



The Medieval Imagination of Sigrid Undset

Then felt I like some watcher of the
skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle
eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his
men
Look'd at each other with a wild
surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

So writes Romantic poet John Keats, in his famous sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, likening his encounter with Homer’s works (in the Elizabethan translation by George Chapman) to a discovery of a new planet, or of the vast Pacific.

I had a similar experience when I first read *Kristin Lavransdatter* over twenty years ago, burning through its pages as a young mother. It was an earth-shattering discovery, and it left me totally in awe of the profound psychological, cultural, and spiritual sensibilities of its author. Dorothy Day recalls her own introduction to Sigrid Undset’s trilogy: “It was in 1926 or thereabouts that I first saw it, in the hands of my friend Freda, who lived next door. While she was reading it, her beach house remained unswept, her husband and son unfed. . . . As the years passed, I recommended it to all the women in the Catholic Worker movement, and they were spellbound by it too.”

Since reading *Kristin*, I have tried to read everything by or about Sigrid Undset I could get my hands on. In the process, I have discovered not planets and vast oceans, but an entire universe: the northern imagination, embodied in works as compelling and mysterious today as when C. S. Lewis, as a child, first read these words about the death of the Norse god Baldr in a poem by Longfellow:

Balder the Beautiful is dead, is dead.
And through the misty air
Passed the mournful cry
Of sunward sailing cranes.

In *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis gives his famous description of “Northernness”, that undefinable feeling which attended his encounter with these lines: “I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky. I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale and remote) and then . . . found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it.”

“*Quid enim Hinieldus cum Christo?*” Alcuin posed this question to the bishop of Lindisfarne after receiving news of the monks’ interest in hearing Northern legends to the accompaniment of the harp during mealtimes. “Let the words of God be read at dinner. It is proper for a reader to be heard there, not a harpist, the discourse of the fathers, not the song of the heathens. *What has Ingeld to do with Christ?* Your house is narrow and cannot contain both.”

I have spent the intervening years since I first encountered *Kristin Lavransdatter* considering Alcuin’s question, recognizing that the Northern imagination not only distracted early English Benedictines, but also captivated many of the best Christian writers of the twentieth century—Lewis, Tolkien, and Undset among them. For nearly a decade now, I have offered a course entitled “Northern Literature” at the small Catholic liberal arts college where I teach. We begin with the poetic *Edda*, which typifies that arresting, forceful directness we find in *Kristin*; as Tolkien reminds us, “To hit you in the eye was the deliberate intention of the Norse poet.” We then work our

way through several sagas, northern saints’ lives, and a Danish ballad or two, and read works—particularly *Magnus*, a fictional account of the martyrdom of the twelfth-century earl of Orkney—by neglected Orcadian Catholic writer George Mackay Brown. We conclude with a fair number of intense weeks dedicated to *Kristin Lavransdatter*.

You can, of course, read *Kristin Lavransdatter* profitably without ever having read the life of St. Olaf or the old Danish ballads (which a melodramatic eighteen-year-old Undset declared “the book of my books and the source of eternal life”). But as with all great works of art, your appreciation of Undset’s trilogy will only deepen and intensify as you familiarize yourself with the works which shaped and influenced her life, writing, and conversion. In what follows, I simply wish to introduce you to two of those works, and to suggest ways in which they help us to better appreciate Undset’s majestic saga—a saga both uniquely medieval and distinctively modern—of the headstrong Kristin.

The “Earthquake”: *Njal’s Saga*

When Sigrid was just ten years old, a friend of her father’s gave her a copy of *Njal’s Saga*, a sweeping, violent tale of the ill-fated friendship of the manly warrior Gunnar and the wise, thoughtful legal expert Njal. Young Sigrid could not put it down—she likened the reading experience to an “earthquake”—and when I first opened its pages, neither could I. I will suggest only one connection between the works; I leave it to you to discover the countless others. There is an unsettling but inescapable similarity between Kristin and Gunnar’s proud, disdainful wife Hallgerd, both of whom stockpile old grievances like Smaug hoards treasure. Early in their marriage, Gunnar makes the fatal mistake of slapping Hallgerd after she has goad-



Bjerkebaek, Sigrid Undset's home. Photo courtesy of Geir Hasnes.

ed him beyond his patience. Later, when Gunnar's home is besieged by enemies and his bowstring breaks, he requests some of Hallgerd's long blonde tresses to restring his bow:

He spoke to Hallgerd: "give me two locks of your hair, and you and my mother twist them into a bowstring for me."

"Does anything depend on it?" she said.

"My life depends on it," he said, "for they'll never be able to get near me as long as I can use my bow."

"Then I'll recall," she said, "the slap you gave me, and I don't care whether you hold out for a long or a short time."

