

FREDERIC AMORY

NORSE-CHRISTIAN SYNCRETISM
AND *INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA*
IN *SÓLARLJÓÐ*

And if we can never be right, it is better
that we should from time to time change
our way of being wrong.

– T.S. Eliot on Shakespeare

ON THE subject of syncretism, one would have thought, from Wolfgang Lange's thorough discussion of the term and the concept,¹ that Norse-Christian syncretism would have been at least a known phenomenon on the northern horizons after the year 1000, but Peter Foote in one of his lately collected papers² has sought to discredit almost every instance of it that could be adduced from Icelandic medieval history and saga, concluding that 'we have little reason to include any active pagan remnants on the one side or any influential Christian speculation on the other – and no positive syncretism at the conceptual level in the middle either.'³ This resounding conclusion need not deter us, however, from looking for syncretism in a poetic text which Foote has disregarded, where Christian mysticism and Scandinavian mythology seem in idea to embrace each other.

It is to be sure partly a matter of definition as to what we shall declare 'syncretic' in *Sólarljóð*, but this matter will not be helped by acceding to Foote's prime desideratum for the use of the term 'syncretism,' namely, 'to restrict it to the positive and respectful union of elements from different religions that are or have been of peculiar sig-

¹ 'Studien zur christlichen Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000–1200,' in *Palaestra* 222, Göttingen 1958, pp. 17–25 – the 'djuptpløyande innleiing til boka' praised by Bjarne Fidjestøl in his edition of *Sólarljóð*, Bergen 1979, p. 11. One minuscule orthographic correction to these pages: *συνκρητισμός* should have been written *συγκρητισμός* throughout.

² 'Observations on 'syncretism' in early Icelandic Christianity' (1974), as in *Aurvandilstá*, Odense 1984, pp. 84–100, with postscript.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

nificance in those religions.⁴ For not only do people of mixed religion judge of the heterogeneous elements of their faith very confusedly, if they discriminate among them at all, but also the phenomenon of syncretism itself, the intermingling of two religions, is inherently ambivalent. How then can the most patient investigator hope to guess what 'the positive and respectful union of elements' might entail between two such religions as the *heiðinn siður* of Iceland and other Scandinavian lands, and northern European Christianity a thousand years ago? Value judgments on this bias are neither practicable nor desirable.

The study of Old Norse literature in the difficult light of the conversion of Norway and Iceland to Christianity demands first and foremost that we make a firm distinction between syncretism proper – the actual mixing of pagan and Christian rites and beliefs – and what goes under the Tacitean label of *interpretatio*, i.e., the often defective syncretistic preconceptions which both parties to the conversion, Christian missionaries and pagan recipients, impose upon the religions confronting them, and will cling to long afterwards.⁵ The crossover effect of *interpretatio* is immediately evident: from the Christian missionaries we get an *interpretatio christiana* of the Germanic cults, and from the pagan Germans, Anglo-Saxons, or Scandinavians an *interpretatio germanica* of the Church of Rome. Nevertheless, we must not be deceived: these bilateral *interpretationes* remained largely interpretations, oil on the troubled waters, which might calm but did not mix with the opposing religious elements; and yet, since they impregnated the Christianized pagan literature of the Germanic peoples in the post-conversion period of the High Middle Ages, they are of as much interest to us as the scarcer instances of true syncretism in that period. Though there is perhaps no more than a vestige of some religious forms of syncretism in the mid-thirteenth-century *Sólarljóð*, through its imagery of heaven and hell runs an eclectic Icelandic *interpretatio christiana* which freely adapts the myths of the Eddas and the kennings of the skalds to the visions of a Christian seer, and thus synthesizes them in Foote's phrase 'at the conceptual level,' which is to say, 'not at

⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵ See again Lange's *Studien*, pp. 21 f., for the full schema of group interaction in religion: conversion – *interpretatio* – syncretism. The order of the three phenomena is not strictly historical: *interpretatio* can precede conversion as well as succeed syncretism; and it covers the stories about the gods (the myths), besides the divine names.

a level of fundamental significance for Christian orthodoxy.⁶ Unlike true syncretism, this literary synthesis of poetry, mythology, and mysticism did not qualify doctrinally the faith of the *Sólarljóð* poet or of his audience.

