

PETER HALLBERG

NJÁLS SAGA - A MEDIEVAL MORALITY?

The title of this paper indicates a rather vague and elusive topic. With a somewhat anachronistic term one can talk of the ideology of a saga. That is, an ideology supposed to reveal the author's intention - more or less unconscious or subconscious perhaps - and supposed to have made a certain impression, to have been understood in a certain way by the contemporary Icelandic audience.

This is a topic which has attracted considerable interest of later years. In some quarters there has been a distinct trend towards minimizing the impact of so-called heathen ideas and values on the sagas, and emphasizing instead their character of medieval Christian literature. In other words, we have witnessed a kind of revaluation, more or less radical, of the ideology of the sagas.¹⁾

We have certainly to do here with a central subject, involving serious problems of principles and methods in saga studies. My paper is intended to deal with some of these questions. One can not, of course, treat all Icelandic sagas (Islendingasögur) alike. For instance, Egla and Njála seem to differ very much also with regard to their authors' outlook and attitudes. But when I have chosen Njála to illustrate my viewpoints, I think it can be justified by the wide scope of that saga, its unusually multiple human relationships and moral implications. So one could hope, perhaps; that conclusions drawn from a study of Njála might have some relevance for other sagas too.

1) The most striking example, known to me, of that trend is Hermann Pálsson's little book Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga (Copenhagen 1971):

What is our initial position for an analysis of the ideology of the sagas and its impact on their contemporary readers or hearers? First of all, we have no single statement, not the slightest hint, by a saga author himself of what he aimed at by his work. And we know nothing at all of how an Icelandic audience from about 1300 reacted to Njála, or any other saga, how it judged the characters and their fates. To be sure, we are in the fortunate position to know something of the Icelanders in the main period of saga writing - especially from that unique chronicle, Sturlunga saga. But that is a rather general knowledge, which will have to be used very cautiously for our purpose.

After all, we will have to resort only to the texts themselves and our interpretations of them. And there we meet with our well-known difficulties, among them the saga authors' formal objectivity and relative reticence about direct statements of their ideological and moral opinions. It is true, this objectivity has sometimes been exaggerated. But it is nevertheless a fact, and I think the attempts to minimize it have sometimes led to misinterpretations.

As far as I can see, we can roughly distinguish between three formal types of direct moral evaluations in the sagas. In the first place, the author himself gives an account of a person's disposition, usually when that person is introduced. Thus, in his presentation of Gunnar from Hlíðarenda the author remarks that Gunnarr was "stilltr vel, vinfastr ok vinavandr" (53). Of Brynjólfur rósta, a relative of Hallgerð's, we get from the beginning this unfavourable judgment: "hann var illmenni mikit" (100). Secondly, there is often referred to a kind of public opinion, as when it is said of the killing of Gunnarr: "Víg Gunnars mæltisk illa fyrir um allar sveitir" (191). Thirdly, of course, in many cases the persons themselves express their opinions of other people. "Af henni mun standa allt it illa, er hon kemr austr hingat" (87), is Njáll's comment when Gunnarr tells him that he is going to marry Hallgerð.

Such are then the formal types of direct moral statements.

But to get an overall and synthetic picture of a character we can certainly not pick out one utterance or the other. We must try to uncover the pattern of the characterization, and we must see those direct moral statements in their interplay with the parts the persons act in the story as a whole. This might seem a trivial remark, but I think one had better take it seriously. For there has sometimes been a tendency to isolate and make too much out of a single statement. We are also probably wrong in taking without hesitation all references to public opinion as the author's own view. Still less we have the right to do so with judgments expressed in the dialogue by persons of the story. I will try to illustrate this latter point by the famous episode, when Gunnarr on his way abroad, accompanied by his brother Kolskeggr, decides to turn back and stay at home.

