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THE PARADIGMS OF HEROISM

The recent growth of saga-criticism in English has proved to be a mixed blessing. While in principle such a growth would appear to be a desideratum, developing the range of saga-research by introducing new insights and approaches, in practice this has occasioned some dismay, in that established approaches and controversies are often treated too summarily. I think particularly (though not exclusively) of Mr Richard Allen's recent book, Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga, a tour de force of methodologies which has not failed to arouse the hostility of reviewers for particular sins of omission or commission. Mr Allen treads on the land-mine of bookprose-freeprose, and in my own country is accused of "feckless speculation" by Paul Schach, ^{(though} given high marks by Mr Schach in other areas.¹⁾ Similarly, Lars Lönnroth finds Mr Allen stimulating as a text-critic, but deficient in the areas in which he, Mr Lönnroth, is strong.²⁾ In England, R.I. Page finds Mr Allen's critical enthusiasm offensive and trivial, wishing for more "scholarly precision."³⁾

It seems to me that there is an innate problem here which transcends the particular instance of Fire and Iron, in that the application of critical methods which are not in themselves new, but new to saga-criticism, can only with difficulty avoid the established masses of critical controversies, even if these con-

1) Scandinavian Studies, 44 (1972), 565.

2) Speculum, 48 (1973), 334.

3) Scandinavica, 11 (1972), 151.

troverſaries have little to do with one's own particular insight. Problems ſuch as bookproſe - freeproſe exert what amounts to a gravitational field, and ſubtly deflect the elaboration of a critical point into an orbit around one the maſſive bodies of traditional queſtions. However theoretically valuable a new approach might be, a critic attempting one begins to ſympathize with Grendel, who, deſcribed by his reviewer as a "fēond man-cynnes," was unable to approach the precious gifstól in Heorot. I aſk your indulgence, then, for I ſhould like to borrow a term from Northrop Frye -- "diſplaced myth" -- and diſcuſs an apparent paradox in certain ſaga-narratives.

One of the great achievements of Icelandic culture of the Middle Ages was the development of a corpus of ſecular civil law, and a deep reſpect for that law. "Með lögum ſkal land vart byggja, en með ólögum eyða," ſays Njáll, echoing earlier Norſe laws. In the Íslendingabók, Þorgeirr the lögſögumaðr alſo recognizes the primacy of law for civilisation, even over myth and religion, the alternative to having "ein lög oc einn ſiþ" being violence and ultimate chaos.

This recognition of the neceſſity for eſta bliſhing order through civil law is an historical fact; but does it not run counter to a literary fact? Memorable heroes of ſaga-literature -- Grettir, Gíſli, Gunnarr--eſta bliſh themſelves as heroes not through their conforming to collective imperatives, but through being outlaws, and their deaths are not ſeen as being victories for law and order, but as tragic. How is this paradox poſſible, and how does it make ſuch excellent literature? It is true that American culture has at leaſt two figures of the outlaw-as-hero; Jeſſe James in the world of Weſtern narrative, and the gangſter--Bonnie and Clyde, for inſta nce--in films. Though there have been ſome attempts to portray theſe as morally juſtified, deſcribing them as latter-day Robin Hoods who rob from the rich to give to the poor, generally theſe characters are fascinating but not admirable. Furthermore, their conflicts are with individuals representing the law, not the collective judgement of an Alþing, and their actions do not take place againſt ſuch a meticulous articulation of legal maneuvering. I might add in

passing that in the wake of our era of fashionable social protest we may well develop a hero who defines himself heroically by negating a body of tradition and civil law, but my concern here is with this problem in the world of the sagas.

