

## Saga as Historical Novel

My title is “Saga *as* historical novel,” not “Saga *is* historical novel.” Obvious as it is, the distinction must be made because in the context of a contemporary debate over the poetics of the sagas and especially over genre, several influential scholars have rejected the application of “analytic” or modern generic systems to the saga literature: systems like the standard taxonomy in terms of “sagas of Icelanders,” “kings’ sagas,” and so on.<sup>1</sup> From this position, to apply other modern terms

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Versions of this paper were read at the Medieval Circle, University of California, Santa Barbara, January 1975; Conference on Medieval Historiography, Stanford University, February 1978; and at Cornell University, November 1980.

1. Lars Lönnroth, “Tesen om de två kulturerna: Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar,” *Scripta Islandica*, 15 (1964), 1–94; M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, tr. Kenneth Ober (Odense, 1973) and Steblin-Kamenskij’s articles “An Attempt at a Semantic Approach to the Problem of Authorship in Old Icelandic Literature,” *ANF*, 81 (1966), 24–34 and “Zur Bedeutung der altisländischen Literatur,” (tr. K. Menger), *Nordeuropa*, 3 (1969), 171–76. Lönnroth’s views in “Tesen” are attacked in my “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*,” *SS*, 44 (1972), 1–27 and “Theme and Genre in Some *Íslendinga þættir*” *SS*, 48 (1976), 1–28, and further debated by Lönnroth, T. M. Andersson, and me in *SS*, 47 (1975). Relevant to the genre discussion in other ways are also Fritz Paul, “Zur Poetik der Isländersagas. Eine Bestandaufnahme,” *ZDA*, 100 (1971), 166–78, and “Das Fiktionalitätsproblem in der altnordischen Prosaliteratur,” *ANF*, 97 (1982), 52–66; and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, “‘Fact’ und ‘Fiction’ als Maßstäbe literarischer Wertung in der Saga,” *ZDA*, 101 (1972), 188–200, and “Synkretische oder ästhetische Wahrheit? Zur Methodenkritik in der Saga-Forschung (1),” *Skandinavistik*, 11 (1981), 141–48. Further reactions to Steblin-Kamenskij may be found in *Mediæval Scandinavia*, 7 (1974), 102–17, where Peter Hallberg’s “The Syncretic Saga Mind: A Discussion of a New Approach to the Icelandic Sagas” makes several of the same objections raised here; Steblin-Kamenskij defended his views in “Some

like "historical novel," "romance," or "novella" to Icelandic sagas must seem not merely rash but perversely anti-historical. The Soviet folklorist and linguist M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij greets such modern terms with sarcasm:

... it is sometimes flatly asserted that the family sagas are historical novels by the intent of their authors. It is quite beyond doubt, of course, that the family sagas had certain literary prototypes. But could these prototypes be works that appeared six hundred years later? The historical novel, as is known, appeared as a genre only at the beginning of the nineteenth century ... and was the result of a lengthy process, the stages of which are well known. It may, of course, be assumed ... that the prototype of a given saga was another saga, and this latter saga was actually a historical novel. But what was the prototype of this other saga? *Ivanhoe* or some other novel of Walter Scott?<sup>2</sup>

For a literary audience this view is likely to appear naive and amusing, perhaps even absurd and unworthy of criticism. On the other hand, it is true that comparisons of the kind I am advocating here run the risk of being historically misleading and reductive, and I am prepared to admit that their secret snares can be treacherous and subtle; so can the attempt to avoid such comparisons. But to do Steblin-Kamenskij justice, his glance at the genre question comes in the context of a serious book-length attempt to discover the "saga mind" through a vaguely anthropological method—a method which, at least in Steblin-Kamenskij's hands, creates a gulf unbridgeable by literary criticism between the modern world and that of the sagas.

His book attempts an ethnography but relies solely on the preserved words of the culture, and reading it one is bound to find the "saga mind" peculiarly empty; for Steblin-Kamenskij is continually arguing *e silentio* and further *ad silentium*, from the absence of distinctions in the lexicon to their absence in life. The fallacy in this is that a real ethnographer also observes life and questions informants—a

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Considerations on Approaches to Medieval Literature," *MScan*, 8 (1975), 198–91. For a more sympathetic review by a Westerner see the appropriate section of Carol J. Clover's survey of recent saga scholarship in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985).

2. *Saga Mind*, pp. 28–29.

methodology closed to us in dealing with a dead culture. So it is fitting that when in his final chapter Steblin-Kamenskij does produce his “informant,” the revenant ghost of a thirteenth-century Icelander, all this “Thorleifr” can do, being equipped with only the “conceptions” the author has given him, outside a social context, and limited entirely to talk, is to shake his head in puzzlement over our distinctions, especially over the notion of literary criticism, or, as he calls it with disgust, that “saga about a saga.”<sup>3</sup>

Steblin-Kamenskij’s radical methodology has its most basic manifestation in his version of “truth” and hence of history for the saga mind: medieval Icelanders, on the evidence of their lexicon, did not recognize the distinction between our “history” or “real truth” and “fiction” or “artistic truth” but only what Steblin-Kamenskij calls “syncretic truth,” a category that contains “latent fiction” and is opposed to “lying.” But most of us would deny the simple positivistic notion of a “real truth” in “modern culture” (a concept he also treats as having a unified meaning) and would insist that the positive evidence for medieval Icelandic conceptions in this area is inadequate and the negative evidence inconclusive. Steblin-Kamenskij’s focus is entirely on “intention,” which he treats as accessible only through the very sparse “meta”-level vocabulary; but whatever the intentions of the authors, there remains the fact of the saga literature itself, offering, from *our* point of view, both history and fiction existing, for them as for us, on a gradient rather than as exclusive categories. To limit oneself to the thirteenth-century point of view as evidenced in vocabulary—a method I, in any case, find inadequate—is to confine oneself to willful silence. Nor are Steblin-Kamenskij and his Thorleifr any more sympathetic to the metaphorical language of criticism than to a modern point of view, but it seems to me that it is the duty of a critic to go beyond the tautology of calling a spade a spade or a saga a saga: we first begin to learn something beyond the obvious when we are forced to metaphorical levels in talking about a text. Despite Steblin-Kamenskij’s fears, the danger of someone’s rewriting literary history to derive the Icelandic sagas from Walter Scott is slight, and I mean only to try on the sagas—and not for the first time<sup>4</sup>—the

3. *Saga Mind*, pp. 141–52.

4. Since Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkatla*, *Studia Islandica* 7 (Reykjavík, 1940); *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða: A Study*, tr. R. George Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press,

label of "historical novel" for what that critical metaphor can suggest about this body of realistic historical fiction—a heuristic device that assumes more familiarity with the second term than the first, in this case more familiarity with writers like Walter Scott, whose *Waverley* novels I take to be paradigmatic for the early historical novel, than with the Sagas of Icelanders and related works. Through the third terms of such comparisons the modern reader may find a point of entry into the saga world and even into the real "saga mind."

The most basic similarity, of course, is that both sagas and the early historical novels contain both real and fictional events and persons which are separated from and connected with author and reader by *historical* distance, not merely "set in the past," conveying a sense of the differences between the time of the action and the time of the reading and simultaneously a sense of historical-causal entailment.

This quality—the essential, historical aspect of the historical novel—seems to flow from a simple, basically dualistic vision of historical process in which the past past is replaced by the past future in a dialectic that is causally related to the writer's present. The content and structure of the historical novel in many of the classical practitioners are informed by such a historical vision underlying their private fictions. The lives of the private fictional characters wind in and out among those of historical characters, situations, and events and are made historically meaningful to us or at least to their original audiences by their association with an essentially liminal or transitional moment of historical significance, as if their presence at an important historical rite of passage sanctified them as witnesses.<sup>5</sup> This assumes, of course, a consensus between author and audience about the historical process just described, the mutual understanding that made historical fiction in the two periods under discussion a *popular*

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1958), the idea has been implicit in many literary treatments of the sagas. In a recent essay Forrest S. Scott, "The Icelandic Family Saga as Precursor of the Novel, with Special Reference to *Eyrbyggja Saga*," *Parergon*, 6 (1973), 3–13, offers an explicit and theoretical justification for the treatment of saga as novel.

5. If historical fiction does arise in a historically liminal zone, or rather in the contemplation of such a zone, its kinship with Victor Turner's attractive theory of myth becomes striking and the transition to Weber's *Geschichtsmythos* (in the article cited below) is eased; e.g., Victor Turner, "Myth and Symbol," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills, vol. 10 ([N.Y.], 1968), 576–77.

art. The morphology of the historical passage itself is essentially stable: a monolithic new order overtakes an individualistic ancient one, empire, for example, succeeding provincialism. The paradigm can be expanded with other opposed qualities. The balance of the two orders is, of course, never static, and a static presentation of the oppositions would in any case be ironically undermined by our knowledge that the new order, though modified in the dialectic of history, represents the way of the future, the writer's present.

This rather abstract model of the view of history in the classical historical novelists is gratefully pilfered from the less general theory argued by George Dekker.<sup>6</sup> He adds many more common features that are not applicable even metaphorically to medieval Icelandic historical fiction, though some are suggestive; for example, the liminal zone is, at least fleetingly, the locus of many of the heroes. Another critic of Scott has said that "in fiction, no principle of organization is superior to a rich and awesome dichotomy,"<sup>7</sup> and I would add that one appeal of this kind of dichotomy, in Scott at least, is its essential ambiguity: it allows author and reader to invest with value either side or both. The general picture, then, derived from the Scottish sequence of Scott's *Waverley* novels makes national history the story of the replacement of the Stuarts, the feudal order, and the ancient agrarian economy by the Hannoverians and the new men of developing capitalism. Scott's fictional characters and plots in *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *Heart of Midlothian*, *Old Mortality*, and *Redgauntlet* are brought in contact with historical characters and situations, but in general he does not try to make great men—Hegel's "world-historical figures"—and the history of nations the *direct* subject of his fiction. (The virtue of this plan was a source of controversy among his imme-

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6. My introduction to serious work on the historical novel stems from Dekker's teaching at Stanford in 1973. His in-progress book on the American historical "romance" will be important beyond its field [*The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), Eds.]; in the meantime one may consult his "Sir Walter Scott, the Angel of Hadley, and American Historical Fiction," *Journal of American Studies*, 17 (1983), 211–27.

