

ANNEX 15

36. THE PROCESS OF DISENCHANTMENT: MAGICAL AND DISENCHANTED MORAL LOGIC

ROSALIE H. WAX

Reprinted by permission of the publisher from Rosalie H. Wax, Magic, Fate and History: The Changing Ethos of the Vikings, pp. 127-143. Copyright 1969, Coronado Press. Rosalie H. Wax has a continuing interest in cultural history and the transformation of cultural patterns. She has especially devoted herself to studies of ethos and worldview and in addition to the book from which this excerpt has been selected, she has published a number of essays in this field with her husband (Murray L. Wax). Her field researches were conducted in the Japanese-American Relocation Centers and among American Indian communities; these furnish much of the materials for her book on field methods to be published by the University of Chicago Press in 1971.

■ We have seen that people's images of themselves are colored and shaped by the kind of relationship they maintain with their habitat. Built into each man's self-image is his group's systematized way of thinking of the cosmos, and these are as inevitably reflected in the group's artistic productions as in their religious and secular values. Sometimes this reflection is tenuous, in what to outsiders may seem to be arbitrarily defined categories; sometimes—as in myths and folk tales—views of the cosmos are quite explicit. Such reflections help us to understand people's perceptions of themselves and the imperatives of their social systems, especially during periods of change. In the following selection we consider an example of such a set of ideas in the sagas of the Vikings.

in the sense of a universe

Myths and tales are among the symbolic means by which the members of a group express their shared participation in a way of life, whether it is that of an isolated, preliterate community or of a socioeconomic class in a complex society. Myths simultaneously reflect and reinforce the deepest assumptions about how the world is and should be ordered and about the rewards and punishments that stem from appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Inevitably, there are close links between a group's level of development and its world view. Among preagricultural people, all objects in the universe exist interdependently, not separately and side-by-side as among us. All objects, including man, are part of a single design, each influencing the others, and often the force governing this design—what Wax calls the Vital Power—is placed in the realm of the deities. In some pre-

agricultural societies, the universe is seen as in such delicate balance that the individual is enjoined not to disturb its wholeness, and there are many taboos against interfering with nature; such concepts are especially useful in explaining people's relationship to their strategies of adaptation. Myths and folklore are thus important vehicles for the study of sociotechnological systems.

Viking society was a gusty system in which many people alternated between farming and raiding or trading expeditions; for some, raiding and long distance exploration were full-time occupations, and at times they made our own frontiersmen look sedate. Viking raids covered all of Europe, and they appear to have taken place within well-developed political systems; Sweden, for instance, had a well-established monarchy before long-distance raids began in earnest in the 10th and 11th centuries.

The imperatives of Viking agriculture and raiding are clearly mirrored in their sagas, as Wax shows. One of their major themes is self-reliance; another, which we have seen to be general among agricultural societies, is a strong reliance on the deities and the fatalism which this reliance engenders. Their literature also reflects the transition from an agricultural society to one based on distant war, trade, and foreign settlement. Here we see a world view that is in between the social order associated with an agricultural system—including obligations of community and kin—and the individualistic amorality of armed raids and territorial aggrandizement. As Wax observes elsewhere in the book from which this selection is

taken, Viking literature "reflects a hard-headed materialistic individualism—a self interest that is shrewd, down-to-earth, and pragmatic. The gods are often depicted as masters of expedient trickery. The law is stated so that its enforcement rests on man's inclination to guard his own interests" (p. 89).

A good introduction to these exciting people is *The Vikings*, by Johannes Brøndsted (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965). The reader who wants to get a broader introduction to the anthropology of myth and folklore can find a variety of approaches in *The Study of Folklore*, edited by Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965); *The Anthropologist Looks at Myth*, compiled by Melville Jacobs and edited by John Greenway (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966). *Studies on Mythology*, edited by Robert A. Georges (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1968) and *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, by G. S. Kirk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). For an approach to the analysis of literature based on concepts of class-conflict, see *The Concept of Freedom* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), by Christopher Caudwell (Christopher St. John Sprigg). For a fusion of several of these approaches to folklore in a contemporary setting, see *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*, by Roger D. Abrahams (Chicago: Aldine, 1970). ■

THE PROBLEM

IN THE MAGICAL world, the man who accomplishes deeds of worth and grandeur is able to do so because of his Vital Power. Thus, in ancient Scandinavian society, if a man's family were hale, his trading or raiding ventures successful, and his party triumphant and unscathed amid storms and battles, then surely he possessed Power: Such Power might issue either through his fortunate relationship with a potent Being—as when Víga-Glúm's good fortune depended on keeping the cloak, sword, and spear given him by his grandfather—or it might issue from his own innate nature—as when the saga writer traces Egil Skallagrímsson's more than human talent, strength, and ferocity to his giant or etin ancestors. In any event, he had *gipta*, *gaefa*, or *hamingja*. Conversely, if nothing of his turned out particularly

well, then he had no such relationship and no such Power; while if he were really unlucky, then wittingly or unwittingly, he had done some dangerous or ill advised deed—he had offended some being who was paying him back by withdrawing his favor or using sorcery against him.

