

## **Cultural Assimilation in *Njáls saga***

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### **Introduction**

Lars Lönnroth has recently described the social context of the Icelandic family saga as follows: thirteenth-century Iceland comprised two

overlapping and peacefully coexisting cultures jointly promoted by the Church and the secular chieftains, one dominated by native oral tradition, the runic alphabet, Old Norse feud stories, Eddic and skaldic poetry, the other dominated by the Latin alphabet, clerical education, and foreign literary genres (1991:10).

Both “literary production systems” contributed to the writing of sagas:

For even though the plots and narrative language of the Icelandic sagas usually come from the first and indigenous culture, the actual writing, the chronology, the encyclopaedic background of knowledge, the literary composition, and the entire production of codices on a large scale presuppose the diligent work of clerics belonging to the second culture (10).

Lönnroth thus envisions two distinct, but productively interacting, literary “systems” cultivated within the larger framework of Icelandic political and ecclesiastical life.

Carol Clover, in her summary of the question over a decade ago, described more precisely the new “syncretic form” produced by this interaction (1985:294). The Icelandic family saga derived from prose oral tales or *þættir*—Lönnroth’s “Old Norse feud stories”—that were elaborated in the process of being written down into the constituent episodes of longer narratives that themselves had been only “immanent” or potential in native oral tradition, that is, generally understood by experts in that tradition but never actually performed in their entirety (Lindow 1995, Foley 1991). The elaboration of these episodic oral narratives in writing produced a new “long prose” form, and consequently a new *literary* tradition, where competition between the two systems could be played out in a more

disciplined and structured form. Such competition, we may imagine, had already occurred to some considerable extent in the successive and multifarious oral performances of vernacular verse and prose. After all, even oral storytellers had been at least nominal Christians for over two hundred years; some very successful performers were themselves priests of the Church, like Ingimundr in *Sturlunga saga* (Bauman 1986:135). These performers of native tradition, whether cleric or layman, cultivated a distinctive value system of secular manly honor—"the *drengskapr* complex" (140-46)—that nonetheless may have accommodated some sharp, and not perhaps always entirely consistent, penetrations of Christian ethics and ideology (Andersson 1970). But the sometimes comfortable, sometimes anxious process of assimilation between secular and clerical culture—the not unfriendly competition between the two systems—was accelerated and finally resolved as churchmen were involved more closely in the literal production of saga texts. In fact, it is in the writing of the family sagas themselves that medieval Icelandic culture achieved its most fully integrated, comprehensive, and definitive expression. The family sagas are an ideological workshop, the primary site in the imaginative life of the country, the place where the last nails of cultural assimilation were neatly and irretrievably driven home.

My ambition in this essay is to explore more deeply the final fraught stages in the dynamic assimilation between Lönnroth's two systems of medieval Icelandic literary culture, between the one system dominated by the most prestigious narrative complex in clerical education and ideology—the Bible and its dependent *vitae sanctorum*—and the other system first generated within the matrix of pre-Christian Norse mythology. More specifically, I intend to argue that the most potent, but subtle and ramifying, issue at the heart of the greatest of the Icelandic family sagas, *Njáls saga*, is that between two competing systems of eventuality, two opposed formulations of what Joseph Harris has called the "plot of history" (1986:202, 213; 1974:264). For all the accommodation between the two systems prior to the composition of *Njáls saga*—whether oral or literary, whether in verse or in prose—there remained in this work one last barrier to full assimilation: the recalcitrant "deep structure" of traditional Norse plots.

This adaptation of Chomsky's linguistic term is useful in describing the basic plot-system or pattern of events that was characteristic of traditional narratives in the late pagan period. A new system of narrative eventuality was introduced to the culture during the conversion of Iceland to Christianity at the end of the tenth century, perhaps much earlier, in fact, since some of the founding families were already Christian by the time they arrived. The biblical pattern, with its providential plot of history, with its

sequence of sin and salvation, of preparation and fulfillment, of progressive dispensations of grace, is neatly formulated in Paul's Epistle to the Romans: *Scimus autem quoniam diligentibus Deum omnia cooperantur in bonum* ("And we know that to them that love God, all things work together for good. . .") (Vulgate/Douay-Rheims, 8:28). The heroes of this narrative register are the patriarchs, prophets, martyrs, and other saints whose lives anticipate or recall that of Christ; they are understood to approximate an *imitatio Christi*. The late pagan pattern is perhaps most succinctly summarized in the famous old chestnut from *Hávamál* (stanza 77):

*Deyr fé, deyaifræmðr,  
deyr siálfr it sama;  
ek veit einn, at aldri deyr:  
dómr um dauðan hvern*

Animals die; loved ones die;  
Oneself dies the same.  
I know one thing that does not die:  
The reputation of the dead.

This formula encapsulates the defensive fatalism implicit in traditional Norse plot-structures, that tradition's characterization of the way things work out in this world, a process of negative and ultimately disastrous eventuality that may be resisted and delayed but must also finally be confronted with the stoic courage and grim dignity that will at least secure the respect of posterity. This is the pattern of sacred history preserved in *Völuspá*, *Snorra Edda*, and other works.