Having defined our terms, we can now turn to the text of *Sólarljóð* for illustration.⁷ The poem, composed in the *ljóðaháttir* meter and the Eddic diction of the *Hávamál*, falls into three sections of 32, 20, and 30 stanzas each, which deal first with life in this world in five *exempla*, then with the death of the seer and his passing to the other world, and lastly with life after death in heaven and hell.⁸ The frame story surrounding the whole may be surmised from stanzas 29 and 78 and the interpolated final stanza in some mss., beginning, 'Dásamligt fræði / var þér í draumi kveðit . . .' (*Sljð.* II, p. 24).⁹ A bereaved son dreams that his father – the seer – has revisited him from the other world to give him moral instruction and spiritual guidance, and to picture to him the rewards and punishments of the Christian afterlife. The dream vision, like certain Latin visions of the earlier Middle Ages, is intended to be a warning to the living and a plea for prayer on behalf of the long-suffering dead, as in stanza 82 ('gefi dauðum ró, / en hinum líkn er lífa!').¹⁰ Contrary to what Björn M. Ólsen fancied,¹¹ purgatory has not yet entered into the seer's picture of the other world.¹² As be-

⁶ Cf. in his 'Observations,' op. cit., p. 86, with p. 99.

⁷ Editions with commentaries: Hjalmar Falk, Kristiania 1914 = *Sljð.* I; Björn Magnússon Ólsen, Reykjavík 1915 = *Sljð.* II; and Bjarne Fidjestøl, as in fn. 1 = *Sljð.* III. Further commentary with translation, in Fredrik Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, 1914; 2nd ed., Oslo 1948, pp. 170–208; cf. the sparse comments of Lange in his *Studien*, passim. Besides the Scandinavian translations of Paasche, Falk (in *Sljð.* I), and Severin Eskeland (reprinted in *Sljð.* III), there is also a German translation with notes by Alexander Baumgartner, S.J., 'Das altnordische Sonnenlied,' in *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach* XXXIV (1888), 419–43. References to *Sólarljóð* above will be mainly to Fidjestøl's edition – a conservative revision of Falk's text.

⁸ On the structure of *Sólarljóð*, see Björn M. Ólsen, *Sljð.* II, pp. 25, 35–6, and 65–6, and Fidjestøl, *Sljð.* III, pp. 19–29.

⁹ See on this stanza H. Falk in *Sljð.* I, p. 58 and ms. AM 166b 8vo.

¹⁰ These lines, on which see Baumgartner's note in 'Das altnordische Sonnenlied,' pp. 440–41, are worded in the oldest liturgical language of the Church.

¹¹ In *Sljð.* II, pp. 47–48, 53–54.

¹² In Jacques Le Goff's expert opinion, 'The birth of Purgatory is a phenomenon which we can associate with the turn of the thirteenth century,' *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago 1984, p. 198. This birth might be antedated to the

tween the first section and the second to third, the *exempla* of human frailty in heroic and wayfaring life may appear more worldly and 'pagan,' and the spectacles of heaven and hell more ascetic and 'Christian'; but these appearances, we shall see below, are an oversimplification of the structure of the poem. The author who could envision such spectacles in all their doctrinal particularity was probably a cleric, a cleric who was equally conversant with Church doctrine and the pagan literary culture of Iceland.¹³

At the poetic peak of *Sólarljóð*, which culminates in a series of anaphoric stanzas, 39–45, in section two, the dying seer performs an act of obeisance which may be a piece of true religious syncretism – he bows to the sun (st. 41).

Sól ek sá,
svá þótti mér
sem ek sæja göfgan Guð;
henni ek laut
hinzta sinni
aldaheimi í.

The sun in this and the other 'sól-ek-sá' stanzas is clearly not just the heavenly body, but a symbol of the majestic Christian God, or of Christ Himself, the morning star of *Revelations* XXII, 16, and stanza 39 ('sanna dagstjörnu').¹⁴ The focal biblical and theological image that

Early Middle Ages, but none of the major Latin visions up to *Saint Patrick's Purgatory* made room for purgatory, and neither did the anachronistic *Sólarljóð*.

¹³ Cf. on the author, Björn M. Ólsen in comment on the almsgiving in stanza 69, *Sljð*. II, p. 57, and Falk in *Sljð*. I, p. 54: 'Han hadde, som saa mange islændinger i Sturlungtiden, staat med et ben i kristendommen og med det andet i hedendommens livsmoral.' More one cannot say; Paasche's attribution of *Sólarljóð* to Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson in *Hedenskap og kristendom*, pp. 206–08, exceeds the evidence, leaving up in the air the date of ca. 1200 for *Sólarljóð* that Foote favors in 'Three Dream-Stanzas in Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar,' his *Festschrift* contribution to *Sagnaskemmtun*, ed. Rudolf Simek et al., Vienna 1986, p. 109.

