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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Day of wrath and doom impending,
David's word with Sibyl's blending,
Heaven and earth in ashes ending!

Dies Irae

I would like to express my thanks to Professor Rae McDonald for her guidance and generous responsiveness.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1920's, two authors of Scandinavian stock wrote novels of rural life in Manitoba. Laura Goodman Salverson's The Viking Heart (1923) described the experiences of an immigrant Icelandic family from the 1870's to the First World War. Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese (1925) had a contemporary setting and covered a period of a few months, from spring to autumn. Her main characters are of indeterminate nationality, although Carlyle King thinks of them as English. However, their family name, Gare, appears to have Norse origins, and many of the other characters are of Icelandic origin.

The authors present vastly dissimilar pictures of Western rural life, Salverson being somewhat idealistic in describing the motives and ambitions of her people, whereas Ostenso creates an extremely introverted and critical representation of the prairie family. Yet, both were greatly affected by their ethnic backgrounds and, in particular, the very powerful literary heritage of the Scandinavians. They shared a pride in coming from Viking stock, but its expression in the novels is obvious in Salverson's work and veiled in Ostenso's.

They both draw heavily on old Icelandic literature for their inspiration and, in particular, for their symbolism. However, in spite of the common influences and the duplication of symbols, there is one major difference. Salverson's story of heroism and fortitude

was modelled on the Icelandic sagas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ostenso, who had more obviously been exposed to the concept of literary symbolism, went back further for her inspiration, to the oldest literature of the Scandinavians, the poetic Elder Edda and later Prose Edda of Iceland. To achieve her effect, she made use of another literary device, the allegory. This is not to say that the novels were unaffected by both types of traditional Icelandic literature. Salverson names three of her characters, Balder, Thor, and Loki, who were all important deities in the myths of the Eddas. Similarly, there is reference to the sagas in Wild Geese, and certainly one episode which can be related to them rather than the Eddas. Nevertheless, the main object of this study is to illustrate how the frameworks of The Viking Heart and Wild Geese were based respectively on the Icelandic family sagas and the Icelandic Eddas.

The Icelandic sagas basically fall into three groups. The oldest, the History sagas, were about kings of Norway, and were biographical. The most recent are the Heroic sagas, tales of Viking heroes. The sagas which are considered the greatest and most important from the literary angle are, however, the third group, the Family sagas. They were written in the thirteenth century and describe the lives, customs, laws, and religious beliefs of Icelandic families in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Their realism and careful use of accurate historical facts at one time led to their being interpreted as actual histories, but this is now doubted. Their stories were violent and dramatic.

The characters assumed a fatalistic approach to life, which was as well, for they often died a cruel death, endured however, with bravery and stoicism. The most famous of these family sagas are Njal's Saga and The Saga of Gisli, both of which will be referred to in this work.

The poetic Elder Edda is the oldest known literature of Iceland. It was passed on orally from generation to generation, but was not recorded until about the thirteenth century. Before this, around the turn of the twelth century, the poet and historian Snorri Sturluson wrote The Prose Edda, drawing on the oral sources of the eddaic poetry. Regrettably, not all of his sources were later recorded, and although there is some duplication of material between the Elder and Prose Eddas, Snorri provides unique information. Unlike the older poetry, which is disjointed and often obscure, Snorri Sturluson's prose provides a distinct story line. He often uses his prose as an introduction to, and it appears, translation of, the older poetic form. One example is in the Ragnarok description, "then shall Heimdallr rise up and blow mightily in the Gjaller-Horn."[1] He ends his prose with a reference to the eddaic poem (Voluspa) before quoting the poem itself: "so it is said in Voluspa: High blows Heimdallr, the horn is aloft."[2]

The main theme of both the Elder and Prose Eddas is the constant battling of the two rival factions of the Norse gods, the Aesir

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[1]Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda, translated from the Icelandic by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, (The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, 1916), p. 79.

[2]Ibid., p. 80.

and the Vanir. The story covers the time from the creation of the world to its destruction in Ragnarok, or the Twilight of the Gods. All of the gods were Aesirs, the Vanes being a splinter group. The Aesir's chief god was Odin, the god of poetry and battle. He also commanded the Valkyries, who summoned fallen warriors to Valhalla. Second in importance was undoubtedly Thor, the god of thunder, the symbol of strength, vitality, and fearlessness. Then, there were the two sibling Vanes, Freyr, the god of plenty, and Freyja, the goddess of love and fertility. The maternal goddess was Frigga, wife of Odin and mother of Balder, the beautiful god. Balder's significance as a deity is indistinct. His importance to the story, however, is most critical. He is the catalyst for the actions of the other gods. His mother roams the world in order to protect him. His father Odin rides to Hel to bring him back from the dead. His death, due to the evil scheming of the malicious devil-god Loki, is the most crucial episode leading to Ragnarok. It is Loki around whom the plot revolves. He has a close relationship with the other gods, and in the early vignettes often helps them. A good example is his journey with Thor to the land of the giants to recover Thor's stolen hammer. As the story progresses, he becomes more and more evil, and his scheming brings so much anger and ill-feeling that the ultimate chaos and destruction of Ragnarok results.

Apart from the characters, the cosmos of the gods is important. There are three worlds, described by Snorri as concentric circles. The innermost is Asgard, the fortress of the gods, then Midgard, the

world of man, and on the outside, Utgard, the land of giants and trolls. Linking the worlds of gods and men is Bifrost, the rainbow bridge. The enormous Midgard serpant circles the world of man, and the dreadful monster Fenrir, the wolf, is preparing to devour Odin, the sun, and the moon. Loki sired both of these creatures, as well as the goddess Hel. Linking all the cosmos together are the roots of Yggdrasil, the world ash and tree of Fate. Below and gnawing at the roots of the tree is Nidhögg, a monster who sucks the blood of the dead.

Perhaps the most relevant aspect of The Elder Edda to this paper is its heavy emphasis on riddles. Much use is made of kennings, or substitute phrases for people or things. For example, 'Balder's Bane' is a kenning for mistletoe, as it was a shaft of mistletoe which killed Balder. Without understanding the kennings, it is difficult to appreciate the eddaic poetry. Peter Salus and Paul Taylor, in their introduction to The Elder Edda, explain the importance of the riddle to the Norsemen.[3] It linked the structure of their language with that of their cosmos and provided an intellectual stimulus to what was of great importance to the Nordic mind, the fate of themselves and their race.

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[3]Paul B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, A Selection, trans., Introduction by Peter H. Salus and Paul B. Taylor, (Vintage Books, New York, 1970), p. 22.

CHAPTER I

THE AUTHORS: LAURA GOODMAN SALVERSON AND MARTHA OSTENSO

Certain biographical information is relevant, since it contributes to an understanding of the writers' artistic consciousness. Salverson and Ostenso were of Scandinavian stock, but, while both drew inspiration from this, their outlooks, and consequently the works themselves, are quite different.

Laura Goodman Salverson

Laura Goodman Salverson was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1890. Both parents were Icelandic immigrants. Her formal education stopped at the high school level. Details of an early life of hardships and struggle are to be found in Salverson's autobiography Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter. In it, the author tells of being nurtured on the rich tales from the Icelandic sagas. She recalls that her mother often spoke of:

> The glamorous reign of the Ancestors, on whose achievements she liked to dwell. They too were outside my small, immediate world, but represent a ghostly court of equity, to whom it was my duty to refer the record of my deeds and misdeeds. . . . One walked warily before this ghostly assembly, and shuddered to be found wanting in commendable behaviour. Consciously and unconsciously, my mother's judgements were invariably coloured by this final court of appeal.[4]

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[4]Laura Goodman Salverson, Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter, (The Reprint Society of Canada Limited, Montreal, 1949), p. 64.

Salverson, in her autobiography, suggests that she can trace her ancestry back to Gunnar Hamundson, the "last of the great Vikings."[5] He was a representative in the old Norse parliament and was renowned for the concern he showed towards less fortunate countrymen. This is presumably the Gunnar Hamundson of Njal's Saga, an important character and great friend of Njal himself. The author describes her mother's home as an

> ancient, historic estate, where a noble Norse chieftain had raised his booth and written his famous laws, and where, in later times, dignitaries of the church pursued their homely ways, cherishing many admirable customs, kindly customs, such as the house-reading, of which mamma so often spoke, when all the household assembled in the badstoffa and the old dean read from the ancient saga, from poetry, or holy writ.[6]

In this description one gets not only the awareness of ancestry but also the relevance of the old days to daily life. Laura Goodman Salverson clearly identified with these traditions. She saw herself as part of an ongoing historic process, and her family's settlement in Canada represented part of her nation's history and an extension of their continuing struggle.

Icelanders had always had to struggle to survive. As Norsemen, they had fled to this isolated island, placing liberty above the bonds of a king's dictatorship. But even here they were subjected to further suppression. Foreign trading powers such as the Hanseatic League and the Harkraemer Syndicate monopolised the economy for centuries. The former group were German merchants who bought Iceland's

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[5] Ibid., p. 65.

[6] Ibid., p. 43.

fishing rights from the Danish King. "Their policy of absolute control and unabating greed rapidly reduced the native fishermen to abject poverty. He could neither buy nor sell through any other agency, and the slightest defection brought swift, and instant punishment."[7] But Icelanders were also betrayed by the very land on which they depended. Down through history the island had been plagued by volcanic eruptions. Salverson gives vivid descriptions of some of these in her autobiography. The facts alone are frightening:

> There are 107 volcanoes in a country which is one fifth larger than Ireland. Since historic times twenty-five vents have caused almost inestimable damage, while countless others, still extant, have been fitfully active. Lava streams from these various sources cover an area of 4,650 square miles.[8]

The author speaks of Iceland as "that ill-fated land."[9] When referring to the loss of more than 200,000 animals in a single eruption she describes the effect as "an Inquisitorian death sentence to a people whose economic resources were so wickedly exploited."[10]

To Salverson, Iceland's literary tradition was closely related to its history, as is evident from her comment on the 19tn century agitators whose efforts finally resulted in independence in 1918:

> These political firebrands might have failed in their monumental task if their message had not been caught up and impregnated by the immortal

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[7] Ibid., p. 91.

[8] Ibid., pp. 92-93.

[9] Ibid., p. 95.

[10] Ibid., p. 95.

> ideology of the national poets. Without the magic of impassioned poetry to fix and hold the public mind to the vision of a liberated Iceland, the inertia of woeful poverty would certainly have defeated these rebel hopes.[11]

This close relationship between history and literature in Salverson's background and thinking is clearly illustrated in Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter, as she describes her first visit to a library. Her knowledge of English was still rudimentary and so she was offered a simple children's book. This held no appeal for the girl "who had been fed on papa's heroic narratives and mamma's proud tales."[12] So she chose instead The Conquests of Julius Caesar:

> Yet there was something here that I wanted, something vital, some proud defiance that captured my fancy. The written word was beyond me, but the pictures were of fighting men, of splendid places whose ruins were like broken music, or rare and graceful images . . . These pictures moved me then, as, indeed, they were destined to move me throughout my bit of time - moved me to a passion to live in this splendid past - to suffer the shocks of turbulent fate, and thrill to those ancient dreams, that even now, breathed from these dull pages an irresistibly stirring charm.[13]

The first and obvious importance of this passage comes from the insight it gives of the individual reactions of the young child. While accepting that there may be distortion in retrospection, she reveals the influence of a family who admired their historical and literary traditions. But more important is the subject matter to which the budding writer is attracted. She sympathizes with Caesar, who helped

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[11] Ibid., p. 97.

[12] Ibid., p. 97

[13] Ibid., pp. 299-300.

develop the great Roman civilization. He was part of a dramatic past where men and deeds were larger than life. The individual was prepared to die for a cause. Even when the splendid palaces fell, it was to her a great event. It would be written in history. Salverson wanted to be part of that splendid past and to take a chance on destiny. One can interpret the title of this chapter of her autobiography, "Meeting Destiny," on different levels. The excerpts highlight the emergence of a thoughtful young mind. As a member of a particular nationality, she has succeeded in paralleling her inherited mythology with another outside her world. Julius Caesar and Joan of Arc have the charisma she has always been taught to admire in Viking stock.

Once, when viewing a picture of the martyred Joan, Salverson recalls her reaction:

> To me, however, it was not a framed print upon a cottage wall in a mundane prairie town. It was a living experience so profound that everything else faded out of mind. . . . It was just as though the centuries had fallen away, and that every act of that piteous drama were being enacted anew. . . I was a point in consciousness . . . But to perceive that all creatures, now and for ever, are extensions of it rounds the sum of existence into a crystal sphere, wherein whosoever has eyes to see can read a fascinating epic.[14]

As a future writer she is already drawn to elements of the epic: an heroic figure, struggle for a grand cause, the importance of the past, the acceptance that fate can alter the course of events. Art and life are interrelated; her art will reveal what she most admires in life.

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[14] Ibid., pp. 183 & 185.

Salverson will set out on her own heroic journey as artist, recalling her father's comment that "only a maker of books had the power to immortalize his age."[15] Here one witnesses the metamorphosis of the artist. She speaks of the world of books as "a hundred empires and a gleaming host of immortals, into which mighty company I might enter at will. . . . Thanks to the saga-man, who wrote on the walls of time."[16] Like another who felt that he must forge the conscience of his race in literature, Salverson accepted her role: "It was a feeling that spread like fire through my consciousness. Standing there, rapt as a sleepwalker, an odd figure, surely, in my funny, made-over clothes, I was face to face with my own predestined Vafallogar."[17]

When Salverson required a framework for her tale, The Viking Heart, she returned to her beloved sagas. They became her medium for expressing the spiritual strength of a race. Clearly, it is the author's aim to recreate a modern Icelandic saga which would, as that early literary genre did, contain all the elements of adventure, heroic behaviour, fatalism, and a final conquering by the spirit. Thus, while The Viking Heart shows the painful and gradual acceptance of The New World, it is even more the record of a whole race who could only face the present and future through the past.

In The Viking Heart, Salverson typifies the immigrant consciousness which maintains the new land as foreign and alien. However,

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[15] Ibid., p. 300.

[16] Ibid., p. 300.