Life, health, and well-being in the magical world are inextricably related to virtuous or correct behavior. The wise person does not even uproot a flower without taking proper moral (or social) precautions.

In the hole from which the root was withdrawn a pinch of tobacco was left. Often a knife or some money was left there also, and the taker of the root uttered a brief prayer, "I have taken what you have given, and I am leaving this here for you. I want to lead a long life and to have no harm strike me or my family."

If we translate this philosophy into terms more familiar to us, we may say that in the magical world, every grave mishap is perceived as having a specific cause, which very often proved to have been an ill intentioned or careless deed. The man who is switten with woe may have offended someone, intentionally or unintentionally. Perhaps, if nothing else, his prior prosperity and health aroused the enmity or greed of others. Contrariwise, the man who is blessed above all others has offended no one. He has done all the "right" things and none of the "wrong". Or again, an individual who suffers mishap, illness, or death may have been exposed to the malevolence of an innately destructive or dangerous being, just as the extremely fortunate or lucky man may have been exposed to the health and power infusing influences of an innately benevolent being. Because of this causal emphasis, the tales told by peoples who live by the precepts of the magical world tend to be etiological, which is to say that, primarily, they explain why good or evil things happen to particular persons or peoples.

This magical perspective, as outlined above, dominates a good part of the early Old Scandinavian literature. Appearing in the myths and in some of the Eddic poems, it shows itself later, in occasional incidents, in the sagas. For example, in *The Lay of Grotti*, King Fródi meets a terrible fate because he mistreated his giant thralls; in *The Lay of Völund* King Níðoú loses his sons because he enslaved and abused

the magically gifted hero. Similarly, in *Ynglinga saga*, King Vanlandi dies because he was not permitted to return to his witch-wife and King Vísbur because he refused to give his sons their inheritance. Kormák the skald, who lived in the tenth century, refused to compensate a witch for the death of her sons; thereupon she laid a spell upon him so that he was never able to possess his beloved.

By the thirteenth century, a distinctly different perspective and moral philosophy was being manifested in the literature of the classic sagas. These seem to exhibit what may be termed an eschatological point of view in that the sagas focus not on a cause or explanation of misfortune but on the long and intricately linked series of events which lead to a predetermined apocalyptic resolution, usually the death of the hero. He is portrayed as a man of excellence and honor, and his death confronts the audience with a moral paradox, namely that the reward for virtue may be misfortune and defeat. The Norse hero is no Job, and his demise is usually an act of vengeance which he himself had helped to provoke, but the moral issue is as clear as the Book of Job:

One of the most disturbing experiences of the old saga writers appears to have been the recognition that worthy men, too, must endure suffering and defeat—merely because they lack a sufficient measure of “good fortune.”

Great gifts and ill fortune go hand in hand . . . everything is constantly shifting. . . . And in the midst of the general dissolution we still find individual men of remarkable integrity and blamelessness. And—lest the drama should point too simple a moral—these men fare not a whit better than the others—but not a whit worse either.

The difference between the magical point of view and the saga writers is profound; within the former view all of the crucial phenomena of man's experience are morally and socially explicable, while within the latter the coherence is troubled by rationalistic disenchantment. In this chapter it will be my task to describe some aspects of the change from one to the other. So far as I have been able to determine, the first literary manifestation of the change appears in some of the early heroic lays (c. 600-800). Here, and in the subsequent literature, it is associated both with a change in the conceptions of fate and of the nature of man—or of the “self.” The point of view of Snorri

Sturluson or others of the sophisticated saga writers probably represents an extreme or ultimate aspect of the process, as it was reflected in the writings of an elite class of men who were acutely aware that their way of life had undergone marked changes and that their values were increasingly out of tune with each other.

THE CONFLICTING MORAL IMPERATIVE OF THE HEROIC LITERATURE

Some of the oldest poems in the Old Scandinavian literature are based on situations which rarely, if ever, appear in mythological or magical stories: the hero is placed by fate in a situation where he must choose between defending his personal honor or slaying someone near to him, either his blood kin or his beloved. Thus, in an ancient Gothic lay, Hiltibrant is obliged to slay his son, while in a later Scandinavian variant, he must go into battle and be slain by his half-brother. Brynhild must kill the hero Sigurð, whom she loves, because Sigurð pledged her his love and then married another woman. Guðrún is obliged to kill her children and her husband because her husband slew her brothers. Starkaðr is “fated to kill the chief and friend who has trusted him.”

In some of the heroic lays the hero (or heroine) laments his (or her) woes and tells us, either at the beginning or end of his discourse, that his sad lot was brought about by fate or by evil norns. In other poems, like *The Lay of Atli*, we are shown by the narrative and by the words of the characters how fate has made inevitable the series of disasters.