¹⁴ Falk, *Sljð*. I, p. 22, as against Björn M. Ólsen, *Sljð*. II, p. 42, whose reading of the poem is perversely antisymbolic. 'Solen er solen,' as Paasche puts it in *Hedenskap*, p. 181, 'og samtidig er det som skalden gjennem den ser inn til Kristus.'

the seer has before his eyes in the hour of death, the thing he is really 'seeing,' since he cannot be staring at the sun itself, is the image of Christ as 'the sun of righteousness' in *Malachi* IV, 2, which has had a lengthy exegetical history in western Christianity.¹⁵ But was the symbolic sun also a former pagan object of worship, a deified life force, which can still sway the seer? The historic scene at the death of the 'noble pagan,' Porkell máni, in *Landnámabók*, S/H9, is often coupled with *Sólarljóð*, st. 41, in answer to this question, because Porkell acted not unlike the seer and had himself taken out into the sunshine in his dying hour, 'ok fal sik á hendi þeim guði, er sólina hafði skapat.'¹⁶ Though the death scene has been somewhat Christianized, Wolfgang Lange has argued that together with the mass of pre-Christian literary and historical testimony to pagan Scandinavian cult practices it points to some kind of sun worship among the early Icelandic settlers, which, during their conversion to Christianity, lay dormant, to spring up again sporadically in the Christianized culture of medieval Iceland, as in *Sólarljóð*, st. 41.¹⁷

Paradoxically, there is an even better reason in Christianity itself for finding the seer's obeisance syncretic. As Franz Dölger demonstrated in his monograph of 1925, *Sol salutis*,¹⁸ Jewish and Christian genuflection to the East, where the sun rose, was originally an ancient Indian and subsequently a Graeco-Roman rite, which in late Antiquity savored unpleasantly of heathenism to both Jews and Christians, despite their adoption of the same.¹⁹ By the age of Charlemagne, however, the eastward orientation of Christian prayer was ensconced in the Roman

¹⁵ See the fundamental monograph of Franz J. Dölger, *Sol salutis: Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum*, Münster 1925, pp. 381 ff. The biblical phrase 'sol iustitiae' (*Mal.* IV, 2) was translated into Old Icelandic in the Stockholm Homily Book, ed. Theodor Wisén, Lund 1872, pp. 14, 47, 75, as 'réttlætis sól' or 'sunna,' cited by Falk, *Sljð*, I, p. 22. (I have corroborated all references given to Wisén's untrustworthy edition with the facsimile ms. published by Paasche in the *Corpus Codicum Islandicorum Medii Aevi* VIII, Copenhagen 1935.) Cf. Ian J. Kirby, *Biblical Quotation in Old Icelandic-Norwegian Religious Literature*, Reykjavík 1976, p. 117.

¹⁶ As in *Íslenzk fornrit* I, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Reykjavík 1968, i, 46.

¹⁷ *Studien*, pp. 188, 243-45; cf. the Norse references to sun worship of Falk, *Sljð*, I, p. 24.

¹⁸ See especially chs. 2 and 4.

¹⁹ See, e.g., sermon 27 of the fifth-century pope, Leo I, in Abbé Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (abbreviated hereafter *MPL*), LIV, col. 219A, which Dölger quotes, p. 3, fn. 1:

liturgy,²⁰ and with this prayer orientation the Christ symbolism of *sol iustitiae* and *sol salutis*²¹ naturally aligned itself through exegesis. Honorius Augustodunensis, a popular exegete in the northern Church,²² summed up the threefold reason for praying to the East in his *Gemma Animae* I, 95:²³

Una [sc., causa] est, quia in Oriente est patria nostra, scilicet paradisu, unde expulsos nos dolemus. Orantes ergo contra paradisu nos vertimus, quia reditu illius petimus. Alia est, quia in Oriente surgit corpus coeli et lux diei. Ad Orientem itaque nos vertimus, quia Christum, qui est oriens et lux vera, nos adorare significamus, cuius debemus esse coeli, ut eius lux in nobis velit oriri. Tertius [sic] est, quia in Oriente, sol oritur, per quem Christus sol iustitiae exprimitur. Ab hoc promissu habemus, quod in resurrectione ut sol fulgeamus. In oratione ergo contra ortu solis vertimus nos, ut solem angelorum nos adorare intelligamus, et ut ad memoriam nostrae gloriæ resurrectionis revocemus, cum solem, quem in Occidente quasi mori conspeximus, tanta gloria resurgere in Oriente videmus.

To this syncretic complex of beliefs one ought to add the Church practice of facing the dying to the East, which in Antiquity was coeval with praying to the East.²⁴

Now, if with Björn M. Ólsen²⁵ one reads stanzas 39–45 of *Sólarljóð* as a description, pure and simple, of the sun setting in the western ocean, stanza 41 will be discrepant from the Christianized solar myth

‘Quod fieri [i.e., bowing to the rising sun] partim ignorantiae vitio, partim paganitatis spiritu, multum tabescimus et dolemus.’

²⁰ *Sol salutis*, p. 256, with reference to Alcuin’s *De Fide Sanctae et Individuae Trinitatis* I, ii, 5, and Walafrid Strabo’s *Liber de Exordiis et Incrementis Quarundam in Observationibus Ecclesiasticis Rerum* 4.

²¹ As in two hymns quoted in *Sol salutis*, p. 381, the older of which may date to the sixth century.