It is possible to approach a text historically in two ways: first, as a source of empirical data (and here we feel the tug of the bookprose - freeprose controversy), or as cultural symbols, much in the manner of Ernst Cassirer and Erich Auerbach. This approach, called "critical historicism" by Murray Krieger, "sees a culture as a complex of unformulated forces which is inaccessible except through that culture's symbolic structures."⁴⁾ In this approach, the forms in which a culture expresses its values are symbolic of its understanding of human existence.⁵⁾ Specifically, Ólafur Lárusson has noted about Icelandic law of the lýðveldi a clarity, a stringency and relative lack of rhetorical formulae that distinguishes it from contemporary Germanic law on the Continent.⁶⁾ The law of 930, for instance, expresses both the conservatism and intellectual quality of an uprooted aristocracy desirous to maintain an assaulted tradition as well as the lack of tradition of a transplanted culture.⁷⁾ As a cultural form, Icelandic law of this period is symbolic in that the texts indicate less a codification of tradition than a conscious creation of legal relationships.⁸⁾

While codifications of tradition are concerned with preserving a sacred past and to an intense degree are trapped by it, Icelandic law was at least in part a free creation of the human will. Mr Lárusson suggests that the Icelandic government of the lýðveldi, particularly the institution of the goði, had fewer sacred roots than has previously been thought.⁹⁾ On the Continent,

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- 4) "Critical Historicism: The Poetic Context and the Existential Context," *Orbis Litterarum*, 21 (1966), 51.
- 5) C.f. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, New York, 1967), pp. 88-104.
- 6) "Íslands forfatning og lover i fristatstiden," in Lov og ting, tr. Knut Helle (Bergen-Oslo, 1960), p. 34.
- 7) Lárusson, pp. 4-6.
- 8) Lárusson, p. 34.
- 9) Lárusson, pp. 36-42.

however, where sacred places made the past an integral part of the present, law had a more magical aspect, invoking árgaí, primordial mythic forces.¹⁰⁾ Walter Baetke has emphasised the sacred roots of Germanic society and the shattering effect upon the symbolic world of the Germanic tribes of the conversion to Christianity.¹¹⁾

I do see a relationship between the secularly-based collective respect for law and the hero's status as outlaw, but to elucidate this relationship I must borrow and elaborate upon the term "displaced myth."¹²⁾ A myth differs from fiction in that to the believer, the actions of myth really happened, that these stories are transmitted accounts of the primal relationships between light and dark, good and evil, gods and monsters, heroes and demons. In short, to the believer, myths are moral facts, ontological statements of moral experience.¹³⁾

Myth's primary function is one of orientation. As Cartesian coordinates provide a means of locating and ordering contents in the profane world through a mathematical reference-point, a universe constituted by the mythic consciousness orders the world by providing a sacred reference-point. A mythic apprehension of space and time thus can integrate the disparate elements of man's experience by giving a unified moral understanding of events in the profane world.

Another way of stating this is to recognize that myth is a fundamental part of identity, man's knowledge of himself. It is through myth that man has access to his values, and consequently can measure his own experience by sacred paradigms.¹⁴⁾ These images form a reality which is a moral analogue to a culture and its individuals, but at the same time stands outside them as

10) C.f. C.G. Jung and Karl Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology, tr. R.F.C. Hull (New York, 1963), pp. 7-9.

11) "Die Aufnahme des Christentums durch die Germanen," in his Vom Geist und Erbe Thules (Göttingen, 1944).

12) C.f. Northrop Frye, "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement," in his Fables of Identity (New York, 1963), pp. 36-38.

13) Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, tr. W.R. Trask (New York, 1959), pp. 94, 95.

14) The term "paradigm" is not used here in the sense of a mathematical coefficient, but in the sense of an objective standard of measurement. See Berger and Luckmann on "reification," pp. 82-83.

objective truth. While it is warranted to emphasise the symbolic nature of the world of myth, it must also be borne in mind that myth's main function is to provide not values, but knowledge of them.