[17] Ibid., pp. 300-301.

in order to articulate the difficulties of this present situation, she must reach back to the past, reminding her race of who they are and what has been achieved. Details of Iceland's long history of survival are included. One learns of a tiny nation struggling on scanty and unreliable resources. It is a land vanquished by a foreign oppressor who stifled the religion and literature of Iceland, replacing them with its own. Later, when economic death forced large sections of population to emigrate, this seemed in fact the final blow in a gruelling series of fated events. The author's recollections of this past are all verifiable in history. Her account of the epidemic which afflicts the Halsson family and many others shortly after their arrival in Canada is recorded in Canadian history. "There was an outbreak of smallpox in October 1877. The disease, though mild at first, increased in virulence when the cold weather forced the people into their small and badly ventilated houses. The plague spread from one end of the colony to the other, and more than fifty persons died."[18]

Salverson presents her portrait on a very wide canvas. This is significant for two reasons. First, the panorama suits Salverson's purpose of portraying an overview of the immigrants' lives. She does this in terms of space by recording the move from Iceland to Canada. She also traces it through passing time. The Halsson family are seen through four generations. Secondly, this episodic style releases her from the necessity of detailed character revelation and permits the

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[18]Adam Shortt and Arthur G Little, General Editors, Canada and its Provinces, (Glasgow, Brook and Company, Toronto, Canada, 1914), Vol. 7, p. 532.

intrusion of regular author-narrator comments. Salverson does not let her characters reveal their inner selves. Their actions are explained by the author. This is justifiable to one who sees herself as spokeswoman for all, who is concerned with the fate of her race, rather than the lives of individuals.

Martha Ostenso

Martha Ostenso was born in Bergen, Norway in 1900. While she was still a youngster, the family left Norway for the United States, but finally settled in Manitoba, Canada. After completing studies at Brandon Collegiate, she became a teacher while pursuing further studies at the University of Manitoba. From what information there is, one knows that Ostenso, like Salverson, had strong emotional ties to her Norse forbears. She writes that "the Ostenso family has lived, in the township that bears its name, since the days of the Vikings . . . [and that] the land that borders the lovely fjord is still in the family's possession."[19]

Details of Ostenso's life are scant in comparison with Salverson's autobiographical outpourings, and yet she has made some direct statements which point to the inspiration behind Wild Geese. Like Salverson, she used her feelings and associations of the past to interpret the present:

> The story of my childhood is a tale of seven little towns in Minnesota and South Dakota. Towns of the field and prairie all, redolent of the soil from

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[19] Grant Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, (Books for Library Press Inc., Freeport, New York, 1967), p. 246.

> which they had sprung and eloquent of the struggle common to the farmer the world over, a struggle but transferred from the Ostenso and Harkeland of the Old World to the richer loam of the new. They should have a story written about them, those seven mean little towns of my childhood! . . . It was during a summer vacation from my university work that I went into the lake district of Manitoba, . . . My novel 'Wild Geese' lay there, waiting to be put into words. Here was the raw material out of which Little Towns were made. Here was human nature stark, un-attired in the convention of a smoother, softer life.[20]

Ostenso went to Columbia and took a course in the technique of the modern novel. One could speculate that in this period she must have gained exposure to the latest developments in contemporary writing. Certainly, she was way beyond what Carlyle King calls "the Sunshine School of Canadian fiction."[21] Wild Geese is testimony to her dislike for hypocrisy in art or life. One can conjecture that a great deal of the spirited, liberated Judith of the novel was Martha Ostenso herself. Like Lind Archer, Ostenso went to work as a fledgling schoolteacher in a small rural community. Clearly the author has a keen sense of the social pressures imposed on young women in such a setting. The role of teacher brought with it particular restraints. W.L. Morton, in his history of Manitoba, writes that Wild Geese

> caused a mild scandal and much shocked discussion in communities, a record of the life of any one of which would have revealed true stories of the same kind. When Miss Ostenso eloped with Douglas Durkin, author of The Lobstick Trail and The Heart

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[20] Ibid., pp. 247-248.

[21] Martha Ostenso, Wild Geese, (McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1971), Introd. Carlyle King, p. v.

> of Cherry McBain - but also a married man - the scandal seemed to be confirmed. But perhaps their flight was symbolic of their rejection by a community which 'remained fast wedded to the old ways in manners and morals.'[22]

Fortunately, there were those who recognized the merit in this young woman's work. She was awarded the Dodd-Mead prize for Wild Geese in 1925.

It is almost inconceivable that Ostenso was not exposed to the works of her compatriot, Ibsen, during her studies. Some claim that he was the greatest dramatist of his age and the first to bring symbolism into modern drama. He drew heavily on Norse myth and saga for many of his plots and symbols. The symbol of the wild duck in Ibsen's play of the same name has been interpreted by Raymond Williams as an "explicit figure for broken and frustrated lives."[23] This description aptly fits the Gare family in Ostenso's Wild Geese. The wild duck in Ibsen's drama has been described as making "a symbol rather than a character central to the action."[24] Ibsen himself viewed Wild Duck and its central symbolism as an innovation: "In some ways this new play occupies a place of its own among my dramatic works . . . I also think that the Wild Duck may perhaps entice some of our younger dramatists into new paths which I hold to be desirable."[25] The wild

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[22]W.L. Morton, Manitoba, A History, (University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 382.

[23]Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot, (Chatto and Windus Ltd., London, 1965), p. 76.

[24]Orley I. Holtan, Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays, (The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1970), p. 38.

[25]Ibid., p. 37.

duck is, of course, a mystery and capable of many interpretations. Ostenso also attempts to convey several levels of meaning to her wild geese. They, like Ibsen's symbol, become a focus for the total work, while, at the same time, suggesting interpretations for particular aspects of the novel. Overall, the symbol can clearly be seen as a mirror of man's condition.

Although Orley Holtan attempts to relate the wild duck to myth, his connections are somewhat tenuous, and the origin of the wild geese as a symbol is just as vague.[26] More specific evidence of Ibsen's influence on Ostenso's work is the introduction of the horse as a fylgje to presage Caleb's death. Ibsen used the fylgje in his dramas. In The Vikings at Helgeland, which Ibsen based on the Icelandic family sagas, Hjordis sees her fylgje in the form of a wolf. More significantly, in Rosmersholm, a ghostly white horse appears prior to deaths in the house. Writing about Rosmersholm, Orley Holtan points out the debt to mythology:

> There is little doubt that Ibsen was making use of a fragment of Norse mythology, especially when we consider his earlier use in The Vikings at Helgeland . . . Pavel Fraenkl argues . . . 'Without white horses, without the death-ritual that ties itself to them, and without the connected mystic tradition that lies behind this conception, there is no drama that can rightly be called Rosmersholm.'[27]

Although Ostenso's symbolism palls in the light of Fraenkl's assertion,

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[26] Ibid., pp. 36-51.

[27] Ibid., p. 56.

it will be seen that the horse is one of the most important symbols in Wild Geese.

While Salverson and Ostenso both brought their Scandinavian heritage into their writings, each started from a different perspective. The Viking Heart is clearly about Icelanders living in Canada, but the place is of secondary importance; it could be any foreign land. They occupy the land, that is all. In Wild Geese, Ostenso's characters are enveloped by a sense of place; the land, the environment contains them. The resolution must spring from the interaction of both.

Caleb is indeed the supreme example of man's fusion with the earth. He identifies only with the earth and the others only see him through it. His nightly walks are attempts to confirm his own existence. Lind Archer sees him as the spiritual counterpart of the land. In symbolic terms, the lantern he always carries close to the earth confirms this spiritual quality. But Caleb Gare is an evil spirit who has transferred his humanity to the land. He has an insatiable desire to possess it.

Ostenso chose the name for her main character with obvious deliberation. Brita Mickleburgh notes that "after all, 'gare' . . . is Old Norse for 'covetous, greedy'."[28] The choice of his first name is even more significant. When God commanded Moses to send a representative from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to spy out the Land of Canaan, Caleb was the one chosen from the tribe of Juda. When

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[28]Brita Mickleburgh, Canadian Literature, Two Centuries in Prose, (McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, Canada, 1973), p. 109.

they returned, Caleb was the only one to state that the tribes were strong enough to conquer the land. For his faith, God gave the land to Caleb; "his seed shall possess it."[29] The others died in their efforts to occupy the territory. By being pre-figured in the Bible, the vision of Caleb Gare's extra-human powers is sharpened. Caleb, son of Jephone, was given a legacy of ownership by God. His descendant, Caleb Gare, has inherited the power to possess land, but in him the gift has become warped. Perhaps it is this mythical significance which Lind Archer is confused by when she contemplates the lot of the Gare family: "she was overwhelmed by her helplessness against the intangible thing that held them there, slaves to the land. It extended farther back than Caleb, this power, although it worked through him."[30] For Salverson it is an external series of events which finally cause the Icelanders to adapt. The Viking Heart is a story of recognition--about the process of discovering home -- but Wild Geese stresses the importance, the necessity, of escaping from that home.

Ostenso went to the Eddas, principally the poetry of the so-called Elder Edda, for her inspiration. She patterned character, events, images, and symbols on what she found in Iceland's most ancient literary form. Ostenso's first published work, In A Far Land, was, perhaps significantly, a book of poems. Wild Geese reflects the compactness and unity of shape and theme found in the Eddas. Furthermore, her vivid descriptions and eye for detail do not infringe on the

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[29] Numbers 14-24.

[30] Martha Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 38.

mood of mystery which she maintains throughout. Always preferring to conserve an unknown, perhaps unknowable, element, she is recorded as saying,"I leave it to those who argue about the relative influences of heredity and environment to decide the responsibility . . . The blood of the Norsemen? The Seven Little Towns? I do not know."[31]

[31]Grant Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 248.

CHAPTER II

THE NOVELS: A SUMMARY OF THE VIKING HEART AND OF WILD GEESE

Summary of The Viking Heart

The story of The Viking Heart by Laura Goodman Salverson begins in Iceland where Einar Halsson and his family live in a manner that was typical of those on that remote island. He is a farmer and fisherman, and one gets a picture of his struggling but contented husbandry. Clearly this is the pastoral idyll. Halsson's family consisted of his wife Gudrun, Borga the elder daughter, Carl the only son, and Helga the youngest child. Carl is the only one who expresses dissatisfaction with life. News of Icelanders' fortunes in Canada have reached his ears. He taints the vision of Iceland as a little Eden by calling it a "burned out country with only patches of green here and there and field after field of lava and basalt."[32] He is referring to the frequent volcanic disturbances which brought recurring tragedies to the Icelanders. Ironically, it is he who loses his life when a volcano does erupt.

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[32]Laura Goodman Salverson, The Viking Heart, (McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, Canada, 1929), p. 14.

When this occurs, the saddened family leave their island home and, in the company of other destitute settlers, arrive in Winnipeg in the October of 1876. The need for employment forces the daughter Borga to separate from the others, who settle at Gimli. When she returns two years later it is to discover that only her mother has survived a smallpox epidemic. She is now an invalid, and Borga stays to care for her, but she dies within a few months. Four years later, Borga marries Bjorn Lindal, whom she had met on the journey to Winnipeg. The children of this marriage are Elizabeth, Ninna, and Thor. The remainder of this novel tells of the lives of this family, but in almost equal balance it focuses on the stories of other settlers who came to know the Lindals. The daily lives of all were filled with busy domesticity: Holidays, christenings, and feast-days brought the settlers together, and Icelandic food and entertainment were enjoyed in common. Salverson comments, "They were still all poor but they were working for home and children and the betterment of self, and with that adaptability of the Norse nature, were becoming fond and proud of this new land."[33]

Anna and Loki Fjalsted are neighbours of the Lindals. It was Anna's sister who helped Borga endure Thor's difficult birth. Anna and Loki have a miserable marriage. She finds Loki cruel and aggressive, while he sees her gentility as unacceptable in a farmer's wife. Their conflict is worsened by the fact that their only child Balder is physically handicapped, having been born lame. When Anna

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[33] Ibid., p. 79.

suffers a mental breakdown, the child is quite neglected until Borga Lindal arranges schooling for him. The musical talent he has inherited from his mother is recognized and he begins to have lessons.

As the children grow older, the elder daughter Elizabeth develops a deep affection for Balder Fjalsted, while he, quite unaware of Elizabeth's feelings for him, worships the beautiful but arrogant and superficial Ninna. The hardworking and cooperative Thor makes no attempt to hide his preference for his understanding sister Elizabeth.

Elizabetn goes to train as a seamstress in Winnipeg where Balder has become a violinist at the Grand Theatre. The Lindals suffer a heavy financial setback when their wheat crop is destroyed. The crop was to have financed Thor's medical school fees. The selfless Elizabeth, who had been saving for a dress designing course, insists on giving Thor the money to start his studies. Ninna has by now caused many suitors anguish and shows no regard for anyone's feelings. As her yearning for material status grows, so does her attempt increase to dissociate herself from her family. Her marriage to a weathy man in Winnipeg marks her total break, since she refuses to be married locally where her family and their friends can attend. Balder has dedicated himself to music and has already quite established himself. When he and Elizabeth meet again, they are both successful in their fields. They are soon married.

Meanwhile, Thor has finished training to be a surgeon. The war in Europe has begun but the Lindals and the Icelandic community feel far removed from it. However, Thor writes to say that he is

coming home to visit, prior to going overseas to help in the war. A few months later, Borga and Bjorn receive news of their son's death. Borga suffers greatly and takes a long time to recover. Acceptance of his death only comes when she interprets it as Thor's sacrifice. In realizing that he was willing to die for Canada, she sees a lesson in this for her. Her flesh and blood have fused in martyrdom with this new land. Thor's sacrifice is her baptism. The Norse experience of glorious death has been transmitted through her son.

Summary of Wild Geese

Martha Ostenso's novel focuses on the daily existence of a rural family in Manitoba. Caleb Gare is a farmer whose obsession with work and acquisition of land drives himself and his family in joyless, puritanical toil. His wife is Amelia, and they have four children, Martin and Ellen, who are twins, and Judith and Charlie.

It is soon apparent that Gare is more than an industrious farmer. He justifies his tyrannical rule over his family by seeing it as punishment for his wife who once bore an illegitimate son to another man. The father was accidentally killed before the birth, and the boy, Mark Jordan, was placed in an orphanage. Caleb Gare never allows Amelia to forget her early misfortune. He is relentless in tormenting both her and the children. Amelia does not protest, since he threatens to tell the children about her other son.

