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Creating a Norm for the Vernacular

Some Critical Notes on Icelandic and Italian in the Middle Ages

MATTEO TARSI

1. Introduction

This article¹ consists of some critical notes on the creation of a norm for two vernacular languages, Italian and Icelandic. The argumentation will be based on literary and grammatical works that lay a foundation for these two languages: the *De vulgari eloquentia* (DVE) and the *Convivio* by the great vernacular poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in the case of Italian, and the *First Grammatical Treatise* and *Snorri Sturluson's Edda* in the case of Icelandic. These four works have in common that they put

¹ This article is based on an essay that was written for the course ÍSM015F 'Mál og samfélag' during the spring semester of 2016 at the University of Iceland, Reykjavik. The instructor was Prof. Kristján Árnason, who corrected and made comments on the very first draft of this article. I would like to thank him for all of his help. Moreover, a paper based on this article has been delivered at the conference 'Forging Linguistic Identities', held at Towson University (Towson, MD) in March 2017. I wish to thank the people who took part to the discussion there. I hereby also want to express my gratitude to Prof. George McCool and Prof. Christopher Cain (Towson University). I wish also to thank Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson (The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies) and my friend and colleague Giovanni Verri for the useful discussions about the matter on which this article focuses. Moreover, I wish to thank Dr Elizabeth Walgenbach, who has translated this article, the first draft of which was in Icelandic, and Charles Gittins, who revised its final draft. Last but not least, I am grateful to the editor-in-chief of the present journal, Prof. Veturlíði Óskarsson, and to the two anonymous peer-reviewers, whose insightful comments I have tried to follow thoroughly.

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forward the first grounds for the discussion of grammar and poetics for each of the aforementioned languages. Although these works differ in length, somewhat in subject matter, and in the preservation of their texts, they are all alike in the ideology underpinning them. At the time when they were written, literate people were preoccupied with establishing the grounds for a wide and important discussion about the vernacular. It should be noted that a rich literary tradition lies behind these works, especially the composing of poetry, an art in which both Icelandic and Italian poets from ancient times shone.

The article is organized as follows: first, the four works will be introduced (2). I will place special emphasis on the *DVE* and the *Convivio*, which are perhaps less known to Old Norse/Icelandic scholars. It should also be stressed that whereas Dante's works were both written in the same time period (the beginning of the 14th century), the two Icelandic works are not comparable in this sense, since there is at least half a century between their times of composition. Nevertheless, the core of the scholarly thought which constitutes their background, i.e. that of Western Europe, may be said to be to a great extent the same, for there existed a scholarly canon of authors from Classical and Late Antiquity which was widely known and studied during the European Middle Ages and beyond. This canon was first shaped in church schools and subsequently adopted by other learning institutions such as universities (cf. Graves 1970: 14–19 and 88–90). In the following section (3), the focus will be on the importance of these works for the linguistic norm of the respective languages. I will investigate, among other things, the ideology that forms the foundation of these works, which are interpreted as keystone texts for literary and grammatical discussion in Icelandic and Italian. Moreover, I will challenge Kristján Árnason's (2002) view about the birth of a linguistic norm in Iceland,² and I will offer a different explanation in accordance with both earlier scholarship (Lehmann 1937, Walter 1976) and more recent discoveries (Gottskálf Jenson 2002, 2004, and 2009, and Marner 2016). In the final section (4), I will tie together the different threads of discussion and the main arguments that have been put forth.

² Kristján discusses his views moreover in a book chapter (Kristján Árnason 2003), to which Stephen Pax Leonard (2012) makes reference in his work. Here, I will make reference exclusively to Kristján's 2002 article.

2. The four works

Dante, the First Grammarian, and Snorri Sturluson all have in common that they played larger-than-life roles in the history and development of their respective vernaculars. Moreover, they all set for themselves the goal of creating norms for the vernacular, if it may be so phrased. They each did this, of course, after their own fashion, and their specific intentions in writing were different in each case. The First Grammarian makes it clear that he intends to create an alphabet for the Icelanders in that he attempts to create a spelling convention for his mother tongue. Snorri on the other hand seeks to preserve ancient poetic language in the *Skáldskaparmál* of the *Edda*. His purpose was to document the ancient art and the old norm used by Norse court poets. Perhaps this norm was in decline by the time Snorri wrote his *Edda*, as it might be inferred from his address to young poets in the *Skáldskaparmál*. The *DVE* and the *Convivio* are somewhat complementary. In the former work, which is written in Latin, Dante concentrates on the vernacular language. The *DVE* is, in a nutshell, a research work about the Italian vernacular and altogether a quest for its best variety, which Dante calls *vulgare illustre*,³ the illustrious vernacular (cf. Gottskálk Jensson's introduction in Alighieri 2008: 19–30). The latter work, the *Convivio*, is by contrast written in the vernacular. In this work Dante aims at giving a commentary of a number of vernacular poems. Both the *DVE* and the *Convivio* are from the first decade of the 14th century (probably from the period 1303–1307) and neither of them was finished.