The reality of myth, then, is a dual one. On the one hand, it objectifies and hence makes accessible the value-truths of a culture, while on the other hand myth serves as fact, an unquestioned paradigm for subsequent generations. The social forms of the present are legitimized, while moral certainty is provided for choice in the future. On a small scale, Eliade cites the story of a mariner in New Guinea who before setting out, dressed, danced and spread his arms to imitate the winged hero Aori. Whether or not he actually became Aori, he did not set out alone: his human act was charged with a sacred power and the potential uncertainty of an action in "open" historical time was avoided by the invocation of a sacred action that was in one sense already complete, but was still accessible to mortals.¹⁵⁾

There is a fundamental difference, then, not only between the constitution of the mythic universe and the Euclidean one, but in the kind of knowledge presented by the mythic consciousness and that presented by rational-empirical thought. The mythic universe has a narrative dimension lacking in the Cartesian one: it has a beginning, often an end, but always a meaning. These narrative patterns constitute what Berger and Luckmann call a culture's "symbolic universe."¹⁶⁾ It is in the "Völuspá," of course, that we have a narrative of the Norse symbolic universe with at least some sacred content, but it is unlikely that the "Völuspá" had the incantatory power of myth. Though the Völva is telling of primal truths--ðoxaí--an element of individual artistry, subjectivity, has entered into the narrative. Though there was doubtless a degree of sacred objectivity in the "Völuspá," it is to at least a small degree a poem about myth, much as Snorri's Edda. Hence there is an element of what I will call "displacement."

15) Patterns in Comparative Religion, tr. R. Sheed (Cleveland, Ohio, 1963), p. 394.

16) Social Construction of Reality, pp. 95-104.

As an example of a text completely displaced from the sacred objectivity and legitimizing power of myth, one might cite the profane objectivity of the Reykjavik telephone directory. To a foreigner, this is a mysterious enough document, but as a cultural form it expresses no sacred truths.

It is in a middle realm of displacement--the interaction of the sacred world with the human world--that myth's legitimizing function attains its primary importance: providing an absolute pattern to regulate moral choice, and it is in this context that we consider "The Sagas and Medieval Icelandic Society" in terms of displaced myth. Moral choice can be made on a purely theoretical level of philosophy or law, but it can also be made with a mythic referent, and I see this as the basic tension in the "outlaw sagas." It has been the contribution of Northrop Frye to point out that the sacred paradigms of mythic narratives may not be explicit in profane narrative, but nonetheless can govern their structure.

The moral struggle in the sagas does not take place on the level of undisplaced myth, where the focus is on the gods and elemental powers, or seldom on the more displaced level of human heroes struggling with monsters (though I will consider Grettis saga in a moment). The hero seldom has any overt tie to the power of the sacred world of myth, but it is my contention that the law-outlaw paradox is resolvable by considering these "outlaw-sagas" as displaced myth.

Displaced myth, then, is not overtly sacred, but nonetheless expresses in profane language a view of moral reality undisplaced myth expresses with the objectivity of sacred language. Ultimately we will consider the nature of the myth displaced in these sagas, but it would be hasty and fruitless at this point. First let us look at the fundamental tension in the "outlaw-sagas": the conflict between the assertion of communal freedom through law and the violent assertion of the individual, resulting in, or as a consequence of, outlawry.

In Grettis saga, the hero is violent by birth, and the author takes pains to describe Grettir as an unruly child; yet he becomes an outlaw unjustly, in that he is innocent of the

burning of the sons of Þórir í Garði. There is no overt criticism of the law insofar as it expresses the rational will of the community: in a rare narrative intrusion in Chapter LXXII, the Skagfirðingar are praised for their drengskap in holding to their truce, even when they find out it is their enemy Grettir who is among them. This exercise of communal restraint is depicted as an exemplary model of a golden age: "ok má þá af slíku marka, hverir dygðarmenn þá váru."¹⁷⁾ The community also recognizes that it is unfortunate that a man of Grettir's quality should be estranged from society.

Considering Grettir, we do not see him dramatically rejecting the communal world of law to live on his own; quite the opposite. A poignant note in the "outlaw-sagas" is that though the heroic stature of the individuals grows with their survival outside the community, there is no joy in this isolation. Indeed, the basic structure of Grettis saga is the oscillation between Grettir's isolation and his longing for friends and kinsmen (cf. Ch. LVII).

