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Revisiting the past: P.O. Sundman’s rewrite of Hrafnkel’s saga Freysgoða

Summary. P.O. Sundman’s Berättelsen om Såm (1977) represents a peculiar reworking of one of the most popular and intensely studied Icelandic sagas, Hrafnkel’s saga Freysgoða, and clearly expresses its author’s life-long admiration for the Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages. The aim of this paper is to propose an analysis of some of the main features which characterize Sundman’s novel as a rewrite of the saga. Besides a discussion of the reasons underlying Sundman’s interest in the medieval narrative, particular attention will be given to the investigation of the rewriting strategy that comes out of the comparison between the hypotext and the hypertext, in an attempt to try to work out the mechanisms governing the reshaping of the text and the dynamics regulating them. In addition, we will see how both the traditional elements and the innovations of the novel mirror to different degrees discourses of the present in which the novel has been written.

1. Introduction

Among the literary works of the 20th century which grew out of the vivid interest that Scandinavian writers have persistently shown for the literature and culture of the Nordic Middle Ages, P.O. Sundman’s Berättelsen om Såm (1977) is worth particular attention since it represents a singular rewrite of one of the most popular and intensely studied Icelandic sagas, Hrafnkel’s saga Freysgoða.

As is widely known, this saga belongs to the corpus of the so-called Íslendingasögur (“Sagas of Icelanders”) and, according to the majority of scholars, it was probably written in the second half of the 13th century, although it is extant almost exclusively in later paper manuscripts.

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3 The only exception is represented by a vellum fragment preserved in ms. AM 162 I, fol. which dates from the first-half of the 15th century. See Jóhannesson (1950: LVI-LVII).
Despite its shortness and its narrative linearity in comparison with other sagas of the same group, *Hrafnkels saga* contains a number of interesting themes and aspects which have attracted the attention of critics.

In this respect, there is no doubt that a significant turning point in the scholarly debate on the saga took place after the publication of an important study by Sigurður Nordal (1940), which addressed the complex issue of the origins of the saga between oral tradition and literary fiction. Moreover, the ideas developed by the Icelandic scholar in this monograph were not confined to the case of *Hrafnkels saga* and were bound to exert a noteworthy and far-reaching influence on saga scholarship in the following years. In fact, as Clover (1982: 243) points out:

> ever since Sigurður Nordal published his 1940 monograph declaring *Hrafnkelssaga* to be ‘pure fiction’ with no traditionalist basis whatsoever, the larger discussion of origins has centred on that saga and that analysis of the evidence.

The considerable number of academic studies about this saga that have been written since – most of them, between the 1960s and 70s, more or less directly as a reaction to Nordal’s opinion – undoubtedly bear witness to the lively interest in this work.4 On the contrary, unlike other *Íslendingasögur* which gave rise to various literary reworkings between the 19th and the 20th centuries,5 *Hrafnkels saga* has not been blessed by the same success.6

The aim of this paper is to propose an analysis of some of the main features which characterize P.O. Sundman’s novel as a rewrite of the saga. Understanding rewriting as “the very process which enables texts to cross cultures and endure history” [Helgason (1999: 4)], through *Berättelsen om Såm* (henceforth abbreviated as *BoS*) two different cultures and two different historical contexts enter into a dialogue whose characteristics will be outlined below. Consequently, we will first examine how the Swedish author selects the material of the medieval narrative to be “translated” into his novel. After this preliminary phase, we will focus on the investigation of the rewriting strategy that comes out of the comparison between the hypotext and the hypertext,7 in an attempt to try to work out the mechanisms govern-

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4 For a brief presentation of the most important reactions to Nordal’s positions see Clover (1985: 243-245).
5 Major examples that can be cited here are *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*. See Simek / Pálsson (1987: 79, 117, 226, 260). See also Jón Karl Helgason’s article in this volume.
6 To my knowledge, the only other literary work clearly inspired by the saga is *Nord fra Vatnajøkel* (1994) by the Danish art historian and writer Poul Vad.
7 Both terms – hypotext and hypertext – are derived from Genette (1982).
ing the reshaping of the text and the dynamics regulating them. The perspective from which the analysis will be carried out is based on the reflections recently developed by *New Historicism* regarding the crucial interplay between text and context and its relevance for the interpretation of a literary work. Adopting this theoretical framework, we will see how in the rewritten text we can trace both traditional elements which are present in the hypotext and innovative aspects, determined by the rewriter’s own purpose and clearly recognisable as an expression of the influence exerted by the cultural system in which the process of rewriting takes place. In particular, we will touch upon some of these features; we will see how both the traditional elements and the innovations of the novel mirror to different degrees *discourses* of the present in which *BoS* has been written.

