Christian Carlsen: *Visions of the Afterlife in Old Norse Literature*. Bibliotheca Nordica 8. Oslo: Novus forlag, 2015. 281 pp.

Siân Grønlie

In a much-anthologized story from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, a pagan counselor of King Edwin compares earthly life to a sparrow flying through the hall, illuminated "for the briefest of moments" by the comfortable fires burning within, passing "out of the stormy winter and into it again". If Christianity, he concludes, "brings us more certain information", it is appropriate and right to accept it (II.13). A clearer conception of where one goes after death is posited as the single most significant attraction of the new Christian faith. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the core element of lay belief in Norway and Iceland, according to Nedkvitne, was "doctrines about eternal life and salvation" (p. 310). In this book, Carlsen takes a look at some of the narratives generated by these core Christian beliefs: visions of the afterlife in Old Norse literature.

Visionary literature enjoyed immense popularity across medieval Europe, from the Latin works of Gregory and Bede, to Dante's all-encompassing *Divina commedia*, to the sophisticated secular and courtly dream visions of Chaucer, Langland, and the *Pearl*-poet. The main focus of Carlsen's book is what he defines as "literary journeys through the Christian eschatological universe" (p. 20), which would nowadays be described as "near-death experiences": a genre that continues to exercise fascination, although it rarely now includes tours of Hell. Whereas Wellendorf's earlier book in the same series focused on translated visionary literature, Carlsen treats translation in broader cultural terms, describing the focus of his study as "impact", "cultural turn" or "textualizing", a term borrowed from Carruthers (pp. 41–43); he is less concerned, in other words, with identifying specific sources for the Old Norse visions, than with exploring how the conventions of visionary literature have been adapted to a new cultural context. In particular, he looks for points of intersection between new and old: "signs of cultural continuity across the conversion era" (p. 106). For these purposes, he selects six visionary works: *Völuspá*, *Rannveigar leizla*, *Eiríks saga víðförla*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Sólarljóð* and *Draumkvedet*.

The diversity of these texts is immediately apparent: they range from pagan prophecy to travel narrative, from a saint's life to a dream sequence embedded in an Icelandic family saga. The extent to which they all fit Carlsen's opening definition is debatable, but their hybridity is an important aspect of his thesis. He argues for a sophisticated awareness of genre on the part of Old Norse writers, who carefully adapt the generic conventions of the *visio* to new literary contexts, "offering alternative narrative perspectives and dimensions" (p. 231). This is particularly noticeable in *Gísla saga*, where the sequence of dreams gives unprecedented access to Gísli's interior world. Writers did not hesitate to switch from one genre to another as they self-consciously entered the "literary space" of the *visio*: *Sólarljóð*, for example, changes genre half way from "native gnomic wisdom poetry to Latin eschatological vision" (p. 203). Even the most hagiographical of the Norse visions, *Rannveigar leizla*, can be precisely localised within the political and ecclesiastical landscape of Northern Iceland. Carlsen shows convincingly that the *visio*, like the saint's life, should not be cursorily dismissed as a foreign genre. Rather, it engages in creative interplay with native genres, adapting itself to new "literary possibilities" (p. 234). It is this flexibility that may explain its long-lasting popularity: its survival or re-emergence, after the Reformation, in popular folktale and ballads.

Thus far, Carlsen's research contributes to a growing body of work on the generic hybridity of Old Norse-Icelandic literature (see Clunies Ross 1997; Rowe 1993; Hermann 2013). The reception of the *visio* provides an important insight into how Old Norse writers incorporated, and made their own, imported literary genres. One of the most fascinating parts of the book is Carlsen's analysis of the bridge and the shoe as points of intersection between pagan mythic and Christian traditions. Shoes are surprisingly ubiquitous in Northern European visionary literature, based on the connection between giving shoes to the poor as alms in this life and shoes received in the next life as aids for the arduous journey to Heaven. The twelfth-century visionary Godeschalcus sees an extraordinary tree hung with shoes, punning perhaps on the "fruit" of charitable works. Likewise, an addition to the Norwegian Homily Book allegorizes shoes as "the example of the patriarchs" and feet as "the steps of good works". Carlsen compares the Christian significance of the shoe to its importance in Norse myth: the mysterious "Hel-shoes" that Þorgrímr binds on the dead Vésteinn, the shoes owned by Loki for travelling through air and sea, the shoe worn by Víðarr when he kills Fenrir in revenge for the death of Óðinn at Ragnarök. The fusion of native and Christian here produces a composite symbol rich in "cultural resonances" (p. 179).

