity which comes not of youthful years, but rather of an awful sense of perspective over the years and a realization that in the long run only the simple things count. (*TLS* 13 November 1903)

And so the praise continues.

Hamsun's progress into the British market was distinctly rockier. Even before he was translated he was being denigrated by no less a figure than Sir Edmund Gosse who, in a general presentation of Norwegian literature in 1898, wrote:

I am not concerned to reprove the morals of Mr Knud [*sic.*] Hamsun or of Mrs Amelia [*sic.*] Skram, but it is within the mark to ask whether the depraved and horrible pictures of life which these two clever novelists present to us are true to the conditions around them. I am assured they are not [...]. (Gosse 1898: 19-20)

When *Hunger*, George Egerton's translation of Hamsun's first novel *Sult* appeared in 1899, its impact was negligible and the few reviews were both unkind and culturally arrogant:



But what does it mean, what does it signify morally? It means nothing, it carries no significance [...] The translator says that *Hunger* made a sensation in Christiania. We can believe it [but] less keen for novelty, and more secure in its critical poise, London will accept *Hunger* with a cold inimical calm. For the unlettered will ignore it, and the lettered will perceive that, though it may be surgery, it is not fiction'. (*The Academy* 1899: 682-83)

In a note to a new edition in 1921, George Egerton wrote: 'I translated *Hunger* and introduced the author to an English public, which never bought even the limited edition issued.' Thereafter twenty years of silence about Hamsun with the exception of some scathing passing references in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1901 – the review is equally scathing about the rest of modern Scandinavian literature:

The books produced in Scandinavia necessarily suffer from certain disabilities. In these countries there exists no great classic literature, nor long tradition of letters. They have behind them no Tudor age nor silver age, no Pleiades and no Encyclopaedists, no Cervantes nor Calderon, no Dante nor any of the poets of the Italian Renaissance: their best substitutes for Goethe and Schiller are Ibsen and Björnson. At present the languages of all the three countries are poor, and their vocabulary is meagre. The Scandinavian writers are, as a class, lacking in dignity [...]. (*Edinburgh Review* 1901: 488-89)

The reviewer moves on specifically to Hamsun and tells us some useful things, such as that Hamsun is a Dane who belongs to a group known as the Young Norse Party and that he has written a novel called *Hunger*:

It has no plot at all, and works up to no *denouement*. It is merely a description of the writer's struggle for existence in the town of his choice [...] We are spared no detail – of how the writer has to wear the same clothes for days and days, weeks it almost seems. (*Edinburgh Review* 1901: 488-89)

When Hamsun re-emerges and achieves the kind of acclaim I referred to earlier, it is with his novel *Markens grøde* ('*Growth of the Soil*'), translated in 1920 and rapidly running through a number of editions.

*Growth of the Soil* was widely reviewed, not just in literary journals such as the *Athenaeum*, the *Bookman* or the *Times Literary Supplement* but in weeklies such as the *New Statesmen* and *John O'London's Weekly*, in dailies such as the *Daily Telegraph* and even in the provincial press such as the *Nottingham Journal*

and the Cardiff-based *Western Mail*. It was given a far wider coverage than any other Scandinavian work achieved in that period, and the welcome it received was unanimously positive. Reviewers also united in bemoaning the fact that so little was known about Hamsun and his works. Katherine Mansfield wrote:

It is difficult to account for the fact that *Growth of the Soil* [...] is only the second of his works to be translated into English [...] we have had nothing but the echo of his fame to feed upon. Perhaps this is not wholly lamentable. How often we find ourselves wishing that we had the books of some writer we treasure to read for the first time, and if the novel before us is typical of Knut Hamsun's work – as we have every reason to believe it is – there is a feast before us. (*Athenaeum* 1920: 767)

The reviewers were also united in stressing that this book was, above all, a book for Now, for 1920. The anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* writes in words in which the Spenglerian resonance is unmistakable:

We are not told when this book was written, nor do its contents reveal it, but it is a book to be read at the present time when, in our feverish desire for the increased production of dead things, the mystical poetry of the growth of living things has been forgotten'. (*TLS* 27 May 1920: 334)