7. R. C. Gordon, *Under Which King? A Study of the Scottish Waverley Novels* (New York, 1969), p. 10; Gordon further relates his historical dichotomy by way of "projection" to the division in Scott himself between the claims of passion and necessity. Similar analyses of Scott's divided loyalties are widespread in the literature devoted to him, e.g., in Angus and Jenni Calder, *Scott* (= Arco Literary Critiques, New York, 1969), *passim*, and in Lukács, cited below.

diate followers).<sup>8</sup> And this relationship between private fiction or fictionalized private history and true though "interpreted" public history is similar to what the sagas offer: *Old Mortality* describes the Battle of Bothwell Brig through the eyes of Henry Morton, a fictional character suggested by actual prototypes; *Egils saga* presents the victory at Brunanburg in 937 as mainly the work of an Icelandic farmer, Egill Skallagrímsson, a real person much influenced by fictional patterns. Dekker emphasizes ethnic aspects of the general picture—the fated highlanders of Scott, doomed Indians of Cooper, and marginal Cossacks of Tolstoi—and adds the striking observation that the two terms of the dialectic—"civilization and barbarism" in one view—the halves of the "rich and awesome dichotomy" and the liminal zone of transition are mirrored geographically in a border setting or a frontier. Here the sagas offer no direct analogy; Iceland and the other new settlements contained no primitive peoples, and no experienced reader of the sagas will look for romantic notions about the Skrælings. However, there is a striking geographical aspect to sagas where the action spreads out over the whole northern world. The authors, their own horizons shrinking throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, were obviously interested in the expanding world of their forebears in the Viking Age, and geographical scope in the sagas can, to a certain extent, be interpreted as a transformation of historical scope.

So despite great differences, the basic model of historical process derivable from many of the novels is general enough to be very suggestive for many sagas. And in fact, underlying a significant portion of the realistic historical fiction of the sagas we find a similar dialectic, the terms of which are on one side the unity of the Christian new order and its hand-in-glove partner Norwegian imperialism, and on the other, individualistic paganism and Icelandic independence. It is not a question, at this point at least, of the objective truth of this view of Scandinavian history but of the interpretation of the past favored

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8. On the problem of relating the individual vision of life to the essentially supra-individual vision of history, see Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel* (Cambridge, 1924) and John Maynard, "Broad Canvas, Narrow Perspective: The Problem of the English Historical Novel in the Nineteenth Century," *Harvard English Studies*, 6, 237–66 (= *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley [Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1975]).

by the authors. Nevertheless, I find it an interesting confirmation when an anthropologist studying the transformation of Viking Age worldview due to its encounter with European Christianity independently employs a comparable model derived from the study of modern peasant societies in relation to advanced industrial ones, what she calls the model of the Great and Little Traditions:

The Little Tradition refers to the little community and to that which is transmitted informally (predominantly orally) from generation to generation; while the Great Tradition refers to the corps of disciples within a civilized society and to special wisdom, preserved in scriptures, which they guard and transmit.<sup>9</sup>

In the saga literature the oppositions associated with religion, rather than politics, will be the most obvious because in a few familiar texts this is treated as an explicit “theme,” but the more general fact must not be overlooked that the Saga Age itself, the new heroic age that the Icelandic saga-men of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries chose to celebrate, was precisely the age of the conversion, 930–1030. Of course this coincided with other important developments in the Icelandic state, but it seems significant that in Iceland it was less the frontier period, the Settlement Age from 870–930, or the more distant or more recent past, than the years surrounding the watershed of the “siðaskipti” or “change of customs,” in the suggestive Icelandic term for the conversion in 1000, that attracted the writers of historical fiction.

In the absence of what A. Ya. Gurevich, writing on the historical sense of the sagas, calls “direct general reasoning” in Old Icelandic historiography, we cannot turn, as Dekker and Avrom Fleishman, a recent writer on the English historical novel, have done, to historical theorists contemporary with the authors or even to authorial prefaces like those of Scott for evidence of this “historical conception.”<sup>10</sup> Rather

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9. Rosalie H. Wax, *Magic, Fate and History: The Changing Ethos of the Vikings* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1969), p. 15 (the concepts are borrowed from the work of the anthropologist Robert Redfield).

10. A. Ya. Gurevich, “The ‘Historical Conception’ of Snorri Sturluson,” *MScan*, 4 (1971), 42–54, citation, p. 51; Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore and London, 1971).

main fact—setting, character, and action—becomes a cultural symbol we must interpret to discover the “certain attitude to the course of human affairs” that Gurevich affirms but does not describe.<sup>11</sup> Hence the significance of the enormous interest in the reigns of the two evangelizing kings of Norway, Óláfr Tryggvason, 995–1000, and Óláfr Haraldsson, the saint, 1015–1030, and their contemporary rivals from the house of Hlaðir. Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, for example, devotes about two-thirds of its content to this brief period, making it the focal point of Norwegian history, and a persistent theory holds that the genesis of saga writing lies with the first *vita* of St. Óláfr.<sup>12</sup> It is abundantly clear, too, that the thirteenth-century authors felt a real historical distance from Saga Times, both before and after the conversion; the obvious antiquarian interests of a saga like *Eyrbyggja* are good evidence of this, especially where the author compares or juxtaposes “our” customs with those of “our ancestors.” However, the new order was not imagined as arriving overnight, and the spookiest happenings in the sagas seem to occur in the transition period; for example, the Fróðá wonders in *Eyrbyggja* are ended by a pre-Christian rite and confirmed by a Christian exorcism, and the halloween atmosphere of *Eiríks saga rauða* is unmistakably associated with this transition. The unsagalike style of one version of *Fóstbræðra saga* is useful here because, in this respect at least, it makes explicit what is legible only between the lines of sagas in the tight-lipped classical style: “People said that [Gríma] was skilled in many things, in fact, was a sorceress. [And because at that time the Christian faith was still young and weak it seemed to many a matter of importance if a person was skilled in witchcraft]”; “They guarded the wares which had been on board the ship until Illugi arrived. [For though Christendom still was young in Iceland at the time, yet it was not considered right to appropriate the goods of men who had been slain]”; and much more to the same effect.<sup>13</sup>

So the saga authors seem to have traced the birth of their own

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11. Gurevich, p. 53.

12. The classic statement in English is in G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 1953).

13. *The Sagas of Kormák and The Sworn Brothers*, trans. with introduction and notes by Lee M. Hollander (Princeton, 1949), p. 111 = *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík, 1953), p. 161; Hollander, p. 139 = ÍF 6:212–13.



world to the transitional period between Haraldr Fairhair and St. Óláfr, and this is clearest in their treatment of the coming of Christianity. This interpretation of their own history is reasonable and perhaps even inevitable, for it is likely that it was in fact the historical moment of the conversion that created the necessary conditions for the birth of the body of historical fiction the saga authors were cultivating, and another analogy lurks in the recognition of this probability. Lukács' famous theory of the rise and early development of the historical novel in the nineteenth century identifies the French Revolution, with its mass movements, national armies, and leaders of heroic proportions, as the "world-historical moment" that generated the historical consciousness out of which Scott wrote.<sup>14</sup> Lukács' perhaps somewhat overstated theory is widely accepted, but an equally persuasive case could probably be made for the Icelandic analogy. Christianity introduced not only the necessary technology for cultivation of a history but, more importantly, history itself. It is probable that before Germanic paganism met Christianity it was what we would call a primitive culture with only an approximation to our linear concept of history. It probably had recurring sacred times and myths that were not chronologically ordered; the tense system, lacking a morphological future, is suggestive in this respect. Actually, however, adequate evidence is lacking for a confident reconstruction of an early Germanic time sense, despite a recent attempt, and there are important counterinstances to even the generalizations I have just ventured.<sup>15</sup> The question is complex, but it does seem clear that Christianity, with its very strong historical basis, its teleological orientation, and its comprehensive system of historical relations, will have introduced a new conception of the past, as it necessarily did of the future. Only a Christian historical conception can explain the main features of periodization in the historical conception of the sagas, especially the selection of the conversion period as the locus for the epoch, for the general nature of early Christian historical conception must have provided the model for the Icelandic view in

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14. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell with an introduction by Frederic Jameson (Lincoln and London, 1983; original English ed., 1962).

15. Paul C. Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (Amherst, Mass., 1982).

terms of two great epochs separated by the radical intervention of God in history.<sup>16</sup>

Aspects of my theme here have often been touched on in studies of the sagas. After Nordal came, for example, Baetke's demonstration that the portrayal of pagan religion in the sagas is in large part a projection from Christianity, but Baetke's emphasis and the focus of related work in the field of mythography were squarely on the ethnographic value of the thirteenth-century literature for a knowledge of the earlier culture.<sup>17</sup> The strictly *literary* use of the Christian ethic as projected onto the past has only gradually been unfolded; as milestones marking the line of development one might cite much of the work of Hermann Pálsson and Marlene Ciklamini's early essay on *Valla-Ljóts saga*,<sup>18</sup> Theodore M. Andersson on the development of an ethic of *communitas*,<sup>19</sup> and a series of articles by Paul Schach, who shows that the saga writers "were keenly conscious of what is sometimes called the discrepancy between cultural milieu and cultural reference," in other words, of the historical development of their society.<sup>20</sup> One main

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16. Two recent and richly annotated studies of the Christian sense of time and history are: C. A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History* (London, Toronto, 1972), published in an earlier form as *The Phoenix and the Ladder: The Rise and Decline of the Christian View of History* (Berkeley, 1964); and Morton W. Bloomfield, "Chaucer's Sense of History," in his *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 13–26 (originally in *JEGP*, 51 [1952], 301–13).

