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Honour, sagas and trauma

Reflections on literature and violence in 13th century Iceland

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ABSTRACT  It has long been recognized that the mechanisms of an honour-based society are expressed in the narrative form of the Íslendingasögur, or Sagas about early Icelanders as they are called. These sagas were written in the thirteenth century but the events described are supposed to have taken place in the ninth and tenth centuries. I will briefly discuss the findings of several scholars on this question and then widen the discussion to the contemporary sagas which were composed in the same period but relate contemporary events. Though the latter sagas are more bound by detail and reality in what they describe, they also reveal the same structures of revenge. They also reflect the concerns of a society which is going through an exceptionally violent period in its history. Some of the texts show a deep understanding of the effects of trauma on the human psyche. In the main part of my paper, I will suggest how this understanding finds expression in the more literary compositions of the Sagas of Icelanders, some of which may be understood as efforts to reconstruct a troubled identity in traumatic times.

KEY WORDS saga | honour | trauma | psychoanalysis | death instinct

There seems to be no doubt that our culture, i.e. early 21st century Northern European culture, formulates the sacredness of the individual in a very different way than that of the example of a traditional honour culture which is the subject of this paper, that of medieval Iceland (Wührer 1956–78). We who live in the societies of Western Europe that have gone through the Enlightenment, de-secularisation, the rise of human rights and the establishment of a welfare society are no longer in an honour-based culture. The sacredness of each individual is enshrined in his rights, which are the same for everybody, regardless of gender, race, social status, ability or disability, etc. (Taylor 1989). In an increasingly globalized world, however, we
can be confronted with people who still belong to an honour culture (Grzyb 2016). It is important to understand these differences in order to avoid cultural clashes, especially if our sense of the inviolability and freedom of each individual is challenged by differences in culture.

There are, however, at least some emotional aspects of human behaviour that transcend the different social and cultural constructs. This is nowhere better apparent than in great works of literature which find ways to express this, thereby going beyond the limitations of culture and society to create an understanding of one’s own humanity and that of others, even though these others can be at quite a great distance from us both in time and space. The literary experience gives us the opportunity to understand each other’s humanity across the borders of culture, class, gender, etc. (Black 2010).

This paper will proceed in three stages. First an episode from one of the so-called contemporary sagas will be summarized. It is a tale of traumatic killings and bloody revenge. There is a curious awareness of trauma and its effects on the psyche in the way this story is told in the saga which will be the object of a second section. Finally, it will be suggested that this awareness may have played a part in shaping another saga that many believe to be the greatest work of literature from the Nordic Middle Ages, *Njáls saga*.

For those who have no previous knowledge of the medieval Old Norse-Icelandic literature, a few elements must be kept in mind. The saga is a form of narrative that was mostly developed in Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries, but at a time when the relationship between Iceland and Norway was very close, as the countries shared a common language, a common past, submitted to the authority of the same archbishop and soon to the same king. The sagas are prose narratives which often include poetry. There are many types of sagas, but here I will only mention two of them which are relevant to this paper: the contemporary sagas, narratives about events which happened more or less during the lifetimes of the authors of the narratives, and Sagas about early Icelanders or *Íslendingasögur*. Written in the same period as the contemporary sagas, the Sagas about early Icelanders describe characters and tell of events that are supposed to have happened in the lives of those who settled Iceland around the year 900 and those of their immediate descendants, the generations that live in Iceland until it was converted to Christianity in the year 1000 (Clunies Ross 2010).

These two types of sagas are in many ways similar. Their main characters are Icelanders. They combine prose and poetry, use narrative techniques to some extent derived from oral story-telling and present themselves as accounts of events that really happened. More importantly for our purposes today, they are both
clearly the expression of a society which is based on honour and its corollary, i.e. revenge. There is by now a long history of scholarship on the links between sagas and honour culture, starting with Theodore M. Andersson (1967) and leading to Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1993), William Ian Miller (1990) and Jesse Byock (2001). Indeed, cycles of revenge and counter-revenge structure most of the sagas from each group. This is to be expected since this was also the way society functioned in Iceland in this period. Honour and revenge structured the social relations. And the sagas are not only interested in the honour of male property owners and fighting men, but also to a lesser extent in that of very young or old people, some of them destitute and friendless. Women also play a role in the honour game (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 15–25).