The success of *Growth of the Soil* unleashed a flood of Hamsun translations, a search for 'the feast before us' that Katherine Mansfield had predicted, but far from being a feast, the critics found a famine. With few exceptions the reviews make reference to the 'great Norwegian novelist' and to the grandeur of *Growth of the Soil* and with equally few exceptions, whether discussing Hamsun's early works or his later ones, the reviews throughout the 1920s are almost universally negative: Hamsun was seen as a one-book wonder. Only much later does his stature become accepted and, interestingly, by that stage Lagerlöf is all but forgotten on the British scene.

Can we account for the differences in the reception graciously accorded to Lagerlöf but, we might say, brutally doled out to all of Hamsun except *Growth of the Soil*? I think we can by, in line with my starting point, looking at the context, looking at the conditions in the receiving culture. The reception of modernism by the literary and critical establishment in Britain was late and grudging and well into the 1920s, for instance, a novelist like Virginia Woolf still felt the need to make the case for the modernists against the generation

she referred to as the Edwardians. Looking back on that period in his 1940 essay 'Inside the Whale' George Orwell writes with splendid exaggeration of the same resistance to modernism:

Even more than at most times the big shots of literary journalism were busy pretending that the age-before-last had not come to an end... there was a cult of cheeriness and manliness, beer and cricket, briar pipes and monogamy, and it was at all times possible to earn a few guineas by writing an article denouncing 'high-brows'. But all the same it was the despised highbrows who had captured the young. The wind was blowing from Europe, and long before 1930 it had blown the beer-and-cricket school naked, except for their knight-hoods. (Orwell 1940: 555)

The pre-modern literary establishment, however, had found no difficulty at all in accepting Selma Lagerlöf and nowhere is this revealed more clearly than in the *TLS* obituary that followed her death in 1940:

She was a 'Victorian'. If one wished to show a sceptical modern world what 'Victorianism' was at its best, uncaricatured, one could not do better than present Selma Lagerlöf. She had high spirits, which in some of her books were wild spirits. She had vivid imagination. But above all she had what Matthew Arnold called 'high seriousness'. (*TLS*, 23 March 1940)

Hamsun, of course, in spite of Arnold Bennett's categorisation of him as one of the old brigade, was anything but that, anything but a 'Victorian' – *Hunger* is one of the core texts of early modernism and was thus found unacceptable. But with *Growth of the Soil* Hamsun had moved away from the radicalism of his earlier novels and produced a work that pre-modernists like H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett could read in their own way as a paean to tradition, a rejection of modernity, a return to the soil. So they welcomed it with open arms and were crestfallen to discover it wasn't the real or the only Hamsun.

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For the last of these three case-studies I want to change direction and approach the 1950s and 1960s through the work of one particular translator, Maurice Michael. When Lawrence Venuti entitled his polemical book on translation studies *The Translator's Invisibility* (1994) he probably had people like Maurice Michael in mind since it's frequently virtually impossible to find

out anything about translators unless they have had other activities alongside translation. On a letterhead I came across by chance, he lists himself as 'Author's and Publisher's Agent' based in Horsham in Sussex. He was probably born in 1902 and between 1947 and 1970 he was a very prolific translator with over a hundred entries in the British Library catalogue, which is almost certainly an underestimate of what he actually did since at that period the omission of the translator's name from the published work was not at all unusual. Given the size of his body of translations we can say with some certainty that he was a professional translator, a fact that's borne out both by the variety of things he translated and by the number of languages he translated from – Norwegian predominates but with Danish and Swedish coming not too far behind, followed by German, and then a scattering from Polish, French, Russian and Finnish: the term translator is, I imagine, being used rather loosely in the case of these last languages. And given that his letterhead refers to him as 'publisher's agent' we can assume that he was heavily involved in the selection of Scandinavian texts proposed to publishers. But how he got into Scandinavian I have been unable to discover.