The novel opens with the arrival of a new district schoolteacher, Lind Archer. She is to stay with the Gare family. Lind

quickly senses the atmosphere of fear and subjugation in the household. Furthermore, she notices that Judith is the only one who even attempts to challenge Gare. Judith and Lind become good friends. Judith confides that her father strongly opposes her friendship with a neighbouring boy, Sven Sandbo.

Most of the novel is a close-up view of the enclosed world in which Caleb Gare keeps his family. In fact, it goes further to reveal the isolated shell in which each of them shelters. The neighbours show dislike and fear of Gare. An Icelander, Fusi Arenson, is not afraid and tells Lind that one day he will kill Gare because of his refusal to shelter two of Fusi's brothers, who subsequently died when they were caught in a blizzard. A neighbouring family who have been dragging the lake on their land to recover the bodies of two of their kinfolk who were drowned, despise Caleb because of his attempts to fish in the lake. One of Caleb's distasteful traits is shown in his treatment of Ellen's suitor Malcolm. Malcolm is part Cree and part Scottish and once worked for Gare. The latter makes it quite clear that a half-breed would not be acceptable as a son-in-law. This hostility and Ellen's own timidity lead her to reject Malcolm.

Lind Archer and Mark Jordan are the catalysts through which the tensions in the Gare family are heightened. To Judith, Lind is a symbol of the beauty, refinement, and opportunity of which she herself has been deprived. Their friendship makes Judith realize her alienation from her family: "She was no longer one of them."[34] The

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[34]Martha Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 53.

arrival of Mark Jordan in the district sharpens the old grudge between Caleb and Amelia. But it also brings out new forces in both of them. While the threat to Amelia is closer than she ever imagined it would be, her renewed defense of the secret takes on new forms. While still submitting to Caleb, her reason is now to protect Mark Jordan rather than herself. Furthermore, she is willing to do this at the expense of her family. She no longer attempts to shield herself or them from Caleb, but rather is prepared to sacrifice all to keep Mark ignorant of his parentage.

The strengthening of relationships between Lind and Mark, and Judith and Sven, increases Caleb's threat to expose Amelia's secret. Amelia tries to dissuade Judith from seeing Sven, but the girl refuses. Caleb spies on a meeting between Judith and her lover. Afterwards he reprimands her, and, as he attempts to attack her physically, she retaliates by throwing an axe at him. It barely misses its target. Put at a disadvantage by this act, Judith is bound hand and foot and left in the barn. Then she is not permitted to work in the fields anymore, but must stay in the house under supervision.

By now Lind and Judith have each in their own way suspected that the root of all the troubles lies in Caleb's threat to his wife. Neither knows the nature of the threat, and, when Judith questions her mother, is told that it refers to the hitherto undisclosed dire poverty of her family. As the conflict between Caleb and Judith heightens, so does the man's greed for land. He blackmails a neighbour, Thorvaldson, into selling to him by threatening to disclose that the

neighbour had fished in the Bjarnasson's lake where their relatives had been drowned.

When a Harvest Jubilee is announced in the district, Gare, to his family's surprise, grants permission for them all to attend. Secretly he wants to test Judith by giving her this taste of freedom. Amelia warns Judith to behave, since Caleb could still report her attempt to murder him. Judith reveals that she plans to escape with Sven during the masquerade dance. Amelia realizes her daughter must be pregnant and ponders the consequences of this becoming known. Would Caleb use this opportunity to tell Mark Jordan of his real mother? On the evening of the Jubilee celebrations, the brothers and sisters depart for the gathering while Lind, Amelia, and Caleb remain behind. Amelia accidentally finds a letter addressed to Caleb which proves that the only person who knew that Mark was her son had died six months before.

At the dance, Ellen discovers that Judith has left with Sven. As the couple flee in their buggy, they meet a neighbour who goes directly with the news to Caleb. Gare orders Amelia to tell Mark Jordan the truth about his parentage. For the first time in her life Amelia refuses to obey her husband. He strikes her with a whip, but she still resists. Caleb cannot believe his eyes and continues to attack her. When Lind Archer enters, he threatens her too, but she runs out to get help. Outside, she sees that Caleb's timber is on fire and meets Mark, who has come to warn them. In the house, Caleb realizes that Amelia is victorious and that the trump card he has held

for so many years is now useless. He stumbles out to see his property ablaze and rushes towards it. Mark leaves on horseback to get help, but Caleb attempts singlehandedly to combat the flames. If nothing else, he must save his beloved field of flax. Ignoring reason, he tries a short-cut by crossing the muskeg, but his feet become caught in the mud and his calls for help are lost in the wind and roar of the flames. He is sucked down to his death in the bog as he watches the fire reach the flax. Ironically, it is Fusi Aronson, his enemy, who has inadvertently caused the fire.

At the Gare farm, peace has finally descended. Jude and Sven prosper in the city, and Martin plans for the new house. Lind and Mark prepare to leave for their life together, still unaware of the mystery behind the events they witnessed in the Gare household.

CHAPTER III

THE VIKING HEART AS SAGA

Introduction

The Viking Heart is an account of Icelandic migration and settlement in Manitoba. It is a story of hardship and suffering endured with the support of noble and spiritual values. Many immigrant novels tend to emphasize the virtue of the newcomers while glorifying the place they have left behind. Salverson does this, but her particular contribution is the attempt to frame the immigrant achievement as part of an ongoing epic. She does not depict the immigrant colony for what it is, an isolated group trying to eke out a living in unfamiliar, often hostile conditions. Instead, Salverson has rediscovered her race, her nation, in this tiny part of the North American continent. Her keen appreciation of the Icelandic people, their history, and their literature is strongly expressed in the autobiographical Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter. Wishing to write of Icelandic survival in Canada caused her to look back to her old nation for a literary genre, something indigenous to her race. Since it was her intention to record the story of her people in epic form, she adapted the saga to do this. So it is that in her hands the journey of the

bedraggled immigrant ship on the Red River is transformed into a glorious Viking expedition:

> With that same eagerness to venture into distant fields which characterized their Norse ancestors, this company of fourteen hundred Icelanders severed every tie and left their little country, so laden with sorrows yet so rich in tradition, for this wide land whose shores their ancient seamen once had sounded.[35]

To the most casual reader it is clear that Laura Goodman Salverson intended to give her story epic proportions. The land and people described have a mythical quality. Very early in the book she includes a tragic event of grand proportions which results in the classic journey - both essential elements of the epic. This chapter, however, helps to establish that Salverson's intention in writing her novel The Viking Heart was to create a latter-day Icelandic family saga. The Columbia Encyclopedia gives this summary of the major characteristics of all sagas:

> The epic element is strong, and the milieu of a heroic society is made vivid. Historical accuracy was a major aim of the saga, although re-working, interjection of the supernatural, and other changes caused distortion. The historical approach is felt in the careful selection of events and the great emphasis on cause and effect.[36]

These and other specific points of comparison will be seen to appear in The Viking Heart and selected sagas.

Njal's Saga will be the principal saga referred

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[35] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 21.

[36] The Columbia Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition, ed., W. Bridgwater and S. Kurtz, (Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1967), p. 1861.

to when characteristics of saga are traced to Salverson's novel. It is considered by many to be the greatest of all Icelandic works. It was written about 1280 to 1290, near the end of the classical period of that country's literature. The author, who is unknown, was attempting to portray Icelandic life in the tenth and eleventh centuries. There are numerous characters and episodes, but the main events centre round Gunnar and Njal, who have a strong friendship. Their characters contrast sharply. While Gunnar is strong and loyal, he lacks the wisdom of the noble, thoughtful Njal. The latter could foresee tragedies if they threatened those close to him. Finally, he foresaw his own death. This occurred as a result of a foolish act committed by his sons. They were enticed into murdering Njal's foster-son, the innocent and holy Hauskuld. Revenge was a moral responsibility in these centuries. Atonement was achieved only when punishment to fit the crime was carried out. So it was that a pious man, Flosi, became the organizer of a plan to burn Njal and his sons. The events leading to this act and the manner of Njal's dying are both dramatic and moving. While Njal made several attempts to avert fate, he finally faced his punishment in a classic, heroic way.

The Epic Tone

It can be said that Salverson's novel and Njal's Saga both grew out of particular historical epochs. In this sense they preserve cultural heritage. But their range is universal. Salverson and the saga-writer aimed to show man constantly striving even when the struggle

seemed inadequate. The value of existence itself was questioned. Thus, a grand tone of universality permeates the writings.

Salverson has already been quoted on the importance of the epic tone.[37] She wanted to preserve the ideals and motives which prompted the early Icelandic immigrants in Canada. The battleground had shifted, but resolution would still spring from that same Viking heart. Richard F. Allen, a modern critic of Njal's saga, emphasizes the same outlook in the author of the saga:

> It is possible . . . to step back . . . to see that the curve of Njal's saga, the broadest shape of the narrative, relates it both to other works of literature and to certain vital and universal experiences that the Icelanders in building and maintaining their land share with the rest of mankind.[38]

The Heimskringla is an important historical book which traces the reigns of the Norwegian kings from the earliest times to 1150 A.D. and was an essential resource book for writers and historians. The word "heimskringla" means world circle. The sense of universal relevance permeates all the various types of saga. An Icelandic scribe of the thirteenth century has definite views on the purpose of sagas:

> Their value, he thought, was both moral and practical. 'Sagas about worthy men,' he wrote, 'are useful to know, because they show us noble deeds and brave feats, whereas ill-deeds are manifestations of indolence; thus sagas point the distinction between good and evil for those who wish to understand it.'[39]

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[37] Pp. 9-10.

[38] Richard F. Allen, Fire and Iron, Critical Approach to Njal's Saga, (University of Pittsburg Press, 1971), Introduction, p. 13.

[39] Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, trans., Njal's Saga, (Penguin Books Ltd., England, 1972), Introduction, p. 25.

Salverson develops a dual interpretation throughout her novel. While the story is a chronicle of immigrant life in Canada, the experiences yield a significance beyond the mere story-level account. They reverberate to the racial origins of the Scandinavian people. Characters are linked to those in legends. The motifs of early sagas are reproduced. So, first one gets the social significance as the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries intended, then one sees the affect of this on the consciousness of a people, and finally there is the culmination of this cultural memory when transplanted to Canada at the close of the nineteenth century. Salverson saw these various influences as a totality. They all represented to her stages in a cosmos. Within this cosmos there are various types of life forces, which touch and shape one another. She interpreted this in quasi-realistic terms when viewing the fate of her race. The past influences the present, and the present dictates the future. A typical example of this in The Viking Heart is when Borga Lindal, the only member of her family to survive disease and hardship suffered by the immigrants during their early years in Canada, bewails the fate of her family and friends. But the old Icelandic priest in whom she confides argues that there is a purpose to hardships, "a chain is made one link at a time."[40]

The Fire Image

The quality of one's life and the manner of one's death become extremely important in literature which sets out to represent

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[40]L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 104.

the distinct mores of a nation or people. The saga writers realized the significance of the role they played in this respect, and Salverson, with the belief in the mythical significance of historic events, was no less diligent in aiming to leave a record which would inspire those who read her novel. One also feels that the author would like to think immigrants read her story and felt ennobled by it.

In terms of imagery, the most striking symbol which connects Njal's Saga and The Viking Heart is that of Fire. The pivotal scene in the saga is the death by burning of Njal, the sage-farmer. The novel takes its direction from the catastrophic volcanic eruption which kills Carl and forces the family to emigrate. In The Saga of Gisli there are two episodes describing groups of people being burned in their homes by enemies. The chief character, Gisli, is an outlaw who is trying to escape punishment for manslaughter. He has troubled dreams which reveal his death to him:

> And this time in my dream I seemed to come to a house, or a hall, and I seemed to go into the house, and there I recognized many of those who were inside, kinsmen of mine, and friends. They were sitting by the fires and drinking, and there were seven fires - some were nearby burnt out and some were burning very brightly. Then came in my better dream woman and said that these marked my life, what I had yet to live.[41]

The alchemists said that all things come from fire and eventually returned to it:

> The alchemists retained in particular the Heraclitean notion of fire as 'the agent

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[41]G. Johnston, The Saga of Gisli, trans., (University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 33.

> of transmutation' since all things derive from, and return to fire. It is the seed which is reproduced in each successive life . . . In this sense as a mediator between forms which vanish and forms in creation, fire is, like water, a symbol of transformation and regeneration.[42]

This concept of cyclical growth is central to the saga format, and to The Viking Heart. The theme of Salverson's novel could well be seen as a confirmation of the philosophy of Heraclitus. In her story the growth of character is seen through a change in the perspective of what is homeland. While, towards the end of the novel, this is focused in Borga, she represents a collective development. This community consciousness, which was basic to the Icelandic ethic, identifies closely with the Greek philosophy that no one had a soul of his own, but shared in a universal soul-fire. The central conflict of the novel stems from the difficulty of keeping pace with change and of the characters understanding that they must adapt to the new form. Richard F. Allen sees this same conflict in Njal's Saga, "a saga which as it goes along more and more clearly represents a dialectic between conserving and destroying forces."[43] Salverson aims to show that old aspirations can fuse in a new society.

The Viking Heart portrays the spiritual energy of a people. Carl and Thor are the symbols of that force, and fire imagery is frequently associated with them. The former is linked with fire from the beginning of the novel. He comes from a world where "the sun had dipped

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[42]Cirlot J.E., A Dictionary of Symbols, (Philosophical Library, New York, N.Y., 1962), p. 100.

[43]R.F. Allen, Fire and Iron, p. 147.

his glowing face in a jade sea."[44] He dies by fire. His eyes are "alight with dreams of distant places."[45] The description of a fiery sun dying and of Carl's desires are part of the chapter "They That Go Before." It is evening. Just as diurnal time passes, so will these present day Vikings soon establish a link with their ancestors and, thus, pass into another phase of their history. Like the ancients, they must experience a new fire, a new tragedy, before rebirth comes. Carl's death is a sign of the next phase. Thor is born in the evening during a violent storm. When the neighbour Finna Johnson is losing ground in her efforts to deliver the child, she returns to the cottage door and shouts out to Einar who has gone for firewood. Salverson provides a strong fire/regeneration image: "In the glare of the light which the open doorway made, Finna stood as if in a gateway of fire."[46]

Chapter Four, which describes the christening of Thor, is introduced by a couplet of the author's own composition:

> And God said: I will make his soul impregnated with fire,
> that he may know the distant star but lights his good desire.[47]

Years later, the strains of this dedication emerge. Borga often told Thor the old legends. He was impatient that the glory should only belong to the past:

> Oh, mamma, why isn't there anything wonderful for us to do to-day . . . Think how the Vikings died, mamma, with their big ships burned at sea! I hope

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[44] L. G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 11.