However, of the two groups of sagas, the Sagas about early Icelanders are closer to what we would call today fiction than the contemporary sagas. Their authors are less bound by fact and detail than those writing about events they either witnessed themselves or know that members of their audience may have witnessed. Indeed, the Sagas about early Icelanders are more governed by artistic design which can shape – consciously or unconsciously – the plot, the characters and the underlying structures to a greater extent than the contemporary sagas. This does not mean, as we shall see presently, that the authors of the contemporary sagas are not interpreting the events in the way they tell them and in their choice of what to say and what not to, and that their works are not also governed by literary norms and conventions (Úlfar Bragason 2010).

GISSUR AND HIS REVENGE

The main character of the story which will now be told is the first and only earl of Iceland, Gissur Þorvaldsson. For many decades, he has participated in the strife between the leading families of Iceland. 15 years before the episode related here, in 1238, he overcame in battle the leading members of another family and killed many of them, sometime with his own hands. Though some kind of settlement has been achieved, there is nevertheless a strong urge for revenge in that family (Sturlunga saga, 629–630).

In the winter of 1253 Gissur narrowly escapes death when his farm at Flugumyri in the Skagafjörður district is attacked by members of this family and his wife and three sons are killed in the battle and burning of the farm. This is truly an encounter with death. Gissur is the prime target of the attack and his escape borders on the miraculous. He hides in a barrel full of sour whey in the freezing cold. The saga describes how he shivers so violently that the liquid is splashing, until
the enemies approach and then he is as still as a corpse. When they have gone, he seeks refuge at the nearby church where one of his sons dies of wounds suffered during the battle (Sturlunga saga, 641). Gissur is nearly senseless with cold but recovers when a woman warms him in her lap. The next morning he comes back to his farm and watches when the bodies of his wife and son are being carried out of the ruins. Of his son, all that remains is the roasted flesh contained by the armour he was wearing. The only body part left of his wife are her breasts. He says to his cousin Páll who is with him: ‘See cousin. This is my wife Gró and this is my son Ketilbjörn.’ Then he turns his face away and tears can be seen flying like hail from his eyes (Sturlunga saga, 642).

Gissur’s psyche has been subjected to severe trauma: he was nearly killed himself, and has suffered in his flesh. More acutely, he has lost the wife he has loved for decades and with whom he had three grown sons ready to inherit the power he received from his forebears, but was also able to increase by his own strength, cunning and leadership. These sons are lost to him. The day before the burning he was celebrating the wedding of one of them to the daughter of a member of an opposing family, an event which was supposed to usher in a new era of peace between the warring factions in the country. Gissur is devastated. His behaviour in the aftermath of the burning seems to have fascinated the author of this account, Sturla Þórðarson, who though not present was personally involved in these events (Úlfar Bragason 2010, 182).

Gissur’s reaction upon seeing the grotesque body parts of his wife and son is noteworthy. They have been reduced to meat, roasted meat carried by servants, reminiscent of the food that was presented to the guests at the feast the evening before. It is difficult to imagine a more direct confrontation with our materiality and perishability. What does Gissur do? He gives names to these pieces of roasted meat: ‘this is my wife Gró’. ‘This is Ketilbjörn, my son.’ He restores their humanity, brings them back into the realm of meaning, of intersubjectivity, puts up defences against the atrocity of the real. He then turns his face away and emotion takes over, but he keeps it to himself. He will not allow himself to be overwhelmed by the catastrophic event.

Later that winter he composes a stanza of which here is the first half:

Enn mánk ból þats brunnu
bauga Hlín ok minir,
-- skáði kennir mér minni
minn --, þrir synir inni

(Sturlunga saga, 644)
(I can still remember the evil when my wife and three sons were burned inside. My loss teaches me to remember.)