³ Dante (*DVE* I xvii 2) explains the *vulgare illustre* in the following manner: “Primum igitur quid intendimus cum illustre adicimus, et quare illustre dicimus, denudemus. Per hoc quoque quod illustre dicimus, intelligimus quid illuminans et illuminatum prefulgens: et hoc modo viros appellamus illustres, vel quia potestate illuminati alios et iustitia et karitate illuminant, vel quia excellenter magistrati excellenter magistrant, ut Seneca et Numa Pompilius. Et vulgare de quo loquimur et sublimatum est magistratu et potestate, et suos honore sublimat et gloria.” (Let me first reveal what I mean by illustrious, and why I say illustrious. By this word I mean precisely something brilliant, whose brilliance reflects its splendor. And in this sense we call men illustrious either because, illuminated by the power they illuminate others with justice and charity; or because ruled excellently, they in turn rule excellently, like Numa Pompilius and Seneca. And the vernacular of which I speak is both exalted by mastery and power and exalts its own with honor and glory [Latin text: Alighieri 2011: 1336–1340; English translation: Shapiro 1990: 65]).

2.1 The *DVE* and the *Convivio*

The *DVE* and the *Convivio* are among the theoretical writings of Dante, who is generally best known for his *Divine Comedy*. Although they differ in many respects, the *DVE* and the *Convivio* complement each other in the framework of Dante's discussion on the vernacular. The former work is written in Latin and discusses the vernacular language, which might loosely be labelled Italian. It is in broad terms an essay about the language, which in this case ought to be interpreted as the common language of the Italian peninsula (cf. below). The latter work deals with poetics in the sense that Dante explains in it some poems and these poetic explanations are especially intended for those who have not been able to concentrate on learning although they had the talent to do so.⁴ Owing to this, among other things, the work is written in the vernacular.

In the *DVE* Dante puts forward his theory that *mutatis mutandis* may be called linguistic. He notes indirectly that which today is called diglossia (cf. also Alighieri 2011: 1070–1071),⁵ i.e. the distribution of the use of two languages in one area where they are differentiated by their fields of use. In Dante's time, there was such a situation in Italy. Latin and the vernacular, *sermo vulgaris*, belonged to different fields of use. Latin was the language of science and learning, whereas the vernacular was the language of the general population. Dante's purpose in the *DVE* is, first

⁴ Dante (*Convivio* I i 2–4) gives four reasons due to which people might not have the opportunity to improve their knowledge and learning. Dante divides these reasons into two groups: intrinsic and extrinsic to the person. There are two reasons given in each of these groups although only half of them is excusable. Excusable reasons are disability and the care for family or society, whereas on the opposite side are malice and poverty.

⁵ Dante (*DVE* I i 2–3) says that there are two languages: *vulgaris locutio* and *gramatica*. When he says *vulgaris locutio*, i.e. the common language, he does not mean the language of a particular people, but rather the concept of a mother tongue (cf. Alighieri 2008: 37, footnote 1). He says that *vulgaris locutio* is that language which “children gather from those around them when they first begin to articulate words; or more briefly, that which we learn without any rules all by imitating our nurses” (Shapiro 1990: 47). On the other hand, *gramatica* is the language of the Romans and the Greeks (in addition to other populations that Dante does not name), which requires much time and learning to master. He deems (*DVE* I i 4–5) *vulgaris locutio* to be nobler than the *gramatica*. In the *Convivio*, Dante's opinion about the vernacular is the opposite. He says there (*Convivio* I v 14) that *gramatica*, more specifically Latin, is prettier and nobler because it follows artistic rules whereas the vernacular follows use. However, according to the *Convivio*, the vernacular fits that very work better than Latin, since the poems that Dante deals with in it are composed in the vernacular and therefore Latin was not at the same level as the material that it was to be explaining (cf. *Convivio* I v–vii).

and foremost, the enrichment of the vernacular over Latin, i.e. to ennoble the vernacular and make it suitable for use at mankind's highest levels of discourse. But Dante is not speaking about the language or dialect of a particular group of people or of a particular region of Italy. This language does not exist, but at the same time – he states (cf. below) – it is everywhere. It is the language of all of Italy, the illustrious national tongue, the *vulgare illustre*. In his search for this language, Dante first gives an overview of the languages of Europe and then turns his spotlight onto the dialects of Italy. At the end of his intellectual quest, he explains his conclusions with the following words (*DVE* I xvi 6):

Itaque, adepti quod querebamus, dicimus illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale vulgare in Latio quod omnis latie civitatis est et nullius esse videtur, et quo municipalia vulgaria omnia Latinorum mensurantur et ponderantur et comparantur. (And so having attained what we sought, let me say that it is an illustrious, cardinal, courtly, and curial Italian vernacular, which belongs to every city but seems to belong to none, and by which the municipal vernaculars of all Italy are weighed, measured, and compared. [Latin text: Alighieri 2011: 1336; English translation: Shapiro 1990: 70]).

Here, Dante clearly articulates the defining characteristic of a national language, which he will go on to explain further in the chapters that follow. In his understanding, in addition to being illustrious, the national language must have three additional features: it must be a cardinal language (*vulgare cardinale*), a courtly language (*vulgare aulicum*), and a curial language (*vulgare curiale*). The first feature, being illustrious, was discussed above in footnote 3. The other features may be briefly explained (cf. Alighieri 2011: 1097–1099) by saying that the national language ought to be the chief language of Italians and all of Italy, not by absorbing all dialects under itself but rather by directing their development over time. The national language ought also to be a court language and a language of law, i.e. a language that is used both at the king's court and by representatives and officials of the emperor. From Dante's words we may draw the conclusion that the national language, which he here clarifies, ought to be everyone's language, understandable to all precisely because it is not bound to any particular location, but rather comprises the best that Italian has to offer. But although Dante's search seems to be first and foremost linguistic, it is in reality stylistic (cf. Migliorini 1988: 171). The norm that he is advocating is first and foremost a poetic language, i.e. a koine of poetry (cf. below).