In a comment on this scene Theodore Andersson cites Kolskeggr's words to Gunnarr: "I will not dishonor myself in this matter or any other matter in which my good faith is counted on; and this thing alone will lead to our separation." Now we are told by Andersson that

Kolskeggr is our only key to the author's opinion. Gunnarr has been struggling long and hard against the maelstrom of the feud imposed on him by his wife, but at the last moment he weakens and is dragged down. He has not gained personal honor but has slipped back into a personal morality. (2)

I am not sure what is meant here by (the positive concept) "personal honor" as contrasted with (the negative concept) "personal morality". How that may be, Gunnarr is unlikely to be quite unaware of the viewpoint which his brother expresses. In fact, Kolskeggr's reproach might well be the author's device for dramatizing the struggle that has been going on in Gunnarr's own mind. But now Gunnarr has arrived at a decision, driven by some force - "personal morality" or not - stronger than his obedience to the judicial verdict in his case.

2) Theodore M. Andersson, "Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas" (*Speculum, A Journal of Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. XLV, No. 4, October-1970), p. 587.

I think we should see in Kolskeggr's words the expression of just his opinion, of the motive which carries the greatest weight to him. The author's opinion we will have to seek in the totality of all judgments passed on Gunnarr, both before and after the episode in question. Needless to say, Gunnarr is constantly referred to as a man of the highest human qualities, much more than any other person in the saga.³⁾ "Við alla vilda ek gott eiga" (84), is a characteristic sentence of his own. "Sáttgjarn hefi ek jafnan verit" (145), is another one. And they are certainly not meant by the author as boast or cant, but as an honest characterization. When Gunnarr has been killed, he is praised by one of the attackers, the chieftain Gizurn hvíti: "We have felled a great champion, and we have not found it easy. His last defence will be remembered for as long as this land is lived in." Such a eulogy, on such an occasion and by such a man, is likely to tell us much of the author's own opinion. In a wider perspective it seems strange and quite contrary to the reader's spontaneous impression - in the 14th century as well as in the 20th - to make a major moral point out of the situation between Gunnarr and Kolskeggr. It is hard to believe that the author should have seen Gunnarr, fighting his last, lonely fight, mainly as a man who "has slipped back into a personal morality".

Of course there are many definite and unequivocal moral judgments of the characters, by the author himself as well as by persons in the story - especially, perhaps, on the negative side. It is an interesting fact, however, that these judgments seem to be completely independent of a certain ideology, a certain moral system, heathen or Christian. The real villain of the story, Mörðr Valgardsson - more than once referred to as slægr and illgjarn, a man from whom one can expect more "illt en gott" (289) - becomes a Christian; he even tries, in vain, to convert his father to the new "custom". But Mörðr is a bad man after his conversion as well

3) Cf. my article "Några anteckningar om replik och dialog i Njals saga" (Festschrift Walter Baetke, Weimar 1966), pp. 139-140.

as before. As a Christian he commits his most wicked deed, the calumny upon Höskuldr, bringing about the murder of that completely innocent man, and consequently also the arson at Bergþórs-hváll. It fits in with this picture that Mörðr is said, by the heroic Kári, to be "hræddr ok huglauss" (356).

Before going on to examine some other characters in the light of the dichotomy heathen/Christian, it may be instructive to recall how the author deals with the christianization of Iceland. That event is described rather objectively, as a historical fact among others - though as a turning-point of great significance, of course. For instance, the missionary Þangbrandr kills a berserkr (268), certainly a praiseworthy Christian deed. But berserks are in no high esteem among the heathens either. Egill Skalla-Grímsson is much respected for his achievements as a berserk-killer too, without being a missionary.

One of many amusing episodes in Njála is the dialogue between Þangbrandr and Steinunn, the mother of Skáld-Refr. The old woman asks the priest if he has heard that Þórr "challenged Christ to a duel, and Christ did not dare to accept the challenge". She also tells Þangbrandr that it was Þórr who wrecked his ship on the coast of Iceland, and emphasizes that conviction by two stanzas in dróttkvætt (265-266). "With that, Steinunn and Thangbrand parted." There is nothing to indicate that the Christian author looks down upon that heathen woman or regards her as a kind of witch. She occupies the scene completely in her own right, as the missionary's equal. The author's attitude is calm, open-minded - and neutral. There is a gulf between such an episode and all medieval legends, homilies, or moralities.