Gissur is a battle-hardened man by this time. He is in his late forties. As far as we know, no major catastrophe has impacted his life. He is a respected leader and has mostly had the upper hand in his dealings with other chieftains. His defences are therefore strong. Nevertheless he must make an effort to recover, to deal with his ‘skaði’, i.e. his trauma. It is interesting to note that he says that it is loss which teaches him to remember. There is one aspect of trauma that is worth thinking about in this context. It is that it escapes consciousness. The memory of the trauma is ungraspable but we must try to reconstruct it in order to regain our humanity. In a way, the trauma opens up the possibility of memory (Caruth 1996, 1–9).

The second half of Gissur’s stanza is as follows:

Glaðr munat Göndlar röðla
gnýskerðandi verða,
-- brjótir lifir sjá við sútur
sverðs --, nema hefndir verði

(Sturlunga saga, 644)

(The warrior, the breaker of swords who lives in sorrow, will not be glad unless revenge takes place.)

This is a declaration of intent and it is indeed what will happen. Gissur is determined to kill as many of his assailants as he can and he is able to do so. Let us note however the importance of the emotional aspect of revenge. Revenge is a way to get over the loss, to repair the effects of the trauma. This is far from being unknown in the world of the sagas, both the contemporary ones and the more fictional ones, be they legendary or historical. Gissur’s cousin Kolbeinn kaldaljóss died of grief after the slaying of his son he was unable to avenge (Sturlunga saga, 546). Egill Skalla-Grimsson is supposed to have composed the elegy Sonatorrek, i.e. on the impossibility of avenging the sons, after his son dies by accident when his boat capsizes in a storm (Egils saga, 242–245). Kári, in Njáls saga, cannot sleep after the burning down of Bergþórshváll, until he also embarks upon a campaign of bloody retribution.

The striking thing about the contemporary saga’s account of Gissur is how interested he seems to be in this emotional aspect. While the author insists on Gissur’s dignified restraint in the scene I just commented, in the subsequent episodes, he pays much more attention to Gissur’s emotional volatility. Gissur is fidgety, on
edge, frustrated when burners manage to escape or if he feels that the ones that have been slain in revenge are not sufficiently high in rank compared to those he has lost. It is as if the author of the saga understands how long it takes for a soul to get over an experience such as Gissur has gone through. And how exacting revenge relieves the suffering. It is not until one of the highest born of the attackers, Kolbeinn grön, an impressive warrior and close cousin of the Sturlungs, is killed that he begins to feel satisfied.

Shortly afterwards, the author tells us, he takes a young mistress that he soon comes to love dearly.

Why does the author choose to inform us about this? I believe it is because of his interest in and intuitive understanding of the psychological effects of trauma. As modern research shows, people are more or less resilient and much depends on their psychological strength, i.e. the effectiveness of their defence mechanisms. Gissur is a strong personality and does not fall into the melancholic impossibility to grieve which Freud analysed in a famous essay. Instead he is able, after having achieved retribution, to find a new love object to replace the lost ones. He remains nevertheless quite volatile and a few months later, the author describes how close Hrafn Oddsson, who knew of the imminent attack but did not warn Gissur, is to being killed or maimed by Gissur when they find themselves together. Heeding the advice given to him by his uncle, Teitur Álason, Hrafn acquiesces to Gissur’s every demand, avoiding at all costs to contradict anything that Hrafn says. Later, Gissur says that he did not know what had kept him from killing or harming Hrafn, as he had intended to. I believe that it was Teitur’s advice not to give Gissur any reason to fly into the murderous rage that he is prone to after the burning. Gissur is still a victim of what we would call today post-traumatic stress disorder. He is always potentially at the mercy of the blind rage within him. It is important to refrain from doing or saying anything that might provoke his anger.

