

Seeking Death in *Njáls saga*

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In the last lines of *Njáls saga*, near the end of the 159th and ultimate chapter of this longest of the sagas about early Icelanders, we are told the following about Flosi, a noble man whose misfortune it was to commit a terrible crime:

Þat segja menn, at þau yrði ævilok Flosa, at hann færi utan, þá er hann var orðinn gamall, at sækja sér húsavið, ok var hann í Nóregi þann vetr. En um sumarit varð hann síðbúinn. Ræddu menn um, at vánt væri skipit. Flosi sagði, at væri ærit gott gömlum ok feigum, ok sté á skip ok lét í haf, ok hefir til þess skips aldri spurzk síðan.¹

People say that the end of Flosi's life came when he had grown old and went abroad to find wood for building a house and spent the winter in Norway. The next summer he was late in his preparations. Men talked about the bad condition of his ship. Flosi said that it was good enough for an old man doomed to die, and he boarded the ship and put out to sea, and nothing was ever heard of the ship again.²

At this point Flosi has made compensation for the burning of Njáll and his family: “Hafði hann þá af hendi innt alla sætt sína bæði í

1. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), henceforth ÍF 12, 463.

2. Robert Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 310.

utanferðum ok fégjöldum” (He had then fulfilled all his part in the settlement, both the exile and the payments).³ The settlement is not only with humans, but also with God, since Flosi has received absolution for his sins from the Pope himself. It is therefore noteworthy that the saga emphasizes that he pays no heed to warnings against putting out to sea on a damaged ship to go to Iceland. The ship disappears somewhere between Norway and Iceland and we must assume death by drowning. There is a strange peacefulness to Flosi’s attitude, even though it might be qualified as reckless. Indeed, his decision not only puts his own life in danger, but also imperils that of his shipmates. However, the author takes care not to introduce his audience to these characters and therefore neutralizes any potential concern for them. Instead, Flosi’s behavior can be seen as noble and detached. From a literary point of view, it is a fitting end for this tragic saga.⁴ All passions have been spent and the characters can fade back into the past.

Flosi is only one of many characters in *Njáls saga* who seem to welcome their own demise, as will be shown in the following. Indeed, a willingness to die is an important structural and semantic feature of the saga. The desire of all living beings to “return to the quiescence of the inorganic world” is the troubling idea Freud proposes in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he introduces his concept of the death wish.⁵ A psychoanalytic approach based on this concept can indeed enrich our understanding of the structure and meaning of this remarkable saga.

Psychoanalysis and the Sagas

In recent years, scholars have brought psychology to bear on literature of medieval Iceland. Ármann Jakobsson studies empathy as a key

3. Ibid., 309; ÍF 12:462.

4. Scholars have commented diversely on this ending over the years. Einar Ól. Sveinsson talks about Flosi’s strength of character; he is ready to take whatever life brings him. See *Á Njálsbúð: Bók um mikið listaverk* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1943), 169. Richard F. Allen sees in it a parallel with the last voyage of the Danish king Scyld Scefig in *Beowulf*. See *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to “Njáls saga”* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 178.

5. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 62.

factor in his reading of *Egils saga* as a psychological drama, while Russell Poole, in an equally interesting article on *Grettis saga*, uses a broad spectrum of psychological theories to understand the saga's main character and his resonance for fourteenth-century Icelanders.⁶ Poole focuses not least on Grettir's fear of the dark and other phobias which would have been easy to relate to in these times preceding the invention of gas or electric lighting. Neither scholar adopts a specifically psychoanalytic perspective, though Poole mentions Jacques Lacan's particular version of psychoanalysis as a possible key to aspects of Grettir's relationship with his father.

The tragic nature of *Njáls saga* as well as the sexual themes it contains invites a purer psychoanalytic approach, and I am not the first to attempt one. Richard F. Allen was inspired by C. G. Jung in his reading of the saga, and Carolyn Anderson has written a brilliant article in which she studies the construction of gender in the saga in light of the theories of Lacan.⁷

Applying psychoanalysis to the sagas is fraught with difficulties. Their authors are anonymous and we are not sure whether it is indeed correct to assume individual authorship of these works. Their texts vary from one manuscript to another, and the issue of to what extent and in what way they are based on oral tradition is still being discussed.⁸ Moreover, it is not always obvious that the concepts of psychoanalysis can be of use in pursuing the aims of most literary historians, i.e., understanding the way the texts are structured, how they generate meaning, and how they relate to the social and historical reality in which they (in this case, the sagas) originate.