[45] Ibid., p. 14.

[46] Ibid., p. 54.

[47] Ibid., p. 74.

> when I die it'll be fall, for the woods are all in color, like a flame. Haven't you thought of that, mamma? The summer dies like a sea king in a flame of red and yellow.[48]

Thor is to achieve his desire. The subject of prophesies and portents will be discussed later, but this use of fire imagery in relation to death prophesies has equivalents in the sagas. In Njal's Saga, the fire image is vividly introduced as a portent of the death of Njal, who, incidentally like Thor, is to die in the fall. It describes the vision of Hildiglum:

> He heard a tremendous crash, and the earth and the sky seemed to quiver. He looked to the west, and thought he saw a ring of fire with a man on a grey horse inside the circle, riding furiously. He rushed past Hildiglum with a blazing firebrand held aloft, . . . and Hildiglum heard him roaring out:
>
> 'I ride a horse
> With icy mane,
> Forelock dripping,
> Evil-bringing.
> Fire at each end,
> And poison in the middle,
> Flosi's plans
> Are like this flying firebrand - '
>
> Before Hildiglum's eyes, it seemed, the rider hurled the firebrand east toward the mountains; a vast fire erupted, blotting out the mountains from sight. The rider rode east towards the flames and vanished into them. . . . Hjalti said, 'you have seen the witch-ride, and that is always a portent of disaster.'[49]

Flosi was the leader of the group which was to burn Njal soon after.

But if fire destroys and creates new life, it can also create

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[48] Ibid., pp. 181-182.

[49] H. Hagnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, pp. 260-261

a cathartic tone. Salverson affirms this in her final chapter, "The Sunset Trail." Thor, who volunteered for overseas service in the medical corps, has been killed. Returning from his memorial service with her husband Einar, Borga recalls the boy's wish:

> "To sail and sail into the sunset". . . Ahead of them the golden sun was fast slipping down the heavens. It was like a ball of flame, a golden world dropping into some unseen space.
>
> Sailed into the fiery sunset,
> Sailed into the purple vapours,
> Sailed into the dusk of evening . . . .
>
> Something like that he had read for her when a boy. She felt as if she were following the passage of his soul.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> When in the house they saw a telegram was lying on the table . . . It was from Balder: "Born October tenth -- Thor the Second."[50]

Once more the Icelandic experience of tragedy and regeneration has come full cycle.

Character

On referring to Scandinavian character as seen in the sagas, W. Gore Allen suggests that:

> Character rather than scenery or setting, actions rather than personal motives or personal decisions, was emphasized by the classic authors. . . . Human character in turn possessed certain marks by which it could be recognized and measured. The chief attribute would be the will for freedom. Adventurers, travellers, explorers, the Vikings had quested far afield in search of liberty: liberty

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[50] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, pp. 322-323.

> to grow, after their own kind, in physical and mental stature.[51]

Salverson's characters can best be understood in the light of this definition of the Scandinavian mould. The character of Carl exemplifies this point. Superficially, he is typical of emerging manhood and wants to leave home to find himself. But Carl is more than this, he is a representative of the adventurous Norseman, a transmitter of that mythology. His restlessness is as much racial as it is personal. This dimension of character is also illustrated in the sagas. Phillpotts says:

> The doings of the chief characters are like a pattern of bright threads woven into a tapestry: we can pick out the pattern anywhere, but it would have no meaning if it were not part of a web. Every now and then, after some catastrophe like the death of Njal . . . we are made to realize the interests of the . . . community as against those of the individuals whose fortunes we have been following.[52]

This aspect of the Norse character reflects the lack of explanation of the thoughts and motives of the characters in the sagas and in The Viking Heart. The only knowledge one gets of their personality is from records of speech and action. The interior mind is never searched. This is typified by Njal himself:

> Njal was wealthy and handsome, but he had one peculiarity: he could not grow a beard. He was so skilled in law that no one was considered his equal. He was a wise and prescient

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[51] W. Gore Allen, Renaissance in the North, (Sheed and Ward Inc., New York, 1946), pp. 11-12.

[52] Bertha Phillpotts, Edda and Saga, (Thornton Butterworth Ltd., London, 1931), p. 147.

> man. His advice was sound and benevolent. . . . He was a gentle man of great integrity.[53]

We only know what the character is thinking or plotting from observation or statement: "Njal was silent for a while. Then he said, 'I have thought it over, and this will work out well....'"[54] Salverson adopts a similar approach when she describes one of her major characters:

> Thor at fifteen was the usual gawky long-legged boy; he was no paragon of virtue. His temper was hot and flaring and many a time his dark eyes were unnecessarily black. He had the same tawny coloured hair as his father and there was something unusual in the lift of his head - a fearlessness and an unconscious pride.[55]

His thoughts and aspirations can only be guessed at through a statement such as: "Mamma, the teacher thinks I will get through both my grades this term. . . . Gosh, I'll be a doctor before you know it."[56]

Another example is her characterization of Loki Fjalsted, who drives his wife to insanity. He is an obvious archetypal figure: "A swarthy complexioned, heavy-set man came out shovel in hand. He spat a volley of tobacco juice, wiped his mouth with a very dirty hand and addressed the visitors."[57] The author leaves no doubt as to

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[53] M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson, Njal's Saga, p. 74.

[54] Ibid., p. 75.

[55] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 178.

[56] Ibid., p. 179.

[57] Ibid., p. 67.

the evil of the man. She titles her chapter "The House of Fear," paints the wife as a figure of pity, and introduces their small lame son by having the father deliberately trip him as he runs past in terror. Salverson gives the reader no insight into the reason for Loki's brutishness. We are never exposed to his thoughts. Like the saga writer, she never provides such psychological exposure of her characters.

Quest

Mention has been made of the restlessness of the Norse spirit, the striving to reach some wider plane of existence where desires can be satisfied. In legend and saga this is often typified by the quest or journey motif. The Norse gods were constantly travelling, in defence of Asgard or to recover a lost treasure such as Thor's hammer. In Njal's Saga, a great deal of travelling is described. There are journeys overseas, such as Njal's sons' trip to The Orkneys, and there are the annual autumn visits to the Althing where laws and settlements were agreed upon. In The Saga of Gisli, there are sea and land journeys. Gisli himself is on the run as a criminal. The journeys in The Viking Heart signify change and a growing awareness. Carl longed to go to the New World but his family was destined to make that journey without him. Salverson parallels the biblical quest when she describes their hope and joy on arrival in Manitoba:

> In every face a great relief was recorded with fervent gratitude that so much at least of the long and strenuous journey was safely ended. And the Red River, its murky waters winding on its crooked northerly way, was a baptismal

stream out of which their God would lead them to the promised land.[58]

Balder's ambition to be a great musician and to win Ninna Lindal's love is also expressed in terms of a journey: "Balder was steeped in a loneliness such as he had not experienced since his days of early childhood. He was a Galahad with an earthly objective. The prize he coveted, an artist's crown."[59] He begins training at Winnipeg, and, when Ninna rejects him, he leaves to play with The Boston Symphony. When Elizabeth realizes that Ninna is the focus of Balder's attentions, she makes a decision: "She perceived at last that hers was the duty to cleave out a separate and distinct path and upon this one idea the whole strength of her mind fastened."[60] Elizabeth arranges to leave for New York where she can begin formal training as a fashion designer.

Undoubtedly, Thor's departure from Canada to serve in the war is meant to be the supreme archetypal heroic journey. At birth, he was dedicated to greatness by Borga, and he inherited the passion for quest which was depicted in Carl. With typical saga foresight, Salverson forecasts Thor's ultimate role through a poem which he reads to the family when still a youth:

> Sometimes on lonely mountain meres
> I find a magic bark;
> I leap on board, no helmsman steers;
> I float till all is dark.

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[58] Ibid., p. 24.

[59] Ibid., p. 152.

[60] Ibid., p. 232.

> A gentle sound, an awful light,
> Three angels bear the Holy Grail,
> With folded feet, in stoles of white
> On sleeping wings they sail.[61]

It is to be through Thor that Borga finally accepts the new nation of Canada as her homeland. Her son's sacrifice is the group confirmation of the Icelanders. From the baptism of their first journey on the Red River, the immigrants have been confirmed in their promised land through the final journey of the son.

Cause and Effect

Njal's Saga is typical of its genre in that there is a strong emphasis on cause and effect. One sees a long train of events stretching over fifty years and ultimately resulting in the death of Njal. Magnusson and Palsson point out that, if Hrut had not gone to Norway to claim his fortune, his marriage would not have floundered and the ensuing conflict for money and position would never have taken place.[62] Such a deliberate structure is not apparent in The Viking Heart. But the novel is episodic and further analysis does provide connections to the sagas, as Phillpotts notes:

> Since the saga cannot jump backwards in time, it sometimes has to begin a long time back and introduce incidents of which the reason only becomes apparent afterwards and then only to a reader who realizes that the saga expects him to understand the relation between cause and effect . . . The saga method is . . .

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[61] Ibid., p. 154

[62] M. Magnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, Introduction, p. 12.

> logical . . . We see, step by step, incident after incident, how the strands of tragedy are being woven, or how great events may spring from small causes.[63]

Salverson's novel does not contain the action-packed vignettes of the saga. But, like the ancient narrative form, it goes back in time to establish the background and to trace the driving force from which plot and character emerge. Just as Njal's Saga goes back half a century to establish the original cause (Hrut's visit to Norway), so Salverson takes the reader back to her prologue "They That Go Before" to record the origins of her story. Her title can be construed as an indication of the deliberate saga structure.

It has already been suggested that the novel's theme could be expressed in terms of a people's inability to recognize, and hence to adapt to, their new environment. When the author selects particular events in the lives of her characters, she wants to show that ancestry and ancestral beliefs can influence present and future lives. Occurrences in the introductory chapter set the pattern for this philosophy. When the Halsson family escapes from the devastating volcanic eruption, Carl is engulfed by the flaming torrent when he stubbornly delays to free the sheep. It is after this tragedy that the destitute family leave for Canada. But the central event of their only son's death becomes a core element in the story which is to unfold. Carl had been shown as the only dissatisfied member of the family. He chided the family, saying, "We might as well be sheep for all the

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[63] B. Phillpotts, Edda and Saga, pp. 176-177.

ambition we have."[64] His eagerness to journey to distant places is depicted by Salverson as having its origins in some power outside the boy himself: "Carl's eyes were alight with dreams of distant places. The old restlessness of the ancient Norsemen - a longing for the new and the strange - a desire which had never wholly left their descendants, was awake in his young veins."[65] By now Carl has been linked to the ancestors, and his ardour for adventure has developed mythic overtones. He has joined the ranks of Odin and Thor. Salverson quite clearly establishes the symbolic connection between the Halsson family and their Norse ancestors. Seeing Carl die with his sheep he is "a Viking turned shepherd and buried in the same mound as his flock."[66] As Gudrun threatens to join him in the flames she becomes "a Viking mother ready for the funeral flames of her beloved."[67]

Salverson's message is clear - the Icelanders have a unique outlook on life. They must search, struggle, experience tragedy. They can only endure by recognizing and accepting this identity. In the novel, Carl is the symbolic image of this philosophy, his nephew Thor bears witness to it. They represent the communion of past and present, the essence of Icelandic philosophy. At the novel's close, the strife, loneliness, and losses endured by the immigrants are given

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[64] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 13.

[65] Ibid., p. 14.

[66] Ibid., p. 19.

[67] Ibid., p. 20.

purpose when Borga is shown to have accepted them and to now be at peace. Just as Carl and Thor were part of the larger Scandinavian mould, the effect on her is also transferred to a wider perspective.

Historical Accuracy

One of the most striking ways in which the saga portrayed Scandinavian life was through the inclusion of accurate historical facts. While Njal's Saga is not a major source for the historian as such, nevertheless, some elements in it are based on acutal occurrences and on popular oral tradition. Magnusson and Palsson have researched these parallels:

> The burning of Bergthorsknoll is undoubtedly a historical fact, corroborated by earlier written sources - by, for instance, Landnamabok (Book of Settlements), the early-twelfth-century historical account of Iceland's first settlers and their descendants; and excavations close to the sight of the present farm at Bergthorsknoll have proved that certain buildings - outhouses, probably - were burned down there hundreds of years ago . . . The author of Njal's Saga clearly made use of written sources . . . for some of the saga material - the account of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year 1000; . . . the account of the Battle of Clontarf outside Dublin in 1014; the elaborate . . . legal formulae; the genealogies, and background material for many of the subsidiary characters.[68]

Salverson's novel has its roots in history too. The year 1876 when her fictional family emigrate to Canada was, as the author points out in the novel, one of the worst periods for recurring volcanic eruptions in Iceland. She is accurate in her explanation as to why Canada was

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[68] M. Magnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, Introduction, pp. 22-23.

chosen by these people:

> Canada was in need of immigration. She needed immigrants . . . to rid her lands of timber and destructive beasts . . . she needed them also to build roads and bridges to bind her towns more closely together, and to dig ditches and lay sewers that her cities might be habitable. . . . Her call went out into the highways and the byways and penetrated even that lonely island in the North Sea.[69]

Indeed, a definite effort was made by Canada to entice Icelanders as immigrants:

> Lord Dufferin, one time Governor-General of Canada . . . had visited Iceland, and . . . had found the people interesting and admirable. It was his hope that in Canada the qualities he had marked and admired might take root and contribute to the cultural life of the dominion.[70]

Efforts to attract Europeans to the Canadian West were not very successful and it was in this region that the authorities hoped that the Icelanders would settle. "In 1887 another large contingent of Icelanders arrived and scattered to Gimli, Argyle, and other Icelandic settlements."[71]

The Viking Heart gives an account of how tragedy soon strikes the Halsson family and the whole community of immigrants. Borga's parents become victims of smallpox and people tried to live in makeshift quarantine facilities. Again, this episode is based on fact: "The colony was sorely smitten in the winter of 1876-7 by smallpox, which

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[69] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 22.

[70] L.G. Salverson, Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter, p. 98.