This tension between the individual and the community is not just expressed in profane terms. On a deeper level, the effective cause of Grettir's outlawry is the intrusion of the demonic: the curse of the monster Glámr in Chapter XXXV, but if we pursue this, we see that here is a material intrusion of uncontrolled violence into the world of civilized restraint. Before this physical encounter with the demonic, Grettir's inborn violence had taken the form of valor; with some reservations, he was socially acceptable. What is the nature of this "ófagnaðarkraptur" Glámr possesses? First, he does not change Grettir, but rather, the effect Grettir has on society. I do not wish here to be a psychoanalyst, but I would suggest that, thematically considered, Glámr objectifies and catalyzes a destructive violence latent in Grettir and human nature that law and civilization can sometimes harness but never eliminate.

In Grettis saga, then, agents of the disruptive forces underlying individual control and social order are very close to the human world and can intrude directly to negate man's attempt to

17) Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, ed. R.C. Boer, Altnordische Saga - Bibliothek (Halle, 1900), Vol. VIII, 260-61.

control violence. When Glámr curses Grettir, sealing his estrangement and ultimate death, the author describes Grettir as being "í milli heims ok heljar" (Ch. XXXV). In terms of mimesis, there is less displacement in Grettis saga than in, say, Gísla saga; part of my argument is that an outlaw-hero is between two worlds, but in Grettir's case this is on the verge of being literally true. Unlike heroes in other literatures, Grettir is unable to go from one world into the other: The Babylonian hero Gilgamesh, for example, can leave the profane world of Uruk and seek direct knowledge of the sacred world and the paradigms of human experience and return; the pattern is familiar. The saga outlaw-hero, however, lives between the world of man and the world of myth, but can survive in neither.

So initially I would suggest this about our paradox: it is not the outlaw who is out of harmony with the underlying mythic reality, but the law. While modern thought, as Alfred North Whitehead observed, assumed that its rational constructs were expressive of an underlying rationality in creation, laws being discovered, not freely fabricated, I do not think this was the case in medieval Icelandic civilization as it is represented in the "outlaw-sagas." The hero-outlaw is between two worlds, one profane, asserting order, and one demonic, expressing violence and disorder. The primacy of the latter is clearest in Grettis saga, for Grettir's death is not a justified result of law, but Þorbjörn ǫngull's use of witchcraft. The threat that this disruptive energy presented to order can be seen in the case of Þorbjörn ǫngull: though Grettir's death is unsatisfying to the profane world through the use of the demonic, the law maintains its integrity by exiling Þorbjörn, who by employing witchcraft to execute a profane judgement becomes an "óðáðamaðr" (Ch. XXXII), according to the man who most wanted Grettir dead.

In Gísla saga, there is a greater displacement, but the thematic tension is the same. The intrusion of the demonic is less objective, and cannot interact with the profane world. Still, the tension leaves the hero between two worlds (figuratively, this time), and the execution of the outlaw is no triumph of order: though there is no witchcraft directly involved in

the execution of Gísli, those that survived the attack "fengu þó óvirðing" (Ch. XXXVII).¹⁸⁾

The interaction of the two worlds is more subtle in Gísla saga, as the displacement is greater, but presents itself early as a communal judgement: Gestr Oddléifsson observes that everybody is saying that Gísli and his friends are not observing the norms of the Þing, and goes from social censure to prophecy, from the secular world to the mythic, saying the friendship of the four will not survive: "Eigi munu þeir allir samþykkir hit þriðja sumar" (Ch. VI). Again, it is the hero Gísli who senses that there is a peculiar mode of truth in this statement, and suggests that the friends counter this with a sacred act of blood-brotherhood.