2. **P.O. Sundman and the Icelandic sagas**

Per Olof Sundman (1922-1992) is without any doubt one of the most prominent figures of Swedish literature of the 1960s. In Sweden’s post-war literary scene, his works distinguish themselves through a predilection for a spare style that intentionally avoids any psychological introspection in portraying the characters, which in their turn are described through their appearance and actions within a group.

This way of writing led many critics to link the author to the tradition of the Icelandic sagas. Since his literary debut in 1957, Sundman undeniably showed a great interest in the Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages:

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9 As S. Würth (1999: 193) points out, *New Historicism* aims at showing “wie zeitgenössische Diskurse in literarische Texte eingehen, sich dort kreuzen und auf welche Weise sie diese Texte wieder verlassen”.
11 In fact, from the very beginning of Sundman’s literary activity many attempts have been made to trace his narrative models. As Warne (1984: xviii) points out, “his seemingly simple and straightforward prose, the extreme economy of expression, and the terse dialogue were reminiscent of the Icelandic sagas and of Pär Lagerkvist’s cubism. Hemingway was mentioned as a remote literary kin. Some critics, noting the absence of psychological interpretation and the predominance of surface observations in Sundman’s stories, pointed to the contemporary experimentations in French literature, where *le nouveau roman* was beginning to attract attention”. Besides, a significant role in the development of Sundman’s style was played by his early acquaintance with the behaviouristic theory of John Watson and with Frans Bengtsson’s works. On these aspects see McGregor (1994: 33-51).

In his overall literary production the influence of the narrative model and techniques of the sagas is apparent. Yet, as McGregor (1994) has persuasively demonstrated, this influence is not limited to the mere acquisition of stylistic traits. In fact, rather often in Sundman’s works we find allusions or clear references to literary texts of the Old Icelandic tradition, especially to *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*. What is new in the case of *BoS* is that it explicitly represents a reworking of a single saga.

The genesis of Sundman’s interest in *Hrafnkels saga* can be traced back to the period when he was attending *Katarina realskola* in Stockholm. At that time he read the saga in the classical Swedish translation by Hjalmar Alving (1935-1945). Many years later, after having spent much time in Härjedalen and Jämtland, he re-read it in Sven Bertil Jansson’s revised translation (1966). In 1968 he was elected member of the Swedish parliament. Among other things, his intense political activity gave him many occasions to visit Iceland and to get to know its culture. In 1969, during his first Icelandic trip, what most struck him about the country was its peculiar blend of elements belonging both to the past and to the present, “en märklig blandning av forntid och nutid”, an aspect which he would transform into a structural element of *BoS* some time later. In 1970, another stay in Iceland represented a decisive stage in the development of Sundman’s interest for *Hrafnkels saga*:

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12 “There is for me a literature that I believe has had a completely crucial significance for me and I believe that I have said so on many occasions too. It is quite simply the literary tradition that began in the thirteenth century, the Icelandic sagas, both the family sagas and the more directly fictional sagas, which I continually return to. It is there I have my roots and I believe it is my strongest literary connection” [McGregor (1994: 42)].


14 It needs to be mentioned, however, that according to McGregor (1994: 230-235), in the novel it is possible to detect allusions to other texts of the Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages.

15 In fact, beside his political activity in 1969 he also became delegate of *Nordiska Rådet* (the Nordic Council).
In the summer of 1976, he took part in the Swedish radio series “Sommarprata” where he read Hrafnkels saga; in fact, it was while collaborating on this project that Sundman started to think about the idea of reworking the saga by retelling it from the point of view of Sámr.

3. **Why did Sundman decide to rewrite Hrafnkels saga?**

If we now turn our attention to examining the reasons behind the writing of BoS, what is clear is that they go far beyond Sundman’s admiration for the style of saga literature as mentioned above. It can be claimed that in the medieval narrative telling of the struggle between the mighty chieftain Hrafnkell and his opponent Sámr in the region of the eastern fjords in Iceland he found an interesting representation of a constellation of motifs he had always been interested in since the very beginning of his career as a writer. As Lars Warme (1984: 165) comments upon the writer’s interest in the saga,

> the material had a number of ingredients that had earlier attracted the author: a stark and drastic fable built around two central characters representing opposing ideologies, a thoroughly realistic story whose ultimate moral is puzzling and questionable and open to interpretation.