[71] W.L. Morton, Manitoba, A History, p. 223.

flared and smouldered periodically along the Indian frontier during these years of rapid immigration by whites."[72] The poor medical facilities and, indeed, lack of concern among the authorities is emphasized in history: "The official quarantine imposed at the northern boundary of Manitoba seemed to the suffering people an act of unnecessary cruelty, only scantily made good by such help as was extended."[73] Salverson introduces this actual event into her story, when depicting the deaths of members of the Halsson family:

> Without doctors, without any knowledge of medical hygiene or any adequate housing or arrangements of any kind for the handling of disease . . . through inclement weather, the insidious plague crept upon them. Their only help came through an unlearned little man, who nevertheless showed such instinctive medical skill and with his small store of homeopathic concoctions . . . saved many a life.[74]

Another issue through which the novel dovetails with Canadian history is the question of this nation's commitment to World War I. Salverson tells of the reluctance of the settlers to become involved in the war. Their outlook typified their fractured allegiance to Canada as a nation. Like the Mennonites, they failed to identify with this call to duty: "The entire calm world they had lived in seemed invaded and overrun by this battle spirit whose throne was across the sea."[75] In her autobiography, Salverson's personal views on the war are even

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[72] Ibid., p. 177.

[73] Ibid., p. 177.

[74] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, pp. 43-44..

[75] Ibid., p. 303.

more revealing:

> Death for one's country - if one had any share in that country or that country's wealth - was not what repelled me.
>
> My practical Scandinavian nature stood aghast that some less costly solution should not be found by so-called enlightened nations, for purely economic, commercial problems, and all my instincts were revolted that the dearest ideals of the human heart should be preyed upon by propagandists, to feed the sinews of war.[76]

When Borga watches Thor march through Winnipeg, with the departing troops, she observes that "Winnipeg had given up her noisy demonstrations. She had settled down to grim duty."[77] The reference is to Winnipeg's labour unrest which took the form of frequent marches by dissatisfied workers. Again, she adds a touch of realism to the novel by emphasizing the historical context.

The Supernatural

Duality of meaning was a familiar element of pagan and early Christian literature. Vivian Mercier traces its source to "the disillusionment with this world felt by one who had some vision of an ideal other world."[78] It is this perspective which seems to be the cornerstone of Salverson's philosophy. She chooses the following verse by R.H. Stoddard to introduce one of the chapters in her novel:

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[76] L.G. Salverson, Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter, p. 475.

[77] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 304.

[78] Vivian Mercier, Great Irish Short Stories, (Laurel, Dell Publishing Inc., New York, 1964), p. 23.

> There are two worlds about us,
> Two worlds in which we dwell-
> Within us and about us -[79]

While the obvious reference is to Elizabeth's realization that Balder's affections are elsewhere and she must find her own individual path in life, the "two worlds" motif could be interpreted as the overall theme of The Viking Heart.

The "two worlds" to which Salverson refers are indeed present in the sagas and in the novel. As narratives, the Icelandic family sagas are lively adventure stories which are full of action, have a variety of settings, and reflect the universal themes of love, war, justice, man's quest for gain, and death itself. But, integrated with plot and theme, is a strong sense of the supernatural which shapes the actions and directions of these very realistic stories. In the sagas, the supernatural takes the form of recognition of fate, omens, superstitions, spells, dream prophesies, and fylgjies. In Njal's Saga, these motifs abound. An example of how influential they were in affecting the course of people's lives is seen quite early in the saga. The Icelander Hrut had gone to Norway to claim an inheritance. To strengthen his claim in that country, he had to gain favour with the Norwegian king, Harald Grey-Cloak, and the monarch's mother, Queen Gunnhild. Hrut became the old queen's lover. He secured his inheritance but then requested permission to leave. "'Will you have

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[79] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 221.

greater honour there,than here?' asked the king. 'No,' replied Hrut, 'but each must do as destiny decides.' Gunnhild said, 'You cannot pull against a force like this.'"[80] But the queen cast a spell on Hrut which would ensure that he could never find happiness with his bethrothed in Iceland. He becomes impotent, and his wife finally has him murdered.

Mention has been made in the section on fire imagery as to how Salverson has the young Thor ironically forecast his death in the autumn. The saga writers heightened the suspense of their narratives with prophetic dreams and prescience. The most notable example is Njal himself. He can foretell the future for himself and others; as in a conversation with his friend, Gunnar: "'But bear in mind that if you disregard both these warnings, you will not have long to live, otherwise you will live to be an old man.' 'Do you know what will cause your own death?' asked Gunnar. 'Yes,' said Njal. 'I do.'"[81] And later, talking to his son after Hoskuld has been murdered: "'What will it lead to?' asked Skarp-Hedin. 'My death,' said Njal."[82] There are other prophesies in the saga. Just before the burning, an old woman who had second sight tries to destroy the chickweed that lies around the house. She says that it "will be used as kindling when they burn Njal."[83] Gunnar dreams that he is attacked by wolves,

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[80] M. Magnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, p. 49.

[81] Ibid., p. 136

[82] Ibid., p. 233.

[83] Ibid., p. 260.

which kill Hjort by ripping open his chest. Then Gunnar kills the beast by cutting it in two with his sword. In the following chapter, Hjort is killed by a sword-thrust in the chest, but his killer is cut in two by Gunnar.

In The Viking Heart, the son Thor is undoubtedly the main character to whom Salverson gives a mythical aura and supernatural overtones. At his birth, his mother says: "He is my little storm child - Let us call him Thor."[84] Salverson deliberately relates him to the god Thor, whose anger brings thunder and lightning. Turville-Petre writes that, "in contrast to the Eddas, [the family sagas] suggest that Thor was the favourite god of the Icelanders."[85] The authority provides many relevant facts about the importance of the god to the Icelanders, as for example, the use of the name as a prefix in place-names and the names of people. One can count no less than eighteen major characters in Njal's Saga whose names begin with Thor. He recounts the story in the Eyrbyggja Saga where a chieftain takes the pillars of Thor's temple with him when he emigrates from Norway to Iceland. As he approached the Icelandic coast, he threw the pillars overboard and let them drift ashore, making his home at the place where they landed. Thor became the god of the pillars which held up their houses, and, in fact, the "patron and guardian of the settlement itself, of its stability and law."[86] There is no doubt that Salverson

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[84]L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 58.

[85]E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1964), p. 20.

[86]Ibid., p. 86.

used Thor as a symbol of the settlement in Manitoba. Indeed, she employs him as a sacrifice to it. Even the fire image scene when the neighbour stands in the doorway "as in a gateway of fire"[87] could be a reflection of the pillar myth. More specific, however, is the episode describing the mother bathing the infant Thor: "As she bathed . . . him . . . she would hold him aloft - like Hannah offering up the infant Samuel."[88] Turville-Petre refers to the frequent allusions to pagan practices in the family sagas, such as "sprinkling the new-born child with water, naming him, and occasionally dedicating him to a god."[89] It can be reasonably argued that the child, who was named after the god, was dedicated to the god, and sacrificed to the god, was the symbol of the continuance of the Norse heritage.

Fate

The concept of fate and the desire to foretell the future and know one's destiny was paramount in the concerns and interests of the ancient Norsemen. Salus and Taylor in the introduction of The Elder Edda explain the literary relationship between the tales of the gods and the tales of the heroes. The former establish the framework and environment in which man must struggle. The latter describes the qualities of the heroes in facing the fates foreshadowed for them by the gods:

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[87] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 54.

[88] Ibid., p. 62.

[89] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 20.

> The mythological poems of Icelandic tradition are typologically related to Nordic heroic legends in poetry. The former constitute a kind of mythological explanation of the condition of universal life, and the latter illustrate struggles of men within these conditions. What happens in Asgard foreshadows what will come to pass in Midgard. As the gods struggle to escape a destruction they know is inescapable, so heroes are impicitly urged to face inevitable fate without succumbing to despair.[90]

Yggdrasil, the world ash, the Tree of Fate, was central to the Norse cosmos. Its roots linked the world together. "The Lay of Grimnir" tells how the gods:

> Ride each day to deal out fates
> From Yggdrasil the ash tree.[91]

The gods, particularly the all-wise Odin, knew of their fates. In the myths they were not supreme; they had certain human qualities. Fate ruled them as it ruled man.

The central theme of the family sagas is also Fate. Magnusson and Palsson describe its importance in Njal's Saga in their introduction:

> The action is swept along by a powerful undercurrent of fate, and Njal's fierce struggle to alter its course heightens the conflict of personalities. Njal was prescient; he could see aspects of the future, blurred glimpses illuminated by sudden ambiguous shafts of knowledge. He was not a fatalist in the heathen sense - a man content to accept what fate had in store, but careful to meet it like a man.[92]

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[90] Paul B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, A Selection, trans., Introduction by Peter H. Salus and Paul B. Taylor, p. 32.

[91] Ibid., p. 66.

[92] M. Magnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, Intro., p. 16.

The conflict for Njal is his struggle to avoid destiny while at the same time realizing, and indeed acknowledging, that his efforts will not save him.

Salverson continues the belief in the importance of fate. In her autobiography, Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter, she states, "that everything that ever was, or ever will be, lived out under the chiming clock and the years, is nothing but the slow unfolding, incarnation by incarnation, of the Divine principle seeking expression in matter."[93] This personal philosophy pervaded her fictional work The Viking Heart. Here she attempts to give an historical and mythical perspective on the Icelandic people. They have a burden of tradition. As the homesick immigrants try to grapple with the harsh conditions of Canadian settlement in the 1870's, it is clear that they must stay and fight. The author refers to history to point the moral. Iceland endured foreign invasion, volcanic onslaughts, cultural genocide. Hence, survival was a racial decision: "the past lives in us . . . we are not products of one generation, and limited to the peculiar attributes of a sole set of parents. We were foresworn in the loins of the remotest ancestor, and shall continue until the last living form is extinct."[94] When Bjorn Lindal fears for his wife's life in childbirth, "He implored fortune - or heaven - or the universe - or any power that be, to show them mercy. Then he cursed the providence which for gen-

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[93] L.G. Salverson, Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter, p. 185.

[94] Ibid., p. 186.

erations had foresaken his people. He cursed the world in which such things might be."[95] Bjorn's pleas are answered, the child is born and named Thor. The author's deliberation in describing the child's dedication to the god, together with her portrayal of the father pleading "to any power that be" implies a strong symbolic intention. The Lindals are putting their child in the hands of the gods and their fates. The gods have responded. Thor's future has been determined.

Of course, while Fate itself is the overall decider in terms of who should die, the belief in the necessity for revenge and atonement is often interpreted as what destiny wants. When Njal's step-son Hoskuld is murdered by Njal's own sons, it is Njal, as head of the clan, who must bear responsibility, even though he loved the boy and is revolted by the act. The arbitrariness of the decision to avenge is indicated in the following statement made by Flosi soon after the act: "We must find other things to boast about than burning Njal to death . . . for there is no achievement in that."[96] Clearly the attack was not aimed at the person of Njal. But, through his death, a fitting atonement was made and honour was restored. The peace which settles at the close of The Viking Heart is a similar levelling of events. While it is not a question of revenge, Carl's futile death in Iceland is re-enacted by Thor for a new cause in a new land. Borga understands the sacrifice of her son to the Norse gods as an atonement which must be paid for the continuance of her race.

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[95] L.G. Salverson, The Viking Heart, p. 56.

[96] M. Magnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, p. 271.

While Laura Goodman Salverson was born in Canada, her particular community was a tight-knit group of Icelandic immigrants. As with any newly-transplanted people, they made a conscious effort to preserve traditions indigenous to their race. For Salverson the writer, this unique culture was best preserved through the style of the ancient myths and sagas. The nationalism, the heroic sacrifices and the cultural outlook, as described in The Viking Heart, is only fully understood by a reader who perceives the Icelandic dimension.

CHAPTER III

WILD GEESE AS EDDA

Introduction

In The Viking Heart one follows the painful attempts of a close-knit community to keep its central identity while simultaneously trying to adapt to a new environment. The Icelanders' awareness of their greatness as a nation of warriors and adventurers supports them in their struggle. In Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese there are no such consolations. While Caleb Gare's family does not bear the emotional handicaps of the immigrants' attachment to the land, neither does it have the spiritual rewards of the old nation's mythology.

Martha Ostenso dramatizes the family's loss of this spiritual heritage in her novel. She uses her symbols and motifs to emphasize this theme. Their origins can be traced to Scandinavian myth, but not to the ordered world of the saga. In Ostenso's vision the domain of the noble Viking has long been destroyed. The structure and resolutions seen in the saga and adapted by Salverson will no longer suit the new struggle. Ostenso knows this and brilliantly coins symbol and plot to match. Having seen the traditional saga teller in Salverson's work, one finds in Wild Geese the mythological elements of the Eddas trans-

formed to suit a more contemporary theme.

Many of the characteristics of saga so apparent in The Viking Heart are absent from Ostenso's work. Wild Geese can hardly be described as an epic. There is no attempt to establish an accurate historical background. Furthermore, the principal characters, the Gare family, are the very antithesis of "the heroic society." Nevertheless, the Norse hero figure is present within the community, the cause and effect feature is basic to the structure of the novel, and atonement and fate are most significant elements. The supernatural, including Salverson's concept of "two worlds," is also evident, though heavily veiled in symbolism. Many of Ostenso's powerful symbols, such as fire, horse, and quest can be identified in saga. It is not, however, the sagas that influenced the author, but the earlier Eddas, the main source of the Norse myths. This section explores how Ostenso drew inspiration for her novel from the Eddas, using not only stories and themes as background for her work, but also basing her principal characters on those of the myths.

The Fertility Goddess

The cycle of nature, fertility, life and death, is the constant theme of Norse myth. Ostenso follows the same theme in Wild Geese; the time span of her novel stretches from Spring to Fall, from seeding to harvest. Her plot revolves around fertility; the conflict which originated in the mother's pregnancy finds its ultimate resolution through the daughter's pregnancy. The character of the daughter, Judith, is

depicted with such dimension and power that one soon realizes that Ostenso intends this dynamic figure to have a mythical perspective. Although she is vibrant and realistic, one is left with the overall impression of a creature compelled by forces acting through her: "At sunset one evening in the middle of May, Judith rode the colt, Turk, north across the grazing land like some dark young goddess, her hair low against the horse's mane, her blood avid for speed."[97] It will be seen that Ostenso's young goddess can easily be related to the Norse fertility goddess, Freyja. Just as Judith is the most important female figure in Wild Geese, so Freyja is the dominant female figure in Scandinavian myths. The goddess represented "fertility, birth and death,"[98] and was known for the practice of magic known as seior. This gave her power to adopt a bird form and in this shape she would travel and exert her will on others through this trickery. Guerber comments that she had "very martial tastes, and that as Valfreya she often led the Valkyrs down to the battlefields."[99]

In Wild Geese, Judith Gare is portrayed as a sensual, free and liberated spirit. She is the character through whom Ostenso conveys the theme of fertility. Judith's role in the novel as well as her personal characteristics strongly suggest that for the author, she was a modern Freyja. Her innate sexuality is emphasized from the beginning:

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[97] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 73.