Another strategy of acculturation is the rendering of Christian concepts in secular and heroic terms; here Carlsen selects the hall as a metaphor for Heaven, found across Old English, Old Saxon and Old Norse literature. While he is undoubtedly right about the importance of the hall as a locus of safety and conviviality (as in Bede's account of Edwin above), it is not clear that all of the images of Heaven he cites do relate primarily to the Germanic hall. The candles, sacred writings, bowing angels, and holy maidens (virgin saints) in *Sólarljóð* suggest a sacred space rather than a convivial one; while the tower room that is Eiríkr's final destination in his saga has Eucharistic and romance overtones, with its finely woven fabrics, white bread, and wine-filled chalice. We are closer here to the mysterious scene in the English Corpus Christi Carol than to the hall in Germanic literature. Indeed, in *Njáls saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, the concept of an afterlife in a hall-like setting is explicitly rejected as pagan: the dead in *Eyrbyggja saga* are cast out of the hall, while the flames that consume Njáll's hall are figured as cleansing and salvific, in contrast to the cheerful fires in Gunnarr's pagan mound. Two further eschatological visions could usefully be added to Carlsen's analysis here: Þórey's vision of Heaven in *Flóamanna saga* and the visionary stanzas in *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*.

The visionary sequence in *Gísla saga* is particularly complex, as the first vision is nowhere explicitly related to the hereafter: as Carlsen observes, it seems just as likely that Gísli dreams of what he desires here: a warm welcome from family and friends. While the "better" dream-woman does offer Gísli a comfortable afterlife of riches and comfort in the hall, it is not clear that this is equivalent to the Christian heaven; in fact, the most explicitly Christian verse in the saga is spoken by the "worse" dream-woman, who tells him that he must set out *from* his hall alone, to foreign lands, *annan heim at kanna* ("to explore another world"). This sounds more like the Old English poet of *The Seafarer*, for whom the hall is a morally dangerous place. These dreams do not provide a tour of the "Christian eschatological universe", so much as project outward Gísli's deepest hopes and fears. In this case, it certainly seems true that the exact relationship to the Latin *visio* is impossibly difficult to untangle.

With this book, Carlsen has made an important contribution not only to scholarship on visionary literature, but also to studies of the relationship between native and imported genres in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. While recent work on genre has focused on the impact of romance, there is still much to understand about how Latin European genres shaped and influenced Old Norse literature. By shifting attention from source study to generic interplay and creative adaptation, Carlsen has opened up new avenues of research. The richness and complexity of Old Norse visionary literature testify to the success with which Norse writers made this genre their own.

Bibliography

CLUNIES ROSS, Margaret. 1997. The intellectual complexion of the Icelandic Middle Ages”. *Scandinavian Studies* 69.4: 443–453.

HERMANN, Pernille. 2013. “Saga literature, Cultural Memory and Storage”. *Scandinavian Studies* 85.3: 332–354.

NEDKVITNE, Arnved. 2009. *Lay Belief in Old Norse Society 1000-1350*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculum Press.

ROWE, Elizabeth Ashman. 1993. “Generic Hybrids: Norwegian ‘Family’ Sagas and Icelandic ‘Mythic-Heroic Sagas‘”. *Scandinavian Studies* 66: 539–553.

Siân Grønlie, Tutor in English, Kate Elmore Fellow in English Language and Literature, St. Anne’s College, University of Oxford.