In this respect, it is safe to assert that the “sociological interests” lying at the very heart of Sundman’s literary world found in the plot of the saga a significant ground for investigation. In particular, his attention was directed to the patterns of behaviour, the schemes of interactions among individuals, and the relationships of power that characterize the world depicted in the medieval narrative.

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16 “It was on Midsummer Eve 1970. I was sitting on the so-called Law Rock north of Reykjavik with the editor of Morgunblaðið, Iceland’s largest daily paper. We saw a bus arrive and two riders on pack-horses. That was how I hit upon the idea of having the warriors travel by jeep to the battles which are fought” [McGregor (1994: 200)].

17 See McGregor (1994: 199-249) for a detailed presentation of the lines of development of Sundman’s interest in Hrafnkels saga and for a comparison between the saga and the Swedish novel.
In many of his previous works – both short stories and novels – he had portrayed tensions mainly within small groups, often in the form of contrasts between the individual and the collectivity. In the saga, these contrasts are described within a strongly hierarchical society, where the rights of the mighty outweigh the rights of the poor:

Det sagan skildrar är den dramatiska, oförsonliga och blodiga maktkampen mellan två män av helt olika sinnelag och beskaffenhet. Det är en sammansatt berättelse om släktbundens krav, om lojalitet och rätten att med våld taga sin rätt [Sundman (1977)].

Undeniably, a central aspect of the saga’s appeal for Sundman is to be found in the topicality of its story. As we will see in some detail later on, according to the Swedish writer, the modernity of the saga affects both the level of interpersonal relationships and the level of power relations.

Commenting upon his novel as a whole in comparison with the medieval narrative, Sundman (1977) states:

De komplicerade rättsliga regler som präglade konflikten mellan Ravnkel och Såm var en realitet i fristaten Island för tusen år sedan. De finns i dag i andra länder, nödtorftigt dolda i västerländskt präglade formuleringar.

Judging from this and other similar statements, it seems clear that his main concern was to try to point out the timelessness of the themes the saga dealt with, the metahistoricity of the dynamics lying behind the events depicted in the saga:

Jag ville låta handlingen utspelas i vår tid med t ex bilar i stället för hästar. Tyckte att de moraliska problem som sagan handlar om skulle gå förlorade bakom runda sköldar, blanka hjälmar och vassa svärd [Björsson (1977: 3)].

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18 “What the saga depicts is the dramatic, irreconcilable and bloody struggle for power between two men of completely different nature. It is a complex story about the duties linked to blood ties, about loyalty and about the right to exercise your own will with violence”. Every quotation from the 1977 edition of the novel which is not followed by page numbers refers to Sundman’s own statements printed on the book jacket.
19 “The complex legal rules that characterize the conflict between Ravnkel and Såm were present in the Icelandic free state one thousand years ago. Today they are still evident in other countries, barely concealed behind Western formulations”.
20 “I wanted to let the action be set in our time with for example cars instead of horses. Thought that the moral problems that the saga deals with would be lost behind round shields, shining helmets and sharp swords” [McGregor (1994: 201)].
Consequently, the mechanisms of rewriting the hypotext, which will be analysed below, are determined and influenced first of all by the achievement of this goal.

4. Revisiting the past: modalities of rewriting of Hrafnkels saga

The choice of retelling the story by setting it in the present forces the writer to adapt or substantially modify some central features of the saga. Thus, all the elements explicitly pertaining to the chronological setting in the Middle Ages are left out. As a result, the references to the time of the landnám which are to be found in the saga\(^1\) are not present in BoS. Moreover, if the places where the actions take place in Hrafnkels saga are identifiable with the region of the eastern fjords, the rewrite describes a landscape which, although undoubtedly reminiscent of the Icelandic one, is not Iceland.\(^2\)

Furthermore, the re-contextualization of the story in a different age – the 20\(^{th}\) century – and culture – that of Sweden – also results in the reshaping of some cultural features of the medieval text. In fact, the comparison between BoS and the saga brings to the fore that the major changes the Swedish writer introduces regard those aspects of the hypotext which can hardly find a full equivalent in the present, and whose unaltered ‘translation’ into modern times would bring about an effect of estrangement. I am referring in particular to the issues linked with the question of heathenism mirrored in the saga.