Many saga characters—the two Þórólfs of *Egils saga*, Arnkell *goði* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Gísli Súrsson in *Gísla saga*, and Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*, to name only a few—act out this traditional plot of history. These figures exemplify the value-system of unflinching manly fortitude in the face of overwhelming odds that is encoded in this narrative structure. The saga-writers sometimes even invest their heroes' deaths with an aura of uncanny force or heroic apotheosis. Gísli, for instance, is said to have

*lét líf sitt með svá mörgum ok stórum sárum, at furða þótti í vera. Svá hafu þeir sagt, at hann hopaði aldri, ok eigi sá þeir, at högg hans væri minna it síðasta en it fyrsta.*

died of so many great wounds that there seemed to be something strange about it. His attackers said that he never gave ground, and they could not see that his last blow was weaker than his first (*Gísla saga* 1943: 115; trans. Johnston 1963:58).

After death, Gunnarr is seen by moonlight in his grave mound, exultantly chanting a verse in his own honor (Sveinsson 1954:193). Such mystification is the reflex of a sacred tradition of heroic demise: the strangeness of Gísli's ferocious invincibility and the spookiness of Gunnar's defiant apparition invest their example with a special—and traditional—potency in the reader's sensibility.

To summarize the principle in operation here: the process of events in secular legend reflects the pattern of eventuality in the *Heilsgeschichte* or “sacred history” of the culture. In the late pagan universe, temporal security is precariously wrested from aboriginal chaos and inevitably collapses back into it, as seen most clearly in the rise and fall of the Æsir against the monsters of chaos. This process of chaos, creation, and catastrophe is the precise inverse of the biblical creation *ex nihilo*, fall, and redemption. Both plot-systems exerted a pervasive influence upon the structure of stories composed under their narrative hegemony. The implicit truth or validity of those secondary narratives—their historicity as understood by their contemporary audiences—is confirmed by the closeness with which they approximate the temporal structure of events in narratives of superior cultural authority. As Marshall Sahlins argues with regard to the various Polynesian heroic traditions, what constitutes a significant account of the past is very differently formulated in the narrative systems of distinct island groups: “different cultures, different historicities,” he concludes (1985:x). Actual historical events are assimilated to the “underlying recurrent structures” in the tradition of their narration (72); the presence and recognition of those structures are a large part of what makes the stories “true” to the participants in that tradition. Clover comments on the historicity of the early sagas in just these terms: they “sprang from historical reality but . . . once set in oral motion, they were slowly but surely rationalized, localized, contemporized, and above all ‘traditionalized’ (repatterned according to the narrative ‘laws’ of that society)” (1985:284-85). These traditional plot structures implicitly define the way things can happen in their world, but can themselves be subjected, and progressively acculturated, to competing traditions of eventuality. And the process of “traditionalization” is not confined merely to the performance of oral narratives, of course; it continues in literary traditions as well.

As I suggested earlier, we may assume that the oral feud stories of founding Icelandic families had come to reflect in some cases considerable influence from Christian patterns of narrative organization before they were construed during the process of literary composition into the longer sagas that they had only implied or adumbrated. But they were not as yet fully

assimilated to a biblical world-view or Christian value-system, certainly not in the deep structure of their plots. Many of these still retained the intimately shaping imprint of the late pagan system in which these stories had first been generated. The new Christian plot of history, the biblical pattern of eventuality, though introduced to native hagiography and the stories of some founding ancestors, was not deeply or securely internalized in saga prose until the mid- to later thirteenth century, in *Laxdæla saga* and, more especially, in *Njáls saga*, where the resolution of the conflict between the two systems of eventuality constitutes the underlying cultural work of the saga form.

### *Laxdæla saga*

The impressive, if rather bald and peremptory, conversion narrative of Guðrun Ósvífs-daughter with which *Laxdæla* concludes anticipates a deeper and more complex integration of Christian conversion paradigms in the plotting of *Njáls saga*. Nonetheless, the author of *Njála* seems to have learned some of his strategy of narrative organization from the earlier saga's depiction of Guðrún's four marriages, each different but all ending in the divorce or death of her husband in ugly or regrettable circumstances (Conroy 1980:117). The technique of sequenced structural redundancy in these marriages, anticipated by Guðrún's four dreams as a young woman and Gestr Oddleifsson's foreboding interpretations of them, prepares us for the final overturning of the established pattern in her concluding "marriage" to God as Iceland's first nun and anchoress, founder of the most distinguished monastery on the island. God, one might say, turns out to be the only "man" good enough for Guðrún, the only one to whom her marriage can be termed an unmitigated success. From the repentance of this "chief of sinners" springs the religious life in Iceland; from her troubled marriages descend the many distinguished churchmen who furthered the progress of grace in the land. From a repeated pattern of failure emerges the redemptive plot of history implicit in the concluding episode of *Laxdæla*.