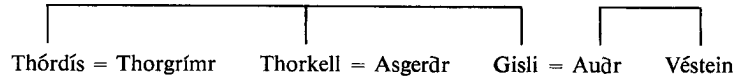
So that the reader may gain some notion of these lays, here is a synopsis of one based on a legend which is very old—perhaps fifth century. As recorded in the Edda, *The Lay of Atli* may itself date from the ninth century.

Gunnar, King of the Gjúkungs, and his brother Högni possess the great gold hoard of the Niflungs. Atli, King of the Huns, invites Gunnar and his court to visit him. Atli and Gunnar are brothers-in-law, Atli being wedded to Gunnar's sister, Guðrún. When the invitation is presented, Gunnar turns to his brother for advice. Högni advises against the journey, pointing out that Guðrún, their sister, has sent

them a warning token by the Hunnish messengers, a ring wound with wolf's hair. For reasons not made clear (experts think certain stanzas are lost), Gunnar ignores Högni's advice and the brothers set out for Atli's court. When they arrive, Guðrún begs them to flee, but Gunnar says that it is too late. Thereupon, Gunnar and

The Saga of Gísli:

Gísli Surrson, an uncle of Snorri goði, lived in the third quarter of the tenth century. The earlier of the two sagas about him may have been written in the latter part of the twelfth century.



Högni are captured, though Högni defends his brother most valiantly, slaying seven men with the sword and throwing another into the hearth fire. Atli now demands that Gunnar give him the Niflung hoard or die. Gunnar says that he will reveal the hiding place of the treasure only if his brother Högni's heart is laid in his hand. The Huns first cut out the heart of a thrall, but Gunnar is not deceived, because, he says, only a thrall's heart would beat so much. The Huns then cut out Högni's heart, whereupon Gunnar tells Atli that now only he knows the secret of the hoard and he will not tell. Atli then has Gunnar thrown into a serpent pit, where he holds off the serpents for a time by playing the harp. When Atli returns to his hall he is met by his wife, Guðrún, who offers him young game to eat. After the Huns have eaten, Guðrún announces that to avenge her brothers she has slain her two sons by Atli and that this is the meat they have eaten. That night she kills Atli in their bed and, after warning the housecarls and freeing the dogs so that they may escape, she sets fire to the hall, burning up the dead Atli and his sleeping men.

Like the lays, some of the sagas show how fate relentlessly pursues its ends by placing individuals in situations where honor demands that they do something dreadful to their relatives or neighbors. The deeds committed in the name of honor are usually not so extreme in the sagas as in the lays: no mother kills and cooks her own children, no wife slays her husband with her own hand (though Hallgerðr stands by and lets her husband be killed because he had once slapped her). The sagas also differ from the lays in the painstaking and explicit manner in which they reveal the influence of fate in every chronological step of the action.

The saga begins in Norway and introduces us to three siblings: Thórdís, the handsome and wilful sister, who takes her fun where she can find it; Thorkell, the elder brother, who is easy-going and inclined to make friends outside of the family; and Gísli, who is ruthless and zealous in defending family honor. Before the family leaves Norway for Iceland, Gísli has killed three of Thórdís' suitors and two of Thorkell's friends, always for reasons compatible with his code of honor.

In Iceland the three siblings and their spouses settle in the same district and are joined by Véstein, the brother of Auðr, Gísli's wife. Gísli hears that a man has predicted that this powerful family group will be at odds within three years. Thereupon he suggests that he, Véstein, Thorkell, and Thorgrímr, swear an oath of blood brotherhood. But the men qualify their oaths so that Thorgrímr is not bound by an oath to Véstein and Gísli is not bound by oath to Thorgrímr. Gísli remarks that he thinks that fate will have its way in this matter.

Subsequently, Auðr (Gísli's wife) makes an unguarded remark which reveals that Asgerðr (Thorkell's wife) is having an affair with Véstein. This remark is overheard by Thorkell. Thorkell now asks for a division of property, leaves Gísli's homestead, and goes to live with Thórdís and Thorgrímr, Auðr tells Gísli about her unlucky words and asks him not to be angry with her. But he does not blame her, saying: "Fate's words will be spoken by someone."

Véstein having gone abroad, Gísli does all that he can to keep him from returning to the district. But fate thwarts Gísli's efforts: Véstein returns and is slain by Thorgrímr (egged on by his brother-in-law, Thorkell). Auðr tells a thrall to take the weapon out of her brother's

corpse, but the thrall is afraid. Then Gísli comes in and removes the weapon which (so the saga writer asserts) obligates him to take vengeance.