A case in point here is connected with Hrappr Örgumleifason, one of the notorious malefactors in the saga. Out in Norway he burns down a godahús, belonging to Earl Hákon and Guðbrandr í Dölum, after having robbed it of precious things. (214-215) In a truly Christian medieval text the destruction of a heathen temple would have been a laudable act. But upon Hrappr Earl Hákon passes sentence as follows: "But the gods are in no haste to take vengeance; the man who did this will be driven out of Valhalla for

ever." And the author has no comment of his own. In other words, he presents the episode in a completely detached manner. He is able to see it in a historical perspective (correct or not, that is another matter), from the viewpoint of the old belief and cult.

As said before, the distribution of good and bad qualities among the leading characters of Njála is certainly not based on religious belief. Gunnarr from Hlíðarendi disappears from the scene before the conversion; he never gets into touch with the new faith. The Christian author makes this heathen man not only a heroic ideal, but also a calm and well-meaning man - "much more reluctant to kill than other men are", according to his own view. Moreover, even after Gunnarr's death his belonging to the heathen world is emphasized, when he appears in his burial-mound, speaking a stanza on his resolution to die rather than yield to his enemies. And his fame is living on among his Christian fellow-countrymen in the saga, more brilliant than ever before.

If Mörðr is a consistently bad man, heathen or Christian, Njáll on the other hand is an equally good man before his conversion as well as after it. All the time he appears as the same peace-loving and peace-making man, who never raises a weapon himself. But there are definite limits to his love for peace and law, and they are set by the ideology of blood revenge. As his sons return to Bergþórshváll after having taken a bloody revenge for insults - níð - to their family, Njáll seems rather relieved: "May your hands prosper", is his comment. After Gunnarr has been killed his friends can not start legal proceedings against the killers, because he had been slain as an outlaw. Instead Njáll suggests that "it would be better to dishonour them by killing a few of them off in revenge"!

When Flosi offers Njáll to leave his burning house, the answer is: "I have no wish to go outside, for I am an old man now and ill-equipped to avenge my sons; and I do not want to live in shame." Christians, of course, as men of other confessions, have always wanted to retaliate. But it is certainly not Christian to express one's longing for revenge openly, especially not in one's

last hour. If the author had wanted to represent Njáll as a man of pure Christian virtues, he could easily have suppressed that talking of revenge. But he is broad-minded enough not to do so; and there is not the slightest hint of disapproval in his relation of that episode. On the contrary. I would be very much mistaken, if Njáll does not - by those very words! - rise to truly tragic dimensions and gain our sympathy and admiration more than ever before. Should that scene have made a different impression on the audience of 14th century Iceland? And if so, why should it?

Njáll is faced with the choice between life and death, and chooses death. So is Hrafnkell in Hrafnkatla, when he has fallen into his adversary Sámur's power. But Hrafnkell prefers life. Hermann Pálsson has commented upon that decision; in accordance with his main point of view he sees it in the light of medieval theology, quoting Hugh of St Victor: "For above all man was ordered to preserve both his own and another's life".⁴⁾ Thus, on this occasion Hrafnkell acts as a Christian should do. How about Njáll's choice, measured by that standard? He destroys not only his own life; his wife Bergþóra and their little grandson Þórður follow his example, expressly referring to their loyalty to their husband and grandfather. Should Njáll then, consequently, behave much worse than Hrafnkell, from a Christian point of view? It would be hazardous to draw such a conclusion, to say the least. The comparison, I think, is likely to indicate that a narrow moral yardstick, to say nothing of a theological one, is rather inadequate for the purpose of revealing the "ideology" of Njála.

The arson at Bergþórshváll has sometimes been compared to a famous incident in the autumn 1253, the Flugumýrabrenna, related by Sturla Þórðarson in his Islendinga saga.⁵⁾ Sturla, who had attended his daughter's wedding at Flugumýri, but left the place a few hours before the incendiaries arrived, must have been strongly affected by that event; among other people the young

4) Hermann Pálsson, Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel' Saga (Copenhagen 1971), p. 44.

5) For details cf. Barði Guðmundsson, Höfundur Njálu (Reykjavík 1958), pp. 225-234.

bridegroom, his son-in-law, was killed. Concluding his detailed report from that appalling night, Sturla remarks: "This news became soon known, and to all well-informed people it seemed to be the most terrible news ever heard of here in Iceland. God forgive the men who committed that deed, by His great grace and mercy."⁶⁾ I have quoted this passage in order to show a typical difference between such a text as Islendinga saga and Njála. We would probably have felt a similar remark by the Njála-author as an intrusion, a false note. Presumably he was an equally good Christian as Sturla. But he was aware of the fact that he was writing of another age, of other people, in another genre. Again, this author had a sense of perspective and style.