I will try to show how the author of *Njáls saga* adapted this pattern of sequenced but finally overturned redundancy in his own work and why it is especially effective there. But before I do so, I would like to point out one other thing that he learned from the author of *Laxdæla*: that is, how to stage a martyr's death for a secular hero, a death not actively fierce like that of the Þórólfs, or Gísli or Gunnarr, or Óæinn or Þórr, but passive and principled, like that of Christ or one of the martyrs who imitate him.

Kjartan Ólafsson, after manfully defending himself against the Ósvífssons, finally provokes his cousin and foster brother Bolli into drawing his sword. He then throws down his own (Sveinsson 1934:154; trans. Magnusson and Páilsson 1969: 175):

*Víst ætlar þú nú, frændi, níðingsverk at gera, en miklu þykki mér betra at þiggja banaorð af þér, frændi, en veita þér pat.*

It is an ignoble deed, kinsman, that you are about to do; but I would much rather accept death at your hands, cousin, than give you death at mine.

The saga-writer suggests some very uncharitable and un-Christlike motives on the part of Kjartan here. Perhaps Kjartan's only way of besting Bolli and regaining the superiority he had once enjoyed before their going to Norway is to entice Bolli into shaming himself irrevocably by killing a close kinsman. But whatever ambiguous motivation we are to see on the part of Kjartan in this scene, he does in fact impress by his willingness to sacrifice his own life rather than kill his cousin, though he surely could.

This formula is adapted in *Njáls saga* in the death of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, who echoes Kjartan in saying that he would *hálfu heldr þola dauða* ("much rather endure death") at the hands of the Njálssons than *gera þeim nökkut mein* ("do them any harm") himself (Sveinsson 1954:278; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:230). Höskuldr, in fact, dies praying that God will forgive his foster brothers. His death in turn becomes the model, the type, of which the even more potent "martyrdom" of Njáll is the antitype or fulfillment. The deaths of Kjartan, Höskuldr, and Njáll reconcile in a compact narrative event competing values of ultimate heroism in the two narrative systems Lönnroth has described, each episode evincing a progressively different balance between pagan and Christian virtues. The component of conspicuous good will toward enemies rises sharply from Kjartan to Njáll.

Christian teaching, of course, rejected the *lex talionis* of the ancient Germanic blood-feud, an institution that clearly comes in *Njáls saga* to be associated with the negative fatalism of the old world order: the system of reciprocal kindred violence is shown persistently and perversely to overwhelm the best efforts of good people to find a settlement that will satisfy both parties in a conflict (Byock 1982, 1995). The saga-writer would agree with C. R. Hallpike, who concludes with regard to the hill-clans of Papua New Guinea that "the organization of some societies makes a high level of conflict both permanent and inescapable" (1977:vii). Families can exercise only hortatory constraints on the external violence of their

individual members, but retaliation for such violence can fall upon any appropriately ranked member of the offending kindred; hence a minimum of social control is joined with a maximum potential for renewing and extending hostilities (211). The kindly Njáll is trapped in a system where he can exercise only minimal control over his own sons, but one in which he is nonetheless fully responsible for their behavior. Njál's social identity, whatever his personal feelings, includes the behavior of his sons. We might compare an Ibo proverb that is used in a novel by Chinua Achebe: "When a mad man walks naked it is his kinsmen who feel shame not himself" (1966: 132).

In any case, in Norse tradition this inexorable tendency toward violence in the saga replicates on a social level the inevitability of catastrophe on a cosmic one. Like Guðrun's four marriages in *Laxdæla*, the three episodes of *Njáls saga* that focus on the characters of Hrútr, Gunnarr, and Njáll, respectively, each establish and then intensify the traditional process of eventuality. This sequential redundancy confirms and clarifies the basic pattern: the efforts of better and better men to avoid conflict ironically produce increasingly violent consequences, more slowly perhaps, but with greater devastation once the techniques of legal control snap. Like opposing continental plates that produce more violent earthquakes the longer the pressure between them builds, it seems as if the longer that the friction between families is suppressed under the old system of suit and arbitration at the Althing,<sup>1</sup> the more violent the eruption when that system fails. As Gunnarr says to Skarpheðinn at a horse-fight: *hér mun verða urn seinna, þó at allt komi til eins* ("with me, the process [of violence] will be slower, even if the outcome is the same") (Sveinsson 1954:150; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:143).

### **"Hrúts saga" (chapters 1-24)**

Let us consider the career of the first of the parallel protagonists, Hrútr (Sveinsson 1954:6; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:39):

*vænn maðr, mikill ok sterkr, vígr vel ok hógværr í skapi, manna vitrastr,  
harðráðr við óvini sína, en tillagagóðr inna stærri mála.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Althing was an island-wide judicial and legislative assembly held annually in June in the southeast of Iceland at Thingvellir.

a handsome man . . . tall, strong, and skilled in arms, even-tempered and very shrewd, ruthless with his enemies and always reliable in matters of importance.

Piqued in his sexual vanity, the normally fair Hrútr puts his wife Unnr in an impossible position when he challenges her publicly to declare the reason for her unhappiness in their marriage. His dysfunction is physiologically unlikely though poetically apt. He is not impotent, but rather dramatically the reverse: he suffers from a kind of acute priapism, the result of a curse laid upon him by the queen dowager of Norway when he lied to her about having another woman back in Iceland. In fact, Hrútr's gigolo-like servicing of the queen in order to gain his Norwegian inheritance is not itself the finest example of the inherent quality of his character.