Subsequently Thorgrímr reveals to Gísli that he is the slayer. Now it is Thorkell who tries to stop the progress of fate by counseling peacefulness, but his friend Thorgrímr will not listen to him and once again insults Gísli by demanding that Gísli send him some tapestries that belonged to Véstein. Gísli sends the tapestries but asks the carrier to slide back the bolts of Thorgrímr's house on that night. Then Gísli takes the spear which slew Véstein and, in the dark of night, he kills Thorgrímr, even though he is lying in bed with his wife, Gísli's sister. Gísli also leaves the weapon in the wound.

Gísli's sister, Thórdís, now marries her slain husband's brother and proceeds to egg him on to vengeance. The matter is taken to the Thing and Gísli is declared an outlaw. Gísli tries several times to get his relatives and other chieftains to arrange a settlement, but matters always turn out badly for him. This, the saga ascribes to witchcraft, for Gísli had killed a sorcerer who had laid a curse on him—so that no man on the main island would help him. An isolated, hunted man, he flees from hiding place to hiding place. His dreams are haunted by two supernatural women, one gentle and the other bloodthirsty, but neither of these dream creatures helps him. And when his dream women tell him that his time has come, he proceeds to his doom without hesitation, defending himself against fifteen adversaries. Even when his entrails fall out, he ties them up in his kirtle and kills a man with his last blow. So valiant is his defense that the characteristically restrained Icelandic saga writer goes so far as to remark: "And it is everywhere agreed that never in this country has one man put up a more famous defense, so far as such things can be known for certain."

Gísli's wife, who is portrayed as a loyal and honorable woman, does not urge her husband to avenge her slain brother, though by ancient custom a woman's primary loyalties were to her blood kin. After Gísli's death she goes to come to end her days. Thórdís, Gísli's sister, first encourages her second husband to kill Gísli; then, when Gísli has been slain, she tries

to kill her husband's cousin, the man who led the party that slew her brother. Véstein's young sons kill Thorkell.

Njál's Saga:

The events on which this saga is based occurred shortly after the turn of the eleventh century. The saga about Njál is relatively late—around 1300.

Njál's saga is even more complicated than Gísli's. First it tells, step by step, how Gunnar, an honorable but not very astute man and a loyal friend to Njál, is brought to his doom because of his own impulsive acts and because he follows the well-intentioned and just advice of Njál. Next it tells how the Christian Njál—wise, restrained, and respectful of the law—pursues a path that inexorably brings about his death and the death of most of his kin. Then it tells how Kári, the blood-brother of Skarpeðin, one of Njál's sons, takes vengeance.

Njál's sons are contentious and jealous of their honor and they make many enemies. When the relatives of the men they have slain approach Njál's homestead, the sons wish to stand outside and fight—and the saga makes it clear that, had they done so, their adversaries might not have attacked. But Njál tells them to go into the buildings, pointing out how well Gunnar defended himself against a great number of men. Skarpeðin retorts that the men who attacked Gunnar were of "noble mind" whereas the men they are facing are likely to set the house on fire. But Njál has his way. The avengers fire the house and their leader, who does not want to kill Njál, offers the old man permission to leave. But Njál answers in the words of a man of honor, saying, "I will not come out, for I am an old man and little fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame." The avengers then ask his wife to come out, but she says, "As a young woman I was married to Njál and vowed that one fate should befall us both." She then notices her little grandson and tells him that he is to go out of the house. But the boy says, "You promised me grandmother, that we two should never part, and that's the way I want it to be." The grandmother says not a word; she picks the boy up and carries him to the bed to die with herself and her husband.

THE EMERGENCE OF MAN AS INDIVIDUAL

In magical or mythological literatures man, as an individual or character, often plays a petty role; sometimes he does not appear at all. Most of the important actors are Beings who demonstrate their nature and Power by doing wonderful deeds. When humans are introduced they are usually featureless young men who cannot be distinguished from each other by any of the aesthetic criteria of a sophisticated society. Judged aesthetically, the heroes of most American Indian "hero tales" are monotonously alike, the narrators rarely mention whether the hero is brave or cowardly, tall or short, clever or stupid—since, from their point of view, these individualistic aspects of personality or character are not worthy of comment. What is important is that the young hero establish a proper and advantageous relationship with some Being, thereby gaining Vital Power which he will use to help himself and his relatives.

Old Scandinavian mythology retains some of this magical indifference to individuality or personality. The gods are Beings with idiosyncratic Powers rather than strong, resolute, or peculiar characters. Specifically human beings or individuals rarely appear and the gods are not always anthropomorphic: Óðin, for example, is not so much a "human" character or personality as a Great Being who may assume the shape of a serpent or eagle as easily as that of a man. Similarly, the warriors in *The First Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer* are not individual characters, but men who are acting so much like proper warriors that without labels one cannot be told from the other.