In comparison with the hypotext, the religious aspects connected with the relationship between Hrafnkell\(^3\) and the god Freyr in Sundman’s narrative are emptied of the value they possess there.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Jóhannesson (1950: 97): “Þat var á d. gum Haralds konungs ins hárfrægra, Hálfdanar sonar ins svarta, Guðrøðar sonar veiðikonungs, Hálfdanar sonar ins milda ok ins matarilla, Eysteins sonar frets, Olafs sonar trételgu Svíakonungs, at sá maðr kom skipi sínu til Íslands í Breiðdal, er Hallfreðr hét”. Hreinsson (1997: 261): “It was in the days of King Harald Fair-hair, son of Hallđan the Black, son of Gudrodd the Hunting King, son of Halfdan the Mild and Meal-stingy, son of Eystein Fart, son of Olaf Wood-carver, King of the Swedes, that a man named Hallfried brought his ship to Breiddal in Iceland”.

\(^2\) Sundman (1977): “Mitt landskap är isländskt men det är inte Island” (“My landscape is Icelandic but it is not Iceland”).

\(^3\) As regards proper names and place names, in this paper I will distinguish between the spelling of the saga (Hrafnkell, Sámr, Einarr, Þorbjörn, Aðalból) and the spelling of Sundman’s novel (Ravnkel, Sám, Einar, Torbjörn, Adabol).

\(^4\) When dealing with this issue, it needs to be emphasized that what Hrafnkels saga depicts is not to be interpreted as a true account of actual practices of pagan Iceland, but rather as a pro-
In fact, Freyr does not play the same role he plays in the medieval narrative; significantly, in BoS his presence is expressed by a wooden statue in Ravnkel’s rumpus room (gillestuga). This, in its turn, corresponds to Hrafnkell’s temple in the hypotext, built for the worship of the heathen god.

Consistently, throughout the novel the horse is not said to belong to both Ravnkel and the god, nor does it show any relationship with Freyr. Moreover, while in the saga it is mainly because of Freyfaxi that Einarr is killed by Hrafnkell – who swears an oath to kill anyone who rides the horse he has consecrated to Freyr – in Sundman’s rewrite it seems rather to be Ravnkel’s jealousy and his fear of being deprived of his unlimited power that stirs him to murder the young boy.

Given this clear intention to demythicize the religious elements the hypotext shows, the appearance of Frey’s statue and its description seem to serve the purpose of giving concrete expression to Ravnkel’s nature. In BoS, Freyr is connected with the sole sphere of sexuality, as the phallic attribute of his statue exemplifies, while in the saga there is no element indicating this trait of the god. Here it seems probable that the writer, in the attempt to preserve at least one traditional feature of the divine figure, chose the one that seemed more functional to his own purpose, as we will see in some detail further on.

Hrafnkell’s nature of godi, though itself emptied of any religious meaning, is not completely lost in the rewriting process. Although he is portrayed as a powerful chieftain whose actions are inspired by a sharp sense of superiority and excessive pride, the description of his feasts on Fridays, in the presence of Frey’s statue, could constitute an attempt to translate into modern concepts what the saga aimed at depicting as a religious reality from heathen times: an attempt to refFunctionalize it, from the religious sphere of the hypotext to the sexual one of the hypertext.

Significantly, whereas the adaptation of the mythic-religious elements clearly indicates the alterity of both the age and the culture into which the narrative material of the saga is transferred, and corresponds to the necessity
of rewriting these features, in the case of the “translation” of the legal system – another central aspect of the saga – as it is presented in the Icelandic narrative, Sundman’s attitude is different and could even be described as rather conservative.

In fact, not only does he preserve it in his novel as it is in the hypotext, but he also adds further information about the system of laws of medieval Iceland not given in the saga. Furthermore, the description of the whole trial is clearly expanded in comparison with the medieval narrative and is rendered in detail. If the historical accuracy that Sundman apparently aimed to achieve with these descriptions is again a trait we find in his whole production, the transposition of the legal rules without significant changes into the present expresses the author’s point of view regarding their topicality for his own time.

After the killing of Einar, the plot in BoS faithfully follows the main lines of narrative development of the hypotext; at the end of the trial, Sám and his supporters go to Ravenkel’s farm to punish him. Some of them – Torkel and Torgeir in particular – want to kill him, but Sám gives him the opportunity to choose between ceding his own properties to him or being killed. Ravenkel chooses to live and is forced to move away; some time later, he builds another farm and progressively regains all the power he used to have before the trial. Seven years later, he kills Sám’s brother Eyvind to exact revenge for the humiliation he had suffered by Sám and his men. Then, he forces Sám to leave Adabol and deprives him of all his possessions.