17. Nordal, cited above; Walter Baetke, "Christliches Lehngut in der Sagareligion," in *Christliches Lehngut in der Sagareligion. Das Svöldr-Problem. Zwei Beiträge zur Sagakritik*, Berichte über die Verhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Bd. 98, Heft 6 (Berlin, 1952); Olaf Olsen, *Hørg, hov og kirke: Historiske og arkeologiske vikingetidsstudier* (Copenhagen, 1966), esp. pp. 19–34; J. S. Martin, "Some Comments on the Perception of Heathen Religious Customs in the Sagas," *Parergon*, 6 (1973), 45–50. From a large number of studies of this type devoted to the mythography one may instance Anne Holtmark, *Studier i Snorres mytologi* (Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, II. Hist.-Filos. Kl., N. S. 4, Oslo, 1964); Ursula and Peter Dronke, "The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background," in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, I (Reykjavík, 1977), 153–76; and Anthony Faulkes, "Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to Snorra Edda," in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Haraldur Bessason and Robert Glendinning (= Manitoba Icelandic Series 4, [Winnipeg], 1983), pp. 283–314.

18. For example, Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga* (Copenhagen, 1971); Ciklamini, "The Concept of Honor in *Valla-Ljóts saga*;" *JEGP*, 65 (1966), 303–317.

19. "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas," *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 575–93; cf. Calder on the theme of peace and violence in Scott (e.g., p. 143).

20. Paul Schach, "Antipagan Sentiment in the Sagas of Icelanders," *Gripla*, 1 (1975),

“discrepancy,” as he sees it, proceeds from religious development, but Schach also adumbrates a political aspect (though not the one I suggested above): “the sagas reveal that the advent of Christianity in Iceland loomed quite as large and momentous in the minds of thirteenth-century saga writers as did the colonization of their country.”<sup>21</sup> In these three articles Schach seems to concentrate on three different artistic ways of recognizing the “discrepancy”: Christian writers might condemn pagan practices, revealing their “antipagan sentiment” even while giving the pagan ancestors their moment on stage; or they might simply focus on describing aspects of conversion itself, especially on the kind of *resistance* to conversion that a later good Christian (such as Kjartan Ólafsson) might offer; or again they might see the “discrepancy” chiefly in the contrast of personalities within a family, in a “generation gap.” This last is a useful concept for saga criticism and a significant part of the historical conception of the sagas, for if the family is itself a kind of microcosm of historical continuity, such “gaps” will represent in little the major historical disjunctions. In this discussion Schach exemplifies chiefly “the transition from the savage culture of the Viking Age to the farming community of the Icelandic Commonwealth,” but also shows “the conversion from paganism to Christianity” reflected in generation gaps.<sup>22</sup>

That the saga authors did employ this personal and dramatic structural formula to convey supra-personal and historical conceptions is absolutely clear, but an example not used by Schach may demonstrate briefly how the gap can be used with artistic indirection. At the end of *Hœnsa-Póris saga* the feuding parties are represented (mainly) by an older generation, Gunnarr Hlífarson and Tungu-Oddr, and a younger generation, Jófríðr, daughter of Gunnarr, and Þóroddr, son of Tungu-Oddr.<sup>23</sup> The feud is resolved, of course, by marriage, but not before

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105–34; “Some Observations on the Generation-Gap Theme in the Icelandic Sagas,” in *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Harald Scholler (Tübingen, 1977), 361–81; and “The Theme of the Reluctant Christian in the Icelandic Sagas,” *JEGP*, 81 (1982), 196–203; citation, “Antipagan Sentiment,” p. 105.

21. “Reluctant Christian,” p. 186. For a comparable view of the role of settlement history, see Kurt Schier, “Iceland and the Rise of Literature in ‘Terra Nova’: Some Comparative Reflections,” *Gripla*, 1 (1975), 168–81.

22. “Generation-Gap,” p. 373; cf. Wax, above.

23. *Hœnsa-Póris saga*, in: *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík, 1938), pp. 42–47.

the generations have been contrasted in terms of something like “epic and romance.”<sup>24</sup> In the summer Jófríðr spent her time sitting in a tent, “finding this less dull.”<sup>25</sup> By accident Þóroddr happened to ride by; he walked into the tent and up to Jófríðr. She greeted him in a friendly fashion, and he sat down beside her to talk. Now, Þóroddr is not a wandering knight, but despite the absence of a silk-clad serving maid, wine, and a harper and granting the perfect plausibility of the scene, it is still clear that the meeting of these young people is flavored by “romance,” and their engagement, mooted in this scene, is achieved a few paragraphs later in a broader parody of the arch-heroic (or “epic”): Old Oddr means to attack Gunnarr with an overwhelming force, but young Þóroddr arrives first with a substantial war-party. Gunnarr withdraws to his house, the lone defender of the “narrow place against Odds,”<sup>26</sup> and readies his bow. Gunnarr’s laconic reaction to the arrival of his enemies is surely a mild send-up of the old-heroic type: “‘Já,’ sagði Gunnarr, ‘svá er þat,’” (“‘Aye,’ said Gunnar, ‘so there are’”); and at this moment the narrator compares him to his more famous namesake, the hero of the greatest last stand in the literature: “hann skaut allra manna bezt af honum, ok er þar helzt til jafnat er var Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda” (“he was the best shot of any man, and only Gunnar of Hlíðarenda was reckoned his equal”).<sup>27</sup> Asked if he is willing to compromise, Gunnarr’s laconism is relaxed sufficiently for him to utter the last word in last words: “‘Ek veit eigi, at ek eiga nokkut at bæta; en hitt væntir mik, áðr þér fáíð mitt vald, at griðkonur mínar muni stungit hafa nokkura þína félagaga svefnþorni, áðr ek hníga í gras” (“I don’t know ... that I have anything to make an offer for. On the other hand, I believe that before you work your will on me, these arrow-maids of mine will have stung some of your comrades with a sleep-thorn ere I sink on the grass”). Warned that Tungu-Oddr is determined to kill

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24. I am referring, of course, to these concepts as set forth in W. P. Ker’s classic *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York, 1957; original, 1897).

25. *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, p. 42: “Jófríðr, dóttir Gunnars, átti sér tjald úti, því at henni þótti þat ódaufligra.” Translations from *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, tr. Gwyn Jones (London, 1961), p. 33.

26. Ker’s much-quoted phrase (p. 5) takes on an amusing appropriateness here, but of course he wrote “odds.”

27. *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, p. 44; see also pp. 44–45, n. 4, and *Hænsa-Þóris saga: Mit Einleitung, Anmerkungen, Glossar und einer Karte*, ed. Walter Baetke (Altnordische Textbibliothek, N. F. 2, Halle, 1953), p. 72, n. 19; Jones, p. 36.

him, Gunnar continues: “vel er þat; en þat mynda ek vilja, at ek hefða mann fyrir mik áðr ek hníga at velli” (“Very well then ... Yet I rather fancied taking a man with me when I fell on the field”).<sup>28</sup> In the end Þóroddr is a “góðr drengr,” not a *riddari*; his methods, a combination of the trickster and the *Realpolitiker*, are thoroughly Icelandic, but he is more modern, conciliatory, and romantic than either Gunnarr or Oddr, whose comment, when Þóroddr opposes revenge on the father of his new fiancée, is: “Heyr hér á endemi ... væri þér þá verra at eiga konuna, þótt Gunnarr væri drepinn áðr ... ?” (“Listen to the fool! ... Would you be any worse off marrying the girl if Gunnar was killed first ... ?”).<sup>29</sup>

*Hænsa-Þóris saga* shows perhaps even less “direct general reasoning” than most sagas; yet it is not overreading, I hope, to insist that this beautifully told episode is imbued with a sense of history as “discrepancy” in which generations embody the historical trends. In this passage, too, though not necessarily everywhere, “discrepancy” is isomorphic with “comedy” in its large meaning: history is progress and amelioration and comic integration in its classic form, marriage.

The principal “milestones” in the interpretative developments I am tracing, however, are Lars Lönnroth’s article “The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas” and Gerd Wolfgang Weber’s “Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter. Zum Mythencharakter der altisländischen Literatur.”<sup>30</sup> One manifestation of the thirteenth-century authors’ attempt to come to terms with the otherness of their ancestors, as Lönnroth shows masterfully, was through imputing to the best of their pre-Christian ancestors intimations of the new religion: the saga writers made such “Virtuous Pagans” spokesmen and “signposts” (a trick of Scott’s too) of the new historical order that was looming on the horizon. The theological (hence also historiographic) problems involved in the fate of their pagan ancestors had already been faced by the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons, and the appeal to a Natural Law,

28. p. 45; cf. n. 3 and Baetke’s edition, p. 72, n. 20; Jones, p. 36.

29. p. 46; Jones, p. 37.

30. “The Noble Heathen,” *SS*, 41 (1969), 1–29; “Irreligiosität,” in *Speculum Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke, et al. (Odense, 1981), pp. 474–505. Note that my account of the relevant scholarship is not chronological.

beside the Old Law and the New Law, established a solution that allowed for the existence of good men before Christianity,<sup>31</sup> and Lönnroth shows how this historical theory is worked out in the family sagas.

Weber's article brilliantly draws the logical consequences of many strands in the sequence of studies I have been alluding to and surely represents the "state of the art" on this general subject. For example, where Lönnroth had shown us how the saga authors *used* the figure of the man who "believes in his own might and main," Weber demonstrates that this formula is part of a more complex topos which also includes refusal to worship the pagan gods and a faith in fate or fortune, and with great learning establishes that the entire complex has origins in Christian thought (pp. 477–94). Another example of drawing full consequences: Schach discusses Kjartan Ólafsson's conversion to show how different versions handled the scene, including especially the swimming contest, but Weber shows that the scene, with its gift of a mantel, *prefigures* Kjartan's later baptism, with its baptismal robe.<sup>32</sup> Among the valuable contributions of Weber's article, then, is a further device of the thirteenth-century writers for relating events of the more remote to the less remote past or to the present: the device of typology.