The *Convivio* is a work that Dante composed in the same period as the *DVE*, which he indeed mentions (*Convivio* I v 10). As said above, this work is unlike the *DVE* in many ways. The feature that most distinguishes it from the *DVE* is the material with which it deals, that is, poems, and the language in which it is written, the vernacular. However, this work is closely linked to the *DVE*, first and foremost because it is here that Dante puts into practice the writing in the vernacular for higher, scholarly purposes. What is important for the discussion here is precisely the fact that Dante uses his mother tongue in order to compose a type of text, a poetic commentary, which usually fell under the scope of Latin. There are various reasons for which Dante chooses to write this essay in the vernacular. One is particularly important to the present discussion, especially concerning the position of the vernacular language relative to the readers. Dante explains (*Convivio* I vii 11–12):

E lo latino non l'averebbe esposte se non a' litterati, ché li altri non l'averebbero intese. Onde, con ciò sia cosa che molti più siano quelli che desiderano intendere quelle non litterati che litterati, séguitasi che non averebbe pieno lo suo comandamento come 'l volgare, [che] dalli litterati e non litterati è inteso. (Now Latin would only have expounded them to the lettered, for others would not have understood it. Wherefore inasmuch as there are far more unlettered than lettered who desire to understand them, it follows that Latin would not have fully accomplished their order, as doth the vernacular, which is understood alike by the lettered and the unlettered. [Italian text: Alighieri 2014: 144; English translation: Alighieri 1903: 33]).

Here Dante's language policy shines through. He fully accounts for the possibilities for his mother tongue to be used in the highest cultural areas of mankind. This view reached full development in his masterwork, the *Divine Comedy*, in which the vernacular is used to elucidate the three realms of the dead: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

2.2 The *First Grammatical Treatise* and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*

In the Middle Ages, it can truly be said that conditions in Iceland and Italy were not similar, especially as regards the political situation in the two countries. Italy was divided into a number of smaller and larger state entities, whereas Iceland was a single political entity that was first independent and then became a part of the Norwegian, and later the Danish, Crown. The two Icelandic works here under discussion were both written

during the so-called Commonwealth Era (930–1262). Rough dates for the two works can be given as the second quarter of the 12th century for the *First Grammatical Treatise* and the first half of the 13th century for the *Edda*.

The *First Grammatical Treatise* is an important witness for the Icelandic phonological system in the 12th century. In it, the First Grammarian, sets himself the goal of adapting the Latin alphabet to the Icelandic language. There were, however, not enough Latin graphemes for all of the sounds of Icelandic. I will not attempt to discuss this whole system here. Readers can refer to the edition by Hreinn Benediktsson (1972), who has researched the matter much more thoroughly.

The words of the First Grammarian present a specific attitude towards the Icelandic tongue. He realizes the Icelanders' need for an alphabet that, by being especially designed for Icelandic, would simplify the reading and writing of texts. He says in the beginning of the preface:

[J] flestvm londvm fetia menn a bækr annat tveggja þann froðleik er þar innan landz hefir giorz eða þann annan er minnifamligaztr þikkir þo at annarf staða[r hafi] helldr giorz eða lög sín fetia menn a bækr hverr þjoð a sína tvngv[.] Enn af því at tvngvrn[ar] erv [v]likar hverr annarri. þær þegar er ór æinni ok hinni somv tvngv hafa gengiðz eða græinz þa þarf vlika stafi í at hafa enn æigi ena sōmv alla i öllvm Sem æigi rita grikkir latínv stofvm girzkvna ok æigi latinv menn girzkvvm stofvm latínv helldr ritar sínvvm stofvm hverr þioð fina tv[n]gv. (In most countries men record in books either the historical lore relating to events that have come to pass in that country, or any other lore that seems most memorable, even though it relates to events that have taken place elsewhere, or men commit their laws to writing, each nation in its own tongue. But because languages differ from each other – which previously parted or branched off from one and the same tongue – different letters are needed in each, and not the same in all, just as the Greeks do not write Greek with Latin letters, and Latinists do not write Latin with Greek letters, nor do the Hebrews write Hebrew with Greek or Latin letters, but each nation writes its language with letters of its own. [Icelandic text and English translation from Hreinn Benediktsson 1972: 206–207]).