As the violence escalates, culminating in Gísli's outlawry and ultimate death, so do the manifestations of the disruption move from the empirical world to the mythic, from Gestr's social judgement and prophecy to Vésteinn's expression of the sense of clamor in metaphor ("nú falla vötn öll til Dýrafiarðar ok mun ek þangat riða.") in Ch. XII, to the overt witchcraft of Þorgrímur nef in Ch. XVIII to the objectifying of the demonic in Gísli's two draumkonur in Ch. XXII. As Mr Hallberg has observed, it is with Gísli's formal ostracism from the collective world of law that these forces take form, and become an active determinant of his actions.¹⁹⁾ The draumkonur cannot interact with Gísli in the profane world, as Glámr can with Grettir (with whom Gísli is compared by "öllum vitrum mönnum"), but in the dream Gísli increasingly experiences the violent essence of the other world which is coming more and more to govern his life.

Gísli, too, is between two worlds, though the situation is more complex than in Grettis saga. If Grettir was between life and death, so too is Gísli in his dream, for as Cassirer observes, in mythical thought a dream-state is not divorced from the waking world, but is a heightening of it, much as the sacred time of origins can be an integral part of the in-

18) Gísla saga Súrssonar, ed. Agnete Loth, Nordisk Filologi (Copenhagen, 1956), p. 66.

19) Peter Hallberg, The Icelandic Saga, tr. Paul Schach (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962), p. 86.

tensified reality of rite and ritual.²⁰⁾ In this heightened state, the empirical barrier between the world of the dead and the world of the living is dissolved. In other sagas, the dead can use the dream as a gateway to the world of the living (Forsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar, Ch. V, for instance) and are sometimes visible after waking or are seen by a person who is awake (Porskirðinga saga, Ch. III, for instance). It is true that Gísli's draumkonur do not do this, and in his dream in Ch. XXII about the fires, Gísli is aware that the draumkonur exist solely as symbols and not empirically, but as the dreams intensify, the element of Christian allegory disappears, and the violent draumkona graphically dominates.

Empirically, Gísli's life is increasingly circumscribed by violence, and like Grettir, he oscillates between solitude and community with Auðr. The historical fact is borne out in the text, for not only does Gísli become afraid of the dark, as was Grettir, but from the time his last year is up (Ch. XXXIII) to the final encounter with Eyiólfr and fourteen men, the text is largely (85%) concerned with Gísli's telling of his dream-world.

Again, the tension between the law vs. the hero is not one of right vs. wrong, good vs. evil; it is simply that Gísli, as Grettir, is described as not being a gafumaðr. At this point, I do not wish to discuss the concept of fate in the sagas, although in view of our discussion of the disruptive effects of the displaced myth, I do not think it is sufficient to describe it as merely "necessity."²¹⁾

The conflict between the individual and the law is given its broadest scope, of course, in Njála, and here is the greatest attempt to transmute the underlying mythic base from violence to forbearance. If there is a hint of a new mythic base in the allegorical elements of Gísla saga, in Njála one can describe the basic drama as the interplay of two displaced myths, and it has been suggested that in the reconciliation of Flosi and Kári, violence has finally been overcome -- not by law, to be sure, but by forbearance. Possibly; but I am not so sure.

20) The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, tr. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, 1955) II: Mythical Thought, 36 - 37.

21) Hallberg, p. 88.

As far as the outlaw-hero goes, there is a greater displacement than in the other two sagas we have considered. There are intrusions of a mythically-constituted reality into the empirical world, such as the appearance of fylgjur (once, to Hrútr, in a dream), and so on.²²⁾ But there is no one objectification of the forces of violence and disorder, save Gunnarr himself, whose verse from his grave-mound in Ch. LXXVII suggests to Skarpheðinn and Hogni that it is better to die than to yield. Rather, as Mr. Allen shows, the tension between violence and social interaction based upon self-control is subtly woven into the narrative, even from the comparison of the genealogies of Mörör gígja and the half-brothers Hrútr and Høskuldr in Chapter I.²³⁾ The lineage of the latter goes all the way back to the days of great warriors, while the former is only the son of Sighvatrenn rauði. While it is the man of heroic lineage, Hrútr, who is attuned to something ominous in Hallgerðr's "thief's eyes" (Ch. I), it is significant (remembering my earlier comment about law being a free creation, not bound to mythic roots) that Mörör's excellence is not based upon a bond to heroic origins, but he was "svá mikill lagamaðr, at engir þóttu lögligirdómar/^{deamðir} nema hann væri við."²⁴⁾