Weber, too, recognizes that in the center of the "historical perspective" of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Scandinavia stands "die heilsgeschichtliche Peripetie des Übertritts zum Christentum" (p. 474). But his larger historiographical point concerns (in part) the applicability of typological thinking, derived of course from biblical exegesis and ultimately from Jewish historical-religious thought,<sup>33</sup> to the "certain attitude to the course of human affairs" in Norse

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31. Put thus briefly it may seem as if the pagan ancestors were rather cheaply redeemed, but the more uncompromising Augustinian tradition is represented by major thinkers such as Alcuin, who was certain that the pagan ancestral hero Ingeld was lost and lamenting in hell. By contrast a Norse analogue in *Porsteins þátrr skelks* treats the damned heroes jokingly. Beyond Lönnroth, "Noble Heathen," see Charles Donahue, "Beowulf and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance," *Traditio*, 21 (1965), 55–116, and W. F. Bolton, *Alcuin and Beowulf: An Eighth-Century View* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1978).

32. Weber, p. 502; Schach, "Reluctant Christian," pp. 192–95.

33. For general treatments of these concepts, Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern and Munich, 1967), pp. 55–92 (originally, 1939); Friedrich Ohly, "Halbbiblische und ausserbiblische Typologie," in his *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt, 1977), pp. 361–400

historiography. In the case of the “irreligiosity topos” Weber has not only established the Christian origins of the elements of the topos and demonstrated their development—how “signals” from older heroic tradition were reinterpreted in the course of reception—but, more important in the present argument, convincingly located the topos in a context of “secular” typology and related both to “secular” political history as a “Geschichtsmythos” or “historical myth” of Icelandic freedom (especially, pp. 497–505). (The categories of secular and sacred turn out to be at very least intricately interwoven, and my perhaps artificial distinction at this point is merely convenient.)

When we consider Icelandic medieval historiography in this light, we notice an interesting twist: Biblical typology ultimately meant interpreting the present to conform with the sacred past (the “Geschichtsmythos” of the Jewish past). But in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia it meant re-“writing” (revising) the past to create antecedent types for the Christian present. Thus Lönnroth has shown how the story of the first Óláfr was shaped by the second,<sup>34</sup> and he and others have shown how “present,” twelfth- and thirteenth-century, Christian-medieval concepts are projected into the past.<sup>35</sup> Such projection, however, (and this is implicit in Weber’s argument) is not random but patterns roughly according to typological principles to constitute a “historical myth.” But if the process of making the historical myth is *regressive*, the force of typological history in the final product is just as *progressive* as in standard Judeo-Christian salvation history.

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(originally biblische, 1976); Jean Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, tr. W. Hibberd (London, 1960); Charles Donohue, “Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: Summation,” in *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York, 1960), pp. 61–82 (and cf. Patrides, above). It is interesting that typological thought was the dominant strain in the historiography of the early North American colonies, more recent “types” of *terra nova*; cf. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven and London, 1975), especially ch. 2 “The Vision of History.”

34. “Studier i Olaf Tryggvasons saga,” *Samlaren*, 84 (1963), 54–94.

35. Not always meeting sweet accord; e.g., Lars Lönnroth, “Kroppen som själens spegel—ett motiv i de isländska sagorna,” *Lychnos*, 1963–64, pp. 24–61; Peter Hallberg, “The Concept of *gipta-goefa-hamingja* in Old Norse Literature,” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh, 1971*, ed. Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson, and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1973), pp. 143–83; Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976), pp. 123–28.

Such *interpretatio Christiana* was sometimes quite conscious, more frequently probably only half-conscious. We have to recognize creative erudition when Oddr Snorrason, a monk, opens his biography of Óláfr Tryggvason by showing that the same typological relationship that held between John the Baptist and Christ also described the two Norwegian conversion kings:

Ok á inu fimmta ári hans ríkis helt Óláfr konungr nafna sínum undir skírn ok tók hann af þeim helga brunni í þá líking sem Jóan baptisti gerði við dróttin, ok svá sem hann var hans fyrirrennari, svá var ok Óláfr konungr Tryggvason fyrirrennari ins helga Óláfs konungs.<sup>36</sup>

And in the fifth year of his reign King Óláfr Tryggvason held his name-sake Óláfr Haraldsson in baptism as godfather at his christening and received him from the holy baptismal font in the same way as John the Baptist did for the Lord. And just as John was his forerunner, so was King Óláfr Tryggvason the forerunner of the king, Saint Óláfr.

The more interesting challenge to the literary critic comprises all those less explicit cases in which aspects or transformations of the historical myth seem to inform literary works.<sup>37</sup> It is the essence of the sagas that fictional motifs like the Noble Heathen and fictionally developed traditional reports—the love stories, biographies, family chronicles, and above all accounts of famous feuds and cases at law—acquire a historical context by reference to Icelandic and Norwegian history and often by reference to events and lands further abroad, but the sense of epoch, of history with a goal and form other than mere sequence, would be missing if the private plots were not placed in or selected from the crucial transitional period, and it should be of

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36. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eftir Odd Munk in Konunga sögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, I (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1957), p. 3; *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), p. 1.

37. My “Christian Form and Christian Meaning in *Halldórs þátrr I*,” *Harvard English Studies*, 5 (1974), 249–64, takes up a similar challenge and pushes to such detailed results that not every reader will agree. Other “milestones” that should be noted here are: Marlene Ciklamini’s “Divine Will and the Guises of Truth in *Geirmundar þátrr heljarskinns*,” *skandinavistik*, 11 (1981), 81–88; Lise Præstgaard Andersen, “Nogle kompositionselementer i islændingesagaen,” *APS*, 31 (1976), 176–87; and Thomas D. Hill, “The Evisceration of Bróðir in ‘Brennu-Njáls saga,’” *Traditio*, 37 (1981), 437–44.



further specifically literary interest to see how the plots are related to the sense of history implicit in the works as a group. I propose to do this by surveying a group of stories in which the plot of history, as the authors interpreted it, coincides closely with the content and structure of the private fictions.

This correlation is probably most obvious in the þættir or novellas that make the contrast of paganism and Christianity their explicit central theme and the conversion of individuals their common structural element.<sup>38</sup> *Rognvalds þáttir ok Rauðs*, *Þáttir Eindriða Ilbreiðs*, and *Volsa þáttir* all climax in a confrontation of the evangelizing king with non-Christians, who soon see the error of their ways and are baptized. The wonderful satire of *Volsa þáttir*, where the heathens are depicted worshipping as their fetish a pickled horse's penis, is the exception rather than the rule, though in general the treatment of heathenism is humorous.<sup>39</sup> Two other þættir, *Sveins þáttir ok Finns* and *Helga þáttir ok Úlfs*, as well as *Rognvalds þáttir* and *Volsa þáttir*, combine an element of generational conflict within a family with the conversion theme, and the familial reunion or reconciliation is made to coincide structurally with the conversion. The old order here is perverse and ridiculous, but it did give rise to strong and idiosyncratic individuals; the new order, interpreted here mainly in religious terms, does not tolerate pluralism, and the historical figure of the king dominates the forces that are shaping the future.

Besides these realistic short stories there is a group of þættir that use nonrealistic and nonchronological means to bring the early

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38. For a fuller treatment see my "Folktale and Tháttir: the Case of Rognvald and Raud," in *Folklore and Medieval Studies*, ed. Carl Lindahl and Erika Brady (= *Folklore Forum*, 13 [1980]), pp. 158–98, esp. pp. 162–67. Most of the short stories mentioned (and some other relevant ones) can be consulted most conveniently in *Fornar smásögur úr Noregskonunga sögum*, ed. Edwin Gardiner, with an introduction by Sir William A. Craigie (Reykjavík, 1949) or in the editions of *Flateyjarbók*. *Norna-Gests þáttir* is separately edited in *Die prosaische Edda im Auszuge nebst Völsunga-saga und Nornagests-tháttir*, ed. Ernst Wilken, 1 (Paderborn, 1877; rev. 1912) and in editions of the *fornaldarsögur*.

39. Most of the scholarship on *Volsa þáttir* is understandably concerned with distinguishing and evaluating the ancient, heathen elements of the tale; see, for example, Gro Steinsland and Kari Vogt, "Aukinn ertu Uolse ok vpp vm tekinn": En religionshistorisk analyse av *Volsaþáttir* i *Flateyjarbók*," *ANF*, 96 (1981), 87–106. Without specifically taking issue with this point of view I will argue in a future paper that the final literary form and temper of the story are a product of Christian satire.

Christian reigns of the two Óláfs in contact with the distant pagan and heroic past. *Tóka þáttr* and *Norna-Gests þáttr* both tell how a mysterious old man arrives at court; it develops that the old man is cursed with a supernaturally long life and remembers the heroes of ancient times—Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Starkaðr the Old, Hálfr and his Hálsrekkar, Bøðvarr-Bjarki, and so on. Like the Old English scop Widsith, the old men of these two þættir recount stories based on their own wanderings among the vanished heroes. At the end Tóki and Gestr ask for baptism and die. *Sǫrla þáttr* is comparable but lacks the framework provided by the old saga-teller: at the end of a series of loosely concatenated myths concluding in the eternal battle of Høgni and Heðinn, the *Hjaðningavíg*, King Óláfr Tryggvason lands on the island where the battle is still going on after some five centuries, and one of the king’s champions—Ívar “Beam-of-light,” appropriately enough—ends the conflict by giving the heathen warriors the permanent death that only a Christian could effect; however, Heðinn did not die before explaining the curse. A fourth tale, *Albani þáttr ok Sunnifu*, is somewhat similar. Like such an unrealistic historical sketch as Hawthorne’s “Main Street” they present history in a foreshortened form with supernatural machinery and (in part) with a commentator. However, the mainstream of saga literature, in so far as it can be approached “as historical novel,” is firmly realistic.