According to this, each language needs an alphabet that mirrors its phonological system. This is why the First Grammarian attempts to create an alphabet and spelling rules for his fellow countrymen. The point of view put forward here is similar to the conclusions reached by Kristján Árnason (2004: 378–384), when he considers the importance of norms for ancient societies (cf. also Árni Böðvarsson 1964: 177–179 and Leonard and Kristján Árnason 2011: 91–92). The First Grammarian is eager to

set down specific rules for his mother tongue, that is, to create a written norm. This effort attests that Icelandic was at this time held in high esteem by Icelanders. This is also confirmed by the number of works of various kinds from about the same period such as, for example, the *Icelandic Homily Book*, *Íslendingabók*, and not least the law collection of the Icelanders, which according to Ari the Learned was committed to parchment in the winter of 1117–18 (cf. Ari Þorgilsson 1986: 23, and further Stefán Karlsson 2000b: 46). It can be considered that, in fact, all the oldest Icelandic literary works in the vernacular bear witness to a norm, which was in continual development and adaptation of the language to foreign influence. That is to say that with the practice of translation and the writing of original texts, Icelanders enriched their language, the range of areas in which it was used widened, and Icelandic moved to a higher, more elevated plane.⁶ Some kind of linguistic norm must have existed at the time when these works were drafted, and thus the efforts of the First Grammarian might be interpreted as an attempt to bring a more organized form to this norm (cf. Kristján Árnason 2004: 381 ff.).

Snorri's *Edda* has often been interpreted as a manual of poetics. In it, Snorri considers the conventions and imagery of Norse poetic tradition. Snorri's attempt to compose a manual for young poets comes through clearly in the foreword to the *Skáldskaparmál*, where it says:

En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum, þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar og heyja sér orðfjöldu með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat er hulið er kveðit: þá skili hann þessa bók til fróðleiks og skemtunar. (But these things have now to be told to young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and furnish themselves with a wide vocabulary using traditional terms; or else they desire to be able to understand what is expressed obscurely. Then let such a one take this book as scholarly inquiry and entertainment. [Icelandic text: Snorri Sturluson 1998: 5; English translation: Snorri Sturluson 1987: 64].)

In order to give his readers a good and sufficient overview of traditional Norse mythology, Snorri first writes a cosmology in the form of a dialogue:

⁶ This enrichment should not be confused, however, with the one that came about with Humanism in the 17th century, when Icelandic was instituted on equal footing with Latin (cf. Gottskálk Jensson 2008: 4–5). Because to equate Icelandic with Latin means that Icelandic is no longer seen as a vernacular language (*vulgaris locutio* in Dante's words) but rather as *gramatica*, i.e. a language bound by crystallized rules. It should be kept in mind that the words by Arngrímur the Learned in *Crymogæa* (Arngrímur Jónsson 1985: 96–105) carry with them a politically colored spirit that cannot be attributed to medieval authors.

this part of the *Edda* is called *Gylfaginning*. This is followed by a section where a wealth of *kenningar* are explained (*Skáldskaparmál*), and finally a catalogue of meters (*Háttatal*).

What is particularly relevant to the present discussion however, is Snorri's use of sources. From it we can draw the view that the norm that Snorri is aiming for is a well-established poetic norm, based on the traditional meters, *fornyrðislag*, *ljóðaháttur*, and *dróttkvætt*, which may justly be called the foundations of Norse poetics, and highly-codified imagery. It has, however, been suggested (cf. Kristján Árnason 2016: 210) that both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* were added later, perhaps to explain the *Háttatal*.

When the role of poets is discussed in the context of the Icelandic language, the words of the First Grammarian are often cited (Hreinn Benediktsson 1972: 224–226): “the scalds are authorities in all matters touching the art of writing or the distinctions made in discourse, just as craftsmen are in their craft or lawyers in the laws”. That is to say that poets first and foremost shape the norms for the general language, i.e. they are the trustees of a particular language. One might perhaps say that this idea also lies behind Dante's words in the *DVE*, in which he collects examples from the language of various poets including himself. In addition, he begins the second book of that work with the following words (*DVE* II i 1):

[...] ante omnia confitemur latium vulgare illustre tam prosayce quam metrica decere proferri. Sed quia ipsum prosaycantes ab avientibus magis accipiunt et quia quot avietum est prosaycantibus permanere videtur exemplar, et non e converso – que quendam videntur prebere primatum –, [...]. ([...] I must first of all acknowledge that the illustrious Italian vernacular may be used as appropriately for prose as for verse. But prose writers seem to receive it from those who bind it into verse (rather than the contrary), and because what has been so bound together seems to stand as a model to prose writers (and not vice versa); and since this seems to urge a certain superiority for the former, [...]. [Latin text: Alighieri 2011: 1364–1366; English translation: Shapiro 1990: 69]).

In short, according to the First Grammarian, Snorri, and Dante, poets are considered to be the noblest creators of language, and this idea was not a novelty in the Middle Ages. Poets have, from time immemorial, been emissaries between heaven and earth, between royal power and the people, trustees of mythology, beacons of national identity and consequently of the tool of all of these, i.e. language.

3. Creating a norm for the vernacular

In the preceding sections, I have introduced four works about language and poetics. I have attempted to show that the theories set forth in these works are attempting to lay the foundations for the use of the vernacular in certain settings that were generally reserved for the language of international learning, Latin. Contributions from different authors, Dante on the one hand and the First Grammarian and Snorri on the other, can be interpreted as efforts to raise the vernacular to a higher level of discourse. Linguistics, poetics, and learned commentaries had for a long time been the realm of Latin language. In Italy, Dante was not, however, the first author to use the vernacular to compose poetry. The ‘Sicilian school’ conducted an important pioneering activity in poetic composition in the vernacular (see Migliorini 1988: 123–129 and furthermore *DVE* I xii 2–6). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Dante was the first to attempt scholarly discussion of the potentials of the Italian vernacular. In the preface to the *DVE* (I i 1) Dante says:

Cum neminem ante nos de vulgaris eloquentie doctrina quicquam inveniamus tractasse, atque talem scilicet eloquentiam penitus omnibus necessariam videamus, cum ad eam non tantum viri sed etiam mulieres et parvuli nitantur, in quantum natura permittit, volentes discretionem aliquantulum lucidare illorum qui tanquam ceci ambulant per plateas, plerumque anteriora posteriora putantes, Verbo aspirante de celis locutioni vulgarium gentium prodesse temptabimus, non solum aquam nostri ingenii ad tantum poculum aurientes, sed, accipiendo vel compilando ab aliis, potiora miscentes, ut exinde potionare possimus dulcissimum ydromellum. (Since I find that no one before me has dealt with the matter of eloquence in the vernacular; and since I see how necessary such knowledge is to everyone (for Nature allows it not only to men but even to women and children); I shall attempt, wishing to enlighten somehow the understanding of those who wander the public squares blindly, seeing before them what is actually behind them, to be of service to the speech of the common people (inspired by the heavenly Word), not only pouring into so great a vessel the water of my own wit, but commingling therewith the more potent learning of others so as to dispense from it the sweetest hydromel. [Latin text: Alighieri 2011: 1126–1130; English translation: Shapiro 1990: 47]).

It is precisely because no one had previously elaborated a theory about the vernacular (*doctrina vulgaris eloquentie*), that Dante’s work is important, namely in that he testifies to the right of the vernacular to be allowed to be used for higher purposes.

As mentioned above (cf. 2.2), the political situation in Iceland was quite

different from that on the Italian peninsula. These different conditions were also mirrored in that, whereas in Iceland there was just one single language, in Italy there was a wealth of different dialects, whose origins are to be traced back to Latin.⁷ These varied Italian dialects are well described in the *DVE* (I x 3–xv) in which Dante first divides Italy into different language areas and describes fourteen different dialects (*DVE* I x 4–7). After this dialectological survey, Dante begins his quest for the *vulgare illustre*, and comes in the end to the famous conclusion that the noblest vernacular cannot be geographically located in Italy, although it may be said that it pervades the peninsula everywhere.

In this discussion, it is crucial to take into consideration the importance of Latin as a high-level language in Italy on the one hand and in Iceland on the other. Whereas in Italy there was an unbroken literary tradition in Latin from Roman times to Dante's day (and thereafter), in Iceland

⁷ It is important to remember that, although Dante realizes that Italian, French, and Spanish had a common ancestor (cf. *DVE* viii 5), it was not clear to him that they had come from Latin (cf. Alighieri 2011: 1071). In order to account for the fact that Romance languages were similar to Latin, especially with regard to vocabulary, Dante (*DVE* I ix 11) writes: "Hinc moti sunt inventores grammatice facultatis: que quidem grammatice nihil aliud est quam quedam inalterabilis locutionis ydemptitas diversibus temporibus atque locis. Hec cum de comuni consensu multarum gentium fuerit regulata, nulli singulari arbitrio videtur obnoxia, et per consequens nec variabilis esse potest. Adinverunt ergo illam ne, propter variationem sermonis arbitrio singularium fluitantis, vel nullo modo vel saltim imperfecte antiquorum actingeremus autoritates et gesta, sive illorum quos a nobis locorum diversitas facit esse diversos." (This is what motivated the inventors of the art of grammar, which is nothing but a certain unalterable identity of speech unchanged by time and place. Since it was regularized by the common agreement of many peoples, grammar then became independent of individual judgement, hence incapable of variation. They invented grammar that we might not fail, because of the variation of speech that fluctuates according to individual judgement, to attain partially or wholly to the knowledge of the opinions and deeds of the ancients, or of those whom distance makes different from ourselves. [Latin text: Alighieri 2011: 1228–1232; English translation: Shapiro 1990: 56–57]). It is interesting to compare here Dante and his contemporaries' understanding of Latin as an unchanging language and the Romantic attitude towards the Icelandic language, in which the unbroken connection between ancient literature and contemporary language is also considered. Perhaps one might suggest that whereas Dante could not clearly account for the natural connection between Latin and Romance languages, which had, however, by his time undergone dramatic changes from their common ancestor, Icelandic language purists in the 19th century were very conscious that Icelandic had changed little over the course of time, and used this to operate in an archaising fashion on the language. That is to say that whereas Icelandic language purists used the ancient literature, and with it its language, Old Icelandic, in order to justify the contemporary language and its ancient tradition, Dante considers Latin to be a complete, unchanging language, and justifies this by saying that otherwise the connection to ancient literature would have been broken long ago.

written language as a whole was introduced much later, in the wake of the conversion to Christianity (see the discussion in Stefán Karlsson 2000b: 46–47). Nevertheless, Latin was a foreign language in both countries: in Iceland for it was introduced with Christianity, in Italy for the Italian vernaculars had become phonologically, morphologically, lexically, and thus typologically different from their common ancestor (cf. furthermore Dante's words quoted in footnote 5 above). In addition, one should bear in mind that it is problematic to draw too definitive conclusions solely from the rich Icelandic written tradition in the vernacular vs. that in Latin (which appears to be rather scanty, cf. furthermore Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2017), especially for the following reasons: a) we do not know how many works existed in Latin before the Reformation in Iceland; and b) there is no written tradition that can be attributed to the settlers before the advent of Christianity, except for limited runic material.