Maurice Michael's position and productivity provide us, I think, with reasonably accurate indicators of what was being translated from Scandinavian in the 1950s and 1960s. There are, of course, the things that any professional translator has to do to make a living – not much joy to be had from *An Illustrated History of the Ecumenical Councils* or *Peter and Caroline: A Child Asks About Childbirth*. But by far the biggest category among Michael's translations is made up of travel books, with an emphasis within that on sailing ships or Arctic adventure – two zones, anyway, which might be considered typically Scandinavian. So he translated Ejnar Mikkelsen's *Two Against the Ice* (a crossing of Greenland in 1909-12), Håkon Mielche's *There She Blows!* (an account of a whaling voyage) and Holger Thesleff's *Farewell, Windjammer*. Then there is *skönlitteratur* – novels, short stories and poetry – but not much of it: he has one novel by Axel Jensen (*Line: A Girl I Knew*), one by Axel Sandemose (*The Mutiny on the Barque Zuidersee*), one by the Swede Eyvind Johnson (*Return to Ithaca*, Johnson's great historical novel *Strändernas svall*, a retelling of the Odyssey), one by the Swedish poet Harry Martinson (*The Road*, the wonderful tramp novel *Vägen till Klockrike*, full of Martinson's philosophy of nomadism), and there are the novels of Agnar Mykle, to which I'll return. At the bottom end of the literary scale there is Sven Hassel's *Legion of the Damned*, the first of a series of war novels, purporting to be the authentic experiences of a Dane serving in the Waffen SS: Hassel's books were very big sellers on the pulp market and, indeed, several of them have been reissued in the last few years. Interestingly, most of the novels Maurice Michael translated also have elements of travel

and seafaring in them, which suggests that these were themes close to his heart. But beyond Maurice Michael's taste for salt-whipped derring-do, I can fall back to some extent on personal memory of the 1950s to account for the particular pull factors at work here: we are dealing here, I think, with the Kon-Tiki effect. I can remember the excitement when the Companion Book Club edition of Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki Expedition* arrived through the door in 1953, having been taken to see the film the year before. Heyerdahl's book had first appeared in English in 1950 and then went through numerous editions, including paperback and book-clubs. The film filled cinemas and grainy extracts were regularly just about visible on television screens.

But Maurice Michael's real success story came with the novels of Agnar Mykle. In 1954 the Norwegian author Agnar Mykle published his *Lasso rundt fru Luna* (Lasso round the Moon) which he followed up in 1956 with *Sangen om den røde rubin* (Song of the Red Ruby). Set in the 1930s, the novels tell the story of a young Norwegian student and teacher, Ask Burlefot, growing up in a small town and moving to Bergen as a student. They are very fine novels, honest, often moving, and sometimes very funny, but by the standards of the time they are explicit in sexual matters – which means that there is nothing you would not see or hear now on an early evening family soap. In 1957, however, Mykle and his publisher were prosecuted in Norway for writing and publishing obscene material and, although they were acquitted, the court ordered the withdrawal of *The Song of the Red Ruby* – the Supreme Court overturned that decision the following year. The court case and the attendant publicity had a devastating impact on Mykle himself and a few years later he effectively became a recluse for the rest of his life, but that's another story. The court case, however, boosted the books and they were very rapidly translated into other languages including English, in which *Lasso Round the Moon* appeared in 1960 and *The Song of the Red Ruby* in 1961. In Britain they were first published by the very respectable firm of Barrie and Rockcliff, and then both came out on the pulp Panther paperback list within a couple of years (1962 and 1963 respectively) with suitably lurid covers and they remained a staple of station bookstalls throughout the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> On the whole the critical reception was very positive. Of *The Song of the Red Ruby*, *The Observer* wrote: 'A vital, energetic and rich book, extraordinarily brave and manly and illuminated by an honesty that that burns as vigorously as a

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2 I'm grateful to Miss Janice Robertson, who was present at the lecture, for passing on the following memory. She was working for Heinemann the publisher in the years around 1960 and remembers receiving a letter from Maurice Michael proposing publication: her senior editor told her to turn down the idea, explaining that Michael just wanted to translate a naughty book.