I have argued elsewhere that the common structural idea of all nine of these “conversion þættir” must be derived from Christian history since they are all constructed on the principle of the contrast of an Old Dispensation with a New and motivated by divine intervention in history. The principle does not seem to be very far removed from that described by Friedrich Ohly:

Typologisches Geschichtsdenken gewahrt einen Umsprung der Geschichte am Ort des Einbruchs göttlicher Offenbarung in die Welt mit Christus. Im umwertenden Licht der Epiphanie des Heiles—*ecce facta sunt omnia nova*—nunmehr als dunkler andeutende Prophetie erscheinend, geht das Alte als *figura* “Vor-Bild” nicht verloren, wird es im Zeitgedächtnis als im Neuen Erfülltes aufgehoben. Man schämt sich, wo die Voroffenbarung im Licht der Offenbarung aufging, des Vergangenen, der unauslöschlichen Spur zum Heute, nicht, verklärt es aber auch—im Gegensatz zu jedem Erneuerungsverlangen aus

Ungenügen an der Gegenwart—nicht, es sei denn als die Zeit der Sterne, die vor Tagesaufgang leuchten.<sup>40</sup>

The “conversion þættir” realize their underlying three-part structure in a variety of ways, but seem, as a generic group, to derive from the general European-Christian type of conversion story (St. Martin, Paul).<sup>41</sup>

Saga-length works as well as þættir may closely correlate Salvation History in the conversion period with the private tale of a family feud. The best and earliest example is the *Saga of the Faroe Islanders*, a fictionalized family history of the Faroes during the period 970–1040.<sup>42</sup> The main action is a tightly articulated cause and effect sequence; nevertheless it comprises two parts, the first involving three generations and a time span of about forty-five years. The family history also contrives to be convincingly coordinated with that of the whole northern world, for the hero Sigmundr’s exile and coming of age take him to Norway and on far-flung viking expeditions. When Sigmundr returns to the Faroes for his revenge, it is with the backing of the Norwegian ruler Earl Hákon; Earl Hákon is to judge the case between Sigmundr and Þrándr, and throughout Sigmundr is in close contact with the Norwegian rulers, acting as their representative and tax-gatherer in the islands.

The saga’s implicit comparison between Sigmundr and the other main character Þrándr is a good example of old and new interwoven in

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40. “Ausserbiblisch Typologisches zwischen Cicero, Ambrosius und Aelred von Rievaulx,” in his *Schriften*, p. 360 (originally, 1976). Northrop Frye states the connection between typology and historiography in characteristically strong form: “Typology is a figure of speech that moves in time. . . . What typology really is is a mode of thought, what it both assumes and leads to is a theory of history, or more accurately of historical process. . . . Our modern confidence in historical process . . . is probably a legacy of Biblical typology: at least I can think of no other source for its tradition” (*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* [San Diego, New York, London, 1983], pp. 80–81).

41. Harris, “Folktale and Thattr,” pp. 165–67—After completion of the present essay, Bernadine McCreesh, “Structural Patterns in *Eyrbyggja Saga* and Other Sagas of the Conversion,” *MScan*, 11 (1978–79 [published 1982]), 271–80, came to my attention, an interesting article with obvious complementary relevance for my argument here.

42. The translations given are from *The Faroe Islanders’ Saga*, tr. George Johnston ([n.p.], 1975); standard edition: *Føreyingasaga: Den islandske Saga om Føeringerne*, ed. Finnur Jónsson for “Det kongelige nordiske Oldskriftselskab” (Copenhagen, 1927); I have also consulted the important recent edition in modern orthography: *Føreyinga saga*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Íslenzk úrvalsrit 13 (Reykjavík, 1978 [1st ed. 1967]).

a feud plot. Þrándr is underhanded, treacherous (not least to his own kin), secretive, a great manipulator, a magician. An Odinic figure, he himself never fights but uses his three nephews and others in his feuds. Instead of youthful viking adventures, *de rigueur* for characterizing heroic heroes like Sigmundr, Þrándr went on a single *trading* expedition where he amassed his fortune through several unethical but highly amusing dodges; early in the saga he is directly described: “Thrand was red-haired, freckle-faced, handsome in looks.”<sup>43</sup> A little later the saga offers another portrait of Þrándr, which (despite some conflict with the earlier passage) gives a fuller picture: “Thrand was a big man, red-haired and red-bearded, freckled, hard-faced, dark in his ways, sly and shrewd enough for any trickery, high-handed and ill-natured with common people, soft-spoken with the more important men, and always two-faced.”<sup>44</sup> Whichever description is original, Þrándr was clearly conceived as the shifty red-headed man of the medieval proverbs.

Sigmundr is a generation younger, handsome, popular, frank and open, generous, honest, brave and strong, but not very careful. Above all, it is Sigmundr who is commissioned by King Óláfr Tryggvason to bring Christianity to the Faroes, and that confrontation with Þrándr, falling just in the middle of the saga, forms a stage in their long conflict.<sup>45</sup> In his first effort to convert the islanders, Sigmundr was thwarted by a trick of Þrándr’s. Later he was successful in converting Þrándr only by using force; even so his behavior was unwisely charitable; as his cousin truly predicted: “Your death and your friends’ death, says Thorir, if Thrand is let off now.”<sup>46</sup>

In preparation for his great evangelical effort King Óláfr Tryggvason had recalled Sigmundr, then still unbaptized, to Norway, and in an extraordinary speech, he establishes a parallelism, a sort of secular typology, between himself and Sigmundr:

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43. Johnston, p. 19; Finnur Jónsson, p. 1, n. 14: “Þrándr var rauðr á hár ok freknóttir í andliti, fríðr sýnum.” Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 56.

44. Johnston, pp. 124–25; Finnur Jónsson, p. 4: “Þrándr var mikill maðr vexti, rauðr á hár ok freknóttir, greppligr í ásjónu, myrkr í skapi, slægr ok ráðugr til allra véla, ódæll ok illgjarn við alþýðu, blíðmæltr við hina meiri menn, en hugði jafnan flátt.” For the textual problems here, see Finnur Jónsson, p. 1, n. 14, Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 60–61, n. 3, and Johnston, pp. 124–25.

45. Johnston, chapters 29–30; Finnur Jónsson, chapters 30–31; Ólafur Halldórsson, chapters 30–31.

46. Johnston, p. 68; Finnur Jónsson, p. 49: “Þórir mælti: ‘Þat er þinn bani ok þinna vina, ef Þrándr gengr nú undan.’ Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 118.

Some men, moreover, consider that fellowship between us two would be not unbecoming because we are both considered not unvaliant, and we both suffered teen and trouble for a long while before we achieved the honour that was owing to us, for some things have happened to us two not unlike in exile and oppression: You were a child and looked on when your father was killed without cause, and I was in my mother's womb when my father was treacherously killed, without cause....<sup>47</sup>

Óláfr continues with a version of Sigmundur's life-story, emphasizing that his luck is the gift of God, and then with his own parallel autobiography or *ævisaga*, concluding:

Now it has come round at last that we two have each come back into our patrimony and to our parent soil instead of long lacking of happiness and honour. And so mostly because of what I have heard, that you have never worshipped a carved god as other heathen men do, I have good hope that the high King of Heaven, maker of all things, may bring you to the knowledge of His heavenly name and holy faith through my persuasion, and make you partaker with me in the true belief just as you are in might and manly skills and other of His manifold gifts of grace, which He has bestowed on you as He did on me long before I had any knowledge of His glory.<sup>48</sup>

Finally Óláfr urges that Sigmundur follow his example as missionary: "Now may the same Almighty God grant that I may bring you to

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47. Johnston, p. 63; Finnur Jónsson, pp. 45–46: "Er þat ok mál sumra manna, at okkarr félagskapr sé eigi óviðkæmiligr sakir þess, at vit erum nú báðir kallaðir eigi óhreystilligir, en þolat lengi áðr vás ok vandræði en vit fengim okrar eiginligar sœmðir, þvíat okkr hafa sumir hlutir eigi ólíkt at boriz í útlegð ok ánauð. Þú vart barn ok sátt upp á, er faðir þinn var drepinn saklauss, en ek var í móðurkviði, er minn faðir var sviksamliga drepinn útan alla sök." Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 112–13.

48. Johnston, p. 64; Finnur Jónsson, pp. 46–47: "Nú er svá komit um síðir, at hvárrtveggi okkar hefir ǫðlaz sína fǫðurleifð ok fósturland eptir langan missi sælu ok sœmðar. Nú allra helzt fyrir þá skyld, er ek hefi spurt, at þú hafir aldri blótat skurðgoð eptir hætti annarra heidinna manna, þá hefi ek góða ván á, at hinn háleiti himna-konungr, skapari allra hluta, muni þik leiða til kynningar síns helga nafns ok heilagrar trúar af mínum fortölum ok gera þik mér samfélagi í réttum átrúnaði svá sem jafnan at afli ok allri atgervi ok ǫðrum sínum margföldum miskunnargjöfum, er hann hefir þér veitt sem mér lönfum tíma fyrr en ek hafða ǫþkura vissu af dýrð hans." Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 113–14.

the true faith and the yoke of His service, so that you may by His grace and my example and urging bring unto His glory all your subjects....”<sup>49</sup>

In answer Sigmundur refers respectfully to his former lord, the dead pagan Earl Hákon, but continues: “But since I can perceive by the fairness of your entreaty that this belief which you proffer is in all respects brighter and more blessed than that which heathen men hold, then I am eager to follow your counsels and win your friendship; but I did not sacrifice to carved gods because long ago I saw that that religion was worthless, though I did not know a better.”<sup>50</sup> Sigmundur is a Noble Heathen converted, and at least one of the components of Weber’s “irreligiosity topos” clearly appears in his characterization.<sup>51</sup> But the further import of these remarkable speeches is to establish not only a direct connection but a kind of typological relation between the hero of the private fiction and the “world-historical character” of King Óláfr, and Óláfr’s speech seems thoroughly imbued with the spirit of history as progressive repetition: Sigmundur’s life has recapitulated his own and will continue “by my example.”<sup>52</sup>

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49. Johnston, p. 64; Finnur Jónsson, p. 47: “Nú veiti þat sá hinn sami alsvaldi guð, at ek gæta þik leitt til sannrar trúar ok undir hans þjónostu, svá at þaðan af megir þú með hans miskunn ok mínu eptirdæmi ok áeggjan leiða til hans dýrðar alla þína undirmenn.” Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 114.