²² On his Scandinavian influence, see Paul Lehmann, *Skandinaviens Anteil an der lateinischen Literatur und Wissenschaft des Mittelalters* II in *Sitzsb. d. Bay. Ak. d. Wissen.*, Phil.-hist. Abt. H.7, Munich 1937, p. 19, and Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, Oxford 1975, pp. 137–38.

²³ *MPL* CLXXII, col. 575B, quoted by Dölger, p. 257.

²⁴ *Sol salutis*, p. 260.

²⁵ *Sljð.* II, pp. 41–44.

affecting the poem, inasmuch as the seer must then be genuflecting to the West; but as a Christ symbol the sun does not go down in stanza 39, it merely 'droops' with sorrow (cf. st. 44), presumably at the dreadful spectacle of Hell, which the clangorous gates of Death are unfolding, or at the imminent death of the seer.²⁶ Otherwise as the heavenly body it sparkles so brightly (st. 42) that the seer momentarily loses consciousness. We are not told in what quarter of the sky the sun is located, but one would say that it is in the ascendant rather than in decline – 'Máttug hón leizk / á marga vegu / frá því er fyrri var' (st. 40). Wherever its exact location overhead, it is not invalidated religiously as a syncretic object of worship for the seer.

This trace of syncretism is instructive for what it betrays of the conditions under which religions will or will not mix together. Sun-worship was not objectionable to Icelandic Christianity, which was remarkably tolerant of double-faith modes of observance,²⁷ whereas in the Roman Church of late Antiquity it had been suspect before it was absorbed into the Church's regular devotions and exegetically rationalized. The unobjectionable combination of sun-worship and Christian prayer in medieval Iceland is exceptional not only in the Church missions to northern Europe but also in the Church's own struggles with Graeco-Roman paganism in the Mediterranean sphere. To speak here of 'the positive and respectful union of elements from different religions,' as between Norse paganism and northern European Christianity, would be to miss the point to this syncretism, in which the bad Christian associations with sun worship have been conveniently forgotten.

Another likely bit of syncretism in *Sólarljóð* is to hand in the first

²⁶ Cf. the ambiguous lines in stanza 43, 'Sól ek sá / á sjónum skjálfandi . . .,' which mean either 'I saw the sun with faltering eyes,' or 'I saw the sun trembling visibly,' but hardly 'I saw the sun trembling on the sea' (so Björn M. Ólsen, *Sljð*, II, p. 43). It might be most logical that the eyes of the seer should falter, but in a verse from the saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (*Membrana Regia Deperdita*, ed. A. Loth, in *Editiones Arn-magnæanæ* ser. A. 5, Copenhagen 1960, p. 219) even the natural sun 'shudders' while the souls of men are being devoured by the serpent, Satan – 'skelfr ramr rǫðull' (quoted by Falk, *Sljð*, I, p. 23). Baumgartner's German translation of stanza 39 has misled Dölger at p. 386 of *Sol Salutis* to view the sun as setting.

²⁷ On the borderline believers in Iceland and elsewhere, see Walter Baetke's article, 'Stufen und Typen in der Germanenbekehrung' (1939), as in *Vom Geist und Erbe Thules*, Göttingen 1944, pp. 131–33.

counsel of the seer to his son toward the end of section one, in stanza 25, in which the dreamer is advised to pray to those maidens – the *dísir* – who have the ear of God, as in the kenning below, ‘*dísir . . . / dróttins mála . . .*’ (= *dróttins máladísir*):

Dísir bið þú þér
dróttins mála
vera hollar í hugum;
viku eptir
mun þér vilja þíns
allt at óskum gá.

The ‘*dísir* of God’s converse’ have been elevated in this stanza from their pagan status of guardian spirits to the Christian ranks of ‘holy maidens’ – the ‘*helgar meyjar*’ in stanza 73 – who cleanse the souls of those saved from sin, and can intercede for sinners with God, as it says in the Stockholm Homily Book (p. 43); in the heavenly hierarchy of the Church they would be ranged with the saints of the New Covenant, a little lower than the angels, under the supreme authority of the intercessor, Mary.²⁸ The Church officially accords the saints and the angels invocation, if not worship.²⁹ Norse paganism on the other hand sacrificed to the *dísir* during the nocturnal *dísablót*, these spirits unlike the vaguer *fylgjur* having enjoyed a definite cult in Iceland and Norway.³⁰ Peter Foote has conceded that the *fylgjur* could be assimilated ‘positively’ to the guardian angels in Icelandic Christianity,³¹ and we may therefore regard the assimilation of the *dísir* to the Christian *sanctae virgines* in stanzas 25 and 73 of *Sólarljóð* as an equally good instance of syncretism, which upgraded the tutelary deities of an established Norse cult.

Back to the solar imagery of the poem, one may wonder before the suggestive figure of the sun-stag and its two mysterious (human?) leaders, which greet the dead seer on the threshold of hell (st. 55), whether this creature too were not a truly syncretic reminiscence of Christ as

²⁸ Falk, *Sljó*. I, p. 15. On the pagan *dísir*, see Gabriel Turville-Petre’s chapter, ‘Guardian Spirits,’ in *Myth and Religion in the North*, New York, etc. 1964, pp. 221–28.

²⁹ Falk, loc. cit.

³⁰ Turville-Petre, op. cit., pp. 224–25.

³¹ ‘Observations’, op. cit., p. 86.

a stag from Christian tradition and pagan stag cults of Scandinavia and northern Europe.³² We would be overreaching ourselves, however, for a trace of true syncretism in stanza 55, since in fact no stag cult existed in medieval Iceland and the continental stag cults lay historically beyond recall in the early Iron Age. The figure of the sun-stag in *Sólarljóð* is not the product of Norse-Christian syncretism but of a secondary *interpretatio christiana* which fashioned it imaginatively from diverse literary, legendary, and biblical materials. Since such *interpretatio* is integral to the creative process going on in the poem, it is worthwhile pursuing its ramifications about the sun-stag.

The commentators on *Sólarljóð* are agreed that the stag, like the sun itself, is an incarnation of Christ, who took this animal form in *Plácitus saga*, and who in the allegorized *Physiologus* fought the serpent, Satan, as a stag,³³ but the identities of the two leaders of the animal are hidden from us. They cannot be figures of the same stature as Christ anyway – certainly not God the Father and the Holy Ghost!³⁴ – or the poet would have distinguished them more conspicuously. The trio forgathers thus in stanza 55:

Sólar hjört
leit ek sunnan fara,
hann teymdu tveir saman,
føetr hans
stóðu foldu á
en tóku horn til himins.

Two literary echoes are awakened in these lines, from the *Völuspá* (sts. 4–5) and the second *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II (st. 38).³⁵ As

³² On Christ as a stag, see Will E. Peuckert's encyclopaedic note 'Hirsch,' in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* IV, 96 ff., and on the Bronze Age and Iron Age stag cults, Walther Schultz, 'Bemerkungen zum Sonnenhirsch und Opferhirsch,' in *Varia Archaeologica, Festschrift Wilhelm Unverzagt* (Sekt. f. Vor- u. Frühgesch. d. Ak. d. Wissen. z. Berlin 16), Berlin 1964, pp. 435–39.

³³ See the review of scholarly opinion in Fidjestøl, *Sljð.* III, pp. 14–15, along with *Plácitus saga* in *Heilagra manna sögur*, ed. Carl R. Unger, Christiania 1877, II, 194, and fragment B, 14, of the Icelandic *Physiologus*, ed. Halldór Hermannsson, in *Islandica* XXVII, Ithaca 1938, p. 20.

³⁴ So Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 187, and Falk, *Sljð.* I, p. 35.

³⁵ Falk's analogue, *Sljð.* I, p. 35.

the sun in *Völuspá* casts its rays from the south, extending an 'arm' around the horizon, so the sun-stag with its two attendants wends from the south to the entrance of hell, the south being a realm of light in both *Völuspá* and *Sólarljóð*.³⁶ The beast is of tremendous size, with horns that touch the sky. It has been lent heroic dimensions by an epic simile from *Helgakviða II* (loc. cit.), in which the dead Helgi is compared to a young stag with the dew on him: ' . . . sá dýrkálfr, / döggo slunginn, / er øfri ferr / qlum dýrom / ok horn glóa / við himin síalf-an.'³⁷ The simile in effect has been modified to a metaphor for Christ in *Sólarljóð*.

Under a Christian interpretation poetic details in the Eddas might flesh out the composite figure of the sun-stag, but the bristling intent of the great animal towards hell has another, biblical source. The fact that this stag is at once an emanation of the sun and a manifestation of Christ implies that it is symbolically bringing light to some very dark places and preparing to harrow hell. The scene is set as in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus (translated into Old Icelandic as *Niðrstigningar saga*), when Adam and the Old Testament prophets perceive the irresistible incoming of the light of Christ to the darkness of hell – ' . . . scein þar lios fagrt oc biart sva sem af solo iver oss alla.'³⁸ In the context of this Gospel I suspect that the two unidentified leaders of the sun-stag may be either the principal prophets, Isaiah and Daniel, or perhaps the alleged authors of the Gospel, Charinus and Lenthius, who were rescued from hell by Christ and returned from the dead (like the Icelandic seer) to record the glorious event for Nicodemus. The Gospel was at least the generic prototype of the frame-story of *Sólarljóð*.

The *Sólarljóð* poet picks up the redemptive theme of the sun-stag again in stanzas 78–79 of the 'runic' epilogue of the poem – so called because a horn of the beast is forthcoming (after its death), carved with runes:

³⁶ Hence in stanza 56 of our poem the seven *Niðja synir* (= 'the sons of man?') who ride from the north must be akin to the children of darkness – whoever else they may be. Cf. George Tate's paper from the Sixth International Saga Conference (1985), "Heiðar stjörnur' / 'heiðnar stjörnur," *Proceedings*, II, 1030–1, on the directional correspondences between *Sólarljóð* and *Völuspá*.

³⁷ As quoted from *Eddadigte III*, ed. Jón Helgason, Copenhagen, etc. 1968, p. 39.

³⁸ *Heilagra manna søgur*, II, 1.

Arfi! Faðir
 einn ek ráðit hefi
 ok þeir Sólkötlu synir
 hjartar horn
 þat er ór haugi bar
 hinn vitri Vígdvalinn.

Hér eru rúnar
 er ristit hafa
 Njarðar dætr nú . . .

Amidst the perplexities of the above passage,³⁹ I shall sift through those items which are most intelligible and which best exemplify the *interpretatio christiana* of the poet. The runes on the horn spell out in mystical characters the Christian message of sin and damnation or salvation which the seer as one of the heavenly host has delivered to his son from beyond the grave and expounded in a dream vision.⁴⁰ The sinfulness of man is underscored by the poet's assigning of the cutting of the runes to the lustful daughters of Njörðr, of whom the most notorious, Freyja, has been portrayed in stanza 77 as the driving force which rows the boat of this world.⁴¹ By contrast, 'the sons of Sólkatla' with whom the seer expounds the runes will be of the angelic company

³⁹ In the latest article on it, 'Zur Strophe 78 der *Sólarljóð*' in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 100 (1985), 97-108, Detlev Brennecke's attempt to turn the sun-stag in stanzas 55 and 78 into a unicorn is grammatically impossible: the towering horns on the beast in st. 55 are in the *plural*, and the phrase 'hjartar horn' in st. 78 refers to but one of the horns of the stag, or, better, to a carved piece of them, and not to a *single* horn. Brennecke's notion, moreover, of the 'Sólkötlu synir' (st. 78) as the twelve apostles cannot be substantiated by a couple of 13th-century Latin and German sources remote from *Sólarljóð*. Vígdvalinn, however, can be a type of the risen Christ (so Brennecke with most scholars) as well as His successor, Peter (my alternative, below).

⁴⁰ Cf. the runic images in sts. 40, 'dreyrstafir,' and 60, 'feiknstafir.'

⁴¹ Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, pp. 196-97, and Björn M. Ólsen, *Sljð*. II, pp. 58-60, 61, would fit the nine women numerically and etymologically into Walther of Châtillon's schema of the deadly sins in *Alexandris X*, 31-54, or *Alexanders saga*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1925, pp. 144-46; but it is a Procrustean operation which cannot be done without violence to the text; cf. against schematization, Falk, *Sljð*. I, p. 44. The number nine in *Sólarljóð* is generally denotive of pagan-Norse schemata, the number seven of Christian; on this numerology see Fidjestøl, *Sljð*. III, p. 26.

of Mary in heaven, if the name Sólkatla encodes the designation for her in *Revelations* XII, 1, 'mulier amicta sole.'⁴²

The biblical scene behind the second half of stanza 78 is central to our understanding of the religious role of the sun-stag. Outwardly, the poet seems to be retelling an anecdote from the *fornaldar sögur* of a grave robbery⁴³: a being wise in runic lore, by the name of Vígdvalinn, fetched from a burial mound a stag horn which had runes carved on it . . . The name Vígdvalinn – the 'warlike Dvalinn' – can be either a dwarf's name, or a stag's, which is more appropriate to the (human?) bearer of the horn. Unlike the two nameless leaders of the sun-stag, Vígdvalinn is evidently a prominent follower of that stag. Against the biblical background of the scene he stands out most recognizably as the apostle Peter and founder of the Roman Church. For the scene, ostensibly of a Viking grave robbery, is in *Luke* XXIV, 12, and *John* XX, 3–10, the familiar one at the empty tomb of Christ where Peter pondered over the resurrection of our Lord.

The horn by itself has a potency of its own. Apart from any allegorical meanings which were attached to an animal horn, such as salvation (*Luke* I, 69),⁴⁴ or divinity,⁴⁵ or pride and fortitude,⁴⁶ stag antlers functioned in the medieval *Physiologus* as instruments of physical renewal and moral regeneration, enabling the stag that had swallowed a poisonous snake to eliminate the poison from its body. In Honorius Augustodunensis' exposition of the *Physiologus* episode of the fight between the stag and the snake,⁴⁷

Fertur quod cervus, post[quam] serpentem deglutiverit ad
aquam currat, ut per haustum aquae venenum ejiciat; et tunc
cornuam [sic] et pilos excutiat et sic denuo nova recipiat. Ita nos,
karissimi, post peccatum, debemus ad fontem lacrymarum cur-

⁴² Cited by Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 196, and Falk, *Sljð*. I, p. 53.

⁴³ Cf. Björn M. Ólsen's scenario in *Sljð*. II, pp. 61–62, and the line from *Málshátta-kvæði*, st. 8, 'Niðjungur skóf af haugi horn,' in which Falk, *Sljð*. I, pp. 51–52, misapprehends the word 'horn' for the horn of an animal, instead of the corner of a how.

⁴⁴ Cited by Falk, *Sljð*. I, p. 52.

⁴⁵ Alan of Lille's *distinctio* in *MPL* CCX, col. 737B, quoted by Paasche, *Hedenskap og kristendom*, p. 196.

⁴⁶ Theobaldus, *Physiologus*, ed. P. T. Eden, Leiden and Köln 1972, p. 49, and Honorius Augustodunensis, *Speculum Ecclesiae* in *MPL* CLXXII, col. 847D, quoted below.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* in op. cit., col. 847 C–D.

rere et venenum peccatorum a nobis expellere, et cornua superbiae ac pilos mundanae superfluitatis deponere, et cornua fortitudinis contra vicia virtutum resumere.

The allegorizing and moralizing of Honorius were elaborated from the elementary nature-observation of Pseudo-Bede in a gloss on *Psalm XXVIII* (=XXIX), 'Cervorum enim est natura singulis annis ut cornua deponant, et innoventur, venenatum serpentem sine aliqua laesione translutinentes.'⁴⁸ Similarly, the *Sólarljóð* poet may well have constructed the resurrection scene in stanza 78 on the regenerative power in the 'hjartar horn,' whichever of the aforesaid allegorical meanings he attached to it. A relic of Christ the sun-stag, and the scriptural medium of Christianity, this horn becomes a precious talisman as it is handed on from Vígdvalinn (Peter) to the sons of Sólkatla (Mary?), and from the dead seer to his son – in other words, as the teachings of Christ are communicated through the Roman Church to the faithful in Iceland, from father to son, from heaven to earth.

To recapitulate the *interpretatio christiana* of the sun-stag, and the stag horn from the how, the biblical basis for it was the resurrection of Christ and the apocryphal sequel to *Matthew XXVII*, 52–53, of His raising of the dead and harrowing of hell (in *Sólarljóð* this sequence of supernatural events is reversed through stanzas 55 and 78–79). In the poet's legendary sources of the life of St. Placitus-Eustachius and the *Physiologus*, the symbolization of Christ as a stag – a stag that fights the devil in the guise of a serpent – was already standardized, but in carrying the *interpretatio* further, the poet consolidated the peripheral solar images of light in these sources⁴⁹ with the dominant liturgical and syncretic conception of Christ as the sun. One predictable result of this proceeding was nothing more or less than the creation of the sun-stag, that chimera of the poetic imagination that the commentators on *Sólarljóð* have hunted far and wide. Quite unpredictable, however, was the happy inspiration of the poet to insinuate under the externals of a Viking grave robbery the resurrection of Christ and preservation

⁴⁸ In *MPL* XCII, col. 624 C–D. This horn-molting, be it said, is not mentioned in the extant fragments of the Icelandic *Physiologus*.

⁴⁹ See the quotation from *Niðrstigningar saga* above, p. 260, and the phrase in *Plácítus saga* (*Heilagra manna sögur* II, 194), 'krossmark sólu bjartara,' quoted by Björn M. Ólsen, *Sljð*. II, p. 52.

of His teachings by Peter. Though the stag horn in this 'robbery' could have had several allegorical meanings, the poet utilized it primarily for its physiological power of regeneration on the living stag, which it evokes after death as the risen Christ; carved with runes, it likewise serves to transmit the Christian message.

The syncretism of *Sólarljóð*, which I have confined to a couple of stanzas (25 and 41), tends as with the creation of the sun-stag to break up in the composition of the poem into increasingly complex, quasi-syncretic, literary processes, which are governed by the hermeneutic principle of *interpretatio christiana* and the poet's imagination (the X-factor). Synthetic as these processes are in interworking Christian themes with Norse literary subjects and cultural objects, they fail of being precisely syncretic because there usually is not involved any high-level religious belief or active cult practice on either side of them. So much may be allowed to Peter Foote's narrow definition of Norse-Christian syncretism.

Against the *interpretatio christiana* in section two and three of *Sólarljóð* the commentators on the poem have occasionally postulated an *interpretatio germanica* in passages of section one wherever the poet seems to waver between Christian and pagan ethics, or even prefer the latter.⁵⁰ But their equation of paganism with a specific code of ethics – e.g., the Germanic *lex talionis* – is a scholarly fallacy of German and Scandinavian religious thought which has been refuted more than once, as by Hans Kuhn in a lecture of 1966.⁵¹ Moreover, the allegedly pagan ethics in stanzas 10 and 19 are susceptible of fairly straightforward Christian interpretation. The moral in stanza 10 to the *exemplum* of two men who loved disastrously one woman – 'opt verðr kvalræði af konum' – is not peculiarly 'Eddic' but more commonly Christian; and the well-meant advice in stanza 19, never to trust your enemies, repaying fair speeches with fine assurances,⁵² borrows a phrase from *Hávamál*, st. 45, but only in order to render the injunc-

⁵⁰ See Falk on stanza 10 (= his stanza 11) in *Sljð*. I, pp. 6–7; and Falk again in *ibid.*, pp. 11–13, Björn M. Ólsen in *Sljð*. II, pp. 33–34, and Fidjestøl in *Sljð*. III, pp. 38–41, on stanza 19 (= Falk's st. 20).

⁵¹ 'Das Fortleben des germanischen Heidentums nach der Christianisierung,' *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Dietrich Hofmann et al., II, Berlin 1971, 378 ff.

⁵² 'Góðu þu heit' in the mss., superfluously emended by Björn M. Ólsen, at the instigation of Falk, to 'góðu þót heiti.'

tion in *Matthew X*, 16, to be prudent as serpents in a hostile environment.⁵³ In brief, the ethics in section one of *Sólarljóð* conform in structure to the visions in sections two and three, with a continuous *interpretatio christiana* running beneath the literary and heathenish *exempla* of heroic life in the northern world, as it does on through the spectacles of heaven and hell in the other world. Section one, if you will, is a condensed Christian version of the *Hávamál*, which is propaedeutic to the esoteric revelations of the visions in the rest of the poem.

In *Sólarljóð* the poet's interpretation of pagan myths as Christian symbols is admittedly idiosyncratic, but it is nonetheless justifiable in principle by the medieval hermeneutic rule for the *integumentum* of mythology which was said to 'cover' the moral or spiritual truth in classical literature: 'integumentum vero est oratio sub fabulosa narratione verum claudens intellectum, ut de Orpheo.'⁵⁴ According to this rule, the edifying truth in literature has been clothed by the poets with fables or myths, which must be removed by their readers to discover the truth underneath.⁵⁵ We will not go so very far wrong if we abide by this rule in our reading of *Sólarljóð* as I have in this short paper by hewing to the Christian tenor of the mythologizing and moralizing of its author.

ÁGRIP

Í þessari grein er sýnt fram á grundvallarmun á samruna tvennra trúarbragða annars vegar, og hins vegar túlkun kristniþóða eða trúvarnarmanna á heiðnum goðsögnum er þeir skoða sem kristin tákn. Samruni trúarbragða á með réttu við raunverulegt sambland heiðinna og kristinna helgisíða og átrúnaðar, en

⁵³ Fidjestøl is on the right track with this *interpretatio*, but errs in the hypothesis, *Sljð*. III, p. 41, that the poet 'ironically' suspended judgment in the given case of the imprudent Sörli; cf. the slow torments of Sörli's murderers in hell, stanza 24. Similar advice to that in *Sólarljóð*, st. 19, and *Hávamál*, st. 45, is given in *Hugsvinnsmál*, st. 41 (quoted by Falk, *Sljð*. I, p. 11, fn. 3).

⁵⁴ From Bernhard Silvestris' unpublished commentary on Martianus Capella's *De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae*, as quoted by H. Brinkmann in *Mittelalterliche Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt 1980, p. 169.

⁵⁵ See the subchapter of Brinkmann's book, *Analogische Wahrheit*, pp. 169–214.

kristin eða heiðin túlkun (*interpretatio christiana, germanica*) varðar gagnkvæmar skoðanir sem heiðnir eða kristnir menn hafa á trúarbrögðum hvors hóps um sig án þess að til trúskipta komi. Í *Sólarljóðum* kveður óneitanlega meira að þess háttar túlkun en samruna trúarbragða og mikill hluti greinarinnar fjallar að vísu um hvernig skýra skal hin kristnu tákni sem sérkenna heiðið myndmál kvæðisins. Dæmi um samruna eða blöndun trúarbragða kunna að vera í 41. erindi sem segir frá þeim er sólinni '*laut| hinza sinni| aldaheimi ?*' og í 25. erindi þar sem skýrt er frá *máladísu dróttins*, en hin undarlega mynd sólar hjartarins (53. erindi) virðist vera sköpuð af skáldinu og býr þar hvorki að baki trú þess né áheyrenda, enda er hjörturinn bókmenntalegt tákni Krists eða lærisveins hans, Péturs. Yfirleitt mun reynast vænlegast að lesa *Sólarljóð* í anda túlkunarfræða miðalda og sjá fyrir okkur myndmál kvæðisins eins og þak eða hulu tákna (*integumentum*) sem varpað hafi verið yfir kristilegan boðskap kvæðisins.