In connection with a) we know, for example, that only a small portion of medieval writings have been preserved until our day, and the lack of Latin writings could in large part be due to the fact that many manuscripts have simply been lost, destroyed, or used for other purposes. We also know that knowledge of Latin was a basic requirement for priests and clerics.⁸ This might perhaps suggest that such knowledge ought to have been mirrored, at least in part, in those works that were produced in Icelandic monasteries and church schools (cf. also Lehmann 1937).⁹

As regards b), it is, in my view, thought one-sidedly when the Icelandic written tradition is not set in a larger context, i.e. when Icelandic is looked at as a unique example (e.g. as in Leonard 2012: 55 and Kristján Árnason 2013: 125), precisely because of what has been dealt with above. If we consider that Iceland has culturally been a part of Western Europe, as much evidence suggests, it is difficult to explain why the vernacular was

⁸ Cf. *Grágás*, kristinna laga þáttur: 6, prestþáttur (Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 22).

⁹ As can be seen in *Konungs skuggsjá* (Finnur Jónsson 1920: 9–10), Latin, together with French, was highly valued at the Norwegian court, namely because these two languages were the most widespread at the time. *Konungs skuggsjá* is a Norwegian work intended for the upbringing and education of the sons of Hákon Hákonarson the Old around the mid-13th century. Although then Iceland had been fully settled for a long time, it seems to me possible that Latin and French might have been a part of the education of the upper classes from the beginning of the Writing Era, for they were the most likely to be in contact with the respective milieus. With further regard to this, a number of Icelandic translations bears witness, and not least traces, of Latin learning. As examples, one may mention a manuscript fragment with Latin verb declensions and a corresponding Icelandic translation (ms. AM 921 III 4to, see also Sigurður Pétursson 1996: 276), and the four *Grammatical Treatises* (see also Sverrir Tómasson 1998 and Raschellà 1998).

used almost exclusively for writing purposes. If on the other hand we take into consideration that in Iceland, as in other places on the mainland, the written vernacular developed in a similar fashion as generally in Western Europe, Iceland ceases to be an exception (cf. also Lehmann 1937, in particular pp. 34–35; and Walter 1976, in particular pp. 10–25). The rich amount of writings in the vernacular that has been preserved into the present time can only tell half of the story. The other half is clearly lost (cf. furthermore Hreinn Benediktsson 1965: 17–18).

Having said this, I should mention that it is sensible to say that Latin has held different weight in the two countries, Italy and Iceland, especially as far as the written and scholarly tradition is concerned. These different attitudes towards Latin can, in my view, be clearly seen in the way that Dante (*Convivio* I v–x) feels compelled to explain his choice of the vernacular over Latin for his readers, while the First Grammarian and Snorri offer no justification for their use of the vernacular. It cannot be assumed from this, however, that Icelandic people of learning did not use Latin or neglected it and therefore chose the vernacular over Latin without hesitation. Although Latin seldom appears directly in Icelandic medieval sources (but see the seminal overview by Lehmann 1937, and furthermore Gottskálk Jensson 2009, especially pp. 82–86, Gottskálk Jensson 2012, Marnar 2016, and Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2017), it, or rather its literary tradition, played a larger role in the development of Icelandic literature. It is enough here, for example, to point to various types of texts (homilies, diplomata, law books, bishops' sagas, annals, etc., for further details see Gottskálk Jensson 2004 and 2009). From this follows that, since the core of the oldest medieval literature in Iceland appears to be under an undeniable influence from foreign traditions, chiefly Latin, this leads to the possibility that Latin was also to some extent used in Iceland in a similar fashion as in other parts of Western Europe, although perhaps in a more limited way. Here in particular, I have in mind the different approach to the Latin tradition in the two different societies, the Italian and the Icelandic, which can be explained by considering its spreading. Latin tradition should not be understood only as written but rather also as cultural and pedagogical. With this in mind, it is possible to cast a different light on the contributions of our three authors.

Kristján Árnason (2002: 157–158) suggests that a certain written norm, whose origin was Norwegian, was adopted in Iceland. This view seems to me not to contradict older views on the same matter (for example those of Hreinn Benediktsson 1964: 26 and Helgi Guðmundsson 1977: 316–317),

which propose that the dialects of the first settlers blended together and later evened out, and that some kind of spoken koine arose during the first century of the settlement of Iceland.¹⁰ Here it is important to consider the fact that there may not have been much variation in the language varieties spoken by the settlers. In the wake of the Writing Era, it is more than probable that a written vernacular norm, which was probably formed on the mainland (cf. Kristján Árnason 2002: 186–187), was also taken up in Iceland. At that time, the cultural connections between Icelanders and Norway were strong, not least with regard to book production (cf. Stefán Karlsson 2000a). In his article about the origin of the Icelandic language (Kristján Árnason 2002), the author somewhat criticizes the aforementioned theory about dialect levelling. Kristján's main argument is that Icelandic, in its ancient form as well as today, does not show characteristic features of a creole language, for example there is no simplification of the inflectional system. This strikes one as somewhat contradictory, especially if one considers that there is no need for simplification if the language varieties involved were quite similar, not least with regard to the inflectional system.¹¹ In other words, the language varieties considered here were all part of the same language, viz. Norse.¹² For general reference, creole languages often arise in a colonial context, in which the 'colonized' language shows structural characteristics that are

¹⁰ Leonard (2012: 32), with reference to Siegel (1985: 363 and *passim*), argues that dialect levelling is to be considered as the first stage in a koineization process.