magnesium flare'; of *The Hotel Room*, *The Times Literary Supplement* thought: 'This remarkable book is not merely honest, sensitive and full of passion, it is also morally good and life-enriching'. I said 'on the whole' because *The Times* had little time for Mykle:

Mr Mykle portrays some feelings – notably guilt, lust and anxiety – with conviction. He realizes a few forceful passages of drama. The intense maelstrom of self-discovery in which his unpleasant hero moves sometimes generates excitement. But on the evidence of this first volume Mr Mykle lacks equipment for the epic he has attempted. His characters tend to consist merely of strong emotional claims on the hero. His narrative drags heavily. Now and then, also, he introduces details of love-making which, in a work meant to be taken seriously, a wiser artistry would have avoided. *Lasso Round the Moon* is naive and portentous and thickly sentimental; it is also, in places, more than a trifle absurd. (*The Times*, 28 April 1960)

Now it's quite obvious that commercial factors were well to the fore when a decision was made to translate and publish Agnar Mykle. And commercial successes they certainly were, both *Lasso* and the *Red Ruby*: between 1962 and 1968 the Panther paperback of each of them went through fourteen editions and sold about a million each. They are probably the all-time Norwegian bestsellers on the British market.

But there are other aspects than the commercial that are of interest. 1960 was the year of the unsuccessful prosecution for obscenity of DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* under Roy Jenkins' new Obscene Publications Act of 1959, an act which somewhat dubiously introduced the concept of literary merit as a means of distinguishing between the erotic and the pornographic and was supposed to tidy up the illogicalities of the earlier legislation. The 1950s, in fact, had seen a resurgence of censorship, almost as if an effort was being made to expunge the liberal attitudes of wartime and return to an earlier era. In 1950, for instance, 40,000 books and magazines were ordered to be destroyed as obscene but by 1954 that had become 167,000. Naughty seaside postcards were a particular target with 297 ordered to be destroyed in 1950 compared with 16,646 in 1954 – Orwell's great favourite Donald McGill was tried, found guilty and fined for obscene publication. The situation was made even more tangled by the fact that local magistrates could ban or order the destruction of material within their own limited areas: Swindon, for instance, ordered the destruction of a bookshop's copies of Boccaccio's *Decameron* in 1954 even though it was pointed out that the same work had long been in the town library. That particular order was overturned on appeal (Thomas

2007: 221). It was into this atmosphere that Mykle's novels were translated, an atmosphere in which British (and indeed other European) publishers were pushing against the restraints of censorship. I've no doubt that the fact that *Song of the Red Ruby* was prosecuted and ultimately acquitted under Norwegian and Finnish law played a part in its selection for translation – it could be seen as pressing against but not quite breaching the limits.

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So, to return to the sagas and finish. However convincing or unconvincing we may find the ancestry case put by the Howitts and Laing, it is still with us. The publisher's blurb on the back of a recent history of the Vikings states that the book: 'is a balanced appraisal of these infamous sea-kings, explaining both their swift expansion and their supposed halt. Supposed, because ultimately the Vikings didn't disappear: they turned into us' (Clements 2005). Another case of the blurb stopping me reading the book, unfairly or not. What we cannot deny, however, is that the firm incorporation of medieval Scandinavian literature into the English-language canon has provided us at one, relatively low, level with shorthand and brand names for everything from bicycles to insurance policies – they are Viking bicycles not Fingalian bicycles, Saga insurance not Mabinogion insurance. But even on a more elevated plane, for good or bad, cultural perceptions of modern Scandinavia are often viewed through this medieval lens. When Selma Lagerlöf died, an English obituarist wrote: '[...] she was not in the modern sense a writer of novels at all. Rather she continued in the nineteenth century the prose tales, and fairy tales, of the Scandinavia of the Viking Age' (*TLS*, 23 March 1930). That, of course, is nonsense, but not unusual nonsense.

**Peter Graves**

**European Languages & Cultures: Scandinavian Studies  
The University of Edinburgh**

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