

Translation of Gories Peerse's *Van Yslandt*,
an ethnographic poem that incited a historiographic revolution

David Koester
Department of Anthropology
University of Alaska Fairbanks

This poem was written by Gories Peerse, a merchant, possibly a ship's captain, who is thought to have sailed between Iceland and Hamburg during the period from about 1554 to 1586.¹ It was typical of the travel poetry of the period in which voyagers sought to describe distant places and foreign peoples in an entertaining and memorable form.² What was unusual in this situation was the possibility of native ethnographic critique. Unlike the peoples of Africa, America and Asia who were also the subject matter of sixteenth-century travelers' less-than-complimentary descriptions, Icelanders had access and were able to read and respond to published accounts.³ The result was *Brevis Commentarius* (A Brief Commentary), a nationalistic defense and counter-description of Iceland. Bishop Guðbrandur's comments were printed as preface. The Commentary was composed at Bishop Guðbrandur's request by a young parson, Arngrímur Jónsson, and published first in Latin in 1592-93.

The poem was published in its original Middle Low German in 1883 by Wilhelm Seelman in the Jahrbuch des Vereins für niederdeutsche Sprachforschung as an example of the language, poetry and travel writing of the sixteenth century, and for its significance for Icelandic historiography. Seelman used an edition from 1594, a date which shows that the 1593 Latin publication of Brevis Commentarius did nothing to deter the poem's reprinting. An Icelandic prose translation of the poem by Guðbrandur Jónsson was published in 1946. The present translation is based on both the original Middle Low

¹Jakob Benediktsson (1968:xi) says that the ship's records show him traveling from 1558. Jakob notes, that the evidence seems to show that Peerse witnessed the eruption of Hekla in 1554.

²George Turberville's verse description of Russia, part of which was also published by Hakluyt (Penguin ed., 1985), is a good English-language illustration of this literature. There were few other examples in Middle Low German--a description of India by Lünchburger (1555) and a translation of Mandeville's travels (Cordes 1983:370).

³The Middle Low German in which Peerse's poem was written was related to Icelandic. More significantly, it was accessible to Icelanders because MLG was the *lingua franca* of the Hanseatic trading area (Peters 1973:69).

German text provided by Seelman and the Icelandic translation, which is sensitive to the Icelandic terms referred to in the poem. It has been formulated with early travel writing and its relationship to the development of ethnographic writing and evaluative conceptions of nation and national identity in mind. I have tried to be as literal as possible in clear English, but in choosing between one or another wording I have sought to highlight the ethnographic and the evaluative rather than the poetic and linguistic features of the poem. The prose explanations in small type are from the original.

Van Yflandt (On Iceland)
by Gories Peerse

There is a land that lies northwest in the sea
 As men say, from Germany
 400 miles or more,
 Iceland is its right name.
 5 It is amazing for its cold, rain, wind and snow
 in addition, especially for its high mountains.
 No grass grows there except in the valleys.
 There is a high mountain, Snæfellsjökull
 that no one has seen without snow,
 10 and men can see it thirty miles away.
 Also there is a mountain called Hekelvelle [*Hekla*].
 The farmers believe it is hell.
 That is because gushing flames
 frequently come out of it. The smoke from it is also continuous.
 15 Men hear and see rare wonders there,
 and it has happened before comprehending minds
 that a huge flame burst out over Hekelvelde [same *Hekla*, different spelling]
 and it has destroyed grass, men and houses.
 Strong earthquakes occur there very often
 20 and do great harm as a result,
 break down what they have built up.
 I cannot tell about all of these things.
 That which has occurred during the last few years everyone knows
 who has done business on Iceland and been there.
 25 And it happened about twelve years ago
 that around that time one night
 a powerful earthquake occurred.
 Afterwards men heard such a huge thundering
 that it would not have been possible to create it with guns
 30 and at the same time a powerful flame came
 out of the earth, huge and terrifying.
 It was so powerful and terribly great
 that it melted cliffs and boulders.
 From the flames came steam and smoke
 35 so that men could not recognize the day
 and the fire shone clearly against the sky,
 men heard a horrifying crackling.
 And all the people agree

that the fire burned equally in rain and in sunshine.
 40 There are many swamps and cascades.
 None are greater than other lands.
 Sulfurous mountains burn so much
 that men see them at twelve miles distance or more.
 From various mountains emanate hot springs,
 45 where it would cause great harm to bathe in them.
 Though there are other springs that are not so entirely hot
 wherein it is possible to bathe without injury.
 I have traveled in the south, north, east and west
 and it seems to me that to the south and west
 50 the fishing is best.
 In the north and east they have better things.
 There they can produce good woolen cloth (Wattman, Scottish *wadmal*)
 Because they have enough of sheep,
 cows and woolly goats.
 55 Iceland is good at all ends,
 though those who want to travel there
 must endure much cold, hunger and thirst.
 There are so many lakes and waterfalls
 that men cannot count them all.
 60 Thus, there is a great danger associated with traveling there,
 that I say right and true.
 If you want to travel there,
 you will seldom find a town or village.
 If you plan to travel in the highlands,
 65 then you should bring with you a shelter or a tent.
 You should have provisions with you,
 and you will endure tremendous cold there.
 You will have to set up and stake down your tents
 because sometimes you cannot continue
 70 and not travel or ride forward.
 Rain, snow and cold will teach you to avoid such journeys,
 not one stride in front of you,
 can you see, believe me about that.
 All the roads and paths are blown over with snow
 75 and because you cannot see you cannot travel.
 You must have the taller mountains as markers
 and strengthen yourself on your food and drink.
 Many men freeze to death there,
 lose their lives because of hunger and thirst.
 80 You will not in Iceland run into
 any hares, roe deer, harts or hinds
 and no wild animals except white, grey and red foxes
 and in addition to this a lot of wild and untamed horses.
 The foxes kill a number of sheep.
 85 And in the north white bears come
 on ice from Greenland.
 Much ice drifts ashore each year in the north
 and it is so massive and thick that no ship can approach.
 It is about 20 to 30 fathoms thick and very strong
 90 so that it damages ships that run into it.
 Around St. Johann's [end of June] or later
 men sail easily into harbors in the north

because then the ice is mostly gone,
 and there they load sulfur in huge piles.
 95 Sulfur is mined from the mountains in the north
 and horses must carry it to the sea,
 up the mountains and over, large and small
 so that they often die from it.
 Because of the high mountains, no wagons can be driven here
 100 and that is why the horses carry the loads on their backs.
 I cannot write anything more about birds
 except that geese and ravens fly there.
 It is certain that the ravens in Iceland
 are bigger than in any other land.
 105 In the east and north there are a number of beautiful falcons,
 indeed men have a lot of fat for bait.
 There are many good white field hens [ptarmigan] all over the land,
 though there is no beer and no bread.
 I should also write about rye, wheat and barley,
 110 which cannot grow in Iceland because of the cold.
 Apples, berries, peas, beans, flax and poppies
 cannot grow because of the cold.
 In general you will not find any fruits there
 and you must take them with you yourself.
 115 And nothing grows there that men plant or sow,
 and nothing is harvested except grass.
 There are good fat rams and sheep there
 and the number of them is very great.
 The sheep there become fat in four weeks
 120 and the goats are not raised better in any other land.
 All stallions and mares that are there
 are pack horses and sure-footed.
 Hazelwood, oak and birch are very expensive there
 and no other wood than birch grows there well.
 125 They have sod, seaweed, dung and fishbones
 from which they make fire.
 Men pay a lot for that there.
 And there are huge whales around the land.
 They go near land very often
 130 so that no one dares go to sea.
 The huge Hakal is eight to nine ells.
 Hakal is a fish [*hákarl*, 'shark']
 It can eat up everything at once,
 because its jaws are so huge
 that men could sail a boat up in them.
 135 When men see this fish surface
 they rush to land.
 They are one hundred ells or more in length
 and nothing except ice keeps them below the surface.
 The inhabitants cannot do anything about this
 140 though they use all their strength and weapons.
 Sometimes one comes between the land and ice
 and is thus trapped there
 and loses its life
 because then it is in the power of men.
 145 They have fearful teeth

that are three ells or more in length.
 It has scales on its head as if a shield.
 Its tail is not trifling, rather huge,
 it is a wonder though it is true.
 150 This I tell you true and sure.
 The land is oblong and not round.
 It is certainly 100 miles long.
 There are many furry dogs
 and it costs a high price to buy them.
 155 If it is attempted to get one or more of the small children,
 they give them away without cost.
 Now briefly has been spoken about the ways and situation of Iceland
 and I intend now to tell about the means of the people,
 what clothing, food and drinks they use
 160 and what other customs they have.
 First you should remember and understand well
 that they have a community chapel by their houses
 and go there daily and pray
 as soon as they have gotten out of bed.
 165 They do not say a word to anyone
 before they have said their prayers.
 Here is a holy people.
 They read Psalms of David daily in Latin,
 but the greater part no one understands.
 Many clerics and preachers in the country
 170 preach no more often in a year
 than twice, this is a great disgrace and dangerous.
 The people are both large and small.
 Prostitution and adultery is very common there
 and there is more of it there than other places.
 175 The common man does not consider it sinful
 when they can thoroughly swindle a German,
 and they do not consider it wrong.
 Both common and the great wear stylish clothing
 and in this extravagance they are proud.
 180 When they meet on the byways
 the one kisses the other on the mouth.
 They greet each other in this manner
 and show one to another their warm feelings.
 There is much gravel, but little sand
 185 and there are many strong people in the country.
 They take a ton of raw iron from the ground onto their backs.
 In the whole country there is no more than one bridge.
 When they want, they can take up a cask of beer from the ground and drink from the spout, just as the farmers drink from a
 keg.
 Native born Icelanders do not think it unclean when dirty hair pollutes their butter and occasionally lice; they are a "licey"
 people.
 Then they eat hard, rotten fish, unsalted,
 and with it large amounts of unmelted butter with hair.
 190 And neither do they salt meat.
 If it is lean, they eat tallow with it.
 They eat Hakal and fish raw and without salt.
 Hakal is a fish
 Skyr (Schur), curds (drabbel), oat bread (meelbrey), black pudding (blomen)

can only be served to lords.

Schur (*skyr*) is thick milk [like yogurt]. Drabbel (*drafli*) is boiled from fresh milk until it becomes stiff. Blomen (*blóðmör*) is sheep wurst [actually blood pudding].⁴

- 195 Without salt and bread,
they think food is good.
They greedily eat fatty seal blubber,
without salt and bread in their bowl
they eat it as greedily
- 200 as if it were chicken or rabbit steak.
A sheep or a ram, though it has been dead for a long time,
Such food they eat and gobble up.
I saw it happen once
that a man's cow had died.
- 205 It died around Christmas
and was unspoiled at the beginning of Advent.
He found it in the snow and brought it in
and the meat still tasted like a treat to him.
That happened in the south,
- 210 in the region that is called Arckermisse (*Akranes*)
Believe me it is right and sure,
that what is written here is not made up.
They eat butter thick, the bread is thin.
The fish is dried in the wind and the sun
- 215 and they haul it from the sea with their lives in danger.
I tell you this truly.
Water and buttermilk must
be in every good drink.
And if beer is brought there by ship,
- 220 the people drink it enthusiastically while it lasts.
They don't let it last more than eight days;
they fear that it could turn sour.
Anyone who comes there has immediately to drink with them
and may in no way avoid it,
- 225 and for this reason even the farmers go
where they can sit without paying.
And there no one stands up from the table [lit. dishes]
who needs to pass water, believe me about that.
The lady of the house must pass him the chamber pot,
- 230 and she doesn't turn away,
and must take it back from him.
They are not ashamed of that.
She must then get rid of it,
that is the manner and custom of this land.
- 235 They sit and howl like bears and dogs
and when the beer is gone they wipe their mouths.
Then the guests go to their houses,
the host remains behind with his lice.
They drink most readily from bowls, seldom from flasks
- 240 and they never carry money in their pockets.

⁴The term in parentheses is the Icelandic term that Peerse rendered in German.

They have of course horseshoe nails and pay with them.
 They also drink beer from bull's horn beekers
 that are carved skillfully round in stripes.
 There it is not shameful to eat and drink without money;
 245 it is the custom in this land.
 The houses there are set in the ground
 and it is not possible to protect oneself from the lice.
 They go early to bed in the evening
 and they get up late in the morning.
 250 They sleep ten or more all together in one bed
 and both men and women lie together.
 They sleep head to foot
 snoring and farting like a group of pigs
 together under one *vaðmál* blanket.
 255 They all pass water in one large tub
 which they have left for the night
 and they wash their mouth and head from it.
 They have *vaðmál* above and below themselves.
 That is their bedding and nothing else.
 260 During the winter when they get up,
 they cannot get out of the house because of snow.

If they go out they see nothing other than high mountains covered with snow. That is their fun and happiness.

Then they lie back down in their wadmal blanket like pigs. Then the servants or the children must bring them food and drink in their bed, and when they have eaten and drunk their fill, they are not willing to do anything other than play checkers or chess, and they often have it there with them [in bed]. Then the servants must go out and look for dead sheep and rotten fish, which they then eat from their dishes.

Those who cannot get used to these things
 and who cannot digest this food,
 they cannot subsist in Iceland.
 265 This I say entirely on my honor,
 and to those who do not want or cannot believe this,
 they ought to sail there themselves
 and travel about as I have done
 so they can see the reality.

References Cited:

Arngrímur Jónsson

- 1593 *Brevis Commentarius*. Facsimile edition, Jakob Benediktsson, ed. (1968). Reykjavík: Endurprent sf.
1904[1598] "Briefe Commentarie," in *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, Vol. IV. Richard Hakluyt, ed. Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons.

Cordes, Gerhard

- 1983 *Mittelniederdeutsche Dichtung und Gebrauchsliteratur*. In *Handbuch zu niederdeutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft*. Gerhard Cordes and Möhn, eds. Pp. 351-390. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag.

Jakob Benediktsson

- 1968 Formáli. In *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia 1593*. Íslensk rit í frumgerð II. Pp. v-xxxii, English summary, xxxiii-xlii. Reykjavík: Endurprent sf.

Hakluyt, Richard

- 1904[1598] *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*. Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons.

Peters, Robert

- 1973 *Mittelniederdeutsche Sprache*. In *Niederdeutsch Sprache un Literatur: Eine Einführung*. Jan Goossens, ed. Pp. 65-90. Neumünster: Karl Wachholtz Verlag.

Strauss, Gerald

- 1965 *A Sixteenth-Century Encyclopedia: Sebastian Münster's Cosmography and its Editions*. In *From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation*. C. H. Carter, ed. Pp. 145-63. New York: Random House.

Icelandic translation:

- Guðbrandur Jónsson "Um Ísland" in *Glöggt er gests augað*, 1946. Sigurður Grímsson, ed. Reykjavík: Menningar og fræðslusamband, pp. 19-28.

Original 1594 Middle Low German text published in:

Seelman, Wilhelm.

- 1883 *Gories Peerse's Gedicht Van Island*. *Jahrbuch des Vereins für niederdeutsche Sprachforschung* 9:110-25.