In a recent book on *Egils saga*, I try to show that the twofold structure that so characterizes that saga can be partly explained by using psychoanalysis. The first part of the saga, which deals primarily with Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, stages a simple conflict between hero and

6. See Ármann Jakobsson, "Egils saga and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family," *Scandinavian Studies* 80 (2008): 1–18; Russell Poole, "Myth, Psychology and Society in *Grettis saga*," *alvissmál* 11 (2003): 3–16.

7. See Allen, *Fire and Iron*; Carolyn Anderson, "No Fixed Point: Gender and Blood Feuds in 'Njáls saga,'" *Philological Quarterly* 81 (2002): 421–440.

8. See esp. Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2 (Cambridge, MA: The Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University; distr. Harvard University Press, 2004).

king. In the second and longer part, in which Þórólfr's nephew, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, is the main character, this conflict is complicated by more or less hidden ones with the father and with God. This structure is engendered by a complex play of discreetly suggested parallels and connections between different characters of the saga, especially between kings, fathers, and pairs of brothers. It is possible to explain the way the text functions by using the concepts of condensation and displacement, which are in Freud's thought the way dreams both express and conceal from the reader what is going on in his unconscious mind.⁹ In this sense, *Egils saga* both shows and hides that it deals with basic Oedipal conflicts, which it projects onto religious and political concerns. This approach explains many aspects of the saga, not the least the motivations of its main character, Egill, whose behavior can be understood in light of his conflicts with his father and brother. The psychoanalytic approach has explanatory value whether or not we choose to believe, as many do, that Snorri Sturluson authored the work, though it also brings an interesting perspective to that theory as well.¹⁰

In a series of articles on *Eyrbyggja saga*, I have endeavored to solve the problem of that saga's atypical structure in a similar way. In this saga, several father figures are systematically opposed. By combining the use of the narrative semiotics of A. J. Greimas with psychoanalysis, it is possible to show how this dispersion of the theme of the father is one of the factors that explain the meandering construction that characterizes the saga and that scholars have had trouble explaining. The problematic relationship with the father figure, and in a more general way, with inherited social status, can be seen as expressing an identity crisis of the chieftain class in mid-thirteenth century Iceland. How can young chieftains become what their fathers were, i.e., chieftains, when so many equally well-born and capable men are fighting for these positions?¹¹

9. See *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library 4 (London: Penguin, 1976), 417.

10. See Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skrifinni: Snorri Sturluson og "Egils saga"* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004), 219–28.

11. See Torfi H. Tulinius, "Hamlet í Helgafellssveit: Samræður um samræður við söguöld," in *Greppaminni: Rit til heiðurs Vésteini Ólasyni sjötugum*, ed. Margrét Eggertsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2009), 423–35.

I try to show that in both sagas the saga authors are communicating with their audiences subconsciously about issues that are important in their times. Indeed, if all acts of language are acts of communication, literature, and especially literary narrative, is a quite particular type of such communication. One reason for this is that it goes on through a “third party,” the character or characters of the story. These imaginary beings are representatives of a sort; one could also call them agents. The author is working within a fictional world and the characters he manipulates are projections of his fantasy, desire, fears, and preoccupations—even those he does not know about, or in other words, of his Unconscious. The peculiar thing about literary narrative is that these characters are not only the author’s agents but also the reader’s, who likewise projects himself onto these characters and their adventures. If characters in a story are projections, they are projections of both the sender and the receiver of the particular type of message that literary narrative is.¹²

Literature has therefore the very special status of being both a type of mirroring—consciously or not, both reader and author mirror themselves in the tale told—and a form of communication between these two parties. One could call it “communicative mirroring” or “mirroring communication.”

Jacques Lacan’s famous mirror-stage becomes pertinent in this context. This theory was one of his earliest contributions to psychoanalytic theory. It is about the formation of the Self as a psychological construct. At a certain moment in its development, the infant is capable of seeing and recognizing itself in a mirror. The baby is filled with a feeling of pleasure and invests this pleasure, i.e., the libido, into its own image.¹³ This primary narcissistic experience is central to the formation of the self, which is a construct, and—Lacan insists—never the reality of who we are. This reality, the “Real,” as he calls it, remains forever outside the grasp of our conscious minds.

Both pleasurable and anxiety-ridden, like all libidinal experiences, the formation of the Self is a long and difficult process, always at the mercy of external attacks—the scolding mother, the angry sibling,

12. See Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* (London: Polity Press, 1998), 112–19.

13. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 1–7.

the destructive father—or internal ones, either directly from the Unconscious or indirectly through the Superego. Describing the aim of psychoanalysis as a form of therapy, Freud said, “Where Id was, Ego must be.” But that path is a rocky one, and in the end it leads nowhere because the Real—the strangest and most unsettling of Lacan’s three basic concepts: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real—prevails.¹⁴ All the desperate meaning-making we have been engaged in throughout our lives comes to nothing when our mental lives disappear into oblivion, snuffed out one by one like candles, by a silent but inexorable wind.

But before that, there is the ceaseless task of becoming oneself; the unending construction of identity; the narcissistic engagement with the Symbolic, or who we are told we are; and with the Imaginary, or who we dream we are: sweet dreams of bliss that should go on forever and/or tearful, sudorous nightmares from which we are relieved to awaken.

Eros and Thanatos

The death drive appears rather late in Freud’s work, his first major text about it being *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, first published in 1920.¹⁵ It is one of Freud’s more difficult and speculative texts. In it he postulates that the goal of all life is to seek death (the “quiescence of the inorganic world”) and that furthering this goal is an unconscious drive towards death which interacts constantly with the other main drive in our psyche, an equally unconscious life instinct. This theory led to a major reworking of Freud’s conception of the psychic apparatus, with the development of the threefold scheme of the Id, the Ego, and the Superego.¹⁶

This development took some time and was expressed gradually in a series of Freud’s works, where he speaks of these drives in the plural as two groups of drives, one aiming for death and the other for life.¹⁷ On the one hand, the death drives are those of all living organisms, which at some point seek to end their existence. These drives are

14. See Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal*, 99–104.

15. See note 5 above.

16. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works 19 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953).

17. *Ibid.*, 39–47.

exteriorized in the form of aggressiveness and internalized in the form of masochism. On the other, the life drives' role is to bind the destructive forces of the death drives. He calls the former group of drives Thanatos and the latter Eros. This model is not only dualistic but also dialectic: there is a constant struggle between two sets of drives, Eros trying to keep Thanatos in check. The result is that the two are intricately interwoven or blended, for example in sexuality, which calls for a certain dosage of each drive to be effective. Eros is the more apparent of the two drives while Thanatos is silently working behind the scenes, except at moments of crisis when passions are unleashed; then it appears, usually in the guise of aggressiveness, but sometimes as a willingness to die. This unbinding of the passions is associated with what Freud calls *Triebentmischung* or defusion of drives, i.e., a state which occurs when the binding of the death drive by Eros is deficient.¹⁸

Freud believes that, of the two sets of drives, Thanatos is both the stronger and the more fundamental to the living being. The role of Eros is merely to delay as long as possible the inevitable end. As Freud says, every living thing wants to die, but wants to do so on its own terms.¹⁹

The American literary critic Peter Brooks wrote a remarkable study in which he showed how Freud's theory of the death wish brings new insights into the workings of narrative. Expanding on the idea that every narrative is shaped in accordance with the way it ends, and basing his approach on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he proposes to read narrative as intimately related to the death drive, reproducing the dialectic between Eros and Thanatos in its very form.²⁰

Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of any story without an ending, and one can also say that each narrative is shaped by the way it ends, since the events narrated are chosen and ordered to lead to the ending the author has in mind. But Brooks sees additional characteristics of the death drive in literature, for example, the way the latter typically works with repetition (e.g., rhyme and alliteration in verse and epic triads in narrative).

18. *Ibid.*, 42.

19. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 39; see also Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 1st Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 107.

20. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 112.

Repetition is one of the ways in which the death drive manifests itself. Freud's discovery of this drive is related to his treatment of patients who suffered from shell-shock after the First World War. The way they would relive in their dreams the traumatic situations they had been exposed to did not conform to Freud's theory of the pleasure principle, and that is why he sought to replace it. In his new way of thinking, repetition was a way of achieving the illusion of mastery over the trauma. He gave an example of this in the story of his little grandson, who was extremely distressed whenever his mother left him, but seemed to deal with it symbolically by playing over and over again the strange game of throwing a toy under a bed and saying "fort!" (away) and then retrieving it and saying "da!" (here). By this repetitious behavior, Freud believed, the toddler was paradoxically reliving the anxiety of separation from his mother, but also gaining control over it by symbolically making the mother come back.²¹

Such repetition could be seen as a manifestation of the pleasure principle (relieving the anxiety), but the urge to repeat is deeper still. It allows the binding of energy which protects the psyche from too strong a stimulus (the trauma). It is therefore a sort of defense mechanism, and one could postulate that the more often one finds traces of this compulsion to repeat in a literary text, the greater the trauma it is dealing with. Brooks sees in Freud's theory of the death drive a sort of "master plot" for all narrative. I would argue, however, that in some stories it is more apparent than in others, and that in *Njáls saga* it is particularly so.

"Koma mun til mín feigðin . . ."

It is one of the distinctive features of the saga how many of its characters accept their death.²² This is true of the main protagonists: Gunnarr decides to return to Hlíðarendi, despite Kolskeggr's and Njáll's previous warnings that it will bring about his death (ÍF 12:181–83);

21. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 14–17.

22. I deliberately avoid the subject of fate and willing acceptance of it in this paper. Lars Lönnroth discusses the difficulties of disentangling Christian and pagan thinking on this matter in *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 123–36. My interest here lies in how deeper psychological structures can be perceived in cultural constructs such as the saga in question.

Njáll, Bergþóra, and Skarpheðinn all show in some way that they are willing to die (ÍF 12:326–30), as does Flosi, as has already been noted. This is also true of many minor characters, such as Þjóstólfr; he obeys Hallgerðr when she tells him to go find Hrútr after he has killed her husband Glúmr, even though he suspects why she sends him there (ÍF 12:50). The same could be said of Kolr, Atli, Þórðr Leysingjason, and other characters involved in the series of vicarious murders committed by Hallgerðr and Bergþóra in their feud (ÍF 12:93, 99, 107). They all know what their involvement in the killings will bring upon them, but they nevertheless submit to the will of the women. This does not mean that they do not defend themselves when it comes to the actual fighting; however, it was within their power to avoid being in this situation in the first place.

This is also true of the Norwegian Þórir, who does not want to fight Gunnarr but, when prodded by his Icelandic hostess, goes to battle despite his knowledge that it will lead to his death (ÍF 12:155). Gunnarr's brother Hjortr also chooses to fight though his death has been foretold in his brother's dream (ÍF 12:156). Not to be forgotten on this list is the young Þórðr Kárason, who prefers dying with his grand-parents to surviving them (ÍF 12:330).

This aspect of the saga is closely related to the stylistic feature of foreshadowing, which is one of its salient characteristics.²³ The foreknowledge of one's death, as it has been predicted by somebody like Njáll who has the gift of prophecy, means that in some way one accepts it. This is particularly clear for Gunnarr. In a stimulating recent reading of the saga, Theodore M. Andersson remarks on the strangeness of Gunnarr's attitude throughout the saga: "It therefore seems difficult to believe that Gunnarr is not a partner, voluntary or involuntary, in his own undoing."²⁴ Though Andersson's approach to the saga is quite different from the one proposed here, he also has noticed that the saga seems to indicate that Gunnarr is collaborating in his own demise.

Closely connected to the ideas of foreshadowing and death are the noun "feigð" and the adjective "feigr." A study of the complete

23. See Günter Zimmermann, "Die Vorausdeutungen in der *Njáls saga* unter strukturellen Aspekt," in *Linguistica et Philologica: Gedenkschrift für Björn Colliner* (1894–1983), ed. Helmut Humbach (Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1984), 597–607.

24. Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (1180–1280) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 195.

corpus of the sagas about early Icelanders reveals that, in all of them except *Njáls saga*, it occurs at the most three times, and in many not at all. In our saga the noun and its adjectival form are found a total of ten times. Of course, this is the longest saga belonging to this particular genre. Nonetheless, the exceptional episodic density of these occurrences suggests that the author took a particular interest in the idea that the living were destined to die.

Gunnarr himself uses the noun in quite a remarkable way in chapter 68. His brother is warning of a possible danger and he replies, “Koma mun til mín feigðin . . . hvar sem ek em staddr, ef mér verðr þess auðit” (Death will come to me no matter where I am . . . if such is my fate).²⁵ What is unusual here is the choice of the expression *að vera einhvers auðit*. It is a positive word, suggesting good fortune, but here Gunnarr uses it with the word “feigð” which means “approach, or foreboding of death.” This is the only occurrence of this word with this expression and it intensifies the impression that Gunnarr’s attitude to death is quite positive.

One wonders why, and only a tentative answer can be proposed here. Gunnarr is a complex character. He is an outstanding warrior but also a peaceful man who does his best to avoid conflicts, though he will defend his honor when it is challenged, for example in the case of Otkell’s and Skammkell’s slandering of him (ÍF 12:136). He usually shows forbearance but he can also be carried away by his own ability to fight. Though he kills many men, he does not like it: “‘Hvat ek veit,’ segir Gunnarr, ‘hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnum at vega menn’” (“What I don’t know,” said Gunnarr, “is whether I am less manly than other men because killing troubles me more than it does them”).²⁶

Despite his self-control, Gunnarr is a man of strong emotions. He is often shown to be angry but he is also a true friend to Njáll as well as a loving brother to Kolskeggr and Hjörtr. Finally, he is open to feelings of lust, as can be seen in his brash and ill-fated decision to marry Hallgerðr. Hrútr calls it a *girndarráð* or “decision based on lust” (ÍF 12:87), and this seems to be the opinion of the author of the saga. Here we come to the famous scene, later in *Njáls saga*, when Gunnarr

25. ÍF 12:168; Cook, *Njáls Saga*, 114.

26. ÍF 12:139; Cook, *Njáls Saga*, 93.

changes his mind about leaving Iceland for a three-year exile, which was one of the terms of the settlement he agreed upon after the killing of Þorgeir Otkelsson. Gunnarr's horse has stumbled on its way from Fljótshlíð to the ship that will take him abroad and Gunnarr has dismounted. He turns back and sees his home and the surrounding countryside and says that it has never seemed more beautiful to him (ÍF 12:182).

This scene has been interpreted in different ways over the years. Quite a few think that Gunnarr is actually referring to Hallgerðr, who stayed behind at Hlíðarendi, and that the meadows and fields stand for her hair and other sexually charged attributes.²⁷ Several years ago, the late Hermann Pálsson brought to my attention the fact that what Gunnarr is watching is not only his farm but also the place where his grave-mound will stand, since it is believed to have been on the flat-land between Hlíðarendi and the sea (ÍF 12:192n). He also mentioned that the only other staging of a character contemplating the beauty of a landscape in the saga literature, which is in *Landnámabók*, is associated with death. Hallsteinn Penglsson comes home, learns of his father's death, and interprets his mixed feelings with a verse which tells how the mountain which gives its name to the paternal farm is bowed with grief but that the slopes of his home welcome him with a laugh.²⁸

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

27. Helga Kress, "Óþarfar unnustur áttu": Um samband fjölkynngi, kvennafars og karlmennsku í Íslendingasögum," in *Galdramenn: Galdrar og samfélag á miðöldum*, ed. Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun, 2008), 40.

28. *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), 272.

It is indeed quite striking in this context that Gunnarr is never portrayed as particularly gay or joyful except when he is seen revelling in his grave mound after his death. Indeed, there he is “kátligr ok með gleðimóti miklu” (happy and had a very cheerful look).²⁹ There is one exception to this, and that is when he comes to the Alþingi after his successful journey abroad. Here he is “við alla menn léttr ok kátr” (light-hearted and merry with everyone),³⁰ but it is only a matter of hours or days before his fateful encounter with Hallgerðr, who goes out of her way to be attractive to him. Blinded by lust, he hastily decides to marry her, despite Hrútr’s warnings. It is as if the saga is telling us that sexual passion can only bring tragedy, and that happiness is only achieved by steering clear of desire.