An entirely different phenomenon appears in *The Lay of Völund*, *The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer*, *The Lay of Aili*, and even more dramatically, in the sagas. Here, as Hollander remarks, there are true characters "limned with a few bold strokes" who "stand before us indelibly." Völund, Sigurð, Gunnar, Guðrún, and Brynhild are distinct personalities, not by reason of their particular magical Power or their particular position in a society, but because they feel and behave differently in the face of similar crises or dilemmas. It is the intense

interest of the poet in the particular pattern of response of his hero (or heroine)—a pattern expressing the personal sense of honor of a distinct individual—that sharply distinguishes these lays and sagas from the Power-oriented myths, the ritual dramas, and the deed-encrusted eulogies of the skalds. An obvious but fine example is the account of the burning of Njál. Every person who dies, warrior, old man, woman, or child, meets death bravely. But each meets it in his own way.

It is probably no accident that the literary works in which these genuine and unforgettable human characters appear pay scant attention to gods, giants, dragons, and other remarkable Beings. They may be referred to by the human actors, but they no longer show their faces or speak lines.

SELF-RELIANCE AND RESOLUTION

Another peculiarly sophisticated aspect of the "character structure" of the heroes is their self-reliance and their unfaltering resolution. In a thoroughly magical literature, a hero almost never does any remarkable or virtuous act by himself. Indeed, the more remarkable the deed, the more certain would be its observers that it had been accomplished through the aid of Powerful Beings. While the *Iliad* is by no means a simple tribal tale, it has retained this particular aspect of the magical world view, for the poet is always careful to point out that any noteworthy deed was accomplished through divine possession or coaching.

In marked and even striking contrast, the heroes of the dilemma-oriented lays and sagas of Old Scandinavia tend to keep their own counsel, act for themselves, and take the consequences. Gísli is an outstanding example. He makes all of his decisions for himself. No one shelters him but his wife, a bondmaid, and an impoverished cotter. When he asks his brother for aid he is told, "A man is his own company for most of the way." At the end of the saga he stands and dies "bereft and robbed of everything but his innate worth and ability." This type of hero would not make sense to persons thoroughly immersed in the enchanted world view.

It is the singular self-reliance and resolution

of these human beings that makes many of the death scenes described in the sagas so moving. When they know that they are to die, they look for support to no one but themselves. Having made a resolve, they see it through to the end; or, if, as warriors, they have taken a stand, they fight with all their might and main. There was no higher praise than this: "His attackers said that he never gave ground, and they could not see that his last blow was weaker than his first."

FATE IN THE MAGICAL WORLD

In that part of the ancient heathen literature which does not emphasize moral dilemmas, a man's fate, doom, or lot is usually bound up with or determined by one or more remarkable Beings. There are the birth-norns or *dísir* (female beings of Power) who may appear at the birth of a child and "spin out his fate,"

giving him gifts both useful and otherwise. There is a story in Saxo Grammaticus about a Danish king who took his three-year-old son "to pray to three maidens in the temple," whereupon the first two gave him charm and generosity but the last decreed that he should be niggardly in giving gifts. We are told that the heathen held feasts in the winter to honor the *dísir*, but whether these particular female beings were honored because they controlled men's fate or for other reasons, we do not know.

There are beings called *fulgjur* (sing. *fylgja*—"guardian spirit, attendant"), who attach themselves to certain individuals or families and are intimately related with their fate. Sometimes a man's *fylgja* may warn him of danger and save his life. But when he sees his *fylgja* leaving him he knows that his luck is gone or that he is about to die. There are also female beings who control the fate and fortune of warriors in battle; these are called Valkyries (corpse-choosers), or again, not very helpfully, *dísir* or battle-norns. Moreover, like the birth-norns, these choosers weave the spells that protect their favorites and doom those who are to be slain. One of the most fearful of the Eddic poems pictures the battle maidens as weaving a web of men's entrails with blood-spattered ears as treadles and men's heads as weights. By this spell they doom certain brave warriors to death and protect their favorite. Then there

are three grand maidens of the *Völuspá* who water the world tree, Yggdrasil, and are said to control the fate of men and gods alike. Occasionally we find poems in which the gods (like the divinities in the *Iliad*) favor a human being or doom him to commit dastardly deeds. The unfortunate man can only say, "I was fated fell things to do." When Óðin covets a warrior's services in Valholl, and causes him to fall in battle, this too is likely to be called his "fate." And finally, when a sorceress lays a curse upon a warrior, he may retort defiantly, "My fate does not lie on your tongue."

Fate in this magical or relatively "unheroic" literature is rarely envisaged as truly inexorable or final, for it lies in the hands of Beings who, like human relations or friends, may give welcome or unwelcome gifts, may be bribed or propitiated, or may be thwarted by the power of another Being. In like manner, fate in the magical literature is rarely seen as an amoral, impersonal force, generating moral dilemmas for unsuspecting human beings. Instead, it is referred to as if it were a kind of immanent justice. For example, when Kormák kills a witch's son she curses him so that he is "fated" never to possess his beloved. When King Fróði abuses his giant thralls, they grind out his terrible fate between the millstones. When Hamðir and Sorli kill their half-brother, they "doom" themselves to disaster. Men who swear an oath bring their fate on themselves. If they keep to the oath they will prosper. If they break the oath, the gods, before whom they swore, will destroy them.