50. Johnston, p. 65; Finnur Jónsson, p. 47: “En svá sem ek skil af yðrum fagrligum fortölum, at þessi átrúnaðr, er þér hafð, er í alla staði fegri ok fagrligri en hinn, er heiðnir menn hafa, þá er ek fúss at fylgja yðrum ráðum ok eignaz yðra vináttu; ok fyrir því vilda ek eigi blóta skurgoð, at ek sá löngu, at sá siðr var öngu nýtr, þó at ek kynna öngvan betra.” Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 114–15.

51. In addition to Sigmundur’s preconversion rejection of heathen gods, we can perhaps recognize a reflection of faith in one’s own might and main in Óláfr’s pious hope that God will “gera þik mér samfélaga í réttum átrúnaði svá sem jafnan at *aflri ok allri atgörvri* ok öðrum sínum margföldum miskunnargjöfum, er hann hefir þér veitt sem mér löngum tíma fyrr en ek hafða nokkura vissu af dýrð hans” (Finnur Jónsson; pp. 46–47).

52. Does the biblical Joseph cast his shadow on Sigmundur’s youth (“your kinsmen cast to kill you . . . and you were sold into slavery, or rather money was paid over to have you borne away and bound thrall and in this wise banished and bereft of your birthright and birth land, and you had no help in a strange country for a long while except what alms were offered you by unkindred men through His power and providence to whom all things are possible” [Johnston, p. 63]), the slaughter of the innocents and its Mosaic precursor loom behind Óláfr’s own youth (“No sooner was I born than I was beset and ill treated . . .,” [Johnston, pp. 63–64])? Ólafur Halldórsson, “Nokkur sagnaminni í Færeyinga sögu,” *Einarsbók: Afmæliskevðja til Einars Ól. Sveinssonar 12 desember 1969*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Halldór Halldórsson, and Jónas Kristjánsson ([Reykjavík]: Útgefendur nokkrir vinir, 1969), pp. 260–66, parallels the exile of Sigmundur and Þórir and the later

The parallels continue through Sigmundur's evangelical mission and his death a few years after Óláfr's; of the interregnum between the two Óláfrs, the saga reports:

Now Christianity went on in the Faroes as elsewhere in the lands of the Earls, everyone lived as he liked, but the Earls themselves kept their faith well.

Sigmund kept his faith well, and all his household, and he had a church built at his steading.

They say that Thrand pretty well throws off his faith, and so do all his companions.<sup>53</sup>

But Sigmundur is neither a cardboard figure nor a mere calque of Óláfr. From the beginning his association with Óláfr is shaded by Sigmundur's reluctance to renounce his former lord, Óláfr's predecessor the pagan Earl Hákon: "It is known to you, my lord, for you touched on it in your talk, that I was bound in service to Earl Hakon; he showed me great favour, and I was well satisfied with my service, for he was gracious and good in counsel, generous and glad-hearted with his friends, however fierce and treacherous he may have been toward his enemies, though there is a long way between your faith and his."<sup>54</sup> Later the king asked Sigmundur to give him a certain bulky arm-ring: "I shall not part with this, says Sigmundur, because when Earl Hakon gave me the ring, with much feeling, I promised that I would not part with it, and I shall keep my word, because the giver, as the Earl was, seemed good to me then, and he did well for me in many ways."<sup>55</sup> Óláfr did not take this reply well and predicted that

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revenge for their father with various similar tales, for example from the cycle of *Hrólfr kraki*.

53. Johnston, p. 72; Finnur Jónsson, pp. 52–53: "Nú fór um kristni í Færeyjum sem víðara annarstaðar í ríka jarla, at hvern lífði sem vildi, en þeir sjálfir heldu vel sína trú. Sigmundur helt vel trú sína ok alt lið hans ok lét kirkju gera á bæ sínum. Þat er sagt frá Þrándi, at hann kastar raunmjök trú sinni ok allir hans kumpánar." Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 123.

54. Johnston, p. 65; Finnur Jónsson, p. 47: "Þat er yðr kunnigt herra, sem þér kómuð við áðan í yðru máli, at ek var þjónostubundinn Hákonu jarli, veitti hann mér gott yfirlæti, ok unða ek þá allvel mínu ráði, þvíat hann var hollr ok heilráðr, orlyndr ok ástúðligr vinum sínum, þó at hann væri grimmr ok svikall óvinum sínum; en langt er á milli ykkars átrúnaðar." Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 114.

55. Johnston, p. 70; Finnur Jónsson, p. 51: "Eigi mun ek þessum lóga, segir Sigmundur, því hét ek Hákonu jarli, þá er hann gaf mér hringinn með mikilli ólúð, at ek munda honum

the pagan earl’s gift would cause Sigmundr’s death: “And never again afterward did the King become as free-hearted with Sigmundr as before,” although they parted in friendship.<sup>56</sup> In this theme we may recognize the kind of “resistance” that Schach discussed, whether it is taken as signifying a flaw or integrity of character, but the effect of combining the type “noble heathen converted” with the “reluctant Christian” is to give Sigmundr some complexity and depth of character. Óláfr was killed in battle against Earls Sveinn and Eiríkr, leaders of a partly pagan reaction in the year 1000; Sigmundr reached an accommodation with the Earls, who were not themselves pagans, but by about 1005 Sigmundr had been brutally murdered—for the fatal arm-ring.<sup>57</sup>

So even though Sigmundr is slain three-fourths of the way through the saga and Þrándr lives on, it is clear that, like King Óláfr Tryggvason, the future belongs to Sigmundr and his ways; and this is worked out in the narrative of the second part of the saga where, during the reign of St. Óláfr, when Christianity was restored permanently in Norway, and during that of Magnús Ólafsson, the heirs of Sigmundr stamp out the faction of Þrándr, and the old trickster dies, the saga says, of

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eigi lóga, ok þat skal ek ok efna, þvíat góðr þótti mér nautrinn er jarl var ok vel gerði hann við mik marga hluti.” Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 121.

56. Johnston, p. 70; Finnur Jónsson, p. 52: “en þetta tal fell niðr, ok var konungr aldri jafnblíðr sem áðr til Sigmundar.” Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 121.

57. Ólafur Halldórsson, “Sagnaminni,” pp. 272–73, addresses two close parallels to Sigmundr’s death; there are also general ones (e.g., *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ch. 1); but one other particularly close parallel lends force to the notion that Sigmundr’s resistance to Óláfr was the ultimate cause of his death, for one version of *Steins þátr Skaptasonar* ends as follows: “En þau urðu ævilok hans, at hann braut skip sitt við Jótlandssíðu ok komsk einn á land. Han var þá enn skrautliga búinn ok hafði mikít fé á sér ok var dasaðr mjök. Kona nokkur fann hann, er fór með klæði til þvátar. Hon hafði vífl í hendi. Hann var máttlítill ok lá í brúki. Hon sá, at hann hafði mikít fé á sér. Síðan fór hon til ok barði hann í hel með víflinni ok myrta hann til fjár, at því er menn segja eða hyggja um. Gafsk honum svá af ofmetnaði ok óhlýðni við Ólaf konung.” (*Íslendinga þættir*, ed. Guðni Jónsson [Reykjavík, 1945], p. 266; “But the end of his life was that his ship was wrecked on the west coast of Jutland, and he alone reached land. At that time he was still dressed in a showy fashion and had a lot of valuables on him, and he was very exhausted. A certain woman found him when she was going to wash clothes; in her hand she had a club for beating the washing. He was faint and lay among clumps of seaweed. She saw that he had a lot of valuables on his person. Then she walked up and beat him to death with the club and hid the body to get the valuables, according to what is said and conjectured about it. That’s how it turned out for him because of his presumption and disobedience to King Óláfr.” Cf. Johnston, pp. 78–79; Finnur Jónsson, p. 57; Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 131–32).



grief. Sigmundur is one of the sterling heroes of the saga literature, but I do not mean to imply that the stiff-necked old wizard Þrándr is not much the more interesting character; and the author does treat Þrándr with affectionate humor despite his treachery. The famous episode of Þrándr's credo is the best brief demonstration of that.<sup>58</sup>

Of more symmetrically bipartite construction is the *Qgmundar þátr dytts ok Gunnars helmings*, a short story that radically breaches the primitive biographical unity usually (and wrongly) expected of the saga literature.<sup>59</sup> The first half concerns Qgmundr and the second Gunnarr; originally the parts will have been drawn from separate bodies of story material, but we find them brilliantly fused by a central scene in which the heroes of the two parts meet as strangers and exchange cloaks, literally passing the "mantle of hero" from Qgmundr to Gunnarr. The first part takes place mostly in the last years of Earl Hákon, the last pagan ruler, the second part, in the first years of King Óláfr Tryggvason; the exchange of cloaks took place just after the conversion of Norway or about 996. A single theme is common to both parts of the þátr: the testing, apparent failure, and ultimate success of a young man; but in the first part Qgmundr is tested against a set of social expectations that may be abbreviated as "the heroic ethic," while in the second part Gunnarr appears at first to be a renegade Christian but at last proves true to Christianity and to its representative King Óláfr—in other words, he is tested against a "Christian ethic."