DEATH INSTINCT AND LITERATURE

The first great study of psychological trauma was Sigmund Freud’s 1920 Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In this famous essay, Freud presents and speculates about his observations of patients suffering from what was then called ‘war neurosis’ or ‘shell-shock’, known today as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’. The strange thing about these patients – and it contradicted some of Freud’s earlier theories – is that they were constantly revisited in their dreams, or rather nightmares, by the traumatic event that they seldom if ever were aware that they were thinking about.
Indeed, says Freud, a trauma victim spends her or his waking hours, deliberately albeit unconsciously, not thinking about it. What puzzled the founder of psychoanalysis was the suffering induced by the reliving of the trauma in the dream: sweating, trembling, sensations of intense fear. It contradicted his claim that we fulfilled our deepest unconscious desires in our dreams. Why relive a painful event by dreaming about it instead of confining it to sweet oblivion?

The contradiction might only be apparent. However, Freud’s observation of shell-shock victims did not deter him from continuing to see dreams as the ‘royal road to the Unconscious’, or indeed other forms of behaviour also, such as jokes, works of arts or parapraxis, more commonly known as Freudian slips. However, a new dimension was being added to the Unconscious, which induced Freud to rethink his theory of drives. As if his insistence on the importance of the Libido in the human mind – not to mention his theory of infantile sexuality – were not troubling enough, he now postulated the existence of a second even stronger drive than Eros, a drive he came to call Thanatos or the death drive. Freud’s idea that we are not only governed by the search for gratification, i.e. the pleasure principle, but that there is a force within us conspiring for our demise, i.e. the death drive, is an extremely disturbing one and still makes even many a psychoanalyst bristle at the mere mention of it.

What can happen to us when we live a traumatic event, i.e. an accident, the violent death of a loved one, an attack, rape, or just being witness to one or the other of these terrible things? It is, in some cases at least, as if our system has been saturated by the violence of the attack on our senses – by the stimuli as Freud would say – and shuts down because it cannot cope with it. This happens especially if we haven’t been prepared for the event, if we haven’t rehearsed in our minds beforehand what is going to happen in order to prepare our defences. Indeed our defences have not functioned at all, we have not been able to deal with the stimuli and our consciousness has closed down or at least is in a dramatically altered state. Nevertheless, the trace of the event subsists and even though we are not aware of it, it remains with us in an urge to revisit the psychic wound and repeat symbolically the traumatic experience again and again and again. This entails the neurotic weakening of a self which is unable to grow away from the trauma and condemned to relive the debilitating maiming of its defences unless it finds a way, through therapy, art or through obsessive compulsive behaviour to make some kind of peace with it.

As said earlier, the contradiction with the ideas of dreams as a wish-fulfilment might only be apparent. Indeed, one aspect of the traumatic event, the experience of acute physical danger to the self, but also the denial or almost nullification of
the autonomous self through rape, is that the subject is exposed to what death is. Freud called it the ‘quiescence of the inorganic world’. The death drive would be – and he concedes that this is just speculation – an inbuilt mechanism to be found in all life forms that aims at engineering the end of their own lifespan, to return to the tranquility of pure material existence.

This confrontation with one’s own nothingness inherent in the traumatic experience poses, as the literary theorist Cathy Caruth argues in her book *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History* the enigma of survival (Caruth 1996, 58). Why do we continue to live after having been exposed to our inevitable obliteration? The trauma victim feels – possibly more strongly than others – the terrifying pull of the death drive. Caruth underlines the paradoxical nature of the way trauma works. We both know and do not know what it is and how it affects us. This has to do with on the one hand the unknowability of a situation in which all our psychic defences have been breached and we are thrown out of language and representation. On the other hand – and this is the paradox – the traumatic event, which has imprinted itself into our Unconscious is organizing, without us knowing it, the way we think, the way we make meaning out of our experience, the way we construct reality, our everyday life but also our intellectual and artistic productions.

**EXPRESSION IN LITERATURE**

I come now to the *Íslendingasögur* or Sagas about early Icelanders. Most scholars now believe that they appear as a literary genre in the decades from 1210 to 1240 or 1250, i.e. a period in which there was much more violence in Iceland than ever before or after (Vésteinn Ólason 2005, 112–116). Armed confrontations involving hundreds, even thousands of men, multiple acts of revenge in cycles spanning decades: the cutting off of hands, arms, feet and legs, killing, maiming, burning down farms. Even women and children fell victim to this violence.