In some of the early lays the idea of fate may be used in a somewhat different and less magical sense—as the ultimate explanation of an event which cannot be blamed on sorcery or attributed to the gods. Fate is described by the characters themselves as the force against which there is no remedy. A good example is the incident in which Helgi tells his beloved, Sigrún, that he has killed her brothers and asks her not to grieve because it "avails not to fight against fate." Again, when Helgi himself is slain, his grieving friends remark that his enemy was able to slay him because "the hour was evil."

It is possible that fate, defined as the ultimate explanation of misfortune, may fulfill a useful and necessary function in communities which otherwise see the world in magical fashion. When all magical or supernatural devices fail to

alleviate suffering or avert calamity, the unfortunate event may be blamed on the mysterious power "against which it avails not to fight."

FATE IN THE WORLD OF MORAL DILEMMAS

The kind of fate pictured in the classic sagas and some of the heroic lays is an entirely different phenomenon. It is an impersonal, amoral force, pursuing its own fathomless ends, and lacking the attributes commonly associated with beings. Unlike the temperamental and fallible gods, it can be neither placated nor bribed; it does not punish the evil or the ignoble, nor does it reward the good, the noble, or the brave; it does not assist the pious nor afflict the impious; and from its decrees there is no escape. For the saga writer, this idea of fate becomes a marvelously effective device for the organization of material. Every event in a long and intricate story is put into its proper chronological place and portrayed as having contributed its bit to an ordained and inevitable end. It is here, perhaps, that we see the genesis of the Northern writers' emphasis on causality and linear progression. On the other hand, fate is simultaneously seen as a "personal" attribute of the individual human being, an attribute that develops with him as inevitably as a child within the womb. Each character, great or petty, has "his fate" which he is somehow going to act out as part of the great comprehensive, chronological pattern of the saga. In the parlance of psychoanalysis, one might say that in some of the lays and sagas man is seen as having internalized his fate.

The chief dramatic interest of the fate-oriented lays and sagas lies in the fact that their heroes or heroines never surrender or meekly submit to the power that determines their doom. They are, so to speak, the very opposite of the common conception of "fatalists." If their fate forces them into a situation where honor demands that they commit an excruciating and even inhuman deed, they do not flinch, but act and commit the deed. If they realize that their time has come, they proceed to die honorably and with steadfast courage. Even the most unsympathetic of readers cannot help but conclude that in these Old Scandinavian characters, the

notion of fate or determinism has met as close a match as it is ever likely to meet. For though fate may drive these heroes to commit dreadful deeds, it is never portrayed as having the power to turn them into dastards or cowards. Fate may force a man into a dishonorable or hopeless situation, but it cannot determine how he will feel or how he will act in this situation. His emotions and his deeds are his private responsibility.

COMMENT AND COMPARISON

This "heroic" literature shows us what no enchanted or magical literature hints at, namely, that a man may be blessed with all manner of excellent gifts and qualities and nevertheless commit a deed which law and custom define as evil. At the same time, however, it shows us that it was fate that put the individual into the position where he was obliged to commit the deed and that, moreover, the deed was demanded by the individual's personal sense of honor. Second, this literature shows us that men and women may suffer extreme misfortune and pain through no fault of their own and through no deficiency in their conduct toward the deities and Beings of Power. It is fate that determines what they are and what they must do. Third, the literature shows that in spite of the abysses into which the ruthless dictates of fate may plunge them, human beings may still behave honorably and keep to the code of excellence. Somewhat less explicitly, it demonstrates that doing right can be painful in and of itself and may yield no reward but the expectation that men will remember the deed. The literature also provides an exaltation of the man or woman who keeps to the ideal of excellence under the most demanding of circumstances—the individual who is put to the ultimate test and does not falter or fail.

Both the heroic tradition of the lays and sagas and the magical world view attempt to answer the question. How is it that the virtuous man, the man filled with Vital Power, has been brought low? The enchanted view offers a number of answers: he may have been bewitched; he may have offended a deity, or his time may have come. In any event, he has lost his Vital Power, and unless he can regain it, he is as good as dead. In the heroic tradition it is

fate that brings the great man lower and he retains his manly power until his last breath. In the enchanted view, well-being and happiness are synonymous with virtue and Power. It is doing "good" that has brought happiness; it is doing "bad" that has brought suffering. The idea that being moral or virtuous is a painful process—that doing what is right may hurt not only the doer but his closest kin or the people he loves and admires—does not appear at all. As Lee says of the Trobrianders, "To be Trobriand [to follow the Trobriand pattern] is to be good." In marked contrast, a crucial implication of the fate-oriented lays and sagas is that great virtue and great suffering are inseparable.