The comic pattern of this short story is mirrored in tragedy on a grand scale in the equally bipartite *Njáls saga*, probably the supreme artistic realization of the idea of Northern history as turning on the conversion and of the implications of this idea in the lives of individuals.<sup>60</sup> The

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58. Johnston, ch. 54; Finnur Jónsson, ch. 56; Ólafur Halldórsson, ch. 57. Cf. Peter Foote, "Þrándr and the Apostles," and "A Note on Þrándr's *kredda*," in his *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies*, ed. Michael Barnes, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1984), pp. 188–208 (with postscript; original publication 1969). Other important critical literature on the saga includes Foote, "On the Saga of the Faroe Islanders," in *Aurvandilstá*, pp. 165–88 and Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 32–45. My interpretation is at variance with Erik Skyum-Nielsen, "Færeyingasaga—Ideology Transformed into Epic," in the papers of the International Saga Conference, Reykjavík 2–8 August 1973. Not accessible to me here at Cornell is Klaus Guldager, *Færingesaga som eksempel på ideologi i det islandske Middelaldersamfund* (Odense: Centerboghandelen, 1975).

59. See my "Qgmundar þátr dytts ok Gunnars helmings: Unity and Literary Relations," *ANF*, 90 (1975), 156–82 [Reprinted in this volume, Eds.].

60. Harris, "Qgmundar þátr," pp. 179–80.

saga comprises five major narrative blocks, Unnr's dowry, the quarrel of the wives Hallgerðr and Bergþóra, the feud leading to Gunnarr's death, the feud leading to Njáll's death, and finally the revenge on the burners leading to the reconciliation of Flosi and Kári. Early scholarship recognized the slight narrative connection between the first three blocks and the last two by speaking of an original "Gunnars saga" having been joined to an original "Njáls saga." It is no libel on the well-established artistic unity of the whole work to recognize the two analogous feud structures separated (very approximately) by the great digression on the Icelandic conversion;<sup>61</sup> and (as in the bipartite story of Qgmundr and Gunnarr helmingr) this structural symmetry in *Njáls saga* inevitably throws into contrast a pre-Christian "heroic" culture and the earliest phase of a Christian ethic, though its portrayal of the period before the conversion is of course more complex and sympathetic than that of the þátrr. Gunnarr's life, set in pre-Christian times, is worked out in terms of a heroic ethic: a martial man of honor, he loses his life fighting against odds through the operation of fate, the envy of lesser men, and a certain strain of hubris. He lives on after death, happy enough in his funeral mound.

To some extent the structure of Njáll's story, the second half of the saga, replicates that of Gunnarr in the first, but the parallelism highlights the differences: Njáll's fall takes place in Christian times with the attendant deeper meaning of action expressed in Flosi's moving words about Christian responsibility just before the burning and in Njáll's pregnant words about a future life. In terms of Northrop Frye's still satisfying categories, we may contrast *Njála* and *Qgmundar þátrr* as tragedy and comedy: as the stories of Qgmundr and Gunnarr helmingr confirm the heroic and Christian codes through comedy, the integration of the hero into society, so *Njála* ratifies them through tragedy, the isolation of the heroes, Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Njáll of Bergþórs-hváll, in death.<sup>62</sup>

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61. As in T. M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 28, Cambridge, Mass., 1967). On the details of the integration of the Conversion see Ian Maxwell, "Pattern in *Njáls saga*," *SBVS*, 15 (1957-61), 17-47, especially pp. 37-44. My interpretation is in close agreement with Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, especially Chapter IV "The Clerical Mind."

62. For an extension of this argument to the bipartite þættir *Svaða þátrr ok Arnórs kerlinganefs* and *Pórhalls þátrr knapps*, see Harris "Qgmundar þátrr," pp. 177-79.

However, the two parallel parts of *Njála* do not, in my opinion, exist in a static balance, such as Tolkien attributed to the bipartite structure of *Beowulf*, because they are caught up in a genuine historical sequence. Instead it seems that in the basic plan of the saga the familiar *topos* of *fortitudo et sapientia*, a formula balanced and static by nature, has been interpreted in a dynamic sense as terms of a historical dialectic. The extensive description of the conversion, really the center and hinge of the saga, ends the glorious pagan past in which Gunnarr, *exemplum fortitudinis*, embraced his fate, and introduces the era of Christian *sapientia*, exemplified in the parallel tragedy of Njáll the Wise.<sup>63</sup> The saga's second great digression, the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, marks with drama and supernatural portents the end of the heroic period in the death-throes of paganism.

The world of Gunnarr and Njáll presents a "rich and awesome dichotomy" in motion, calquing (I would suggest) in imitative form the "thesis" and "antithesis" of historical dialectic, conceived of course according to *Heilsgeschichte* rather than Hegel. The saga's concluding "synthesis," then, is peopled by figures still heroic but of lesser proportions. The revenge on the burners leads the opponents Kári and Flosi on parallel paths to Rome and back; and with their sudden reconciliation at the end, the private action completes a descent to the flatlands of social community. With this long coda and the concluding reconciliation the author has managed to suggest the outcome of the dialectic of history and with Flosi and Kári, the survivors, admirable but more nearly ordinary men, to indicate a convergence of the two virtues of the *topos* in the middle way of the future.

It is significant that almost all the feud sagas conclude with a decline from socially disruptive action to community and from heroic to lay figures.<sup>64</sup> The inevitable comparison with Scott's famous middling protagonist—Waverley and Morton are the best examples—suggests

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63. This point is anticipated by at least two scholars, Michael Chesnutt, "Popular and Learned Elements in the Icelandic Saga-Tradition," *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, University of Edinburgh 1971, ed. Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson, and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1973), pp. 53–54 and Carol J. Clover, "Njáls saga," forthcoming in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, but is also in my *The King and the Iclander: A Study in the Short Narrative Forms of Old Icelandic Prose*, Diss. Harvard (1969), pp. 111–14.

64. The first statement of this idea is probably in Andersson, "Displacement."

that an audience could identify with these men closer to themselves in time and stature and through figures like Kári and Flosi and Þorsteinn Egilsson could imagine the world of Njáll and Gunnarr and Egill Skallagrímsson. In any case, even Scott did not surpass the *Njála* author in realizing and almost symbolizing his vision of the plot of history in his private fictions and in harmonizing private with public history.

I suggested earlier a political aspect of the paradigm of old and new in the sagas.<sup>65</sup> The period of settlement, 870–930 in the traditional chronology, was frequently portrayed in terms of heroic defiance of the tyranny of King Haraldr Fairhair. Haraldr fulfilled his vow to become the first *einvaldskonungr*, sole king over a united Norway, and this brought him into conflict with the older independent aristocracy and free farmers as well as with the petty kings and their clans. Icelandic historians presented this as the clash of a relatively modern idea of the state with ancient liberties; many families were forced to save their dignity by emigration, itself a defiance of Haraldr. The emigrants transferred the ancient system to Iceland where, despite sporadic attempts of the Norwegian kings to establish sovereignty, it survived well into the thirteenth century.

*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* is, of course, the greatest and most direct expression of this—call it “imperial”—aspect of the view of history in the family sagas. The main plot is, as in most of the family sagas, a feud, not however a feud between private persons or families but between Egill’s family and that of King Haraldr. The private plot is here part and parcel of the plot of history: the ancient way of life represented by Egill, his father Skallagrímur, and his grandfather Kveldúlfur is strange and powerful but fated to make way before Haraldr’s sole sovereignty, his taxes, and his new men; the saga clearly treats Egill as the last of an epoch. With his old age, the theme of opposition to the Norwegian throne is allowed to lapse, but in the purely Icelandic setting of the close of the saga it remains clear that the old man is the last of his kind. His son and son-in-law were baptized when Christianity came to the country; and the pastness of Egill’s age is suggested when much later his outsized bones are exhumed

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65 Cf. Schach and Weber, cited above.

and a trial axe-blow proves ineffectual on the great skull: "... from that anybody could guess that the skull wouldn't be easily cracked by small fry while it still had skin and flesh on it. Egill's bones were re-interred on the edge of the graveyard at Mosfell."<sup>66</sup> The author might almost have added that there were giants on the earth in those days, for his treatment of the troll-like Egill humorously melds admiration and abhorrence: his stand against the king is heroic but extreme, his defense of his rights grades into fanaticism, at the end in Iceland he is at once a great patriarch and an *ójafnaðarmaðr* or tyrant.<sup>67</sup> Like Scott's extreme characters—Fergus MacIvor, Redgauntlet, Burley, Cedric the Saxon—Egill offers much to admire and much to blame or ridicule, but again as with the comparable figures from Scott, our ultimate point of view and that of the thirteenth-century audience is conditioned by the irony of history.

An important question would be to what extent the political theme in *Egils saga* and elsewhere is a conscious transposition into the past of a thirteenth-century issue, the Norwegian imperialism that increasingly encroached on the Iceland of the saga-writing period and at last led to the recognition of Norwegian sovereignty in the years 1262–64. Did the author of *Egils saga*, for example, have the specific contemporary situation of the decade 1220–30 in mind, or is the political theme of the saga simply an expression of the general historical conception underlying this and other sagas? The Swedish critic Hans O. Granlid calls a similar question as applied to the classical and modern historical novel the "analogy problem"; he finds there a spectrum from lack of concern with an "analogy" in most of Scott to high consciousness of "analogy" in many serious modern works, and this feature usually coincides with a gradation of historical

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66. *Egil's Saga*, tr. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 238; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), p. 299: "ok má af slíku marka, at hauss sá mundi ekki auðskaddr fyrir hoggum smámennis, meðan svörðr ok hold fylgði. Bein Egils vǫru lögð niðr í útanverðum kirkjugarði at Mosfelli." Cf. Maxwell's eloquent commentary: "That terrible relic, coming up out of the earth in a Christian and comparatively civilized countryside, gathered into itself all that the saga had been saying about the grim world before the change of faith, and its power was in proportion to its commonplaceness" ("Pattern," p. 21).