[98] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 177.

[99] H.A. Guerber, Myths of Northern Lands, (Singing Tree Press, Detroit, 1970), p. 124.

> She had a great, defiant body, her chest high and broad as a boy's. . . . her eyes in sullen repose now, long and narrow; her lips were rich and drooped at the corners. . . . An intangible fragrance rose from her, like warmth. Like the warmth of milk, or newly-mown hay. . . . Judith, vivid and terrible, who seemed the embryonic ecstasy of all life.[100]

Very early in the novel, Ostenso introduces a specific symbolic link between Judith and Freyja. On Lind Archer's first evening in the Gare household, she and Judith share a bedroom. Judith notices the teacher's jewelry: "Judith picked up a string of amber beads Lind had placed on the stand near the bed. There was also a pair of earrings of the same limpid substance. 'Wild honey! Drops of wild honey! Judith exclaimed in a whisper."[101] Freyja's most notable possession is the necklace "Brisinga-men." Both The Elder Edda and The Prose Edda make reference to it. Ellis Davidson suggests that Brisinga-men was apparently made of amber; she also footnotes the Freudian significance of the necklace.

There are many examples of Judith's sensual nature in the novel, but it surfaces most revealingly in her para-ritualistic marriage to the earth. Lying naked on the ground, contemplating the freedom of the elements, she herself becomes elemental and filled with ecstasy. Aware of distance stretching above and below her, she experiences herself as part of the immense natural world. Judith's communion with the earth represents a symbolic break from the family's stranglehold. Embracing the earth she transcends her surroundings:

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[100] H. Ostenso, Wild Geese, pp. 11, 21, 33.

[101] Ibid., p. 18.

> She needed to escape, to fly from something - she knew not what ...Oh, how knowing the bare earth was, as if it might have a heart and a mind hidden here in the woods...But here was something forbiddingly beautiful, secret as one's own body. And there was something beyond this. She could feel it in the freshness of the air, in the depth of the earth. . . . On the other side, what? Above the body there were leagues and leagues of air, leading like wings - to what? . . . Lind Archer had . . . sprung a secret lock in Jude's being. She had opened like a tight bud.[102]

This description of Jude's self-discovery accentuates her role as a contemporary Freyja. The references to wings and flight suggests the goddess's constant travels and her ability to fly:

> Freya one day
> Falcon wings took, and through space hied away;
> Northward and southward she sought her
> Dearly-loved Odur.[103]

In her embrace of the earth, Judith symbolically began her journey of freedom from the farm. At the end of the novel, it is her escape from home which forces the conflict between Amelia and Caleb into the open. Judith's transcendental experience echoes the trance-like state Freyja could induce at will through the cult of seior. Ellis Davidson explains that, according to Snorri, the practice of seior originated from Freyja. In this ritual, the leader of the ceremony fell into a state of ecstasy and she was able to answer questions about the future.

Another link between the characters of Judith and the goddess is in their mutual love of animals. Turville-Petre points out that

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[102] Ibid., p. 53.

[103] H.A. Guerber, Myths of Northern Lands, p. 128.

"Freyja was naturally associated, even identified with prolific and sensual beasts."[104] Ostenso clearly makes a similar connection in her portrayal of Judith's attachment to animals. For example, one of her pets is a sheep, "a ewe who always bore well."[105] Even when she is slaving in the fields, Judith's awareness of animal life continues: "After another hour's work, Judith, looking up, saw Martin entering the gate from the pasture with three cows that were about to calve."[106] Immediately after the ritualistic earth scene, the aura of Judith's sensuality is heightened by her reaction when she observes some bull-calves on the way home:

> She saw how they had developed since she had last observed them. Their . . . faces had become more surly, their flanks heavier. . . . They were beautiful bulls. Judith felt an inner excitement from watching them. She turned to go, feeling dismayed that she should be so attracted by the young beasts. But a curiosity over which she had no control held her there for many minutes. Ah, how violent they were becoming in their play.[107]

There is an obvious suggestion of perverse overtones in this passage and Turville-Petre, in commenting on Freyja's lasciviousness, notes that a reference in the poem "Hyndluljod" "probably implies that Freyja's lover had the form of a boar."[108] Judith's reflections confirm her own newly-awakened sensual being. Like the beasts, she too has grown and developed. The combination of violence and pleasure in this scene

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[104] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 176.

[105] H. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 79.

[106] Ibid., p. 90.

[107] Ibid., p. 54.

[108] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 90.

echoes the martial qualities of Freyja's erotic pursuits. As Judith's affair with Sven continues, she becomes aware of the changes that have occurred in her: "she recognized in herself an alien spirit, a violent being of dark impulses, in no way related to the life about her. . . . her passion for Sven pressed through her being like an undercurrent of fire."[109] The fierceness of Judith's nature is best shown at the climax of her continuous struggle with her father. She tries to kill him when she finds out that he has been spying on her clandestine meetings with Sven. Her violent reaction comes when Caleb attempts to punish her for acting immorally:

> "Come here and I'll show ye it pays to be decent!" He took another step toward her. Judith's hand swept down and grasped the handle of the ax. She straightened like a flash and flung it with all her strength at Caleb's head. Her eyes closed dizzily, and when she opened them again he was crouching before her, his hand moving across his moustache. The ax was buried in the rotten wall behind his head.[110]

There can be no mistaking the importance of the axe as a motif of doom and as a symbol of the shattering of the walls of Caleb's world. It will be one of his last images before he dies. Again we find a parallel in the Edda, when war breaks out between the gods who are incensed by Loki's misdeeds. His main crime was giving Freyja to the giants:

> At the host Odin hurled his spear
> In the first world-battle, broken was the plankwall

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[109] H. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 90.

[110] Ibid., p. 166.

Of the god's fortress; the fierce Vanes
Caused war to occur in the fields.[111]

War has undoubtedly been declared in the Gare household. After Caleb has left, Judith, bound hand and foot, lying on the barn floor, reflects on the impact of her actions: "He would be insane with rage. Murder, perhaps...everything going,now...everything closing in,..only the land, the cattle, and manure."[112] Caleb insists that the axe remains in the wall as a reminder to Judith of her crime.

This relationship between violence and sensuality in the character of Judith becomes most obvious when Ostenso introduces the symbol of the horse with its dual interpretation. Ellis Davidson, when discussing Freyja and the Vanirs, refers to the darker side of the cult of seior, which included "harmful magic, dealing out death to its victims, and this aspect of it in the sagas is more than once found in conjunction with the horse-cult."[113]

The Horse Symbol

The horse is one of the most important symbols in Norse mythology. According to Turville-Petre, the "beast most commonly venerated was the horse . . . [which was] regarded as the mouthpiece of the gods . . . The horse is a symbol of Freyr and his fertility and, at the same time, the symbol of death."[114] The fertility myth of the im-

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[111] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 148.

[112] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 166.

[113] H.R. Ellis Davidson, Gods and Myths of Northern Europe, (Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1968), p. 121.

[114] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 249.

pregnation of the earth by the sky is recorded in "Skirnir's Ride" from The Elder Edda. The story tells of how the fertility god Freyr, brother of Freyja, sends his servant Skirnir to woo Gerd, the beautiful giantess. Gerd lives in Jotenheim, the land of the giants in a house protected by a ring of fire. Skirnir asks Freyr for the use of his horse, Blondughofi, which will go through fire. Freyr answers:

> I will give you a mare that will
> gallop through
> The wall of flickering flame.[115]

His mission successfully completed, Skirnir returns to Freyr who rushes out to ask whether Gerd has accepted his suit. Skirnir replies:

> In the woods of Barri which we both know,
> A peaceful, secluded place;
> After nine nights to Njord's son
> Gerd will give herself.[116]

In Wild Geese, Ostenso makes extensive use of the horse symbol, exploiting both the fertility and death myths. It appears very early in the novel, when Judith is seen as "a beautiful creature. She's like a wild horse, more than anything I know of."[117] Later in the book, Judith consummates her relationship with Sven Sandbo in a setting reminiscent of "the woods of Barri . . . a peaceful, secluded place,"[118] as depicted in "Skirnir's Ride": "They got down from the buggy, tying the horse to a tree at the side of the road. Then they crawled through the fence into a little clearing among the cedars, where the sunlight

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[115] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 119.

[116] Ibid., p. 123.

[117] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 65.

[118] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 123.

lay in a warm pool on the ground. 'Kiss me first' said Sven. 'No - after,' Judith said steadily."[119] Further on in the novel, Judith, now pregnant, tells her mother that she intends to leave home with Sven. Amelia refuses to give her blessing. Confused and angry, Judith takes a horse from the corral and deliberately makes him aggressive to match her own mood. The horse finally throws her, and, injured and exhausted, she lies on the ground "in a sort of ecstasy."[120]

The horse is first introduced by Ostenso as a death symbol when Judith comes across the carcass of a dead horse which Caleb has sent her brothers to skin, "red and horrible in the burning sunlight."[121] Turville-Petre discusses the fylgje or fetch in Norse mythology. The fylgje is the guardian spirit of an individual or family and he explains that "to see one's fetch in animal form is an omen of death."[122] He provides a perfect parallel to Ostenso's image when he relates that in one example "a doomed man dreams of his own fetch in the form of a chestnut, i.e. a blood coloured horse."[123] There are many examples of the fylgje in the sagas. In Njal's Saga, Njal knows that Thord is doomed when the latter sees his fetch in the form of a bloody goat:

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[119] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 85.

[120] Ibid., p. 122.

[121] Ibid., p. 101.

[122] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 229.

[123] Ibid.

> Thord said, "That's very strange." "What do you see that seems to you so strange?" asked Njal. "The goat seems to be lying in the hollow there, drenched in blood," replied Thord. Njal said that there was no goat there, nor anything else. "Then what was it?" asked Thord. "It means that you must be a doomed man," said Njal. "That was your fetch you must have seen. Be on your guard."[124]

In the skinned horse scene, the author appears to be deliberately using the mythical relationship between death and fertility, intending a double suggestion to the one symbol, Judith's foetus and Caleb's impending death. She introduces the symbol at a crucial point in the plot. Judith, pregnant, has stated her intention of leaving home and marrying Sven. Amelia is showing the first signs of rebellion against her husband Caleb, who is threatening to tell Mark Jordan that she is his mother. Caleb's power now starts to wane; his world has started to crumble. Ostenso could well have felt that the compound symbol was justified at this juncture.

The horse as the symbol of death appears twice more at the climax of the book, just before Caleb dies. As in Njal's Saga, when Hildiglum is warned of Njal's death by a horseman encircled by a ring of flame, Mark Jordan endangers his life by riding past Caleb through the flames to get help. As he looks back, he sees Caleb desperately driving horse and plough in an attempt to create a barrier to cut off the flames. Ostenso thus provides Caleb with two fylgjes in his death scene. In Scandinavian myth, only the wise and gifted could interpret

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124. M. Magnusson and H. Palsson, Njal's Saga, pp. 109-110.

these spectres. Since Caleb is an agent of evil, he is blind to the significance. Unlike Njal, he has always blinded himself to the world which might exist beyond his own particular landscape.

The Mother Goddess

Similarities to another Norse goddess can be found in Ostenso's characterization of Amelia. Frigga, wife of Odin and mother of Balder, was the goddess of conjugal love and motherhood, in contrast to Freyja, who was lover and mistress. In Wild Geese, Amelia and Judith represent the same polarized roles. Frigga roamed the world to secure Balder's immunity from harm. She tried to obtain an oath from all things on earth, promising that they would never harm her son. The mistletoe plant was ignored since it was considered harmless. The gods often amused themselves aiming weapons at Balder, knowing that they could not harm him. However, the evil Loki discovered Balder's vulnerability to mistletoe and, disguised as an old woman, persuaded Balder's step-brother, the blind Hoder, to throw the plant. Loki caused the mistletoe to harden in flight, and so it killed Balder. Stricken with grief, Frigga then attempted to have her son returned to life by extracting a promise from all living things that they would weep for him. All agreed except for Loki, so her efforts were in vain.

The strong protective instinct of Frigga for Balder is paralleled by Amelia's determination to prevent her illegitimate son, Mark Jordan, from discovering the truth about his parentage. Throughout the novel, Caleb's threat to expose her, thus disgracing herself

and her son, hovers over Amelia. Caleb's jealousy of the love she has held for Mark's father, coupled with his greed for land and possessions support him in maintaining a cruel hold over his wife and through her, his children:

> Caleb felt a glow of satisfaction as he stood there on the ridge peering out over his land . . . He could hold all this, and more - add to it year after year - . . . all this as long as he held the whip hand over Amelia. . . . Amelia had loved the boy's father, that he knew. The knowledge had eaten bitterly into his being . . . The man who had been gored to death by a bull . . . had unwittingly left her bearing in her body the weapon which Caleb now so adroitly used against her.[125]

With Jordan's return to the neighbourhood, the tension between Caleb and his wife increases. When Amelia sees her son pass by when she is tending her garden, her emotions are so strong that in her thoughts she readily sacrifices Caleb's children in her resolution to protect Mark Jordan:

> Caleb's children could wither and fall into dissolution like plants after frost - everything could fall into dissolution. He was his father's son . . . they were only the offspring of Caleb Gare, they could be the sacrifice. She would bend and inure them to the land like implements, just as Caleb wished her to do. . . . She would see them dry and fade into fruitlessness.[126]

This symbolic use of plant life provides another link to the Frigga myth. In Germany, under the name of Bertha, the goddess "watched over agriculture caring for the plants which her infant troop

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[125] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, pp. 19-20.