Several have observed that Njála is a saga about law,²⁴⁾ and I think what it has to say about law is interesting in the light of our previous discussion. There is, I think, an attempt to invest the law with Christian myth--Christianity is officially adopted at the Alþing, the saintly Høskuldr is made a formative power in society through being made a goði, Síðu-Hallr waives the legal atonement for his son, and, with communal approval, offers peace to his enemies. At the end, Kári foregoes killing Flosi, the last of the Burners, and Flosi does not revenge the death of his accomplices upon Kári. Certainly this upturn at the end of Njála, with its note of reconciliation, is more convincing than the bewildering non sequitur of romance at the end of Grettis saga. If we consider the relationship of the

22) C.f. my elaboration of this point in "The Wisdom of Njál: The Representation of Reality in the Family-Sagas," Mosaic, IV (1970), 15-26.

23) Allen, pp. 76-94.

24) Developed in detail by Karl Lehmann and Hans von Carolsfeld, Die Njálssage insbesondere in ihren juristischen Bestandtheilen (Berlin, 1883).

hero to the law, though, these are individual acts of nobility in refusing violence; as far as human institutions go, I do not see Njála presenting much hope for collective attempts to control destruction. The law does not provide an alternative to hostility; rather, it catalyzes it. However much the theme of "turn the other cheek" runs through the narrative, these individual actions are as futile to check the chain of vengeance as is Njáll's adoption of Hǫskuldr and Síðu-Hallr's magnanimity. Similarly, the two great collective attempts to settle the conflict at the Alþing only fan the hostilities, first as Flosi refuses settlement for Hǫskuldr, which was urged by the community "fyrir guðs sakir" (Ch. CXXIII),²⁵⁾ then as the prosecution of the Burners results in the Alþing itself becoming the site for a pitched battle (Ch. CXLV). Indeed, even Njáll is more concerned with legal form than justice (Ch. XCVII), and sets up the fintar-dómur for Hǫskuldr's sake.

So I do not see that there has been any transfiguration of the law; the positive note of Njála is that of free acts of nobility by individuals, but this does not break the causal pattern of violence, and only after all violence is spent can Kári and Flosi be reconciled as individuals. Flosi is not legally bound to revenge the deaths of the Burners, after all, and there is no collective pressure left on Kári to continue his vengeance.

But what about the outlaw? Mr Allen, supported by Mr Schach, applies the insights of Erich Auerbach to suggest that the incorporation of the sublime in the humble (particularly in Grettis saga, but it could be applied to other outlaws), "the particular combination of heroic spirit and bidily mortification... are all the result of a mingling of native tradition with Christian sensibility."²⁶⁾

The implication that the heroism of the outlaw is informed by Christian myth is tantalizing, but it disturbs me, since I believe it to be a poor use of Auerbach's insight. First: this is certainly not an exhaustive description of Christian heroism; Roland dies magnificently, and he is as Christian a hero as one

25) Brennu-Njáls saga, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek (Halle, 1908), Vol. 13, 285.

26) Allen, p. 43.

can stand. Second: Christian culture developed a concept of conscious symbolic action radically different from pagan realism. The reason why the sublime could be embodied in the humble is that the phenomenal world was not seen as being complete in itself, but only as pointing the way to a transcendent world of the spirit.²⁷⁾ Auerbach discussed time in the light of the religious symbol in his essay "Figura," but in terms of character, the reason why a sublime action can be expressed in a person who hasn't an exalted social standing is that there is some indication of transcendence in his action. Although I can see this in some of the characters in Njála, I do not see this view of reality in the depiction of the three outlaws we have mentioned. There is no expression in the texts of a symbolic quality to their deaths, much less transcendence. All three are said to have "gained fame," but this is a social judgment, not a spiritual one, and it is the quality of their resistance that gets them this fame.