Given the fact that Ari Þorgilsson was already writing about the history of Iceland in the Settlement period and leading up to the Conversion period, in both his conserved and lost works of the early 12th century, and since we also assume that there was, throughout that century and before it, a lively tradition of oral saga entertainment which also involved stories of settlers and their immediate descendants, one could ask: Why didn’t the written *Íslendingasögur* appear earlier?

Several explanations could be offered which won’t be discussed here; however, a possible contributing factor will be proposed. It is certainly not the only one but perhaps an important one, especially in giving many of these texts the particular
power they have. It is that the Sagas about early Icelanders were written during troubled times, that the traumatic experiences so many of the authors and members of the audience of these sagas went through, both directly and indirectly, shaped them as works of art. In other words, that it was ‘skaði’, i.e. the damage, the loss, that taught them ‘minni’ or memory, that induced them to work through their trauma by remembering, exploiting, recreating in their narratives a past which expressed this trauma.

Readings of several of the sagas could be proposed from this point of view, but none, to my mind is as shaped by the peculiarities of the death drive as Njáls saga (Tulinius 2015).

One of the distinctive features of this saga is how many of its characters go willingly to their deaths. This is true of the main protagonists: Gunnar decides to return to Hlíðarendi, despite Kolskeggr’s and Njáll’s previous warnings that it will bring about his death (Brennu-Njáls saga, 181–183). Njáll, Bergþóra and Skarpheðinn all show in some way that they are willing to die, as does Flosi at the end of the saga (326–330; 463). This is also true of many minor characters, such as Þjóstólfur. He obeys Hallgerðr when she tells him to go find Hrútr after he has killed her husband Glúmr, even though he suspects why she sends him there. The same could be said of Kolr, Atli, Þórór Leysingjason and other characters involved in the series of vicarious murders committed by Hallgerðr and Bergþóra in their feud (50; 93; 99; 107). They all know what their involvement in the killings will bring upon them.

This is also true of the Norwegian Þórir, who doesn’t want to fight Gunnar but, when prodded by his Icelandic hostess, goes to battle though he knows it will mean his death. Gunnar’s brother Hjörtr also chooses to fight though his death has been foretold in a dream. Not to be forgotten on this list is the young Þórór Kára-son, who prefers dying with his grand-parents, Njáll and Bergþóra, to surviving them (155; 156; 330).

Closely connected to the ideas of foreshadowing and death are the noun ‘feigð’ and the adjective ‘feigr’. A study of the complete corpus of the sagas about early Icelanders reveals that in all of them except Njáls saga it only occurs at the most three times and in many not at all. In our saga both noun and adjective happen for a total of ten times. Of course, it is the longest saga belonging to this particular genre. Nonetheless, the density of these occurrences suggests that the author took a particular interest in the idea that the living were destined to die.

Gunnar himself uses the noun in a remarkable way in chapter 68. His brother is warning of a possible danger and he replies: ‘Koma mun til mín feigðin, segir Gunnar, hvar sem ek em staddr, ef mér verðr þess auðit’ (168). ‘Death will come to me no matter where I am,’ said Gunnar, ‘if such is my fate’. What is unusual here is the
choice of the expression ‘að vera einhvers auðit’. It is a positive word, suggesting good fortune, but here Gunnar uses it with the word ‘feigð’ which means ‘approach, or foreboding of death’. This is the only occurrence of this word with this expression and it increases the impression that Gunnar’s attitude to death is quite positive.

One wonders why. Gunnar is a great warrior but also a peaceful man who avoids conflicts, though he will defend his honour when it is challenged. He usually shows forbearance but he can also be carried away by his own ability to fight. Though he kills many men, he doesn’t like it: ‘Hvat ek veit, segir Gunnarr, hvárt ek mun því óvaskari mæðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnnum at vega menn’ (139). ‘What do I know, says Gunnar, whether I am less of a man than others, because it affects me more than others to kill people.’