How about the moral and "ideological" aspect of other leading characters involved in the course of events around Bergþórshváll? As for Flosi, the leader of the attack and arson, he well knows that he and his men are going to commit an evil deed by burning people to death: "There are only two courses open to us, neither of them good: we must either abandon the attack, which would cost us our own lives, or we must set fire to the house and burn them to death, which is a grave responsibility before God, since we are Christian men ourselves." Still he ends this address by stating: "But that is what we must do." Afterwards a man says to him: "You have taken drastic action here." "People will call it a drastic action, and an evil one too", said Flosi. "But nothing can be done about it now." As far as one can see, he does not repent his action; he had to do what he did. And the author, in spite of his admiration for Njáll and his family, does certainly not reveal any disapproval of Flosi. Flosi keeps his position as an attractive character to the end. After the burning of Bergþórshváll he is on one occasion characterized by the author as "a very genial man and an excellent host, and it has been said of him that he had nearly all the qualities of a true chieftain". He is also said to be "so well liked by his followers that he

⁶⁾ Translated from Sturlunga saga II (ed. Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík 1948), p. 444.

could get any goods from them on loan or as a gift, just as he wished" - a fine recommendation in an Icelandic saga.

Kári Sölmundarson is the outstanding heroic figure in the latter part of the story, referred to by his father-in-law as skapdeildarmadr (226), a man who can control his temper, and an ideal even to his adversary Flosi, who says of him: "There are few men like Kari. He is the man I would most like to resemble in character." Kári is also said to be "allra manna vinsælastr" (443). But this admittedly calm and collected man is the one who does not submit to the reconciliation after the arson at Bergþórshváll. Instead he goes on killing the incendiaries himself. Among other things he leaps into Earl Sigurðr's hall in the Orkneys and decapitates a man "with such violence that his head flew off on to the table in front of the king and the earls". Later on he beheads another man, his last victim, as he is counting his money: "and his head said 'Ten' as it flew from his shoulders". There is not the least word of reproach upon this formidable mankiller and fulfiller of thorough blood revenge, neither from the author nor from any person in the story. Measured by the intrinsic "ideology" of the saga, Kári is certainly a true hero.

Þórhallr Ásgrímsson is another interesting character, coming to the fore rather late. He has been fostered by Njáll himself and learnt so much law from him "that he was now one of the three greatest lawyers in Iceland". During the intricate law proceedings of the Althing after the arson at Bergþórshváll he has to stay in his booth, impeded by a big abscess on one of his legs. At a critical point in the proceedings a man is sent to him for advice; their case seems to be lost:

When Thorhall heard this he was so shocked that he could not speak a word. He sprang out of bed, snatched with both hands the spear that Skarp-Hedin had given him, and drove it deep into his own leg. The flesh and the core of the boil clung to the blade as he gouged it out of his leg, and a torrent of blood and matter gushed across the floor like a stream. Then he strode from the booth without a limp, walking so fast that the messenger could not keep pace with him, and hurried to the Fifth Court.

The first adversary he meets, one of Flosi's kinsmen, he penetrates with the spear and flings him off it, dead. Thus he gives the

signal for a general and bloody fight in this central place of law and peace. But one has a definite impression that this turning-point is felt mainly as a relief from the longwinded legal formalities, with their stratagems to and fro. And Þórhallr is not blamed for his violence. I would be very much mistaken, if there is not a hidden admiration in the author's description of the man; at least there is no hint to the contrary.