It is worthy of note that the saga on several occasions establishes a relationship between lust and a willingness to die. Both Þórir and Þorgrímr, the Norwegians who are killed by Gunnarr, know that they will die but accept to fight with him because of their desire for Egill’s daughter Guðrún. She is the most beautiful (*kurteisust*) of women and called *náttsól* or “night sun” (ÍF 12:147, 155, 160), a cognomen which has connotations of death. It could therefore be significant that Þorgrímr is the first person Gunnarr kills during his last fight (ÍF 12:187), suggesting a link between the two characters that both have allowed themselves to be led into a deadly situation because of their passionate desire for a beautiful woman.

There is also a suggestion that Þjóstólfr is motivated by sexual passion for Hallgerðr when he kills Glúmr. Before that, Þjóstólfr had taunted Glúmr about “brølta á maga Hallgerði” (bouncing around on Hallgerðr’s belly).³¹ That there are close links between exacerbated sexual passions and the death drive is in accordance with Freud’s theory of the interweaving of life and death drives: Eros is serving Thanatos.

“Genginn út úr sjávarhømrum”

Nowhere is the ineluctability of programmed death in the saga more striking than in the famous Járngrímr episode, when Flosi dreams that an impressive figure steps out of the no less imposing mountain

29. ÍF 12:193; Cook, *Njal’s Saga*, 130.

30. ÍF 12:85; Cook, *Njal’s Saga*, 52.

31. ÍF 12:49; Cook, *Njal’s Saga*, 32.

Lómagnúpr to the west of his home and calls Flosi's men to him (ÍF 12:346–48). The men are called in the order of their death, and also in clusters, showing that their deaths will occur at different moments in the future.³² From the perspective of Freud's theory of the death drive, this is a particularly interesting scene for at least two reasons. The first is that it comes to Flosi in a bad dream, not a good one that fulfils his wishes as in Freud's earlier theory, where the pleasure principle prevails. In his nightmare Flosi is living the trauma to come, when so many of his followers will be killed, most of them by Kári. The second reason is that here the idea of future death is not presented as an expression of somebody's insight or foreknowledge, but as something which is inherently uncanny: a mysterious man, with a no less mysterious and intimidating name, coming out of a mountain.

It is no coincidence that Freud was working on his famous essay "The Uncanny" at the same time as he wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.³³ As Freud said himself, the death drive is in itself uncanny.³⁴ The idea of a force within us that is working toward our disappearance is not only counterintuitive but deeply unsettling. It is, however, also a fact of life, in the sense that we all grow old and die, that our own passing is already programmed. But Freud's theory is not a mere statement of this all-too-well-known reality. What troubles us, as in his theory of the Unconscious in a more general way, is that there is a force within us that we do not control and that we do not like. Not only are we not masters in our own house, as in Freud's famous formulation; there is also an enemy within.³⁵

The figure of Skarpheðinn has long fascinated readers of *Njáls saga* as he obviously fascinated its author. He is indeed an unusual character, and in many ways unique in saga literature. In the first part of the saga, he stays in the background, obeying his father and supporting his friends. When he takes a leading role it is almost without exception to commit violent deeds, such as killing Þráinn

32. Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga*, 32. There is quite an extensive literature on Flosi's dream. It is enough in this context to refer to Einar Ólafur Sveinsson on its likely origin in an account in Gregory's *Dialogues*. See *Á Njálsbúð*, 10–11, 171.

33. See Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*.

34. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 21.

35. Sigmund Freud, *A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1917), 143.

and later his son (ÍF 12:231, 280), but also to destroy his and his family's chances of garnering support for their cause after the slaying of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson, and finally to ruin the settlement that at last had been reached after much effort by many good people. As Síðu-Hallr says at this occasion, Flosi and he are obviously *ógæfumenn* (ÍF 12:314)—“men of misfortune.” He also takes a lead when he decides to obey his father on the night of the burning and retreat into the farmhouse, though he knows it means their death (ÍF 12:326).