¹¹ It should however be noted that, when speaking about koineization, it is often made reference to the concepts of linguistic reduction or simplification (cf. Siegel 1985: 363 and Leonard 2012: 31–34). In the case of Icelandic however, it is quite difficult to see any of these. The Icelandic phonological system in the first half of the 12th century, as described by the First Grammarian, has a relatively high degree of complexity, and it can be safely assumed that it was the same during the settlement of Iceland. Moreover, we know from Viking Age runic inscriptions that the Norse morphological system was then in all similar to that of the first written Icelandic sources. This, in my view, speaks in favour of a low degree of dialectal difference in those language varieties which constitute the forerunners of Icelandic (for an opposite view, see Leonard 2012: 74–75).

¹² Leonard (2012: 30), who discusses the birth of an Icelandic spoken norm, argues that such norm was formed in a context of dialect, and not language, contact. In this respect, reference can be made to Siegel (1985: 365), who uses the term "linguistic subsystem" instead of "dialect". According to him two genetically closely related and typologically similar varieties may be considered subsystems of the same linguistic system if they fulfill either or both of the following criteria: 1) mutual intelligibility, 2) the sharing of a superimposed, genetically related linguistic system (e.g. a national standard or literary language). In the case of Icelandic, criterion 1 is thought to have been fulfilled by its forerunners.

to a bigger or lesser extent different from the language of the colonists.¹³ In a nutshell, it seems here most likely to assume that the first settlers of Iceland spoke highly mutually intelligible varieties of the same language or, according to a more radical approach put forward by Leonard (2012: 86–89), that the settlers already spoke one single dialect. By comparison, we can look again at the situation in Italy. The Italian peninsula has always been seething with dialects, in the Middle Ages as well as today. Dante attests to fourteen dialects in his quest for the best vernacular, and also concedes that different varieties of the same language are spoken in different nearby areas, for language changes both in time and space (cf. *DVE I* ix 4–10). Why could the same not apply to the settlers of Iceland?¹⁴ Finally, it should be said that the fact that neither the First Grammarian nor Snorri say anything that suggests different spoken varieties within the same language, is no indication that such varieties never existed. Such varieties, if they still existed by the time the First Grammarian and Snorri wrote, were given no attention, probably because the authors looked at Norse first and foremost as one speech community, and also because dialectal differences within West Norse must have been very small.¹⁵ What happened was probably what in German is called *Sprachausgleich*, and this also likely had an effect on the written language. Norse was a koine, viz. a common language. There were probably two variants of this koine, spoken and written. The latter became dominant over time because of the conversion to Christianity, cultural and economic relationships with Norway, and more. After all, there is a gap between the Conversion and the expected introduction of writing on one side, and the oldest preserved sources on the other. In connection with this, one may also mention that in Norse there seems to be no such division, as there was for example in ancient Greek between dialectal varieties and their use

¹³ Kristján Árnason does indeed mention dialect levelling once in his article (Kristján Árnason 2002: 181), and concedes exactly what has been said above. This makes, in my view, the discussion about creolization invalid since dialects of a particular language are by definition the same language.

¹⁴ As pointed out by Leonard (2012: 86–89), the settlement pattern of Iceland would not speak in favour of a theory of dialect levelling after the settlement, but rather prior to it. According to Leonard (2012: 87), the settlement pattern in Iceland, i.e. that of isolated farmsteads, would have instead contributed substantially to the homogeneity of Icelandic, viz. to the maintenance of a previously established spoken norm.

¹⁵ Cf. on the contrary what Óláfr Þórðarson (1927: 62) notices in his *Third Grammatical Treatise* about word-initial /v/ in West Norse vs. East Norse (Danish) and German. See also footnote 11 above.

in literary works (cf. Kristján Árnason 2002: 161). This only proves that there was one written norm, but tells us nothing about the dialects that lie at its foundations, nor about those varieties of Norse that were spoken at the time of the settlement (cf. the creation of the Greek koine, Rodríguez Adrados 2001: 175–202).

4. Conclusions

In the previous sections, I have discussed the creation of a written norm for two vernaculars, Icelandic and Italian. I have put forward that at the core of such written norm lies the importance of Latin, and that there was a difference between Latin usage in Italy and Iceland. Two factors are to be taken into account when looking at the use of Icelandic as compared to the apparent lack of a comparable use of Latin in Iceland, namely that a) there was a radically different approach to Latin tradition in the two different countries, and b) the poor preservation of Latin manuscripts in Iceland. Kristján Árnason's discussion of the origins of the Icelandic language has been criticized, and it has been pointed out that the lack of Latin manuscripts in Iceland tells us only half of the story. We know, for example, that priests and clerics were required by law to have a certain degree of proficiency in Latin, and that every church ought to have had at least four liturgical manuscripts, which were of course in Latin. It might in addition be pointed out that a poor parish like the one on Grímsey had over twenty manuscripts in its possession in the early 14th century (see the charter for Grímsey church in *DI* II: 443), and that at the beginning of the 13th century there were 220 churches in the bishopric of Skálholt (Walter 1976: 13). Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson (2017: 174–175) estimates that there were about 330 churches and up to 1200 chapels in Iceland during the Late Middle Ages. With regard to books, he says that the minimum requirement of liturgical books which every church had to own amounted to four (gradual, missal, breviary, and antiphoner), and were obviously in Latin. It is difficult to say very much about the fate of these manuscripts other than that they were destroyed over the course of time, although fragments of an Icelandic written tradition in Latin are still sparsely appreciable (for an overview see Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2017).

It seems self-evident that the norm underpinning both the Icelandic and

the Norwegian literary standard goes back to an oral tradition, i.e. that of law and poetry. This tradition was first shaped in Norway and is older than the settlement of Iceland. It has been moreover argued that a theory which takes into account dialect levelling is still valid, although only one dialect is considered as the basis for a written norm.¹⁶ This norm could well have been highly regarded before the advent of written culture, and then used in writing as a natural continuation of this high regard. This says nothing, however, about the spoken language: *verba volant, scripta manent*.

The fact that Dante is fully aware of the way that he deviates from scholarly convention by using and elevating the vernacular, whereas neither the First Grammarian nor Snorri say anything about this, can be explained by saying that Latin had a different weight in the Norse and Southern-European cultural worlds (cf. Tarsi 2016). In addition to this, it is also probable that linguistic variation between the western coast of Norway and Iceland was much less pronounced than that in Italy, since the forerunners of Icelandic were probably dialects that were spoken in a relatively small area on Norway's western coast (for a partially opposite view see Leonard 2012: 74–75).

The rich and developed literary tradition in Iceland in the Middle Ages and its genre diversity shows two things: a) the Icelanders' fully-developed ability to write in their native tongue; and b) that, as early as the 12th century, Latin literary models underlie the Icelandic literary production (cf. Sverrir Tómasson 1988: 35–44). This can be set in a larger context, and it is no surprise to see that as need and ability emerged, the vernacular is used as written language. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that Latin was known and possibly used more widely in Iceland than is usually supposed. As Sverrir Tómasson (1988: 38, my translation) puts it:

It is also worth mentioning a well-known fact, namely that where there is good knowledge of a particular language, much is translated from that same language. The fact that many translations were made from Latin in the Middle Ages need not attest that there was little general knowledge in this language.

¹⁶ It is well known that, as regards the Italian written standard, one dialect, the Tuscan or rather the Florentine variety, was chosen as the basis for the norm. This did not happen, however, in Dante's time. In *DVE* (I xiii 1–5), he judges his local contemporaries harshly for considering their vernacular the most noble. In reality, Florentine played already an important normative role from the 14th–15th centuries (cf. Migliorini 1988: 257–258), first and foremost because of works by the 'Three Crowns' (Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio). However, it was not until the latter part of the 15th century and even more so in the 16th century that a thorough discussion about a standard language began (cf. Migliorini 1988: 309–328).

It has been argued that the origins of a Norse written language can be traced back to an oral tradition, and that such tradition was based in laws and poetry. However, the fact that such works are of course very important in light of what came later cannot be used as evidence to assess the unicity of Norse literary tradition over other Western-European literary traditions. The Latin literary tradition appears widely in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, if not directly then at the very least in the types of texts and literary models for the majority of learned works. This suggests that knowledge of Latin was rather common among those who composed these texts (cf. furthermore Walter 1976: 13–20), and it is understandable that many translations were made for the sake of readers, who were probably often unlearned in Latin. This situation might well also apply to Italy. It is, among other things, precisely for the sake of readers that Dante wrote the *Convivio* in the vernacular.

In conclusion, it should be reemphasized that no norm or standard other than that of Norse is mentioned either by the First Grammarian or Snorri, and that this probably implies that they thought it unnecessary to speak about any other norm in their writings. But this could also stem from the fact that this was not their goal. After all, Norse in the Middle Ages owed much less to Latin than Italian did.

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Summary

The article deals with the birth of a linguistic norm in Iceland and Italy. The discussion focuses on four works, which lay the foundations for the discussion of grammar and poetics in their respective vernaculars, namely Dante Alighieri's *De vulgari eloquentia* and *Convivio* for Italian, and the *First Grammatical Treatise* and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* for Icelandic. A parallel between these four works is established, and the view that Latin has been little used in Iceland during the Middle Ages is challenged, also in accordance with both earlier scholarship (Lehmann 1937 and Walter 1976) and recent discoveries (Gottskálk Jenson 2002, 2004, 2009 and Mamer 2016). It is argued that Latin is bound to have been used as a language of scholarship in Iceland as it was in Western Europe, although manuscript transmission seldom provides direct evidence in this respect. Moreover, a view that takes into account the different weight that Latin as such had in the two different speech communities, Italian and Icelandic, is advocated. This approach rests upon the fact that, whereas in Italy there was an unbroken literary tradition in Latin from Roman times to the Middle Ages, in Iceland Icelandic was the only language to be used until the Conversion, i.e. until the Latin alphabet was introduced. Thus, it is not surprising that the Icelandic vernacular was held in relatively higher esteem in Iceland, therefore leading to a relatively earlier and richer literary tradition in that language, whereas in Italy the vernacular had to be first raised in linguistic status in order to be used as literary language.

Keywords: Latin scholarship in Iceland, care for the mother tongue, treatises in the vernacular, Icelandic, Italian

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