By what moral standard are we to judge of Skarphedinn? He takes part in slaying his foster-brother Höskuldr, together with his brothers and Kári. He is the man who sabotages the possibility of a reconciliation at the Althing after that murder, by grossly insulting a number of chieftains there. He destroys that possibility definitely by also abusing Flosi, when a settlement seems within reach thanks to his father Njáll's and other good men's efforts. His last performance as a fighter is to crush the eye of an attacker at Bergþórshváll by throwing a tooth into his face, the same tooth which he has taken from his former victim Þráinn, whose skull he had cloven "down to the jaw-bone, spilling the back-teeth on to the ice". What is the author's own attitude towards this brutal trouble-maker and mankiller, in most things the very contrast to his father Njáll? We meet Skarphedinn for the last time, standing upright dead, with his legs burnt up to his knees, his eyes open, and biting his beard. One need not be a devoted hero-worshipper to see that picture as rather glorifying than condemning. I can find no trace of a moralistic attitude in the author's presentation of Skarphedinn. I think he has taken positive interest in that terrific figure, and seen him as a heroic character in his own right. Most readers, I assume, share this interest, greatly heightened by Skarphedinn's vitality and sarcastic way of talking.

On the other hand we have such a man as Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, certainly the most saintly one of Njála. But it would be strange to appoint him a leading character. He plays a completely passive part, giving by his death rise to the central crisis of the saga. And as for the exemplary Kolskeggr, we are briefly told that he goes abroad, becomes a Christian and a leader of the Var-

angian Guard in Constantinople. Then he is dismissed by the standard phrase: "ok er hann ór sögunni" (197). A reader could easily forget him, without missing anything essential. Kolskeggr is an attractive figure, but no doubt a secondary one, as well as Höskuldr. The characters brought into focus by the author and thus revealing his main interest and deep human insight, are more complicated.

Apart from the definitely bad characters - lying, slandering, stealing, and so on, and bad by any moral standards - it seems rather pointless to describe the protagonists in Njála in terms of either right or wrong, to apply to them some moralistic yardstick - not to mention theological criteria. There is a revealing phrase, used twice by Njáll. To his wife, eager for revenge because of Hallgerðr's defaming Njáll and his family, he remarks "at jafnan orkar tvímælis, þó at hefnt sé" (114). On another occasion, when his sons and Kári are talking of revenge for an injury, he advises them not to proceed too rashly: "Þat kann ok vera, at mælt sé, at synir mínir sé seinir til atgerða, ok skulú þér þat þola um stund, því at allt orkar tvímælis, þá er gort er." (226) That is to say, we give our advice, we make our decisions, we act, but we have no control over the chain of events, over the final outcome. As far as one can see, this is an insight which the author shares with Njáll, and which marks his view of the characters, their relations and acts. That insight seems to have little to do with a certain belief, a certain moral code, whether heathen or Christian - rather in some vague sense with an inexorable fate. The author of Njála is capable of seeing men and their acts from more than one side, in a relativistic and undogmatic way.

As for the story as a whole, I can not find that the conversion to Christendom means any definite change in attitudes and atmosphere. It affects the plot and structure of the saga, to some degree, it appears in glimpses now and then. But fighting and blood revenge go on as before, on an even larger scale, and executed by Christ-

ians on both sides. It is true, the last main adversaries left on the scene, Flosi and Kári, become reconciled, and Kári gets married to Flosi's niece Hildigunnr. (By the way, one could probably find similar arrangements in the author's own society, in the reality of the Sturlungaöld.) But at that time the forces of action are more or less exhausted, the story is simply toned down - as it has to be, according to normal epic rules.

To sum up the argument of this paper. Njála is a moral story, of course, as all great literature dealing with men and their relations is moral in some sense. It was written by a Christian of his time, but his perspective is neither specifically Christian nor moralistic. We certainly can have a lesson from this saga, a rather pessimistic lesson perhaps. We learn a great deal about man and the conditions of human life. But the author makes no decisions for us, we have to draw our own conclusions, judge for ourselves. Who is right or wrong here? Does Gunnar fall below his normal moral standard, when he turns back? Does Njáll behave in a way, unbecoming a Christian, as he refuses to leave his burning house, thinking of revenge and honour? Should we regard Skarphedinn as an immoral or amoral character, a warning example? I think such questions would have been equally absurd to the author as to his contemporary audience.*

Note: Page numbers refer to the edition Brennu-Njáls saga by Einar Ol. Sveinsson in Islenszk fornrit XII (Reykjavík 1954). Translated passages are taken from Njal's Saga, translated with an introduction by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Penguin Books, 1960).