If a concern with the meaning of existence is philosophical, the "ethic of manly excellence" is probably the Northman's closest approach to a philosophy. Consciously or unconsciously, the poets and some of the saga writers synthesized two mutually inconsistent ideas: the idea that everything was determined by an amoral, impersonal destiny, and the idea that the excellent man could not be *compelled* to do anything he did not wish to do. With this synthesis, they seem to have produced a kind of naive existentialism, a belief that nothing in life had lasting value except the deeds or actions which brought man fame or good repute:

Cattle die and kinsmen die,
thyself eke soon wilt die;
but fair fame will fade never,
I ween, for him who wins it.

In this chapter I have tried to show that the Old Scandinavian literature reflects a significant change in world view. At one extreme we have the enchanted view (as reflected in mythology and folk tales) where we are shown that the universe is a morally responsible realm, in which life, health, and well-being are inextricably related to virtuous or correct social behavior. At the other extreme we have the disenchanted view of the sceptical and reflective Icelandic saga writers, who painstakingly show us that there is no such moral relationship between man, his deeds, and his fate. Between these extremes, we have the heroic poems which exalt and idealize the men and women who conform to the demands of honor—as they see it—and do what they are fated to do, even if this means that they kill their own flesh and blood.

In so far as dates may be ascribed to these

views, the magical view seems to be the oldest and the most persistent. The heroic view was already well developed in the poetry of the ninth century. The disenchanted view of men like Snorri Sturluson reached its peak in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

I do not suggest that the heroic literature caused the disenchantment it reflects, nor do I try to explain its genesis. My guess is that the idea of the heroic dilemma, inexorably brought about by fate, had its roots in the barbarian migrations of the fifth century and is connected with the rise of chieftains and kings who drew their followers from different lineages and communities. Warriors of this type would almost inevitably develop a moral code differing from that of the folk who stayed at home. The court poets of the "Germanic invasions" and the Viking Age were themselves likely to be warriors from families of rank. How much this relatively sophisticated ethic, which exalted the heroic virtues over and above the powers of magic and the gods, influenced the ordinary man of the Viking Age, I cannot say. If he was in any way a fighter it certainly had the power to move him, for we know that the Christian King, Saint Oláf, asked his skald to intone the Old Lay of Bjarki (which tells how an ancient heathen Danish king's warriors died for him) before the decisive battle of Stiklarstaðir (1030). On the other hand, the Old Scandinavian literature also suggests that there were at all times different levels of "sophistication" among different classes and in different regions. Warriors of the ninth century, listening to poets exalt the heroic ethic, might themselves be devotees of the warrior-sorcerer Óðin, or friends of Thór, just as, in the eleventh century, they were professing Christians. By the late tenth and early eleventh century there were individual warriors who did not put much trust in any Being of Power. By the twelfth century there were literate men who could compose a work like *Kormák's saga*, in which an enchanted and a disenchanted interpretation are set side by side. And by the thirteenth century, there had developed an elite class of men who were able to conceive of an entirely disenchanted and impersonalized universe. Meanwhile, the unlettered folk continued to see the world through the spectacles of the more or less enchanted little traditions, trimmed and frosted with selected aspects of Christianity.

Be all this as it may, I think it likely that the already well developed and prestigious heroic tradition, which grappled so courageously with the fact that fate may doom a blameless and talented individual to a terrible end, provided an attractive ideological framework for the disillusioned, sceptical, and reflective saga writers. Living in an age during which the enchanted heathen tradition could no longer be taken seriously by a learned man, and the Christian tradition seemed to bring only increased confusion and disorder, they created works which demonstrate with a relentless consistency that the universe is an amoral and impersonal establishment and that there is no meaningful relationship between a man's virtues and his victories.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HEROIC ETHIC AND FATE

Phillpotts suggests that the Northmen's emphasis on lasting fame

is an assertion that there is something greater than Fate; the strength of will and the courage of human beings, and the memory which could preserve their deeds. Fame and human character: these were the two things against which Fate could not prevail.

Ker also sees the heroic ethic as an assertion of the power of man's "free will." Perhaps I am splitting hairs, but I feel that our contemporary notions of "free will" or "freedom of the individual" are more formal, self-conscious, and more defensive than the ethic of the Northmen. It is my impression that the Northmen took a free man's right to act without compulsion so much for granted that they did not need to assert it. When the heroes stand and fight their hopeless battles they are most clearly and obviously demonstrating that they are *men*, and that they cannot be moved, broken, or turned aside from the state of manliness by any force whatsoever.