In his marriage, Hrútr leaves his wife no remedy short of clandestine divorce and unfairly refuses to return at least her share of the marriage settlement when sued by Unn's father for the whole estate. Hrútr is understandably irked by Mörð's grasping demand, but his reputation for even temper is distinctly tarnished when he challenges the older man to single combat. Such dueling is understood in the saga as an archaic, only quasi-legal expedient, an otherwise deplorable mechanism to avert feud when due process has failed to yield a legal resolution of the conflict. The honor Hrútr defensively asserts in one system of value—manly vigor—thus has to be paid for by a loss in a competing system of value—demonstrated respect for community norms of fairness. Yet, in other situations, especially in handling the various marital disasters of his niece Hallgerðr, the saga-writer troubles to show Hrútr a man of superior character, judgment, and equanimity.

Further violence in "Hrúts saga" is averted when Mörðr backs down, but Hrútr's uncharacteristic belligerence in this one situation leaves a painful imbalance in the relationship between the two families and has an ill effect upon the character of the heretofore very sympathetic Unnr. She seems "curiously demoralized" by her divorce (Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:12) and neurotically tries to recover her self-esteem by a prodigal lifestyle. Unnr soon squanders her inheritance from Mörðr, almost it seems to force the issue of her uncollected dowry with her kinsmen. And, in fact, the instability left by Hrútr's extralegal action against Mörðr is resolved—again, with only poetic justice—when he himself is forced to endure a reciprocal humiliation at the hand of Unn's kinsman, Gunnarr. Hrútr now has to turn over the whole marriage portion, including his own contribution, in order to avoid a duel. Hrútr escapes with his life in this paradigmatic defeat to

his honor, but his unjust treatment of Unnr and her family devolves into even uglier conflicts in the following episode involving Gunnarr.

**“*Gunnars saga*” (chapters 19-81)**

“*Gunnars saga*” is interlaced with that of *Hrútr*, and this character supplants *Hrútr* as the protagonist of the larger saga for its duration. Compared with *Hrútr*, *Gunnarr* is not only a superior warrior and athlete—*hefir svá verit sagt, at engi væri hans jafningi* (“it has been said that there has never been his equal”)—but he is also described as [m]anna kurteisast . . . *harðgörr í öllu, fémildr ok stilltr vel, vinfastr ok vinavandr* (“extremely well-bred, fearless, generous, and even-tempered, faithful to his friends but careful in his choice of them”) (Sveinsson 1954:53; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:73). He finally succumbs when his masculine (*drengiligr*) vanity comes violently into conflict with his cherished self-regard as a *jafnaðarmaðr* (“man of justice”), a good, honest, law-abiding citizen of the commonwealth. After remarking *Ekki skulu vit vera orðsjúkir* (“We must not be over-sensitive”) when he learns of *Skamkel*’s slander (Sveinsson 1954:136; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:133), *Gunnarr* goes on a vicious killing spree after which he reflects bitterly (Sveinsson 1954:136, 138-39; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:133, 135):

*Hvat ek veit . . . hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnum at vega menn.*

But I wish I knew . . . whether I am any the less manly than other men, for being so much more reluctant to kill than other men are.

This with the blood of six neighbors dripping from his halberd.

*Gunnarr* has now irreparably damaged his own rather self-righteous self-image. He is, in fact, more reluctant than other men to kill and proud of his scruples. But *Gunnarr* is hesitant to kill only so long as he is sure his patience is properly appreciated and he can be confident that his neighbors understand and admire his restraint; he had to be constantly assured of *Njál*’s esteem during the killing-match between their wives, *Hallgerðr* and *Bergþóra*. *Njáll* inspired *Gunnarr* to a higher standard. When *Gunnarr* has to endure some continued disrespect on the part of a different family, however, his deeper vanity bursts forth with the inappropriate violence of prolonged suppression. Even *Njáll* equivocates about the justifiability of

his behavior (Sveinsson 1954: 139; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960: 135):

*Mikit hefir þú at gört, ok hefir þú verit mjök at þreyttr . . . . Mun þetta upphaf vígaferla þinna.*

You have taken drastic action, [b]ut you had great provocation . . . . But this will be the start of your career of killing.

Njáll then goes on to predict the conditions that will precipitate Gunnar's death, including his breaking of a just settlement between good men. Gunnarr responds with some reproach—*Öðrum ætlaða ek, at þat skyldi hættara verða en mér* (“I would have thought others were more likely to do that than I”) (Sveinsson 1954: 139; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:135). But in the end, Gunnarr is shown to prefer his independent identity as master of Hlíðarendi to all other values, even to the only temporary discomfiture of partial outlawry to which he had earlier agreed. This pride is the real reason, of course, that the slopes of his farm suddenly look more lovely to him than they ever have before. Hlíðarendi is the only place on earth where Gunnar's own worth is clear, where he is recognized as *ágætastr maðr um allt land* (“the most outstanding man in the land”) (Sveinsson 1954:174; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:160). He would rather die than relinquish that status, and his enemies give him the opportunity to do so—in the finest Norse tradition. Gunnarr dies alone, without flinching, against overwhelming odds. His story epitomizes the deep pattern of traditional Norse narrative.