I realize that I am now orbiting the gravitational field of the "Christian-pagan problem," but I have preferred to use the more neutral term "myth" to indicate the underlying moral orientation over which the outlaw-hero and the respect for law establish their paradox. I would like to conclude by approaching two questions I have dodged thus far: first, if the "outlaw-sagas" are informed by displaced myth, what myth is it that is displaced? Second, within this myth, is the paradox of the outlaw-hero intelligible?

Although I am aware of the substantial body of criticism that has shown ties of medieval Icelandic narrative to Continental Christian culture, it seems to me that the underlying myth in the "outlaw-sagas" can be approached more through elements of the Norse creation-myth than through the paradigms of Christian myth. It is in creation-myths that a culture expresses its value-truths, legitimizing them through projection back into an absolute past, and though the "Völuspá" may itself have a degree of displacement, the insight into creation will be useful in approaching our paradox.

27) Such as, for example, in the Óláfs saga hins helga, XXXIV-VI. C.f. Paul Tillich, "The Religious Symbol," in Symbolism in Religion and Literature, ed. Rollo May (New York, 1960), p. 77.

The unity in the "Völuspá" stems from the theme that Ragnarök, the eventual destruction of the world (and of the gods) is implicit in its creation, that ultimate defeat is inevitable, all of Óðinn's wisdom serving only to resist and postpone the final confrontation. But how is this vision expressed? First of all, it should be remembered that the matter of creation was imagined as the body of Ymir, the frost-giant slain by the gods, and thus was essentially malevolent. The significance of Ragnarök, however, only becomes clear when the inevitability of destruction is understood as a direct consequence of creation.

Myth does not abstract, and only that which is created exists.²⁸⁾ In the Norse creation-myth, the world is not formed ex nihilo, but from the body of the slain jotunn, order being established from this pre-existing substance by the gods. The act itself is less one of creation than of transformation, the first step of ordering being to regulate the means of measuring historical time by giving position to the Sun, Moon and stars (Völ. 5). The gods establish temporal order, and also give megin to the heavenly bodies and to the first humans (Völ. 17). Folke Ström suggests that megin refers to an immanent, dynamic principle, a power of control.²⁹⁾ Thus in the Norse genesis the gods set up historical time, but also create the latent power which is the basis of causal relationships in the mythic consciousness. One instance of this bond in the sagas is the frequent appearance of tutelary spirits, fylgjur. In Chapter XLI of Njála, Þórðr leysingjason sees a dead goat, which Njáll tells him is his fylgja, and that "'Pú munt vera maðr feigr.'" True; Þórðr has not long to live.

The innately malevolent stuff of creation forms the background to the constant conflict between the gods and the giants, and perhaps also to Óðinn's moral ambivalence, for he and all the gods, according to Snorri, were created from the same matter as Ymir; Óðinn himself is partly of giant ancestry.

28) Cassirer, II, 104.

29) Nordisk Hedendom (Göteborg, 1961), pp. 68-75.

The mythic consciousness is able to objectify value, and due to the narrative nature of mythic time, to project this qualitative concept of substance back to a sacred genesis. The gods themselves, since they are a part of the same symbolic act, and not instigators of it, are not immune from the basically inimical nature of creation, and through breaking their oaths to the giants they end the golden age and begin the strife (objectified in the deterioration of Yggdrasil) which culminates in Ragnarok.

In Norse myth, then, the inevitable enmity and conflict between the two forces at Ragnarok is seen as a necessary consequence of the peculiar quality of creation. But this grim expression of time is not rendered in abstract terms; rather it is given substance and made part of the narrative beginning.