An interesting feature of Sundman’s novel consists in the presence of elements expressing a belonging to the past and of aspects clearly linked to the present. In particular, the insistence on the description of modern machines and the activities in which they are used contributes to highlighting the sharp contrast between the fixity of the social development of mankind throughout the centuries and the innovation of technological progress. Once again, this very aspect represents the reworking of a theme Sundman frequently deals with in his works.

Thus, the rewriting strategy outlined so far apparently gives birth to a text whose temporal setting is intentionally depicted as swinging between two opposite poles in order to stress the translatability of some major features of the past into the present.

Going deeper into the analysis of the novel in comparison with the saga, much attention needs to be devoted to the reshaping of the roles some cate-

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29 See Warme (1984: 159-169).
gories of characters play in BoS. In fact, in retelling the story from Sâm’s point of view – the loser’s point of view – Sundman reorganizes the distribution of roles. In particular, as Sâm is the main character (as the title itself suggests), his supporters are given particular prominence. Therefore, new characters are introduced and named, all contributing, among other things, to the portrayal of the protagonist himself because it is through their acting on Sâm’s side, through their relationships to him, that the reasons behind his behaviour are at least partially explained.30

Another central innovative feature regards the prominent role given to women in the novel.31 In BoS, women contribute to determining all the tragic events of the story. Einar is killed by Ravinkel because he has been informed by Åsa, his young lover, that Torbjörn’s son had slept with his wife the night before and that the same had happened with Åsa herself a few days earlier.32 As regards Sâm, it is his wife who prompts him to help his uncle against Ravinkel, thus setting the development of the tragedy in motion.33 When Eyvind, Sâm’s brother, comes back home from a long journey abroad, it is again a serving woman – like in the saga34 – who sees the prominent man on his way to his brother’s farm and let Åsa tell Ravnel about it.35

Thus, in Sundman’s novel we notice a clear tendency to picture the private sphere of relationships between men and women, a feature that is completely absent in the hypotext. To date, scholars have generally confined themselves to recording the expansion of female characters’ roles in the text, without paying adequate attention to the possible reasons lying behind this choice.36 In this respect, it seems to me that the writer probably felt that the little space assigned to women in the hypotext would not fit the setting of the events in the present, where the thematization of the man/woman relationship undoubtedly reflects a condition whose relevance for a full understanding of

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30 “A person must be placed in relation to other people and to an environment in order to have significance and form. An isolated person simply does not exist. Or, to borrow a formulation from mathematics, a human being must be expressed in something – in an environment and, most particularly, in fellow human beings” [Warme (1984: 44)].
31 “Det blev nödvändigt för mig att tillskapa och namnge nya personer. Särskilt angeläget var det att understryka den roll kvinnorna spelar” (It became necessary for me to create and name new characters. It was particularly important to stress the role that the women play) [Sundman (1977)].
33 Sundman (1977: 78-80).
34 Johannesson (1950: 126-127).
35 See Sundman (1977: 207-210). In the saga, however, it is the serving woman who informs Hrafnkell and spurns him to take revenge.
the dynamics governing the modern society is rather significant. Moreover, this choice is consistent with Sundman’s previously mentioned interest in portraying the complex net of relationships among individuals as a means to understand how and why people behave and act the way they do.

Given these premises, the seemingly negative role women play in the rewrite contributes, on the contrary, to highlighting the nature of the male characters. This is certainly apparent in the case of Ravnkel throughout the whole novel. Furthermore, the same can be said about his adversary: for example, Sám’s incapability of making a decision as regards his uncle’s request for help against Ravnkel is signalled by the fact that he himself calls for help, asking his wife to decide for him.

The emphasis given to the description of women’s sexual dimension and to the sexual connotations linked to the man-woman relationship is another significant issue for our discussion. In fact, while it apparently represents an evidence of the influence exerted by the writer’s own time, it could also directly reflect the contemporary debate on sexuality and sexual customs, which reached its height in the 1970s and was particularly lively in Swedish society.

A further important set of motifs lying at the heart of the novel is connected with the issue of power and its control. In particular, the contrast between Ravnkel and Sám represents the opposition of two different ideologies. While Ravnkel is driven by his thirst for power and wants to have control over everything and everyone in his valley, Sám is a quiet man, adverse to the fight, a little man who unwillingly takes upon himself the responsibility of a suit against a mighty chieftain. Nevertheless, he seems to be more concerned about his reputation than about the final outcome of the suit:

Jag har mitt anseende att tänka på. Jag har inte mod och djärvhet nog att ge upp [Sundman (1977: 114)].

If on one level the story of the saga represents different patterns of behaviour, different schemes of interactions and relationships of power among individuals, on another level it becomes apparent that it also points out the political and ideological potential the medieval narrative possesses. Thus, the depiction of the microcosm represented by the valley where Ravnkel lives takes the form of a paradigmatic representation of the actual situa-

37 “I have to think of my own reputation. I don’t have sufficient courage and boldness to give up” [Warme (1984: 168)].
tion of the world at the end of the past century.\textsuperscript{38} The relevance of this paradigmatic nature for a full understanding of Sundman’s strategy contributes to an explanation of why he chose to avoid imbuing his story with any specific connotation of temporal and geographical setting.

The contrast between little and poor people on the one side, and mighty men on the other, is as the author stated a “timeless conflict”. The solution of the conflict, both in the saga and in the novel, is the same: if it is true that the attempt to subvert the order in the valley – undertaken by the little ones, driven by the weak Såm – is doomed to fail in both texts, it is significant that in Sundman’s novel it is more emphasized. The way these relationships of power are portrayed and the final outcome of the rebellion throw a long shadow of pessimism over the story and can be reasonably taken as an expression of Sundman’s position towards an array of themes he had taken up in some of his previous works: what leaders must we have? How are they supposed to be chosen? Are we always bound to follow them?

In this respect, it is significant that the writer does not present Såm as a hero. On the contrary, he stresses all those aspects of his nature that express his weakness, thus indicating that it is primarily because of his weakness as a leader that the attempt to found a new order in the valley fails. Moreover, along with Lars Warme (1984: 173) we can observe that:

\begin{quote}

as a political parable, \textit{The Story of Såm} presents a very contemporary reality of international power struggle where “Ravnkel’s law” is being practised in the absence of any effective supra-international agency to act as public prosecution or to police the violations. According to this law, might is right, and agreements can be broken with impunity. Through the ancient fable Sundman discusses the possibilities of revolt against oppression, the chances of honor and decency in the frontier world of international conflicts, the question of responsible leadership and the sacrifice of moral principles in exchange for material security.
\end{quote}

Thus, Sundman’s rewrite is to some extent a reflection on history and takes the form of a disenchanted diagnosis of the present because it depicts its actual condition through the comparison with the past mirrored in the saga, which was itself the result of a construction \textit{a posteriori}.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} See Sundman’s statement on page 4 (footnote 19).

\textsuperscript{39} The use of the past in Sundman’s work is not confined to \textit{BoS}. As Warme (1984: 160) points out referring to the novels \textit{Expeditionen} (The Expedition, 1962) and \textit{Ingenjör Andrées lufffärd} (The Flight of the Eagle, 1967), “both of Sundman’s expedition novels use the recent historical past to provide a perspective on our present world. These two parables of doom and
5. Final remarks

On the basis of the analysis I have proposed, we can say that Sundman’s process of rewriting moves along two major lines. On the one hand, he reshapes and changes some aspects of the hypotext in order to adapt it to the reception into a new cultural and historical context. Furthermore, he introduces new elements into the plot, as a consequence of his interest in pointing out some of the aspects that remain under the surface in the saga or that are completely absent in it. On the other hand, he preserves in his novel a number of key issues and themes of the hypotext, without changing them. This strategy of conservation is particularly interesting in that it overtly contributes to emphasizing the degree of topicality of the themes the saga presents.

Unlike other Scandinavian writers – for example Frans G. Bengtsson and J. Fridegård40 – who (re)constructed the Nordic Middle Ages in their works in order to project a discussion of relevant issues of their own times into that era, Sundman’s operation finds its starting point in the Middle Ages. From his perspective, the “saga age” is seen as an eloquent term of comparison in order to judge the present and is a means for trying to understand it.

Accordingly, the rewritten text is built on the interlacement between ‘past’ and ‘present’ and becomes their point of encounter. The less the significant features of the medieval narrative need to be reshaped, the more they tell the modern reader how much, in Sundman’s world, the past is an actual reality.

“fall” present a pessimistic vision, which is getting dangerously close to becoming a reality in our twentieth century”.

40 Frans G. Bengtsson, Röde Orm (1941-1945); Jan Fridegård, Trägudars land (1940); Gryningsfolket (1944); Offerrök (1949). On Fridegård and Bengtsson see Mjöberg (1967-68, v. 2: 252-260, 333-344).
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