Despite his self-control, Gunnar has strong emotions. He can display anger but he is also a faithful friend to Njáll as well as a loving brother. Finally, he is open to feelings of lust as can be seen in his brash and ill-fated decision to marry Hallgerðr. It is a ‘gírnndarráð’ or ‘decision based on lust’ and this seems to be the opinion of the saga’s author (87). Here we come to the famous scene, later in Njáls saga, when Gunnar changes his mind about leaving Iceland for the three year exile which was one of the terms of the settlement he agreed upon after the killing of Þorgeir Otkelsson. Gunnar’s horse has stumbled on its way to the ship that will take him abroad. Gunnar has dismounted, turns back and sees his home and the surrounding country-side and it has never seemed more beautiful to him (182).

This scene has been interpreted in different ways over the years. Quite a few think that Gunnar is actually referring to Hallgerðr, who stayed behind at Hlíðarendi, and that the meadows and fields stand for her hair and other sexually charged attributes (Helga Kress 2008, 40). It was once brought to my attention that what Gunnar is watching is not only his farm but also the place where his grave-mound will stand, since it was probably on the flatland between his farm and the sea.

Perhaps that mixed feelings is the correct way to describe Gunnar’s emotions at this moment. Indeed, there is no reason to reject any of the interpretations of what is going through his mind. He could be feeling love for his home, and also want to stay with Hallgerðr, the object of his lust. He is also deliberately going against the advice of his two most trusted friends, Njáll and Kolskeggr, who both have said he would die if he didn’t honour his promise to leave the country for three years. Gunnar is a man of strong and conflicting passions, but he doesn’t like them and is never happier than when he has been freed from them and sings alone but content in his grave-mound.

It is indeed quite striking in this context that Gunnar is never portrayed as particularly gay or joyful except when he is seen revelling in his grave mound after
his death (193). There is one exception to this, and that is when he comes to Alþingi after his successful journey abroad. Here he is ‘light-hearted and merry with everyone’, but it is only a matter of hours or days before his fateful encounter with Hallgerðr, who goes out of her way to be attractive to him (85). Blinded by lust he hastily decides to marry her, despite Hrútr’s warnings. It is as if the saga is telling us that sexual passion can only bring tragedy, and that happiness is only achieved by steering clear of desire. That there are close links between exacerbated sexual passions and the death drive is in accordance with Freud’s theory of the interweaving of life and death drives: Eros is serving Thanatos.

The ineluctability of programmed death in the saga is nowhere more striking than in the episode when Flosi dreams that a man steps out of the mountain Lómagnúpr to the west of his home and calls Flosi’s men to him (346–348). The men are called in the order of their death, and also in clusters which shows that their deaths will occur at different moments in the future. From the perspective of Freud’s theory of the death drive, this is a particularly interesting scene for at least two reasons. The first is that it comes to Flosi in a bad dream, not a good one which fulfils his wishes as in Freud’s earlier theory where the pleasure principle prevails. In his nightmare Flosi is living the trauma to come, when so many of his followers will be killed, most of them by Kári, who the saga tells us is lying awake in his bed thinking of his loss at the same time Flosi has his nightmare. The second reason is that here the idea of future death is not presented as an expression of somebody’s insight or foreknowledge but as something which is inherently uncanny: a mysterious man with a no less mysterious and intimidating name coming out of a mountain.

It is no coincidence that Freud was working on his essay The Uncanny at the same time he wrote Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The death drive is in itself uncanny. The idea of a force within us that is working towards our disappearance is not only counterintuitive but deeply unsettling. It is however also a fact of life, in the sense that we all grow old and die, that our own passing is already programmed. But Freud’s theory is not a mere statement of this all too well known reality. What troubles us, as in his theory of the Unconscious in a more general way, is that there is a force within us we do not control and do not like. Not only are we not masters in our own house, as in Freud’s famous formulation, but there is an enemy within.