[126] Ibid., p. 88.

watered carefully."[127] The symbol is repeated in the novel when, later, Amelia's will has been regenerated, and inwardly she is gathering her forces to oppose her husband. To confront him, she has to meet him on his own ground. As if at last enjoying the nurturing process denied her at the child's birth, Amelia now renews her efforts in the garden: "The garden cost Amelia no end of work and worry; she tended the delicate tomato vines as though they were newborn infants and suffered momentary sinking of the heart whenever she detected signs of weakness in any of the hardier vegetables."[128]

In Wild Geese the field of flax becomes a powerful symbol as the novel develops. Caleb's dedication to this particular crop is emphasized throughout: "While he was raptly considering the tender field of flax - now in blue flower - Amelia did not exist to him. There was a transcendent power in this blue field of flax . . . He would creep between the wires and run his hand across the flowering, gentle, tops of the growth. A stealthy caress, more intimate than he had ever given to woman."[129] The sensual and sexual overtones of this passage strongly suggest that his love for the flax was a substitute for the lack of affection in his relationship with Amelia. Ostenso's use of the flax symbol may well have been inspired by the myth of the goddess Holda, the southern German equivalent of Frigga. Holda was said "to have given

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[127] H.A. Guerber, Myths of Northern Lands, p. 58.

[128] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 97.

[129] Ibid., p. 119.

flax to mankind"[130] and to have been "an enchantress who lured mortals into her realm, where she detained them forever, steeping their senses in all manner of sensual pleasures."[131] It is also worth noting that Freyja was also known as Hörn, and Turville-Petre points out that this related to Hör, the Swedish dialect for flax. "This implies that Hörn was a goddess of flax."[132]

A further connection between Frigga and Amelia stems from the fact that they were both accused of being unchaste. In "Loki's Flyting," from The Elder Edda, Loki accuses Frigga of loose morals:

> Enough Frigg! You are Fjörgyn's daughter
> And have ever played the whore:
> Both Ve and Vili, Vidrir's wife,
> You allowed to lie with you.[133]

Caleb, like Loki, harps on the shame of Amelia's fornication. When informed of Judith's intention to marry Sven, Caleb does not miss the opportunity to vent his spite on Amelia: "Caleb began to enjoy the situation. 'You think, do you?' Hah! Scared Bart might tell the truth, eh? Rather have Sven taken in, eh? Have him think he's marrying into fine stuff? You know - you know nobody around here would marry the girls - if - if - they knew.'"[134] Later, when Caleb discovers that

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[130] H.A. Guerber, Myths of Northern Lands, p. 54.

[131] Ibid., p. 56.

[132] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North, p. 176.

[133] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 137.

[134] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 99.

Anton Klovacz has visited Amelia while he was away, he again implies that she was unfaithful.

Loki's accusation of Frigga's immorality in The Elder Edda is followed by a similar attack on Freyja's morals in the next stanza. When Caleb, who has been spying on Judith and Sven, accuses his daughter of loose morals, he associates her with Amelia in his tirade: "What'er you up to, out there in the bush, eh? With that Sandbo dog, heh! A bitch like your mother, eh?"[135]

The Devil God

In discussing Frigga and Freyja as the legendary ancestors of Amelia and Judith, the character of Caleb was shown to possess many of the god Loki's characteristics. In tracing the identity of Loki, Guerber suggests that,

> In the beginning, Loki was merely the personification of the hearth fire . . . At first a god, he gradually becomes god and devil combined, and ends in being held in general detestation as an exact counterpart of the mediaeval Lucifer, the prince of lies, the originator of deceit, and the back-biter of the Aesir.[136]

From the start, Ostenso establishes a physical description which leads one to imagine that Caleb must possess non-human, perhaps devilish, characteristics:

> At first, Caleb seemed to be a huge man.
> As he drew into the centre of the kitchen,

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[135] Ibid., p. 166.

[136] H.A. Guerber, Myths of Northern Lands, p. 198.

> Lind could see that he was, if anything, below medium height, . . . When attention was drawn to the lower half of the body, he seemed visibly to dwindle. He had harsh grey hair that hung in pointed locks about his head . . . His eyes were little beads of light.[137]

The pointed hair locks have an obvious satanic inference. But the writer goes on to paint Caleb with an even more striking Mephistophlean image when she introduces the relationship to the hearth-fire:

> He and Skuli had drawn their chairs up to the stove in the centre of the room and had taken out their pipes. A feeler of blue smoke curled up and around Caleb's head. Lind was reminded of a painting she had once seen of the fixed, sardonic face of a fakir, lifting his eyes upward to catch the demoniacal image of his conjuring.[138]

Later, Mark Jordan is to tell Lind that the people of Yellow Post say that "he's the devil himself."[139] Loki's predominant characteristic was his maliciousness:

> I shall go in to eye them feasting
> In Aegir's banquet hall:
> I intend to stir up strife and hate,
> Mingle gall with their mead.[140]

This dedication to malice is epitomized in Caleb's treatment of his family and neighbours. He deliberately creates strife and hatred as weapons to ensure his hold over his family and to further his own ends in the community. Typical of this is his destruction of Amelia's

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[137] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 13.

[138] Ibid., p. 15.

[139] Ibid., p. 77.

[140] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, pp. 133-134.

affection for her children: they "could wither and fall like rotten plants."[141] The strong parallel between the main example of Loki's and Caleb's malevolence has already been discussed in terms of Loki's part in the death of Balder and Gare's inhumanity to Amelia over her illegitemate son.

Another example of Caleb's inhuman behaviour is his treatment of his son Martin. The boy is a refreshing contrast to his father's destructive, narrow-minded nature. It is Martin's dream to build a new house for the family. He is "a builder born,"[142] and would do the work himself, if permitted. Knowing the family can afford a new home, he enquires regularly as to when he can begin. Finally Martin realizes that his father is trying to crush his dreams. The house will never be built in Caleb's lifetime. An episode is recounted in The Prose Edda which reflects the image of Caleb as a hindrance to building. The story goes that the gods never felt completely secure in Asgard and decided to build a fortress for protection. An unknown wright offered to do the work in one winter provided he received the sun, the moon, and the goddess Freyja in payment. He also asked for the use of his own horse to assist in the labour. The gods were dubious but Loki talked them into accepting the builder's conditions. The horse was so valuable in hastening the work that the gods feared that they would have to honour their bargain. Blaming Loki for this situation, they threatened

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[141] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 88.

[142] Ibid., p. 93.

to kill him unless he found a solution. He transformed himself into a mare and lured the stallion into the forest, thereby preventing the completion of the task. The builder was enraged, but was killed by Thor. The deities felt no satisfaction, but only anger at Loki for the position he had put them in:

> They had saved themselves on this occasion only through fraud and by perjury, this murder brought great sorrows upon them and eventually brought about their downfall and hastened the coming of Ragnarok. Loki, however, felt no remorse for what he had done.[143]

Like Loki, Caleb feels no guilt in frustrating Martin's ambitions.

There are two other possible links to Loki in Wild Geese. One is the strong symbolism given to the horse as an omen of Caleb's death, which was discussed in the section on Judith. The other is related to the wolf, and Ostenso introduces this in the opening scene of the novel. Caleb, having provoked Judith's anger by his attitude to Lind Archer, deliberately antagonizes her further by making his daughter get up from the wolf-skin rug she is lying on: "Did I show you that wolf pelt Martin got east of here? Big beast he was too, eh, Martin? . . . Here - Jude - show Skuli the rug!"[144] The horse and the wolf both had blood relationships to Loki. Sleipnir, the eight-legged steed which carried Odin to and from the underworld, was born to Loki after he changed into the mare which lured the builder's horse into the forest. He also fathered Fenrir the wolf-monster as one of the three terrible offspring he

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[143] H.A. Guerber, Myths of Northern Lands, p. 204.

[144] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 16.

had by a giantess. The creature was so large and ferocious that the gods tried three times before they were able to chain it securely. But at Ragnarok the monster broke loose and killed Odin before dying itself from the sword of Vidar, Odin's son:

> Now valiant comes Valfather's son
> Vidar, to vie with Valdyr in battle,
> Plunges his sword into the Son of Hvedrung,
> Avenging his father with a fell thrust.[145]

Apart from Sleipnir, the horse which Hermod rode into Hel's kingdom to get Balder back from the dead, Loki also sired Hel, the ruler of Niflheim, the land of death. With Fenrir, an undoubted symbol of slaughter and destruction, Loki was, therefore, closely associated with three death images. As Ellis Davidson stresses: No estimate of Loki can be complete which does not take into account the grim and terrifying background of death to which Loki seems at times to belong."[146] Loki is in fact a most ambivalent character in the myths. He is not always bad and sometimes went out of his way to help the gods. One example occurs when Thor lost his hammer and the giant Thrym offered to exchange it for Freyja. Loki helped Thor in his subterfuge to regain the hammer. Thor dressed as Freyja, and Loki as her handmaid, visit the giant and talk him into showing them the hammer. Once Thor has his hands on the magic weapon, he of course slays the giant and the rest of his kin. There are many such episodes in the myths and there is uncertainty as to exactly what Loki represented. In so far as it is possible to give a chronological sequence to the myths

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[145] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 154.

[146] H.R. Ellis Davidson, Gods and Myths of Northern Europe, p. 182.

however, it can be stated that Loki's character deteriorated with time. His early exploits can be described as mischievous and perhaps humourous pranks, but nobody was amused by his actions in causing the death of Balder. His malicious and vindictive traits increased with the passage of time. At the end we are left in no doubt as to Loki's true nature: "Only at Ragnarok is it clear where Loki's real allegiance lies, when he seems to relapse again into the figure of a bound and monstrous giant, breaking loose to destroy the world."[147]

Unlike Loki, there is little in Caleb's character to relieve the impression of evil and cruelty. There is, however, one episode which suggests a duality in his personality. When Caleb sees Mark Jordan for the first time, he experiences envy and a sense of loss for the love which he knew existed between his wife and her lover and which he had never known: "The soft wind grew in his scrag of hair, and in the invisible touch was a gesture of infinite pity."[148] Carlyle King, in the introduction to Wild Geese, suggests that the passage indicated a lack of control by the author, but it is also possible that what he considered a "lapse into sentimentality"[149] was quite deliberate. Ostenso may have intended to instill more realism into her character by introducing a little pathos, by showing that Caleb had some human feelings. That he was not devoid of the ability to show affection was illustrated by his treatment of his youngest son. It is possible, how-

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[147] Ibid.

[148] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 59.

[149] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, Intro., Carlyle King, p. viii.

ever, that the writer was again parallelling the figure of Loki by giving Caleb some of the god's ambivalent and enigmatic qualities.

In the discussion of Judith and Freyja, it was stated that the overriding symbolism in Wild Geese was the cycle of fertility, and several examples were given illustrating how Judith reflected the image of sensuality and fecundity attributed to the love-goddess. The theme of the myths is, in fact, the three phases of the life cycle, fertility, death, and rebirth, and Loki, in fact, is the main character through whom the second phase is enacted. Ostenso's description of Caleb's death is a close analogy of Loki's death symbolism in the plot of the Norse myths. The final section of this study will point out the subtlety with which the writer achieved this.

The Twilight of the Gods

In the first chapter of Wild Geese, Martha Ostenso establishes an atmosphere of foreboding and despair. While she begins with the mental claustrophobia of the Gare household, she quickly moves to depicting the outside physical world where Caleb also rules. His magnificent pastures and crop-lands are described in detail. But there is one imperfection in this apparent Eden: "Southeast, under the ridge, bottomless and foul, lay the muskeg, the sore to Caleb's eye. In the heat of summer, it gave up sickly vapours in which clouds of mosquitoes rose. Cattle and horses . . . had disappeared beneath its spongy surface."[150] This ugly trap conveys a sense of ill-omen to the reader.

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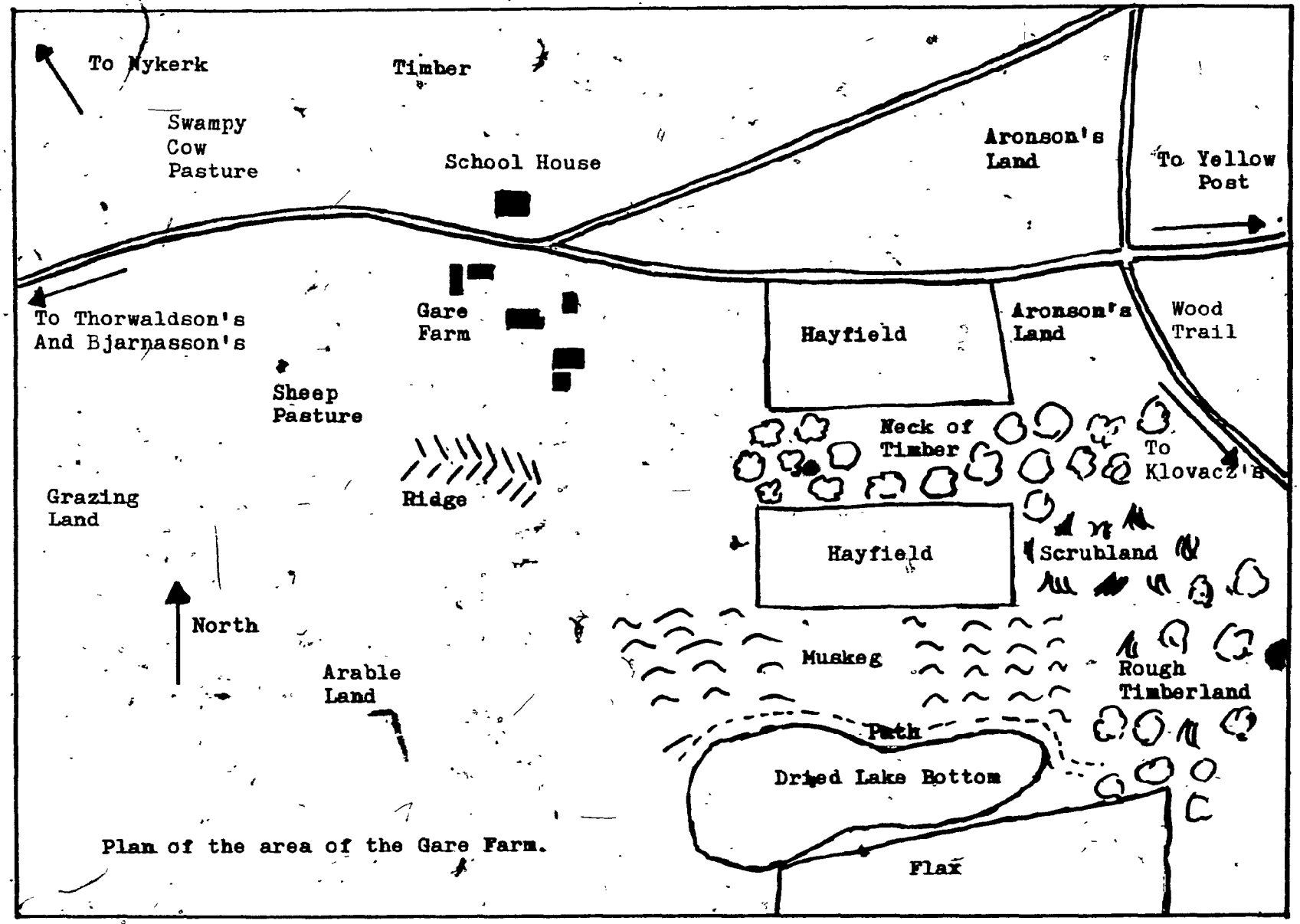
[150] Ibid., p. 19.



Plan of the area of the Gare Farm.

In retrospect, one could conclude that the writer was merely foreshadowing the tragic and climactic scene at the end of the novel. But the significance of this detail sharpens, once one accepts the tremendous influence of Norse myth on Ostenso's work. Invariably the earliest literature contained riddles. They could take the form of a question and answer or, sometimes, they were mnemonic. Failure to find the solution in the latter case could end in tragedy.

Old Icelandic poetry made considerable use of the riddle. "The Lay of Vafthrudnir" in The Elder Edda is a typical example. Odin, in disguise, poses his riddles to Vafthrudnir the giant and finally asks the unanswerable question:

> What did Odin whisper in the ears of his son
> Before Baldur was borne to the pyre?[151]

In his answer the giant acknowledges defeat:

> I doomed myself when I dared to tell
> What fate will befall the gods,
> And staked my wit against the wit of Odin
> Even the wisest of all.[152]

In Wild Geese, Caleb Gare is like the giant who fails to solve the riddle. His muskeg and its immediate surroundings are symbolic of the Norse cosmos, but Caleb knows nothing of this since he has forsaken his heritage. In failing to recognize the riddle, he is doomed. "Knowing the name of something and knowing the events of the past imply some control over the future."[153] Unwittingly, Caleb was embroiled in the

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[151] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 54.

[152] Ibid., p. 78.

[153] Ibid., Intro., p. 22.

cosmology of his forbears. As the latter day Loki, he had incurred the wrath of the gods and was doomed to die with them at Ragnarok, The Twilight of the Gods. The parallel between "Loki's Flyting" and Caleb's accusation of Amelia and Judith has already been drawn. Similarly, Loki's action in preventing the building of the Asgard fortress to protect the gods has been related to how Caleb frustrated his sons's desire to build. The comparison between Loki's part in Balder's death and Caleb's role in suppressing Amelia because of her son has also been made. All of these episodes of the Edda led to Ragnarok. As Loki gradually invoked the anger of the gods, so Caleb built up the antagonism of his family and neighbours. Revolt and bloodshed were the common result.

Apart from drawing her main characters straight from mythology, Ostenso also provides archetypal Norse god figures in the persons of Mathias Bjarnasson and Fusi Arenson. The two Icelanders reflect goodness, in contrast to the evil epitomised by Caleb Gare. The Bjarnassons typify the old Icelandic family; they were a "great clan who lived to the westward. . . . Mathias was a massive man, sixty now, but eternal in endurance, eternal in warmth and hospitality of nature."[154] The author portrays the family as the classic Scandinavian immigrants who have retained their cultural heritage while still achieving success in the new land. In sharp contrast to the Gares, family solidarity is one of the Bjarnassons' most striking characteristics. Four generations

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[154]M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, pp. 43-44.

live under one roof. Their house is of solid stone. Mathias's wife is described as having an "unchanging face"[155] and the blind grandmother, an "ancient lady,"[156] possesses the gift of foretelling the future. The old Norse saga characters had this gift too. In the Bjarnasson family, the beliefs of their ancient culture were not forgotten:

> There followed tales of supernatural events, of visions and omens, and of disasters that befell the unheeding. The great, grizzled Mathias told solemnly of the ancient pride of the Bjarnassons in Iceland, and of the dire fate of one who was disloyal to that pride, to that bond. Told of how the curse of the ancients fell upon him.[157]

Caleb is disloyal to that bond. The Bjarnassons have lost two of their kin drowned in the lake, and their bodies have not been recovered. They have asked that there be no fishing in the lake until the remains have been found, but Caleb has openly scorned their plea. He will suffer that "dire fate." While the Bjarnassons are not critical to the plot of the novel, they accentuate the contrast between the goodness and solidarity of the true Norseman and the evil and solitary Caleb Gare.

However, the other great Icelander, Fusi Aronson, does take a significant part in the events leading to Caleb's death. Fusi has suffered from the inhuman acts of Gare. Two of Fusi's brothers were caught in a storm and had asked Caleb for shelter. There was an epidemic in the area, and, fearing infection, Caleb had refused them

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[155] Ibid., p. 44.

[156] Ibid., p. 45.

[157] Ibid., p. 46.

refuge. Both died from the cold. Fusi presages Caleb's death when he expresses his animosity to Lind Archer: "'Caleb Gare - he does not feel. I shall kill him one day. But even that he will not feel.' There was no anger in Fusi's voice. Only deep, prescient certainty."[158]

Fusi is described in undoubted god-like terms as he approaches Lind through the mist: "Against the strange pearly distance she saw the giant figure of a man beside a horse. . . . It was Fusi Aronson, the great Icelander. . . . There was a vast, rough charm about the man. He was grand in his demeanour. . . . His voice was deep, sonorous, the tone almost oracular."[159] Caleb's wickedness towards the Aronson family does not end with the death of the two brothers. Fusi has another brother who has illegally borrowed church funds to buy cattle. Guessing the truth, Caleb blackmails Aronson into exchanging his neck of timber for the useless muskeg. Fusi is to be the unintentional instrument of Caleb's death in the muskeg, and his role as the revengeful horse god is clearly implied by Ostenso's description of him as he goes to complete the land contract with Gare. "He came with giant strides across the country, like some giant defender of a forgotten race."[160]

Before Ostenso describes the fire on Caleb's farm, she prepares the reader by increasing the mood of tension in her narrative. Once again, the area of the muskeg becomes the omen of tragedy. It is Lind and Mark, the two innocent catalysts of the story, who establish

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[158] Ibid., p. 31.

[159] Ibid., p. 31.

[160] Ibid., p. 70.

a mood fraught with suspense when they decide to walk through the area:

> "Do you know, Mark, I can't shake this feeling that something dreadful is about to happen. . . ." Mark laughed. . . . "Let's walk. How'd you like to go around that dried lake-bottom? It's a weird enough place for your thoughts." . . . Lind agreed. . . . "It looks like the land in the pictures you see of Noah's Ark standing on Mount Ararat."[161]

Ostenso's biblical reference is in itself meaningful in relation to the end of the novel and its death and rebirth images. But she also goes on to stress even more strongly the mysterious and sinister atmosphere of the place where Caleb is to meet his death:

> Then they came to the muskeg beyond which lay the lake-bottom, a drab, flat disk with enormous, ugly cracks crisscrossing upon its surface. Grotesque roots and stones still covered with a pale sediment stood out in the wan light. Lind and Mark made their way across the narrow strip of solid land between the lake-bottom and the muskeg.[162]

In the introduction to The Elder Edda, Peter Salus and Paul Taylor explain that riddles "also suggest the Nordic fascination between the structure of language and the structure of the cosmos."[163] Whole sections of The Elder Edda are devoted to the creation of the universe and to its destruction, and, re-creation. In The Prose Edda, Snorri retells the myths of the Eddic poems and draws the otherwise disjointed

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[161] Ibid., p. 219.

[162] Ibid., p. 219.

[163] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, Intro., p. 22.

episodes into a more logically developed plot. We read of the problems and sorrows of the gods, of the exploits and intrigues of Odin, Balder, Thor, Freyja, and Frigga. Through all the tales, the figure of the scheming Loki is in evidence. He is the thread that runs through the myths; he is the force which incites the gods into battle and the destruction of the Norse cosmos and themselves. In "The Lay of Vafthrudnir," Odin's repeated questioning of the giant is to learn of the ultimate fate of the gods. As Salus and Taylor explain:

> There is in the Nordic mind a subtle relationship, and a necessary one, between an event and the language with which it is described or anticipated. Questions and answers, then, seek to put into a harmonious relationship man's thought and the facts of the world about him, which he cannot fully comprehend or control.[164]

In the examination of the conclusion of Ostenso's novel and its close relationship to the myth of Ragnarok, it will be seen that this "subtle relationship" certainly existed in the Nordic mind of Ostenso.

As the description of the muskeg grows in symbolic significance, so does Caleb Gare's behaviour seem to develop a pre-determined pattern. Sven and Judith have planned to escape together from the Harvest festival. Gare has permitted the family to go, never believing Jude would dare to run away. But the couple are spotted by a neighbour as they flee. Thorvaldson, knowing what the effect will be on Caleb, cannot wait to report the elopers. Caleb is dumbfounded;

> "She's gone - she's gone!" he muttered to himself. Then a bedevilling fury broke loose within him. He rushed to the barn and threw open the door.

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[164] Ibid., p. 22.

> He struck a match and looked at the wall where the ax had been buried. There was a hole in the wall where the rotted wood had dropped out with the weight of the ax. The ax lay on the floor, still deep in the wood that had fallen with it. Caleb backed out of the barn and the match was blown out by the wind.[165]

There can be little doubt that the inspiration for Ostenso's axe scenes was the stanzas of "Song of the Sybil" describing the causes and beginning of the gods' war:

> At the host Odin hurled his spear
> In the first world-battle; broken was the plankwall
> Of the god's fortress: the fierce Vanes
> Caused war to occur in the fields.
>
> The gods hastened to their Hall of Judgment,
> Sat in council to discover who
> Had tainted all the air with corruption
> And Odin's Maid offered to the giants.[166]

These two verses clearly show that although Loki had caused the gods great distress with his corruption, it was his act of offering Odin's Maid (Freyja) to the giants which finally triggered the conflict. The reference to the Vanes causing the war is also significant to the importance of Freyja; she was the Vanes' chief goddess. The broken wall is therefore symbolic of the beginning of the end, in both the edda and and the novel. Caleb's illogical act in rushing to the barn, knowing that Judith had gone, underlies the deliberate symbolism. This is the first time that Caleb is faced with a world outside himself. Thus, it was the interplay between Freyja and Loki which stirred a war between

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[165]M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, p. 230.

[166]P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 148.

the gods, and it was the conflict between Judith and Caleb which determines the outcome of the plot in Wild Geese.

From this point on, the events of the novel build to an inevitable resolution. After Caleb's visit to the barn, the scene shifts to Fusi Aronson, who is unwittingly setting the seal on Caleb's fate:

> Fusi Aronson . . . had started burning the willows out at a short distance from the edge of Caleb Gare's timber - the timber that used to be his own. . . . With nightfall came the wind. Smouldering cinders . . . grew to a red glow. . . . And the wind was directly south . . . But within an amazingly short time the fire rose . . . and hurtled southward.[167]

When Caleb returns to the house, he attacks Amelia with a cattle whip for letting Judith go. To his consternation, he discovers that he has also lost his power over his wife:

> He stooped and looked into her eyes. There was no fear in them. For the first time in her life Amelia was not afraid of Caleb Gare. . . . His face was twisted with disbelief. He could not bring himself to admit that she had beaten him . . . Shame and self-loathing broke upon him overpoweringly. He lunged aside and made for the door, feeling his way as if he had gone suddenly blind - blind with sight.[168]

Caleb, his world destroyed, is to meet his Ragnarok. The two chief goddesses have rebelled against his tyranny. To the north, the mythological land of giants, the fire inadvertently started by the giant Icelander, Aronson, is burning fiercely. When Caleb, distraught, rushes from Amelia, he sees the fire blazing through the timber.

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[167] M. Ostenso, Wild Geese, pp. 230-231.

[168] Ibid., pp. 231-233.

Desperately, he attempts to stop the path of the fire by ploughing round the neck of timber, but the fire breaks through towards the flax field. His only chance is to burn a guard through the flax, but the path round the muskeg is too long. In despair he attempts to cross the muskeg, but is sucked down to his death while he watches the fire approach his beloved flax.

It will be seen that the climax of Wild Geese is an allegorical representation of the Twilight of the Gods. The stage of Ragnarok was, of course, the universe itself as depicted in Norse mythology. Snorri describes the cosmos:

> ring-shaped without, and round about her without lieth the deep sea; and along the strand of that sea they gave lands to the races of giants for habitation. But on the inner earth they made a citadel round about the world against the hostility of the giants . . . and called that place Midgard. Next they made for themselves in the middle of the world a city which is called Asgard.[169]

Snorri's mythological world was, therefore, three concentric circles; the outer one Utgard, the land of giants and elves; within Utgard was Midgard, the world of man; and the innermost was Asgard, the city of the gods. The link between these three worlds was the world-ash Yggdrassil, the tree of fate and wisdom. Beneath one of Yggdrassil's roots lay Niflheim, the realm of the goddess Hel which was guarded by the dragon Nidhögg, who "sucks blood from the bodies of the dead."[170]

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[169] Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda, pp. 20-21.

[170] P.B. Taylor and W.H. Auden, The Elder Edda, p. 149.

her cultural inheritance. This is not the case; Ostenso adopted a more critical stance than the author of The Viking Heart. Ostenso set out to remove the surface layers of the rural idyll, and showed that passion and violence, rather than idealism and sacrifice, were the forces directing people's lives. However, her understanding of the Norse people and her appreciation of their literary inheritance was no less than Salverson's. While the latter tried to stay within the saga tradition, through form and philosophy, Ostenso chose a more complex path. Delving farther back than the author of The Viking Heart, Ostenso sought the patterns and images of The Elder Edda to deepen the significance of relationships in the Gare family. It was in the darker side of the mythology that she found parallels to symbolize the tortured family. The Viking Heart and Wild Geese are a much richer experience when one appreciates that both authors owed a great deal of their literary inspiration to ancient Norse literature.