Gehl states emphatically that the major Old Scandinavian (and Old Germanic) literature was not concerned with free will or with a tension between man and his fate. He asserts that fate is not seen as a mysterious, hostile power, alien and external to man, but as a "personal" phenomenon, the fate of a particular hero. Since fate is an essential part of a hero's being, from

his birth to his death, there cannot (for Gehl) be any conflict. The fact that the characters in the sagas often try to avoid or forestall the events which bring their fate upon them might be cited as evidence for conflict. But for this Gehl has an ingenious explanation. The heroes only try to avoid their fate before it is made clear to them. Once they perceive what they must do in order to maintain their honor, they are united with their fate and accept it courageously and joyfully. *Wollen und Müssen* (personal wish and inner obligation) become one, and it is this mystical union which explains the almost incredible courage, resolution—and even the laughter—with which the Northern hero meets his death.

While I find much of Gehl's analysis very perceptive and would agree that the authors of the Old Scandinavian literature often speak of fate as if it were "personal" (though the heroes themselves often speak of fate as if it were something pushed upon them from the outside), I do not feel comfortable with Gehl's psychological explanation of heroic courage. It seems to me that the Old Scandinavians and their poets and writers took it for granted that an excellent man or woman would die bravely and would, invariably, prefer death to dishonor. There was no other path open to them, for to die bravely was the final assertion of personal and familial worth, the ultimate act of honor.

Gehl further suggests that the Northern hero's belief in fate was fundamentally devout in character and speaks of his *Schicksalsfrommigkeit*. He further suggests that the great hero saw his personal fate as an integral part of the all encompassing fate of the cosmos. On this point I think Gehl may have been led astray by his intense interest in integration. For me the disposition to see the fate of the individual as meaningfully related to the fate of the cosmos is much more characteristic of the Old Scandinavian mythology and of the more homely episodes of the family sagas than of the heroic literature. Perhaps the most striking example of a pious or devout life-close, in which individual and "organic" fate are beautifully integrated, is the story of the death of Unn, a Christian lady, as described in the Laxdoela Saga. Unn, full of years, realizes that her time has come. She puts her house in order, arranges a wedding feast for her grandson, bids the guests enjoy themselves,

and then walks "with a firm step" along the hall to her bed. The next morning she is found dead. In contrast, the hero Bjarki, dying on the battlefield, asserts that he will kill Óðin, the god of battle, because Óðin aided the enemy.

Gehl's depiction of the Old Germanic view of fate as pious and integrated also does not take into account that the essence of the fate-oriented literature is the presentation of a moral dilemma: if the individual man is to be the primary source of "right" or "law," he himself must stand ready to be both the executed and the executioner. Nor does it take into account

the poems which depict the god Thór quarreling with the god Óðin. Thór, who along with Frey was a favored god of hereditary land-owners and farmers, accuses Óðin, the god of warriors, skalds, and landless men, of oath-breaking and contempt for the bonds of kindred. Needless to say, respect for the bonds of kindred and the oath were the very backbone of the law and moral order of the little community. And, significantly, in the heroic literature, the most noble of the heroes and heroines are depicted as conforming to the demands of honor, even though this means breaking an oath or slaying their kin.

37. MUSICAL ADAPTATION AMONG AFRO-AMERICANS

JOHN F. SZWED

Reprinted from the Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 82, No. 324, pp. 112-21, 1969. John F. Szwed is Director of the Center for Urban Ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania. His research experience has included field work among Anglo-French peasants in Newfoundland and Afro-Americans in Trinidad and North America. His publications include Black America (1970) and Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives (1970, co-edited with Norman E. Whitten, Jr.).

Just as a mask or a carving of an ancestral figure cannot be understood only in aesthetic terms and outside the social uses for which it was originally intended, so music must be understood in terms of the specific contexts that give rise to it. We saw in the Introduction to this section that as people work, so do they sing, and we consider an example of this in the next selection. John Szwed's major point in this examination of the evolution of Afro-American music is that musical forms and styles reflect alternative adaptive strategies and that—mirroring the diversity of a complex society—different musical styles coexist in the same group or subgroups.

Szwed begins his discussion by pointing directly to the interplay between the African background of Negro music, American slavery, and the dominant white culture. As he notes at the outset of his paper, "Africanisms" have not exerted a single influence on American Negro music; instead, their intensity varies with time and different social and economic conditions. We see here the emergence and differentiation of secular music—the blues—from sacred music and the ways in

which these musical styles are opposed: blues rest on solo singing, which characterizes individualized work patterns and is directed by an individual performer to a collective group, whereas the sacred music out of which blues emerged symbolized and reinforced church participation and the cooperative work team. As Szwed shows, blues were among the instruments that eased the transition from an agricultural society to an urban way of life; in his words, "blues suggest that men are being presented as musical models in a shifting social order."

One of the best recent books in the anthropology of music and social relations is *The Urban Blues*, by Charles Keil (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), in which it is shown that urban blues are a unifying group ceremony. In addition to Alan Lomax's book cited by Szwed, the basic works introducing the reader to this aspect of anthropological research are *The Anthropology of Music*, by Alan P. Merriam (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); *Enemy Way Music*, by David McAllister (Cambridge, Mass.: