

# Returning Fathers

## Sagas, Novels, and the Uncanny

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the question of the relationship between the sagas about early Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and the European novel tradition. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope is used to describe the world of these sagas which is characterized by uncertainty of identities. Todorov's concepts of "étrange," "merveilleux" and "fantastique" are adapted to the analysis of several sagas. The figure of the dead father is identified as a key theme, which leads to an interpretation of *Grettir's Saga* based on Lacan's theory of the Unconscious structured as language.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article tente de comprendre les sagas des Islandais (*Íslendingasögur*) dans le contexte de l'histoire du roman en Europe. Le concept bakhtinien du chronotope permet de décrire le monde de ces sagas comme caractérisé par l'indétermination des identités. Les catégories « étrange », « merveilleux » et « fantastique » formulées par Todorov sont adaptées pour éclairer plusieurs sagas. La figure du père mort y est identifié comme thème central, ce qui mènera à une interprétation de la *Saga de Grettir* basée sur la théorie lacanienne de l'Inconscient structuré comme un langage.

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Is it legitimate to view the sagas about early Icelanders, or *Íslendingasögur*, as an early manifestation of the European novel?<sup>1</sup> In his influential study of *Hrafnkel's Saga*, Sigurður Nordal gave a positive answer to this question. Nordal's intention was first and foremost to undermine the widespread belief among his contemporaries in the historical veracity of the sagas. He was also insisting on the creativity and artfulness of the individual responsible for this particular saga and, implicitly, the authors of all of the forty or so texts which compose the genre of the *Íslendingasögur* (Nordal 70). Since Nordal's days, scholars have explored the sagas from other perspectives: anthropological, legal, religious, etc., also coming back occasionally to their literary aspects. However, few have addressed the question of their relationship with the novel tradition. There are two notable exceptions to this: Joseph Harris, who published an important article on the "Saga as Historical Novel" (187-219), and Vésteinn Ólason, who devoted a short but useful chapter to it in his *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (228-237).

For Harris the sagas are "historical" because their authors' vision of the past was shaped by a Christian attitude to time: from Creation to Fall and from Incarnation to the Day of Judgement. The Conversion of Scandinavia, and more specifically Iceland, is a watershed in their construction of the past. It is to a large extent based on an opposition between pagans and Christians, where the different people from the past are characterised in relation to Christian values, for example "noble heathens" such as Njál or apostates such as Earl Hákon. The sagas are comparable to Sir Walter Scott's historically inspired novels, because they blend together real and fictional events and characters, but also because they are to some extent meditating on a past which is both different from and similar to the present (Harris 230; 260).

Though Vésteinn Ólason admits there is some basis for the comparison between the sagas about early Icelanders and the novel, he chooses to highlight their differences (235). Among these are the saga authors' apparent lack of interest in the characters' inner life and the absence of authorial commentary and of a clear distinction between society and individual, which is an important aspect of the novel as genre. Ólason even undermines any attempt to draw a parallel between the terse style of the sagas and the seemingly objective narrator of Hemingway (235-36). His conclusion is that the sagas are "a distinctive and, in certain respects, unique literary genre. For all the features they share with other categories of narrative there are a number of important differences relating ultimately to the special historical and cultural circumstances out of which the *Íslendingasögur* grew" (237).

It is of course impossible to disagree that these sagas are the fruit of "special historical and cultural circumstances." This is true of every artistic form. However, one of these circumstances is not, as might be thought, that Iceland and the other Nordic countries were isolated from the rest of Western Europe in the thirteenth

century. Quite to the contrary, they were very much a part of medieval Christianity, not only through religious beliefs and ecclesiastical practices, but also in the general trends structuring society, such as the strengthening of royal power and the development of a written lay culture (Winroth 164). Studying the sagas with an eye on the more recent novel is therefore a contribution to the history of a form of expression which emerged in the medieval West, but has spread to the rest of the world and remains quite vibrant today (Scarpetta).

There is no consensus on when to date the beginnings of the novel as such. Many look to the realist novels of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and France (Watt). Others want to push it back further, at least as far as Cervantes or Rabelais (Kundera). Still others see its origins in Late Antiquity and argue that too little has been made of the influence of novels from that period on late medieval authors (Doody). Finally, there are those who maintain that the main characteristics of the novel were already in place in the twelfth century in the works of Chrétien de Troyes (Zink 38).

There is also a debate on how to define the novel, turning not least on whether or not romance and fantasy belong to the genre or whether narratives that do not show some degree of realism should be excluded (McKeon; Doody). It is worthwhile to consider the sagas about early Icelanders in this context, because in many respects they can be viewed as realist literature, while in others they portray characters and events which do not fit into a modern view of what can actually happen in reality. On the one hand, the physical properties and the social constraints of the imaginary world of the *Íslendingasögur* are quite similar, despite some differences, to what we know about the times in which they were written. On the other, things happen in the sagas that modern readers would qualify as fantastic or supernatural.

In the following pages, this quality of the world of the sagas about early Icelanders will be discussed in light of two separate approaches to the novel. In an earlier and briefer section, I will explore to what extent the concept of the *chronotope*, as formulated by the Russian theorist of the novel, Mikhaïl Bakhtin, is useful to explain the particular features which distinguish these sagas from other Old Norse literary genres. Special attention will be given to a type of “in-betweenness” or “uncertainty of identities” which characterises this particular group of sagas. In a later and longer section, more attention will be given to the supernatural in these sagas. Here I will take my cue from Francis Dubost and his work on the “fantastique médiéval” to suggest possible novelistic readings of passages from three sagas, *Egil’s Saga*, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, and *Grettir’s Saga*.

## Chronotope and Ambiguity

We know enough about the early development of narrative literature in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland to see how an image of the period of

Settlement and Conversion was progressively constructed before the advent of the sagas about early Icelanders (Kristjánsson 21-24). In the twelfth century, the works of Ari the Learned established a chronology of the discovery, settlement and conversion of the country, as well as the founding of its major institutions (Alþingi, Fifth court, bishoprics of Skálholt and Hólar). At the same time, individual traditions about the names and provenance of settlers were collected for the earliest and lost version of *Landnámabók* (Kristjánsson 126). Understandably for a Christian nation, the period of the Conversion was very much in focus (Mundal). The mental image of this period was further enriched a few decades later with the development of biographies of the Norwegian rulers, especially those who ruled during the Conversion period. Often included in these sagas, were short accounts about Icelanders, many of them skalds, and their dealings with these rulers (Jakobsson 395). It was only a question of time before somebody would have the idea of shifting the center of the story from the king to the subject, joining together the world of Norway in the Conversion period and that of Iceland.

These texts developed a constructed image of the past, a “fictional world,” which characterizes all of the sagas about early Icelanders and constitutes them as a genre (Auden; Pavel). Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope can be used to clarify this. The chronotope is a configuration of space and time which is specific to each literary genre and has a certain number of properties (Bakhtin 84). The chronotope of the French *chansons de geste*, for example, is similar to that of the sagas about early Icelanders in the fact that it is based on the mental construction of a historical period two to three centuries older. It differs from the chronotope of the sagas however, because the latter are more embedded in reality, both natural—heroes of the sagas about early Icelanders do not slice their enemies’ hauberks with one blow of their swords—and social—the saga heroes are more involved in complex social relations than a Roland or a Guillaume d’Orange.

The time and settings of the sagas about early Icelanders are Iceland and countries to which Icelanders were likely to travel in the period from the ninth to the eleventh century, i.e. from the Settlement to the Conversion. These times and places constitute their specific chronotope which has a certain number of properties. One of them is that the social and physical world of these sagas is more or less identical to that of their original authors and audience. This probably has quite a lot to do with the fact that these sagas present themselves as history, even though their historical truth is disputable (Kristjánsson 204-06). They nevertheless have a feature which distinguishes them from the other saga genres, most notably from the sagas of the Sturlunga compilation, which are accounts of events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, i.e. contemporary to the time of writing. Elsewhere, I have called this characteristic of the chronotope of the *Íslendingasögur* “ontological uncertainty” (2000a 253). By this I mean an inherent ambiguity attached to the characters and events of these sagas. This ambiguity

is closely linked to the fact that the sagas about early Icelanders take place in a transitional period between paganism and Christianity. The characters are neither entirely pagan nor completely Christian and this has an impact on how they are construed by the saga authors and their audience. Their moral ambiguity can be explored more openly than if they were contemporary Christians.

But the chronotope of the *Íslendingasögur* is also foundational. Iceland is being settled and the basic social and power relations within it are being established. The settlers had a certain position within the society they came from. They did not necessarily retain that position when they came to Iceland. Indeed, settling in a new country creates basic uncertainty about social status, which is another aspect of the ambiguity in the sagas about early Icelanders and their chronotope. This can surely be related to a feature of thirteenth-century society in Iceland. The changes happening in the first half of the century, at the same time as the first *Íslendingasögur* were being written, made it quite likely that a sort of a “déclassé” middle class would appear in society. In this period, there must have been quite a number of people who were the descendants of chieftains and understood themselves to be such, but who were not really members of the ruling class. Their possibilities of social promotion were through service to those with more power than themselves.

The *Saga of Hallfred* gives us an example: Hallfred was the son of Ottar, a noble Norwegian who had to emigrate to Iceland after his father was killed. By the time Ottar arrived in Iceland, all the best land had been settled, and he had to satisfy himself with acquiring land in an area controlled by the powerful chieftains of Vatnsdalr. When he attempted to position himself as their equal, he was forced to leave the region (*Hallfreðar saga* 143-44). His son, Hallfred, tried to assert dominance over someone he considers as his inferior, but failed and was made aware of his dominated position within society. The only way for him to acquire the social position that he feels he is entitled to is through royal service. It is possible to identify persons in the contemporary sagas who could be seen as occupying analogous positions within society as those of Ottar and Hallfred: men who claimed high origin but were nevertheless powerless and were caught up in a conflict between serving more powerful patrons or trying to compete with them. Many of these looked to the royal court as a means to social promotion (Tulinus 2000b 201-05).

Uncertain identities of both the social and metaphysical kind are quite at the heart of the saga of another poet, Egil Skallagrímsson. The identity of the sons of Hildirid, whether they are bastards or legitimate heirs, is the basic uncertainty at the root of Thorolf Kveldulfsson’s undoing, they affirming their legitimacy, he denying it. Later in the saga, the denial of the legitimacy of Asgerd, Egil’s wife, is the source of the main conflict between Egil and King Eirik blood-axe, who denies what Egil affirms. In both cases, doubt is being cast on social identity.

A similar observation could be made about religious and moral identity. Egil is prime-signed, i.e. not quite a Christian and not quite a pagan. The author plays continuously and consistently throughout the saga on this ambiguity, among other things in his wedding to Asgerd, his brother's widow, something a pagan is allowed to do and not a Christian (Tulinius forthcoming).

But there is another side to this play with ambiguous identity that so characterizes the saga of Egil: identity is also always being affirmed. The saga as a whole can be read as establishing the social identity of the descendants of Skallagrim. The equals of Norwegian aristocrats, they have left the country because they haven't been able to submit to the new authority of the king. In Iceland, they themselves claim authority over the region of Borgarfjörður, defending this claim when it is challenged by Steinar in the last part of the saga.

Similarly, Egil's religious identity is finally established at the end of the saga, after its ambiguities have been played out. Indeed, the whole point of the story of Egil's bones being found under the altar of the church at Mosfell and buried again on the edge of the cemetery, is to establish his correct theological status. He is not a pagan. That is why his bones are taken from the burial mound he is first laid to rest in, and moved to a Christian cemetery when the country is converted. However, he is not quite a Christian, and certainly not a saint, as saints are the only people entitled to being buried under the altar. His correct place is at the edge of the cemetery where babies are buried who have only received the shorter baptism because they died before a priest could baptize them properly. This is prescribed in the law-book *Grágás*. Incidentally, the term *primsigning* is used in *Grágás* for the shorter baptism (Tulinius 1997).

*Egils Saga* is therefore characterized by a dialectical relationship between establishing identity and playing with its ambiguities. This is allowed by the nature of the chronotope of the sagas about early Icelanders. The social instability of the Settlement period makes it possible to explore the uncertainties of social identity whereas the "in-between-ness" of the Conversion period permits play with moral and religious ambiguity. This tension between creating identity and deconstructing it is to my mind one of the principal characteristics of the genre.

## Uncertainty and the Fantastic

Another property of the chronotope of the sagas about early Icelanders by which it also has a special relationship to uncertain identities is their portrayal of the supernatural. As has already been said, despite their perceived realism, the sagas present characters and events that do not fit into modern views of reality. This seems to be a problem, unless we relate it to another stream in the history of the novel which runs parallel to the realist stream, namely the fantastic, which yields a literature in the nineteenth century that Tzvetan Todorov studied in his influential 1975 book on the subject. This literature is quite different from the

realist canon though its roots reach far back in literary history (Doody). Its vogue, especially in the nineteenth century, has to do with a crisis of realist representation that prefigures many of the intellectual developments of the twentieth century. This crisis can be seen in the works of major authors such as Flaubert, Dostoyevsky and Maupassant (Jackson; Bayard).

Todorov distinguishes between what he calls “merveilleux” and “étrange.” If the reader decides that the world he has been reading about is governed by other rules than the natural world, if for example birds can talk and men can become wolves, he is in the “merveilleux.” We could also call it the world of fantasy. When on the other hand the reader comes to the conclusion that the laws of nature need not be changed and there is an explanation for the strange phenomena observed, even though it is not obvious, we are in the “étrange.” In this literature, there is hesitation but it is dispelled at the end. There is a third possibility, which is when this hesitation is maintained and the reader continues to be bewildered by the occurrences described after he has finished reading the story. In Todorov’s view, this is “littérature fantastique” (41).

It is this hesitation which is interesting to relate to the “uncertain identities” of the chronotope of the sagas about early Icelanders and at least some examples of the way paranormal events are presented in them. Todorov’s concepts derived from his analysis of nineteenth-century literature have already been adapted to medieval literature by the French literary specialist, Francis Dubost in his 1991 study *Aspects fantastiques de la littérature narrative médiévale (XII<sup>ème</sup> et XIII<sup>ème</sup> siècles)* (220–42). I will now take my cue from him and attempt a reading of one of the most genuinely hair-raising episodes in the saga literature: Grettir’s fight with the revenant Glám.

This fight and the events leading up to it—chapters 32 through 35—are in many ways exceptional in the saga. To begin with it serves as a break in the story of Grettir’s life: the narrative leaves him for two chapters for the first time since he entered the saga, in order to present the characters and set the stage. Secondly, though it is far from Grettir’s only clash with the supernatural, it is the one which receives the most elaborate treatment. Thirdly, this elaboration has a twofold effect, on the one hand it creates uncertainty and raises questions about Glám’s status, both before and after his death and haunting of the valley, and on the other it progressively shifts from being the collective experience of a community to the private experience of the individual, Grettir. This brings us to the fourth aspect of this episode which gives it special importance within the saga: Glám lays a curse upon Grettir which will be the cause of all his subsequent misfortunes. This curse is the explicit answer to the question that underlies the whole of the saga: why did a man who had all it takes to be a hero make such a mess of his life, ending it as an outlaw? In other words an interest is taken in a person’s experience as an individual.

There are three aspects which make this episode especially relevant to the question of the saga's relationship to the novel: 1. the elaborate way in which the narrative outlines Glám's supernatural status; 2. the progressive individuation of the point of view on the supernatural; 3. how this experience of the supernatural is closely linked to the problematic status of this individual, which is what the saga is about.

Before discussing each of these aspects, a brief summary of the four chapters is necessary (*Grettis Saga* 107-23). Thorhall, a farmer from the North of Iceland, has a problem. Supernatural beings haunt his valley and make his herdsmen's life miserable so they won't stay in his service. One summer he goes to Parliament for advice. He is told to hire Glám, a Swede who has recently arrived in Iceland, an unlikable fellow but one who won't mind dealing with such creatures. Thorhall meets Glám and they agree that he will start working for him when winter begins. Everything goes well until Christmas Eve, when Glám refuses to fast like the other members of this Christian household. He goes out to take care of his flock but doesn't come back. The next day he is found dead amidst the traces of a terrible battle. Huge bloody tracks lead into a boulder and it is believed that the supernatural beings which have haunted the valley until then have also perished in the fight with Glám. For mysterious reasons, Glám's body can't be moved to a cemetery and is simply covered with stones. Now it's his turn to haunt the valley, but in a much more virulent way, attacking the farms. No one can do anything to stop him and all of Thorhall's people leave, his daughter is driven insane, and he remains alone with his wife, while Glám's ghost goes on the rampage every night, turning the once prosperous valley into a desert.

Now the story returns to Grettir, who is looking for a heroic deed to accomplish. He hears of the events and decides to go despite warnings that it can only bring him misfortune. The first night he is there, nothing happens, the second nothing seems to happen either, until Thorhall and Grettir discover that Grettir's horse's back has been broken. The third night Glám arrives. He is huge and truly monstrous and Grettir and he fight in the night, first inside the house until they are carried outside where Glám falls on his back with Grettir on top. The wind blows a cloud away from the moon and Glám's face is illuminated, Grettir stares into his eyes and is paralyzed by what he sees. Glám then lays a curse on Grettir, saying that he will not become any stronger than he is now, even though he has only attained half the strength he was supposed to, also that from that moment on all his deeds will turn out badly for him and finally that Glám's eyes will haunt him for the rest of his life making him unable to stay alone at night. After this, Grettir regains his strength and cuts the ghost's head off, placing it by its buttocks before burning the cadaver and burying its ashes where nobody ever passes.

If we begin by looking at Glám's status as a supernatural being, what principally characterizes the part of the episode until Grettir becomes involved



is that the narrator delays being explicit about Glám's nature. Instead he uses a technique that involves giving clues as to what Glám is. These clues are inconclusive and sometimes contradictory and therefore entertain uncertainty about his status as a being.

The first sign that something is out of the ordinary is the disquiet Glám inspires in people. Even the sheep herd together when they hear Glám's deep voice (*Grettis Saga* 110). Indeed, this last element indicates some kind of common features with the wolf, a similarity also suggested by his description: gray eyes set wide apart and wolfish gray hair. Though he is awe-inspiring and unpleasant, there is nothing in his description until then that prepares us for what is to come. Despite his refusal to embrace Christianity and take part in religious activities, he does not seem evil. He rather appears to be a survival from the pagan period, still only a decade or so away at this time in the saga: half man, half wolf. His refusal to comply with Christian rules such as fasting on Christmas Eve does not necessarily mean that he is an enemy of Christianity: he is outside religion.

There are other signs however that seem to indicate that Glám is not just a being from the pre-Christian world and that what happens must be understood in the context of a Christian dialectic between Holy and Unholy. Glám is being moved to a cemetery and the supernatural heaviness can therefore be interpreted as an intervention from some force which does not want Glám's body to be laid to rest in hallowed ground where it can do no harm (*Grettis Saga* 112-13). This interpretation is rendered more plausible by the fact that the body cannot be found when the priest accompanies the men who are to move it. The fact that one of the attributes of the devil in medieval times was the ability to make people see what was not there and not see what was there makes this interesting (Pálsson 99).

Until the very end of the episode, there is constant indecision concerning Glám's status. Some signs suggest that he is a pagan survival in this transitional period, others that he is diabolical. Hermann Pálsson has drawn attention to the close parallels between the Glám episode and the account, in the bishop's saga *Guðmundar saga*, of the ghost Selkolla. Here an unbaptized baby dies out in the open, is invested by an evil spirit, and becomes such a terrible monster that only the holy Gudmund can lay it to rest. As Pálsson points out, Glám's status in Christian terms is the same as that of the baby, neither has been baptized and neither is protected against possession by demons (7).

Through the different stages of the narration it would thus have dawned upon the medieval audience of the saga that Glám's status is that of a non-baptised being, marginally supernatural, which has been possessed, after its death, by an evil spirit. This evil spirit is not the local ghost who haunted the valley before Glám's arrival, but one who is capable of having a far-ranging effect on an individual's life. It seems reasonable to connect him to the boy who makes Grettir lose his temper later on in the saga, when he is submitting himself to the ordeal

that would have proven his innocence in the crime he is accused of. The boy, the saga says, was thought to be an evil spirit sent for Grettir's misfortune (*Grettis Saga* 133). What is being suggested is that some kind of invisible force is conspiring against Grettir's soul.

### Miracles, magic and marvelous

How are we to understand this dialectic between paganism, the diabolical and Christianity? I believe it can be useful to take a look at what was happening concerning attitudes to the supernatural during this period. In his book on *L'Imaginaire médiéval*, Jacques Le Goff discusses the attitude to the supernatural of twelfth- and thirteenth-century clerics for whom there are three types of supernatural phenomena: "miraculosa," i.e. miraculous events or deeds inspired by God or his chosen ones, "magica," engines of the Devil or his followers, and finally "mirabilia," unexplained wonders, mostly from pagan times, which came more to the attention of clerics in these centuries as compared to earlier times (17). If we try to place Glám within this framework, he would be a "mirabilia" which has been invested with an evil spirit coming from Satan: a "mirabilia" which has become "magica." On the other hand, the earlier wonders in the valley, as well as episodes such as that of the trolls in Bárðardalur, are plain "mirabilia."

In his work on the fantastic in twelfth- and thirteenth-century French literature and its links to the development of novelistic discourse, Francis Dubost has taken Le Goff's categories and shown that many works from this period willingly entertain uncertainty about the nature of the supernatural their heroes are confronted with. Is the marvel, be it Breton or other, just that and nothing else or can it be subsumed under either of the two Christian categories, the divine or the diabolical? He distinguishes between two types of medieval narrative. In one type the supernatural is taken for granted as an aspect of the world in which the narrative takes place. He calls this simply "le merveilleux." In the other type, the reader—and very often the hero—is made to ask himself whether the supernatural event or phenomenon might be either divine or diabolical. He expresses this tension with the following diagram where the curved arrows are meant to suggest how the mirabilia are being drawn into either of the opposing categories of the Christian world-view.



The works studied by Dubost have a clear tendency to formulate this questioning of the supernatural, not from the point of view of the community or society, but from the point of view of the individual. It is he who is trying to understand the nature of what he is confronted with (Dubost 1992). Dubost calls this “le fantastique médiéval,” adapting to the medieval mind-set Todorov’s concepts of “étrange” and “merveilleux.” In contrast to nineteenth-century readers, the medieval subject believes in at least some of what we call the supernatural: miracles really happen and the devil exists.

Thus the medieval “fantastique” occurs when the question arises whether the marvellous is miraculous, diabolic or just some kind of pagan wonder. The indecision concerning the nature of the supernatural is therefore highly individualized. Instead of the focus being on the supernatural per se it is on the individual experiencing the supernatural, i.e. on his subjective self (Dubost 1991 231; Dubost 1993 56).

This is clearly what is happening in the Glám episode. The events are persistently presented from the point of view of those who perceive them, but aren’t sure of what to make of them. This uncanniness comes to its climax when Grettir looks into the eyes of the monster. It is possible to show in detail how the narrative becomes increasingly focalized on Grettir as it proceeds. At the end, no one but he looks the ghost in the eye and this experience is the key to his tragic fate, the saga tells us, but also the key to his personality.

This resonates with the historian Peter Brown's article from 1975 on "Society and the Supernatural." He describes there the changing relationship between society and the supernatural in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when there is what he calls "a dramatic shift in the borderline between the subjective and the objective" (143). Among several factors he believes contribute to this mutation, three are relevant to this article. The first is that public institutions become stronger and it is no longer as necessary as it was before to invoke the supernatural in order to keep society together. Ordeals, for example, are not allowed after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. A second factor, which has more direct bearings on *Grettir's Saga*, is a displacement of the supernatural towards the inner sphere. Turning himself inwards with the growing influence of the theology of intention, the individual is increasingly attentive to the supernatural within him, that is to say to how the divine and the diabolical manifest themselves in his soul. Divine Grace leading for example to contrition after sin is an encounter with the supernatural which determines the fate of the soul. This is what we are witnessing in *Grettir's Saga*: the mystery of Glám's supernatural status mirrors the uncertain identity of Grettir as a moral being.

## Dead fathers

Encounter with the supernatural is a key to the deeper layers of the soul in other sagas than *Grettir's Saga*. In *Egil's Saga*, there is an intense, though seldom visible, conflict between Egil and his father, which may be at the very core of the story of this enigmatic individual (Tulinius forthcoming). It is expressed in supernatural terms at least two times in the saga. In an episode from Egil's youth, Skallagrim's wolfish nature suggests that his identity as a human is liminal. It is hinted that he can *hamast*, literally change shapes. This is done when he turns against his own son whom he nearly kills (*Egils Saga* 101). The narrative is quite subtle in the way it entertains this uncertainty. However, the underlying horror of a father wanting to kill his own son is maintained.

The second link between the supernatural and conflict between father and son in *Egil's Saga*, is when Skallagrim himself dies. Father and son have had an unfriendly exchange earlier the same day. Egil has neglected to give his father the silver King Athelstan awarded Skallagrim in compensation for the loss of Egil's older brother Thorolf. Now, Egil has made light of his father's request for what is due to him. After they separate, Skallagrim takes a chest of silver he owns and sinks it into a bog before returning home to die, sitting in an upright position with his eyes open. When Egil comes home, he must dispose of his father's body. He goes into the room, taking care not to be caught in his dead father's gaze, lays the body down, closes its eyes and has a hole made in the wall, so that it won't be carried out through the door (*Egils Saga* 173-75).

This account has a direct parallel in *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Arnkell goði and his father Thorolf Lamefoot have had a fraught relationship. When Arnkell refuses to assist his father in one of his schemes against his neighbours, Thorolf dies in more or less the same circumstances as Skallagrim. Arnkell gives the body the exact same treatment as in Egil's Saga (*Eyrbyggja Saga* 91-92). The difference between the two accounts lies in the fact that Thorolf comes back as an extremely vicious revenant, whereas Skallagrim does not seem to. However, the way Egil handles his father's body more than suggests he fears Skallagrim might come back to haunt him (Tulinius forthcoming).

Elsewhere, I have shown how the theme of dead fathers permeates *Eyrbyggja Saga* (2011). A semiotic analysis coupled with concepts from Freudian psychoanalysis, reveals how the narrative is working through the contradictions of the relationship between sons and fathers. On the one hand, the father is a model to imitate and identify with; on the other, he threatens and punishes. This is suggested in the saga through its main conflict which is between Snorri goði, who is struggling to assert his inherited power over the region, and Arnkell, who is more of a self-made man, and is competing with Snorri for the position of dominant chieftain. Both of their fathers are dead. However, Snorri's father remains dead but is present as the one who gives him his social status, along with his grandfather and great-grandfather, the Norwegian settler Thorolf Mostrarskegg. Arnkell's father, Thorolf, comes back as a revenant, as has been seen. Therefore narrating the difficulties of acquiring power in a stateless society also involves ghostly episodes. This can be related to the duality of the father in Freudian theory: both the figure of the law, a model imposed on the son, and the fearsome tyrant, he who threatens to castrate the son if he does not submit to the law by repressing his desire for the mother. The revenant Thorolf Lamefoot represents the sadistic and castrating father, whereas the memory of the other Thorolf, Thorolf Mostrarskegg, Snorri's great-grandfather, is the model he has to imitate.

Going back to Todorov's concepts of "merveilleux," "étrange" and "fantastique," one could say that in *Eyrbyggja Saga* we are not yet in the domain of the "fantastique," as the saga evinces no uncertainty as to the nature of the supernatural events. They are pre-Christian marvels but it is not suggested, as in *Grettir's Saga*, that they are the work of the Devil. In *Egils Saga*, however, the possibility of the paranormal is merely suggested, since Skallagrim and Egil behave like Thorolf and Arnkell, but Skallagrim does not come back as a revenant. There is however evidence indicating that the saga willingly entertains doubt concerning that, and that he is somehow exacting retribution for Thorolf by causing the death of Böðvar, Egil's favorite son (Tulinius forthcoming).

## The uncanny play of language

There is something terribly unsettling about deadly conflict between fathers and sons. That is why it is the stuff of both myths and tragedies. It also seems to be that of at least three of the sagas about early Icelanders. We have seen it in *Egils Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Let us now turn again to *Grettir's Saga*, thought to be considerably younger than both sagas and composed by someone who had seemingly read both of them (*Grettis Saga* xxviii-xxix).

In a late episode of the saga, Grettir is uncharacteristically lenient in his dealings with an opponent. Grettir has already been an outlaw for a number of years and is now in hiding in the mountains of the Dalir area in western Iceland, preying on travelers and the smaller farmers in the area. The young man's name is Thorodd and he is son to the powerful chieftain Snorri goði, the main character of *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Thorodd has behaved badly and Snorri has sent his son away, telling him not to come back until he has killed an outlaw. Thorodd chooses Grettir, who proves to be more than a match for the young man. However, Grettir refrains from harming him, claiming it is because he fears Thorodd's father and his wisdom (*Grettis Saga* 219-22).

This is far from being the most well-known passage of the saga, but there are many noteworthy aspects to it. First of all, Grettir is quite frank about his feelings. This is the first time he admits to fear of a real person and not a supernatural figure or of Glám's gaze which has haunted him ever since their encounter. Secondly, Grettir shows considerable self-restraint, a quality that he has too little of. As King Olaf says on the occasion of the failed ordeal, Grettir's inability to control himself is at the root of his ill fortune (*Grettis Saga* 134). Though this is not the first time that Grettir shows that he can control his temper, he has never before done so because of fear of a father-figure.

It is no coincidence that he calls Snorri "hærukarlinn," which is a rare expression, or that this scene takes place at precisely this point in the saga. Grettir uses the word *hærukarlinn* to describe Snorri. It means "white-haired old man." The first part *hæru* is the genitive plural form of *hæra* and means "grey hair." It is also the first part of the nicknames of Grettir's grandfather Thorgrim "hærukollr" and his father Asmund "hærulangr." It is also quite interesting that the author—so fond of proverbs as is famously illustrated by the ones Grettir uses as a child to infuriate his father—should let Snorri goði say: "Margr er dulinn at sér." I would translate this as: "Many are those who are hidden to themselves." For anybody interested in the Unconscious as it shapes behavior, language and works of art, this cannot but sound familiar.

Grettir's admission that he fears Thorfinn's father can be understood in light of Grettir's childhood conflicts with his father. He shows time and again that he does not fear his father. Using the language of proverbs, Grettir places himself on an equal footing with Ásmundr. Indeed he shows considerably more verbal

skills than his father. Also, he has no qualms over inflicting physical pain on him when he scratches his back so fiercely with the wool comb that it bleeds (*Grettis Saga* 36-42). Not fearing his father has possibly been Grettir's problem throughout his life but now, as the end of the saga approaches, he finally admits to fearing a father.

This brings us back to the issue of self-restraint. One of Sigmund Freud's discoveries was that in order to learn to control its behaviour, the child must go through a period in which it experiences intense fear of punishment by a third party, outside of the mother-child dyad. This is usually the father or someone occupying his structural place. This fear takes the form of castration anxiety because it is experienced—and also repressed—in the same period that the child is discovering the physical difference between the sexes. The child perceives the mother's less obvious genitalia as an absence of penis and assumes the father has castrated her. Experiencing this fear is an essential part of becoming a socialized human being, of acquiring mastery over one's desires and undergoing the laws of human society. Neurotics experience a characteristic ambivalence towards sexual difference, while perverts tend to deny it (Laplanche and Pontalis 282-87).

The Lacanian spin to this is that submitting to the arbitrariness of the Law also precedes the entry into the world of language, i.e. Saussure's famous arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. The signifier is imposed on meaning by the force of the paternal instance. It is a "coupure" or "cut" into reality. Our contact with the Real—in Lacan's sense of that word—is forever severed by our entry into language, which at the same time heralds the repression of our desires into the Unconscious. The threat of castration is thus intimately linked with language. The Phallus, as symbol of what we have lost and yet desire, but also of the power that threatens it, is what Lacan calls the master signifier. He also calls it the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan 67; 150-154; 284; Evans 162-64).

As beings endowed with language, but also with both consciousness and an Unconscious, we are engaged in a life-long struggle with meaning. We are constantly reacting to the way language imposes its will on us, either by submitting to it or by refusing it, or, as the poet does, by hacking away at it, playing with it, provoking it, undermining the supremacy of the Name-of-the-Father over us (Lacan 159-71).

The term to *hack away* at the name of the father was chosen deliberately. In the episode we have just read, it seems that a fragment of Asmund's name, the four letters that form "hæru," has been dislodged from the paternal eponym and attached to Snorri. If Grettir is not afraid of "hærungr," he does fear "hærukarlinn." One could say that in Grettir's case this word is overdetermined as a signifier of paternity, since both his father and grandfather have nicknames containing it.

We now come to the episode's place in the saga. This is the period in the saga when Grettir is closing the circle. The years of roaming around the country

are over. They were inaugurated by his fight with Glám and are now coming to an end. He will shortly return to his mother and then go on to Drangey, where he will meet his death. Interestingly, the episode just before this one is Grettir's fight with the troll woman in Bárðardalr. Many scholars have remarked on the parallels between this episode and that of the fight with Glám. Both take place inside a farm, which is being subjected to intense damage. In both cases Grettir waits inside until the monster invades the house and in both cases he manages to prevail, though the opponents are manifestly stronger than he is. However, there is a difference in how he disposes of his two foes. Glám has his head cut off and placed between his buttocks. In Bárðardalr, it is the troll-woman's arm which is cut off.

The two episodes seem to be in dialogue with each other; if we pay attention to their differences as well as to the circumstances in which they appear, we might reach a better understanding about what the saga is telling us about Grettir and his fate. In the troll-woman episode, Grettir's ability to rid human dwellings of malevolent supernatural creatures is re-affirmed. He is thanked for it, among others by a priest. He also engages in his only love affair in the saga and fathers a child. As already has been said, he shows unaccustomed restraint in the episode we have studied which takes place immediately afterwards.

The Glám episode on the contrary is Grettir's major traumatic experience. Even though he prevails, the *draugr* has laid a curse upon him which has changed him. He cannot be alone at night, because he is assailed by horrific visions and he has a much shorter temper. As he admits to his uncle afterwards, he has more trouble containing himself and feels more strongly about anything that might be perceived as an offence (*Grettis Saga* 122-23).

By his own admission, this is the only horrific sight that has ever affected him. It incapacitates him so that he cannot brandish his sword and he feels almost as if he is lying between the world of men and that of the dead. The text thus tells us that this is an individual experience of the supernatural and also that it is the individual experiencing himself. In addition, it is a profoundly traumatic episode, which will relegate Grettir to a psychic stage of fear of the dark, being at the mercy of hallucinations, losing his autonomy because he craves company.

Russell Poole has written that: "Glám's role in the scheme of the narrative could be formulated as that of overdetermining characteristics of Grettir that have already manifested themselves in the hero's heritage and upbringing" (7). I agree that there is a deep connection between Grettir's childhood relationship with his parents, the story of his ancestor Önund tréfoþr (*Grettis Saga* 3-25) and what is going on between him and Glám. If we the readers of the saga are spared from the monster's gaze, it is because there is more to Grettir's dealing with him than meets the eye.

During their struggle, they end up outside, Grettir lying on top of Glám. It is then that the moon shines on the monster's face and Grettir sees his gaze. What



horrors does Grettir see in Glám's eyes? A death threat, obviously, but from whom? It is here that I think that the Lacanian approach is useful. What does Grettir do to the body of the *draugr* after he has recomposed himself? By cutting his head off and putting it "við þjó honum," i.e. close to his buttocks, one could say that he is also recomposing his opponent's body.

Of course there is a folkloristic reading of this episode. As in many other Icelandic stories, and probably those of other countries, doing this is a way to keep the evil spirit contained. This does not however exclude other interpretations and I would argue that Grettir is treating Glám's body like a signifier, transforming it to give it a meaning, possibly the deeper meaning of his life. He is taking away the seat of the horrific eyes in which he sees himself close to Hel, and the mouth which has cast on him the spell of his tragic destiny. The head is the seat of phallic power, the power of language and also of castration. It is the terrible unspeakable force of the paternal instance, a power which psychoanalysis tells us we acknowledge in our submission to laws and rules, notably those of language, but of which we also repress our knowledge.

Grettir is taking this sign and putting it somewhere else, in the cleft between the legs, the crotch. By lying on top of Glám, he was in a way casting him as a female, or more precisely as the phallic mother. By putting the sign of the father back where it wasn't, i.e. between the legs, he is symbolically denying castration.

### The floating signifier

Very much in line with the Lacanian approach, this play on the signifier can also be seen in the way the name of Grettir's father, Ásmundr, comes back (gengr apr) in the name of the revenant ("aptrganga"):

**G L Á M R**

**Á s M und R hæru L an G r**

What Grettir does to the body of the castrating and judging figure is paralleled by the author's work on the name of the father. To create Glám, two words have been taken out of Ásmundr's name and eponym, the word "und" or the wound, which is the result of castration, and "hæru," the grey hairs which are a signifier of paternity in Grettir's male lineage.

Significantly, both of these displaced fragments resurface around the same time in the saga. Mention has already been made of the paternal signifier used to characterize Snorri goði: "hærukarlinn faðir þinn." The wound ("und") that had been taken away re-appears in the fight with the troll woman. Indeed, Grettir

does to her the exact opposite of what he does to Glám. Instead of putting back the absent phallus, he cuts it away, when he cuts her arm off. Symbolically, it can be construed, he is acknowledging sexual difference at the same time he is undergoing the law. It is therefore highly significant that it is at this point that Grettir is able to sire his own son (*Grettis Saga* 219).

The dialectic relationship between fragmenting the name of the father and making it whole again is therefore one of the ways in which fiction is engendered in the saga. There are several more examples of this in the saga, especially in the story of Grettir's ancestor, Öundur trúfótr, "the most able-bodied one-legged man in days of yore" (*Grettis Saga* 25-26), but also in the way Grettir is finally killed. It is no coincidence that death comes to him in the form of a floating signifier, i.e. a log inscribed with magic runes and powered by a spell cast by a broken-legged woman (*Grettis Saga* 249-51). Like Öundur's wooden leg that fools his opponent allowing him to cut off his head (*Grettis Saga* 12), the log that brings about Grettir's demise deflects his own lack of restraint upon himself. His leg has almost rotted away when Thorbjorn executes him. However Grettir will not relinquish the phallic sword. His hand has to be cut off his dead body, his "axlar fótr" [foot of the shoulder] as his brother Thorstein later calls it in verse. Not until that has been done, does Grettir let go of it (*Grettis Saga* 261; 275).

In psychoanalytic terms, Grettir's tragedy is that of the denial of castration, and therefore of the refusal to submit to the law. It is quite remarkable that medieval Iceland's most famous and popular outlaw saga should link together in such an intricate way his outlawry, the trauma of his encounter with the supernatural and his story as an individual.

## Conclusion: sagas, novels and the Uncanny

For the South African novelist, André Brink, what defines the novel from its inception is its deep engagement with language. The play of language in *Grettir's Saga* has been studied effectively by Laurence de Looze, and Heather O'Donoghue (180-227). Both insist on the relationship between the development of fictional prose narrative and the practice of skaldic poetry in the sagas about early Icelanders, as I have done elsewhere (2000b). It is easy to imagine why authors, who are so involved in the intricate play of meaning in complex poetry, would also produce artful narrative. In another vein, William Sayers has commented on the links between the representation of revenants and the evolution of saga-writing in relation to historical developments in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. I believe this article combines these approaches and also adds something to what these and other scholars have said about encounters with the paranormal in *Grettir's Saga* and other sagas about early Icelanders. It also contributes to understanding how these sagas belong to the general trend in Western culture leading to the development of the novel as an art form.

By applying Dubost's inspired approach to what he calls "le fantastique médiéval" to the sagas, I have been able to show that the presence of the supernatural in what many perceive as basically realistic stories is an essential part of what makes them novelistic. This can be related to a third factor of change in the relationship between society and the supernatural as described by Peter Brown, which is of relevance here and which hasn't been mentioned yet: In the renaissance of the twelfth century, dependence on authority and Revelation decreased, which led to an increased reliance on the powers of mind and language to know the world (143). This new intellectual self-confidence is visible in these sagas, as in the works of all those who are contributing to the development of the novel, from Chrétien de Troyes onwards. Through their narratives, they are testing their world view, which means both constructing it and undermining it.

The use of Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope makes intelligible why this type of exploration is particularly noticeable in the sagas about early Icelanders, compared to other Old Icelandic genres. The thirteenth-century authors and audience of the sagas are going through a period of change and redefinition of society. The literary representation of the period in which it originated, socially, politically, and spiritually, is an "other scene" in which they can contemplate their own uncertainties. For a medieval Christian the essential uncertainty is about what will happen to the soul. After the twelfth century, the supernatural happens within the soul. Psychoanalysis provides theoretical tools that allow us to determine how the literary representation of encounters with the paranormal in the shadow world of the pre-Christian past open up avenues into the more uncanny aspects of the human soul. As one theorist of literature has recently said, the uncanny "is essentially to do with hesitation and uncertainty" (Royle 19).

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article appeared as "Framliðnir feður: Um forneskju og frásagnarlist í Eyrbyggju, Eglu og Grettlu" in *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, pp. 283–316, edited by Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað, Reykjavík: Heimskringla, háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 1999.

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