Long before this eventuality, Gunnarr concludes the frustrating interview with his mentor just mentioned by abruptly asking Njáll whether he knows what will be the cause of his own death. We might imagine some sudden access of irritation on Gunnar's part toward his superior, know-it-all friend who has not at all reassured him in the way he had hoped. The question certainly seems impertinent, if not downright rude, coming from the *manna kurteisast* (“most courteous of men”). In any case, Njal's response, that he does know and, when pressed, that it will be something that *allir munu sízt ætla* (“everyone would least expect”) (Sveinsson 1954:139; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:136), is borne out in the next constituent “saga,” that of Njáll himself.

**“Njáls saga” (chapters 20-132)**

Njáll

*var lögmaðr svá mikill, at engi fannsk hans jafningi, vitr var hann ok forspár, heilráðr ok gáðgjarn, ok varð allt at ráði, þat er hann réð mönnum, hógværr ok drenglyndr, langsynn ok langminnigr; hann leysti hvers manns vandræði, er á hans fund kom.*

was so skilled in law that no one was considered his equal. He was a wise and prescient man. His advice was sound and benevolent, and always turned out well for those who followed it. He was a gentle man of great integrity; he remembered the past and discerned the future, and solved the problems of any man who came to him for help (Sveinsson 1954:57; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:74).

If Hrútr was normally a fair and law-abiding man, and Gunnarr a generous and courteous one (a real gentleman), then Njáll is a truly gentle man, and one in whom the saga-writer invests a remarkable degree of perspicacity, benevolence, and influence. He is endowed with a superior awareness and subtle initiative in predicting and manipulating the course of events. Nonetheless, Njal's control of events finally fails, just as had Hrút's and Gunnar's: he is burned alive with all his family for the killing of his foster-son, Höskuldr, a crime in which he had no part, for which he had arranged an unheard-of triple compensation, and which he had publicly deplored in the most extreme terms possible (Sveinsson 1954:309; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:252):

*Ek vil yðr kunnigt gera, at ek unna meira Höskuldi en sonum mínum, ok er ek spurða, at hann var veginn, þótti mér slökkt it sætasta ljós augna minna, ok heldr vilda ek misst hafa allra sona minna ok lifði hann.*

I want you all to know that I loved [Höskuldr] more dearly than my own sons; and when I learnt that he had been killed, it was as if the sweetest light of my eyes had been extinguished. I would rather have lost all my sons, to have [Höskuldr] still alive.

The burning of Njáll for the slaying of his beloved foster son is indeed the very last thing anyone would have expected for this wise and gentle hero. How does it happen? What does Njáll do wrong? The saga-writer has so convinced us of his hero's grasp of events that he now forces us to contemplate the cause of his failure: what subtle weakness of character, hidden infirmity of judgment, or fatal confluence of circumstances drags

this truly superior character to an even more catastrophic demise than those of his antecedents?

To take these questions in reverse order, we might first simply remind ourselves that Njáll has a family. Despite his good will to men, Njáll cannot escape, within a society organized around kindred affiliation, a personal responsibility for the actions of his kinsmen, especially his own sons. Their behavior, as I noted above, is part of his identity. The different competing attitudes within this family are the tribal equivalent of psychological ambivalence. Njáll is the guilty conscience of his family group. In a very real sense, then, Njáll feels categorically responsible for the sins of his sons and, like them, must suffer the consequences of their violence, whether or not he personally approves of it: "When a mad man walks naked it is his kinsmen who feel shame." Njál's public grief over the loss of Höskuldr may mitigate the situation, but it does not erase his liability for it.

Next, after contriving with great difficulty the monumental compensation for Höskuldr, Njáll places a silk gown on the pile of money as a final gesture of good will. This completely gratuitous present has the unintended effect of irritating the otherwise genial Flosi, who very much wants to settle his claim peacefully. The gown provokes Flosi into stupidly and uncharacteristically insulting the very man among his opponents who has always shown him the most sympathy and respect: he calls him *karl inn skegglaus* ("Old Beardless") (Sveinsson 1954:113; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:114; *et passim*). This insult in turn incites Skarpheðin's outrageous reply: that Flosi is the mistress of the Svínafell troll every ninth night. After this, Flosi's attitude hardens into an unrelieved determination not to rest until all his enemies are dead. The incident of the silk gown seems mere perverse misfortune and certainly no moral failing, even a venial one, on Njál's part. But it is still a mistake of judgment, if an absurd, meaningless, and finally inexplicable one. For once, Njál's insight into character and events fails him: his gesture produces the opposite effect from the one he intends. The tension between the two parties has now become so great, the rupture into violence so long delayed by increasingly desperate expedients, that even the most trivial, unexpected act, even one intended to smooth over any remaining hard feelings, is enough to precipitate the violent collapse of relations.

The pointlessness of the disruption over the silk cloak reveals that this is no moral weakness on Njál's part, but rather the sheer perversity of history, the pattern of negative eventuality that has already characterized the careers of Hrútr and Gunnarr. *Something* will always go wrong. Njáll now comes to realize that the outcome he has tried so hard to forestall is truly

inevitable: *Nú kemr þat fram, sem mér sagði lengi hugr um, at oss mundi þungt falla þessi mál* (“I have long had the feeling that this case would go badly for us . . . and so it has turned out”) (Sveinsson 1954:314; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:256). Even the most benign and perspicacious of characters, like even the strongest and wisest of gods and heroes, cannot escape the structural incorrigibility of fate. But the question still remains for the Christian audience of the saga, or that dimension of its narrative sensibility that had cause to expect some moral explanation of eventuality: are we to understand that Njáll has done anything wrong, morally wrong, to contribute to the process of fate? Is he guilty of any act or attitude that might explain his failure, that we might recognize as functionally equivalent to Hrút’s unfairness or Gunnar’s pride?

We can begin by noting that even the scrupulous Njáll—who may as a counselor-at-law have plotted deception to help his clients but has never before told a lie himself—does prevaricate a bit when he is driven to a final crisis between his family honor and his Christian pacifism. He prevails upon his sons to leave their position outside Bergþórshváll (in which all, including their enemies, agree they cannot be overcome) with a clearly specious argument (Sveinsson 1954:326; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:263-64):

*vil ek, at menn gangi inn, því at illa sóttisk þeim Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda, ok var hann einn fyrir. Eru hér hús rammlig, sem þar váru, ok munu þeir eigi sótt geta.*

I want everyone to go inside, for they found it hard to overcome [Gunnarr of Hlíðarenda], even though he was only one against many. This house is just as strongly built as his was, and they will never be able to overcome us.

First, Gunnar’s house was not all that strongly built, since his enemies managed to overcome him by merely prying off its roof. Second, as Skarpheðinn immediately points out, these enemies (unlike Gunnar’s) are willing to burn them alive inside. This is one piece of advice from Njáll that does not at all turn out well for those who follow it; his assurance that they will be safe inside is almost immediately belied. Yet after Njáll’s maddening acquiescence throughout the saga in his sons’ various and increasingly irresponsible hostilities, he finally decides to claim his paternal authority over them (Sveinsson 1954:326; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:264):

*Nú mun sem optar, at þér munuð bera mik ráðum, synir mínir, ok virða mik engis. En þá er þér váruð yngri, þá gerðuð þér ekki svá, okfór yðr þá betr.*

Now you are going to override my advice and show me disrespect, my sons—and not for the first time. But when you were younger you did not do so, and things went better for you then.

Just as Njáll had once given bad legal advice to his clients in order to create gridlock at the Althing and thus a chieftainship for Höskuldr, so now he gives bad advice to his sons in order to precipitate what we uncomfortably come to realize must be a fully intended result: their, and his own, destruction. Why does he do this?

Njáll has already declared, as we have seen, that he would rather all his natural sons had been killed, if only Höskuldr were still alive. After all, the Njálssons really are guilty of the enormity for which they are being prosecuted, and Skarpheðinn, in particular, with his sardonic grin and insulting tongue, has contributed substantially to the failure of the planned settlement. But one of the reasons for Njál's regret over Höskuldr, we are led to imagine, is that he has long since understood that his sons will end up dying for their crime anyway: *þeir megu aldri sækja oss at landslögum* (“[t]hey will never have any legal grounds for prosecuting us”), Skarpheðinn says after he provokes Flosi to cancel the settlement at the Althing. Njáll replies: *Þat mun þá fram koma . . . er öllum mun verst gegna* (“Then it will end in disaster for everyone”) (Sveinsson 1954:314-15; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:256). Has Njáll just seen to the inevitable end of the story and given up trying to postpone it any longer?

Njál's motivation in provoking the burning seems far more complicated than an exhausted fatalism. In the end, he seems most concerned not for his sons' lives, nor even for their honor, but for their salvation: not only will they heap more mortal sins upon themselves if they remain outside to fight, but, if they survive, they will prosecute the vendetta, as Skarpheðinn promises, until their attackers are all dead. And these enemies, like themselves, are Christian men, an ugly irony that even Flosi acknowledges (Sveinsson 1954:328; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:265). So Njál's bad advice, his one fib about the good sense of going inside, is designed to instigate a surreptitiously benign result: he hopes to contrive his sons' salvation in a kind of “baptism by fire” before they can do any more damage to their enemies—or to their own souls. When the house begins to burn, he reassures its occupants (Sveinsson 1954:328-29; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:266):

*Verðið vel við ok mælið eigi æðru, því at él eitt mun vera, en þó skyldi langt til annars slíks. Trúið þér ok því, at guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæoi láta brenna þessa heims ok annars.*

Be of good heart and speak no words of fear, for this is just a passing storm and it will be long before another like it comes. Put your faith in the mercy of God, for He will not let us burn both in this world and the next.

But even this spiritual hope does not relieve Njáll of his secular responsibility: he is not his own man. He motivates his reluctant daughter-in-law to leave by approving her promise to urge her kinsmen to seek vengeance: *Vel mun þér fara, því at þú ert góð kona* (“You will do well, because you are a good woman”) (Sveinsson 1954:329; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:266). This we must see as more than a ploy, since Þórhalla is shown to keep her word; the burning is itself a crime, after all. Second, and more tellingly, Njáll rejects Flosi’s Christian distinction between personal and familial responsibility. When offered *útganga* (“free passage out”), he replies: *ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm* (“I am an old man now and ill-equipped to avenge my sons; and I do not want to live in shame”) (Sveinsson 1954:330; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:267). This remark makes it sound as if Njáll would seek to avenge his sons if he were younger, but I read it as another misleading prevarication on his part, a half-truth. Njáll dearly deplores the endless violence of the old system, but he cannot reject his identity as the father of his sons. He would be shamed if he let them lie unavenged, but he is already impossibly humiliated by their crime against Höskuldr. He is, as I suggested before, the guilty conscience of his family. He wants to die now. He deserves to die. He accepts responsibility for the sins of his sons. This acceptance is Njál’s fatal vulnerability, the quality that finally drags him to his death.

### “Flosa saga ok Kára”

In the saga of Flosi and Kiri that follows the burning, characters of lesser moral stature than their predecessors nonetheless manage to overturn the pattern of events we have so clearly come to expect from the three earlier episodes (Harris 1986:212). Flosi is said to have had *flestir hlutir höfðingligast* (“nearly all the qualities of a true chieftain”) (Sveinsson 1954:419; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:326), but himself acknowledges that the burning was *stór ábyrgð fyrir guði* (“a grave

responsibility before God”) (Sveinsson 1954:328; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:265) and certainly nothing to boast about (Sveinsson 1954:336; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:342). Under the terms of his settlement after the burning, Flosi undergoes a pilgrimage to Rome and receives absolution from the hands of the Pope, as his opponent Kári later does. The dispensation of divine grace in human affairs through God’s vicar on earth reverses the prior train of events that had overwhelmed even the saintly Njáll. The two pilgrimages to Rome result in a mutual forgiveness that has the effect of internalizing, even “institutionalizing,” the redemptive paradigm of Christian sacred history in secular saga narrative. To recall: on his return from Rome, Kári shipwrecks in a snowstorm close to Svínafell, Flosi’s farm. Kári decides to *reyna þegnskap Flosa* (“put Flosi’s nobility to the test”). Flosi

*kenndi þegar Kára ok spratt upp í moti honum ok minntisk við hann ok setti hann í hásceti hjá sér. Hann bauð Kára þar at vera urn vetrinn; Kári þá þat. Sættusk þeir þá heilum sáttum. Gipti Flosi þá Kára Hildigunni, bróðurdóttur sína, er Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði hafði átta.*

recognized [Kári] at once and jumped up to welcome him, embraced him, and placed him on the high-seat beside him. He invited [Kári] to stay for the winter, and [Kári] accepted. They made a full reconciliation, and Flosi gave to [Kári] in marriage his niece [Hildigunnr], the widow of [Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði] (Sveinsson 1954:463; trans. Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:354).

Flosi and Kári are reconciled in more than merely political terms, and the moral principle of Christian forgiveness makes possible a deeper, social reconciliation symbolized in the marriage of formerly bitter enemies and the utter end of the feud.

## Conclusion

The political confrontation between the proponents of the native and the newer views of history is dramatized in chapters 100-105 of the saga, but the more profound struggle between paganism and Christianity takes place in the plot of the larger saga itself. The real crisis and resolution of cultural conflict in *Njála* occurs not in the Althing of 999, though it is prepared for there; it occurs in the burning itself. Njáll is both a martyr for the new faith he loves and a hero of the old world whose inescapable violence he abhors, but whose system of cultural identity and heroic dignity

he is incapable of rejecting. In that old system, he really is responsible for his sons' crimes; he really does have to evince unflinching courage in the face of insuperable odds. His burning recapitulates in Christianized, social form the final, fated conflagration of the gods at Ragnarök. The victory of Christianity in the saga occurs at the very moment when Njál's active submission to the burning transforms inevitable defeat, the defining principle of the old world order, into spiritual redemption, the defining principle of the new: *guð . . . mun . . . oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heims ok annars* ("God . . . will not let us burn both in this world and the next"). In a pattern of supplantation reminiscent of biblical typology, the burning of Bergþórshváll recalls and supersedes Gunnarr's heroic last stand at Hlíðarendi, just as Gunnarr's nobility of spirit supersedes Hrútr's merely admirable courage and justice. Christian beatitude transcends but does not destroy pagan posthumous honor; God's blessing supplants but does not diminish the *dómr um dauðan hvern* ("the reputation of the dead") (Hávamál, stanza 77); our sympathy for Kári's impressive vendetta against the burners is subsumed in our relief at his final reconciliation with Flosi. Just as the vicarious atonement satisfies the demands of both law and grace, so the Burning of Njáll fulfills and transcends the revenge imperative. Vengeance for Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði is exacted from the family of his slayers, but Njal's personal innocence and quiet willingness to lead his sons in death patently renders him a Christological victim, a beardless lamb of God whose example serves to cleanse the sins of his kin, a martyr whose death inspires the admiration of his enemies and ultimately, in the case of Flosi, their redemption.

The "martyrdom" of King Brian marks an analogous moment on a larger political level in the late Norse world of the saga: the Battle of Clontarf closes the reign of the old gods, variously intimated by mysterious portents and epiphanies throughout the North Atlantic. The Norns weave the grim fate of men on their bloody loom for the last time. From now on we are in a world where the blood of a martyred king can heal wounds and his severed head miraculously restore itself to his body in visible validation of the sanctity of his sacrifice, and of the institutions he represents and epitomizes. This is the same sanctity attributed to Njál's beatified corpse. After several centuries of elaboration, the author of *Njála* finally managed to find the formula whereby the old pagan plot of history, with its heroic last stand against superior forces of chaos, could be transformed into the triumph of divine grace in human affairs.

*Njála* thus dramatizes and completes the victory of a Christian plot of history in native narrative culture, a fact that gives that work much of its peculiar power and resonance, and one reason, I would suggest, why the

saga form evolved into a different kind of narrative after *Njáls saga's* success. E. Paul Durrenberger argues that it is no accident that *Njáls saga*—so neatly structured—was written after the country had come under the authority of the Norwegian crown in 1264: “It is a summary of the categories and themes of the past, more or less independent of the present . . .” (1992: 106-7). After *Njála*, *saga* narrative becomes less publicly historical and more explicitly moral or psychological, even quasi-allegorical in places, where creatures and characters, like Glámr in *Grettis saga* for instance, take on symbolic dimensions that suggest interior states of the protagonist (Hume 1974:470; Mitchell 1991:30). With *Njála*, the oral-derived literary family saga had achieved its “manifest destiny” or logical fulfillment in a more thoroughly integrated Christian culture in medieval Iceland; it had acculturated in its deepest structure to a biblical process of eventuality. Lönnroth’s “two cultures” had become one.

So it is not at all true that *Njáls saga* is “independent of the present.” *Njála* became the classic text of Icelandic national culture, its *Iliad* or *Aeneid* or *Mahābhārata*. *Njála* achieved a definitive formulation of how Icelanders would perceive, and continue to perceive, the principles of historical process that the competing traditions of their cultural heritage left for them after they had become Norwegian subjects. This saga is the place in the new culture where that reconciliation most deeply and intimately occurs: it is the site of cultural formation. *Njáls saga* not only derives from the conscious life of the culture, it is “constitutive of” that life. To borrow the terms of Gabrielle M. Spiegel (1990:85), the saga performs an “elaborate, ideological mystification” as it instantiates a redemptive plot of history after the double pilgrimage and submission of Flosi and Kári to the judgment of the Pope in the final episode. The native system of government is demonstrated as admirable but obsolete, as categorically ineffective in securing a benign result in the affairs of men. The Roman Church is now shown to be the most potent institution in the culture, the only one capable of inspiring an end to the old destructive cycle of reciprocal kin-violence. Recognition of the Pope’s spiritual authority produces a hypostatized, concluding moment of reconciliation, a happily-ever-after ending, chastened by the terse, sober note on Flosi’s merely ordinary Christian death.

The saga-writer has projected into his imaginative reconstruction of the commonwealth the violence he implicitly associates not only with the pagan ethos of kindred chauvinism and the revenge imperative, but also with the way things categorically happen in an unsanctified world, a world that on a social level is governed by the well-intentioned but ultimately ineffectual mechanisms of the Althing. The saga-writer exorcizes in his story

the violence of his nation's history, one in which Church and monarchy are now charged with the maintenance of social order, however unsuccessfully that ideal order was to be achieved in fact. Indeed, the new coercive authority of the Norwegian crown is still such a highly sensitive political point that the saga-writer sharply occludes it behind his demonstration of the Church's spiritual potency. Nonetheless, the intimacy between the allied institutions of Church and monarchy is encoded in the depiction of King Brian's martyrdom, the dramatization of the divine right of kings being discreetly transferred from the Norwegian to the Irish crown. *Njál's saga* thus implicitly confirms the new institutional *status quo* in Iceland; it works to reconcile its audience to the new coalition of ecclesiastical and royal authority. In fact, the saga-writer found in *Njála* a formula that would continue for centuries to satisfy the ideological needs of the institutions governing the imaginative life of the nation. The productive tension between Church and chieftaincies in the old commonwealth, between secular and clerical culture, was over. And in terms of merely literary history, vernacular narrative after *Njála* found other tasks to perform, tasks of less obviously political and national significance, and of more interior, subjective, moral import. The fires of social violence that once publicly burned Bergórshváll will burn now in the eyes of the revenant Glámr, which are, of course, the violent eyes of the outlaw Grettir himself, glaring back at him when he finds himself alone in the night.

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