The figure of Skarpheðinn has long fascinated readers of Njáls saga. He is indeed an unusual character and in many ways unique in saga literature. In the first part of the saga, he stays in the background, obeying his father and supporting his friends. When he takes a leading role it is almost without exception to commit violent deeds, like killing Þráinn and later his son, but also to destroy his and his fami-
ily’s chances of garnering support for their cause after the slaying of Hóskuldr Þráinsson and finally to ruin the settlement that at last had been reached after much effort by many good people. As Síðu-Hallr says at this occasion, Flosi and he are obviously ‘ógæfumenn’, men of misfortune (314). He also takes the lead when he decides to obey his father on the night of the burning and retreat into the farmhouse, though he knows it means their death (326).

This would be sufficient to connect Skarpheðinn to the death drive in what could be called the psychodynamics of the saga. He has other aspects that add to this impression. He is in many ways an uncanny figure. He is very often described as pale and betrays strong emotions that he nevertheless does his best to repress. One of his defining characteristics is his mysterious grin which he displays at numerous times in the saga (96; 98; 114; 299; 304; 327). There is something strange about this grin, as if he takes pleasure in negative things, and enjoys being provocative.

This is particularly true in his behaviour at the Alþingi when he and his brothers are seeking support from major chieftains in the lawsuit which follows Hóskuldr’s slaying. This episode is of special interest in relationship to the death drive. It is a series of five scenes which are all structured in the same way and all repeat with variations the identification of Skarpheðinn. As we have seen, repetition is closely related to the death drive, and though there are significant differences between each of the five scenes, it is the repetition that makes them remarkable as well as the fearsome and uncanny behaviour of Skarpheðinn. This eeriness is suggested to the reader in several ways, among others in the way the four successive chieftains describe him. Of particular note is that one chieftain calls him ‘tröllsligr’ (‘like a troll’) and another that he is ‘so dreadful that it is as if he had walked out of a sea-cliff’ (297–306). During this episode, there is something out of the ordinary about Skarpheðinn that awakens a sense of unease in those who meet him, as if death itself were among them. The latter comparison is particularly interesting because of the parallel between Skarphéðinn and the giant, who as we have seen announces the death of those whose name he calls.

As in Freud’s theory, repetition is the way in which the elusive death drive makes itself known. It is as if some hidden force has taken over, both human and escaping the control of humans. The only way to stop it is to break the chain of revenge and counter-revenge as Gunnar does after the killing of his cousin Sigmundr, but also Síðu-Hallr by renouncing compensation for his son’s death later in the saga. This has – correctly to my mind – been interpreted as part of an underlying Christian message of the saga. As it tells us, both Gunnar and Síðu-Hallr seem to lose honour but actually they don’t. Gunnar receives a belated and generous compensation for the cousin he has lost. More importantly, his friendship with
Njáll will help him defend his honour in the future. Síðu-Hallr’s speech at the Parliament where he renounces claiming any fines for the killing of his sons brings him much praise and casts him in the role of a Christian hero of peace.

His humility as well as Gunnar’s are not sufficient, however. The death-drive cannot be stopped and its destructive forces always prevail at the end.

CONCLUSION: RECONSTRUCTING A TROUBLED IDENTITY IN TRAUMATIC TIMES

The Icelandic chieftains – as did most medieval laymen – displayed a curious blend of Christianity and violent pragmatism, for example in this other scene from the same contemporary saga involving again the same Gissur, some ten years later. He is now earl over Iceland and one of his enemies – and also his cousin – Þórður Andrésson, has been trying to kill him but has fallen into Gissur’s hands. After some hesitation, Gissur has decided to have him executed. As he is being taken to the place of execution Þórðr says: ‘I would like to ask you, earl Gissur, to forgive me for what I have done to you.’ Earl Gissur answers: ‘I will, when you are dead’ (Sturlunga saga, 756).

The Icelandic chieftains have to use revenge to protect themselves. Otherwise, they would constantly be attacked. But they are also aware of another set of rules and values, those of Christian charity and forgiveness. They live with these contradictions as this example shows. But it is a painful cohabitation.

In their works of art, however, the authors of the sagas were also able to communicate to us over the centuries about other deeper forces, forces that perhaps transcend culture and society and are possibly the source of every civilisation’s discontents: these terrible destructive forces that inhabit us all.

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