This mythic view of time and the myth of Ragnarok provides an introduction both to the nature of Norse fate and to its corollary, heroism, for it is in the interaction of the realities of the human world with the truths of the mythic universe that men define themselves. Through the apprehension of time constituted by the myth of Ragnarok, Þórðr Leysingjason knows his death is accomplished with the death of his fylgja, as do the outlaws, each of whom runs afoul of prophecy. They can approach existence in historical time with several options: they can be passive and wait for time to run out; they can attempt to avoid fate by escaping the cycle of vengeance. They do neither, and behave as though they had freedom of action. The choice is essentially between the profane -- transgression of human criteria for freedom and order -- and the mythic, imitating the paradigms of the Æsir's necessary but ultimately futile (i.e., tragic) resistance to Ragnarok. There is, then, a meaning, a self-definition in their deaths which neither of the profane choices would have allowed. Running from neither fate nor evil, the mythic aspect of the outlaws' resistance constitutes their heroism.

In Gísla saga, Gísli, accepting the ominous truth that the empirical world has taken on a mythic aspect, events being signs which point to his death -- "þykkir honum um allt einn veg á horfask" (Ch. XII) -- continues to incorporate the paradigms of mythic time in historical time. He acts as though the future

were open, a product of his free will. The same stance is true of Grettir and Gunnarr, who, in resisting their executioners, many of whom have been forced by necessity into an act they recognize as evil, attain heroic stature in resisting.

The myth of Ragnarok implies that there is a kind of entropy, a tendency towards disorder in the universe, a gradual disintegration of order which the gods in the undisplaced world and men in the displaced world play a major part in implementing. Here is the connection between the two worlds incorporated in the "outlaw-sagas." The singular fact of Norse myth, as W.P. Ker noted, is that though the Norse gods are on the right side, this is not the side that wins.³⁰⁾ Unlike other creation-myths, the forms of order will finally be destroyed, and the monsters, the "forces of chaos and unreason," will ultimately overcome both gods and heroes. This is inevitable, a necessary consequence of genesis. Displaced to the human world, the myth of Ragnarok shows that it does not take a great assertion to bring on calamity; rather, small incidents or words feed the potential for disorder (in human terms, violence and outlawry), and no innocent act is free from subsequent catastrophic consequences. In Gísla saga, idle womens' chatter brings on the death of the hero, while the narrator of Njála senses the pernicious potential of daily triviality: "þeir váru málgir mjök, því at þeir váru óvitir" (Ch. VIII).

In the interaction between the symbolic universe of myth and the human world of historical time we are at the heart of the drama of the "outlaw-sagas" apprehension of moral reality: heroism does not lie in the confident expectation of virtue rewarded, but in excellent resisting of the inexorable tide of latent chaos. Superiority to evil, then, is not predicated upon its defeat. Here the respect for law makes sense: law, the collective assertion of human order in historical time, is the alternative to surrendering to the violence and anarchy which is not a departure from a fundamentally ordered creation, but is an ontological mythic fact. Collectively, man partakes in a profane irony; individually, the hero partakes of a mythic tragedy. The assertion of collective freedom under law might not be as free from mythic analogues as I earlier implied;

30) The Dark Ages (New York, 1911), p. 57.

indeed, in declaring the necessity for control of violence-- "með lögum skal land várt byggja"--there is a recognition of the consequences of the lack of law: "með ólögum eyða." The authors of the "outlaw-sagas," however, saw deeper than this through the paradigm of the myth of Ragnarök: gods and men will nobly establish order to combat evil, but action, whether on the divine or human level, will bring about the destruction of that order, for "all rivers flow one way." The authors of the "outlaw-sagas" also saw that an ógefumadr such as Grettir, Gísli or Gunnarr had a higher paradigm: to transcend the irony of the futility of human institutions and refuse the passivity this determinism implies. As we have seen, the outlaw leaves the human world and experiences in one degree of displacement or another the current of destruction constituting the apprehension of time in the myth of Ragnarök. Though he leaves the human world, he does not surrender to the deterministic implications of "fate." "Í milli heims ok heljar," he resists both human and mythic determinism, and as the gods, resists an ontological principle without demanding victory. This paradoxical victory in defeat is, I suggest, the junction of the sacred and the profane in the "outlaw-sagas," and the paradigm for heroism.