This would be sufficient to connect Skarpheðinn to the death drive in what could be called the psychodynamics of the saga, or in other words the way it speaks to the Unconscious. But there are other aspects of his character that add to this impression. He is in many ways an uncanny figure. He is very often described as pale, and he betrays strong emotions that he nevertheless does his best to repress (ÍF 12:114). One of his defining characteristics is his mysterious grin (*glott*) which he displays at numerous times in the saga (ÍF 12:96, 98, 114, 299, 304, 327). There is something strange about this grin, as if he is taking pleasure in negative things, but also being provocative.³⁶

This is particularly true in his behavior at the Alþingi when he and his brothers are seeking support from major chieftains in the lawsuit that follows Hǫskuldr's slaying. This episode is of special interest in relationship to the death drive. It is a series of five scenes that are all structured in the same way and all repeat with variations the identification of Skarpheðinn (ÍF 12:297–306). As we have seen, repetition is closely related to the death drive, and though there are significant differences among the five scenes, it is the repetition that makes them remarkable as well as the fearsome and uncanny behavior of Skarpheðinn. This eeriness is suggested to the reader in several ways, among others in the way the four successive chieftains describe him. Of particular note is that Skapti Þóróddsson calls him *trollsligr* (like a troll) and Hafr inn auðgi says he is “svá illiligr sem genginn sé út ór sjávarhömrum” (so dreadful that it is as if he had walked out of a sea-cliff). During this episode, there is something out of the ordinary about Skarpheðinn that awakens a sense of unease in those who meet him, as if death itself were among them. Hafr's comparison

36. See Low Soon Ai, “The Mirthless Content of Skarpheðinn's Grin,” *Medium Aevum* 65 (1996): 101–107.

is particularly interesting because of the parallel between him and Járngrímr, who as we have seen announces the death of those whose names he calls. This is confirmed by the way people react to his body after his death. He had declaimed a skaldic strophe from within the ruins of the burned-down farm, suggesting to Grani Gunnarsson that he might already have been transformed into a revenant (ÍF 12:336–37). Everyone is pleasantly surprised that his dead body does not provoke fear (ÍF 12:344), suggesting that his acceptance of death and the sign of the cross that he burned himself across his chest may have prevented him from becoming one.

“Veg þú aldrei meir í inn sama knérunn”:

Repetition and the Death Drive

As in so many narratives, repetition is one of the ways in which the story is woven in *Njáls saga*. It is particularly present in passages such as Bergþóra’s and Hallgerðr’s vicarious killings of each other’s men, in the story of Gunnarr’s deceit of Hrútr early in the saga, as well as in the lengthy episodes of legal wrangling later on in the saga. It is of interest to note that the saga warns against repetition, as if the author sensed the links between repetition and the death drive. This is true of Gunnarr, who repeats the slaying of Otkell when he kills his son Þorgeir, despite Njáll’s warning against killing again “í inn sama knérunn” (ÍF 12:139), i.e. in the same lineage. Tragic circumstances make this inevitable for Gunnarr. The same cannot be said for Skarpheðinn and his brothers, who allow themselves to be tricked by Mǫrðr, a person they should have distrusted, into killing Hǫskuldr, son of Þráinn, whom they had killed several years earlier. As in Freud’s theory, repetition is the way in which the elusive death drive makes itself known. In the case of the slaying of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson, the saga obviously perceives it as causing the death of Njáll and all his sons (ÍF 12:281). It is as if some hidden force has taken over, both human and escaping the control of humans. The only way to stop it is to break the chain of revenge and counter-revenge as Gunnarr does after the killing of his cousin Sigmundr, but also as Síðu-Hallr does by renouncing compensation for his son’s death. However, the death drive is unstoppable, and its destructive forces always prevail at the end.

Psychoanalysis can lead us to a better understanding of the dynamics of *Njáls saga*, as had already been shown by Carolyn Anderson in a previously mentioned article.³⁷ The present paper suggests that bringing the Freudian concept of the death drive into the analysis of *Njáls saga* can add new insights into this most remarkable and most studied of the sagas about early Icelanders. It is a saga deeply engaged in the struggle between the destructive impulses of the death drive and the efforts of survival instincts to keep Thanatos at bay. This engagement can be seen in the author's obvious preoccupation with chosen death, in the repetitive structure he gave to the story, but also in the way he takes the readers through his vast narrative, inviting them to experience the dangers of passions, to witness the efforts of good men to curb them and in the end return to the inorganic state as does Flosi in his peaceful death at sea. His life has run its course and he has ended it on his own terms. So has the saga.

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37. See "No Fixed Point."

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