67. Cf. Kaaren Grimstad, "The Giant as a Heroic Model: The Case of Egill and Starkaðr," *SS*, 48 (1976), 284–98; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Starkaðr, Loki og Egill Skallagrímsson," in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20 júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1977), II, 759–68.

accuracy.<sup>68</sup> Some Icelandic scholars have, in fact, interpreted *Njáls saga* and *Hrafnkels saga* as virtually *romans à clef* that refer to similar private events in the thirteenth century,<sup>69</sup> and there are a number of well-known and noncontroversial examples of intrusion of thirteenth-century events, more or less veiled, into the accounts of life in the Saga Age.<sup>70</sup> When the intrusions are matters of law, we seem to be dealing with simple anachronism;<sup>71</sup> but when social ideology, from revulsion with the violence of the Sturlung Age to class struggle, colors the interpretation of the past, the result is of more literary interest and not far from "analogy" in the historical novel. In fact, the projection of a current social problem onto the past could itself amount to a historical theory, but the younger generation of Marxist-influenced critics in Iceland, besides being divided among themselves, have not taken this general view of the class conflicts and social analyses they are persuasively arguing for the family sagas.<sup>72</sup>

In my opinion Granlid's formulation with the phrase "analogy problem" is not the happiest one either for the classical historical novel or for the sagas. The concept suggests a *merely* analogical relationship and almost denies the consecutive causal connection between present and past that is the particular strength of the best historical fiction. Scott avoided merely tricking out a contemporary problem in antique dress, and despite some anachronisms, I am not convinced that construction of socio-political analogies is a major mode in the sagas. Instead the sagas, at their best, organically connect

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68. Hans O. Granlid, "Das Analogieproblem im historischen Roman," *Nordeuropa*, 1 (1966), 49–62, and *Då som nu. Historiska romaner i översikt och analys* (Stockholm, 1964), especially pp. 304–06. Cf. Fleishman, *passim*, especially pp. xii, xv, 13–14.

69. Barði Guðmundsson, *Höfundur Njálu* (Reykjavík, 1958); Hermann Pálsson, *Hrafnkels saga og Freygyðlingar* (Reykjavík, 1962). See Carol Clover's survey of saga scholarship for a full account of these trends (note 1 above).

70. For example, the incident in *Laxdæla saga* in which a killer dries blood from the murder weapon with a widow's apron (chapter 55) seems to be based on an actual event of 1244; Andreas Heusler, review of Johannes van Ham, *Beschouwingen over de Literaire Betekenis der Laxdoela Saga*, in his *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Helga Reuschel, 1 (Berlin, 1969), 364 (original review 1932). Cf. Clover's survey (n. 1).

71. E.g., Alan Berger, "Old Law, New Law, and *Hænsa-Póris saga*," *Scripta Islandica*, 27 (1976), 3–12. Cf. Clover's survey (n. 1).

72. E.g., Njörður P. Njarðvík, "Laxdæla saga en tidskritik?," *ANF*, 86 (1971), 72–81; Vésteinn Ólason, "Concentration of Power in Thirteenth-Century Iceland and Its Reflection in Some Íslendingasögur," in the papers of the International Saga Conference, Reykjavík, 2–8 August 1973. Cf. Clover's survey (n. 1).

their audience with the past by stories involved with historical forces that shaped the present—forces interpreted according to a thirteenth-century analysis, of course.

If a thirteenth-century Icelander had expressed himself about his relationship to the past of the Saga Age, it could not have been in a formulation such as “analogy problem” or the “necessary anachronism” of Hegel and Lukács (and Goethe):<sup>73</sup> he would have spoken of stories of his ancestors, and it is clear that the role played for, say, Scott’s audience by national consciousness in connecting the past and the present is in thirteenth-century Iceland played, *in the first instance*, by genealogy. Thus, while Egill is the last of a heroic age, he is not the last of his family. A recent article on “Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas” emphasizes the function of genealogical framing as anchoring the stories in Icelandic history: “Saga narrative technique suggests that writers worked by looking at the span of Icelandic history from settlement to their own times, and composed by running an eye along the whole length, usually along one blood line ... Reaching the main action chronologically, the writer deals with it, trying (in so far as possible) to trace the action to the return of social equilibrium ... and thus works outward from the plot back into the historical continuum which, by common knowledge, comes down genetically to his own audience.”<sup>74</sup> Explicit historical analysis in terms of institutions extended at least to “Christendom” and “kingship,” but for the medieval Icelandic everyman historical forces were probably felt as operating through his direct tie with the past, the blood lines. Thus, at the end of *Egils saga* the two strands, dark and light, ugly and handsome, of Egill’s family—earlier established as different types with different relations to the kingship, though both fated—are alluded to and the distinction extended toward the present, with the significant qualification: “but most of the men of Myrar were outstandingly ugly.”<sup>75</sup>

Instead of an “analogy,” then, in the sense of a contemporary problem transposed arbitrarily to a previous period, the best sagas

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73. Lukács, especially pp. 60–63.

74. Kathryn Hume, *MLR*, 68 (1973), 594–606, citation p. 605.

75. Pálsson and Edwards, p. 239; Nordal, p. 300: “en fleiri váru Myramenn manna ljótastir.”

seem to present a situation in the past which contains the *seeds* of the saga-writer's present. However, a better case for a specific "analogy," which is nevertheless of a historical rather than local-social sort, could probably be made in connection with the thirty-odd short stories that trace the dealings of an Icelander abroad with a Norwegian king. Despite a shared narrative pattern, in which a visiting Icelander is estranged from and then reconciled with the Norwegian king, there is a great deal of variety in these stories. Two of them contain, within the common, genre-bound narrative framework, enclosed conversion tales, like those we have already glanced at, quite skillfully coordinated with the main plot.<sup>76</sup> As a group these stories have a more religious complexion than the subject matter and generic form would suggest;<sup>77</sup> the "analogy problem," however, emerges most clearly as proud and humorous Icelandic self-portraits in a series of underdog heroes who assert themselves against Norwegian court prejudice and hold up their heads in the royal presence. In many of this group it seems reasonable to see projection of contemporary wishes onto stories set in the past, in, for example, *Gull-Ásu-Pórðar þáttur*, *Halldórs þáttur II*, and *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, but aspects of Icelandic self-assertion can be seen in almost all.<sup>78</sup>

I have tried to give some instances of the stories that treat Saga Age history in terms of conversion in isolation from those that emphasize the spread of royal power, but the distinction cannot often be maintained.<sup>79</sup> These two aspects of the new order are closely related throughout the literature, but are especially close in a saga like *Fœreyinga saga*, where Þrándr is identified with provincial resistance to the crown and Sigmundur's mission of conversion is closely bound up with the payment of tribute to Norway. The close relation of these two "themes" suggests that a possible contemporary historiographical source for the view of the Saga Age I have been describing, a source beyond the general ones already offered, would be the standard European ideas of history as *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii*.<sup>80</sup>

76. *Egils þáttur Síðu-Hallssonar* and *Þorvalds þáttur tasalda* in *Íslendinga þættir*.

77. Cf. my "Theme and Genre" (n. 1 above).

78. "Theme and Genre," especially n. 40.

79. Weber shows how the political ideal of freedom has deep roots in Christianity (especially pp. 497–505).

80. A standard treatment is E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York and Evanston, 1953; original 1948), pp. 28–30.



Snorri Sturluson gives a classic Icelandic instance of the *topos* of transmission of civilization or learning in his Preface to the *Prose Edda*, but in general, I think, the Icelanders differed from the Latin Middle Ages in harboring ambiguous feelings about the advance of *studium* and surely about the advance of *imperium*, feelings, I have to point out, like those that divided Walter Scott.

Nor did the saga authors have equally clear, compelling, and weighty analyses for the ideas of empire and conversion: Egill's scorn-pole stands more isolated as a symbol of the political theme than the all-pervasive, if habitually unstated, contrast of hammer and cross. This is not to say that even the recent trend in criticism toward ever greater recognition of Christian thought in the sagas could read them as glosses on the Beatitudes; yet the *historical* aspect of the Sermon on the Mount might not be so inappropriate a point of comparison: "You have heard that it was said by the men of old, 'You shall not kill . . .' But I say that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (Mt. 5.17-48); "... 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" (*Njáls saga*). The significance of such a comparison, however, would lie not in content (as suggested by particular textual juxtapositions) but in the broad structure of a historical vision that presented Christ and, perforce, the Church as fulfilment of what was good and correction of what was bad under the Old Law. This is not to deny that we read the sagas rather for their "dramas of the will" than for Christian instruction, but the historical-Christian vision makes the choice unnecessary: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." The function of the palinode in mainstream European literature seems to be to facilitate the mystery of having cake and eating too, allowing the enjoyment of pagan values while "correcting" them just in time. In this light the pilgrimages that participate in the close of so many feuds serve as the sagas' palinodes.

Applied to our meditation on the metaphor of saga as historical novel the palinode principle dictates that we close by recognizing the analogy as no more than an analogy. Sagas are not historical

novels, but it is remarkable that six centuries before Walter Scott a species of historical fiction grew up in Iceland that anticipates the historical novel in its ambiguous retrospective view of the passing of heroic ages, and the comparison at least throws into relief the knotty genre problems of the saga literature. But recent renewals of interest in the reception of the literature of the past might lead to the question whether the reversal of our analogy, "historical novel as saga," has more to offer than entertaining pastiche (Rider Haggard's *Saga of Eric Brighteyes*) or rousing adventure (John Buchan's *The Isle of Sheep*). Both these examples lack a significant historical dimension, but among the possible lessons the historical novel might learn from the saga we might note: how to correlate a private plot with history, how to invest private individuals with historical significance, how to effect mimesis of history in genealogy and events of a plot, and how to cultivate objectivity and a claim to some kind of truth in the face of history. Luckily the question is one for other critics, but (to allay Steblin-Kamenskij's pretended anxiety that elementary literary history would be reversed) it appears that there is at least some possibility that Scott's reading of *Eyrbyggja saga* stimulated or crystallized his ideas for *Waverley* and that the saga thus stood godfather to the modern historical novel.<sup>81</sup>

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81. John M. Simpson, "Scott and Old Norse Literature," in *Scott Bicentenary Essays: Selected Papers read at the Sir Walter Scott Bicentenary Conference*, ed. Alan Bell (Edinburgh and London, 1973), pp. 300-13, especially pp. 312-13; Edith C. Batho, "Sir Walter Scott and the Sagas: Some Notes," *MLR*, 24 (1929), 409-15.