Even though he could easily have taken the strand of hair by force, Gunnar—good Norse pagan that he is—accepts his manly fate, and is killed shortly after. A little further on in the narrative, Iceland accepts Christianity, and the spiteful Hallgerd is "out of the saga", as the saga writers like to say.

Kristin's own relationship with her par amour and later husband, Erlend, follows a distressingly similar pattern. Like Hallgerd, Kristin bitterly stores up all of Erlend's

accumulated wrongs. When she is pregnant with Erlend's child before their marriage, she resents that the first words with which he acknowledges his bastard child are a rebuke to Kristin to keep quiet so that the villagers won't gossip. "I will never forget for as long as I live", says Kristin, "that those were the first words you greeted him with, this son of yours that I carry under my belt." "You hold a grudge for a long time, my Kristin", Erlend responds.

Erlend's own sieve-like memory and childlike incapacity for nursing a grudge infuriates Kristin, and she never misses an opportunity for harboring resentment. She resents Erlend when he seems uninterested in their sons; she resents him when he seems to be developing too close a relationship with them. She resents that Erlend has separated her from her father, the saintly Lavrans; she resents Erlend all the more when Lavrans himself chastises her for her ill-treatment of her husband. She resents the fact that she hasn't inherited her father's holy disposition; she even, you may recall, resents her parents' love in their final moments together. She *really* resents it when Erlend complains that her frequent pregnancies are impeding their love life: "I thought that when I finally had you, it would be like celebrating Christmas every day. But now it seems that there will

be mostly long periods of fasting." In her stubborn self-will, she even begins to resent St. Olav, because she can't compel him to extend her the peace she so desperately wants: "She had felt her passion temper her will until it was sharp and hard like a knife, ready to cut through all bonds—those of kinship, Christianity, and honor." When Erlend is arrested, betrayed by his "lover" Sunniva, into whose arms he is driven by Kristin's hard-heartedness, Kristin seems to recognize the disastrous effects of her bitter memory: "Each time he offended her she had tended to the memory the way one tends to a venomous snake. . . . If Erlend had a hand in it, she forgot nothing."

Despite Kristin's periodic moments of self-knowledge and a desire to reform, her "long memory", as with Hallgerd's, leads to multiple disasters, as readers of the novel well know. Within the pages of *Njal's Saga*, though, Hallgerd never experiences such regret, and this difference between the two women is instructive. At the end of her masterful introduction to Norse Christianity in *Saga of Saints*, Undset tells us of a legend still shared in the part of Iceland where the events of *Njal's Saga* take place. Hallgerd, so the legend goes, lives to a ripe old age, and accepts Christianity. "It pleases me to think that Gunnar died a pagan, but that I myself am now a Christian woman",

she would often say. “This”, Undset tells us with characteristic Northern dryness, “is what she got out of her conversion.” Thankfully, as readers of *Kristin Lavransdatter* know, Kristin gets much more out of her turn toward Christ. In order to trace the main contours of this transformation, though, it is helpful to consider another medieval work that influenced Undset.

“A man running who does not heed what will happen”

A second Northern medieval touchstone for Undset is a work which she described as “the most outstanding work of the old Swedish literature”: the *Liber Celestis* or *Divine Revelations* of St. Bridget (Birgitta) of Sweden. If Kristin had been a real historical figure, she and St. Birgitta, or St. Bride as she is also known to the English, would have been rough contemporaries. An opening conversation between Christ and St. Bride in the *Revelations* begins with Christ’s question: “Daughter, how stands the world now?” She answers: “It stands as an open sack to whom all run, and as a man running who does not heed what will happen.” One would be hard-pressed for a better description of Kristin’s early attitude in *Kristin Lavransdatter*. She pays no heed to what will happen in her pursuit of her passionate relationship with Erlend, and only later begins to comprehend the effects of her actions in a moment of painful recognition: “I did not realize that the consequence of sin was that you had to trample on other people.”

Further in the *Revelations*, Our Lady asks St. Birgitta: “What do the proud women say in your kingdom?” Saint Birgitta responds with great humility and regret: “O Lady, I am one of them.” What follows is a vision Our Lady grants to St. Birgitta of a mother in hell and a daughter in purgatory (there is some suggestion that these are actually St. Birgitta’s own mother and grandmother). The vision provides a meditation on the vice or virtue mothers transmit to their daughters, and offers some context for understanding the rather understated but important relationship in the novel between Kristin and her melancholic mother, Rangfrid. In St. Birgitta’s vision, the mother has transmitted to her daughter delight in fine clothes, bodily joy, and worldly praise. The mother remains unrepentant and undesirous of God’s mercy, and the gruesome torments she endures in Hell—which easily outpace anything Dante could have imagined—are appropriate to her sinful misuse of her body

in her lifetime. The daughter, who followed her in her worldly pursuit of pleasure, has managed to end up in Purgatory. (By contrast, it is perhaps worth recalling that Saint Birgitta’s own daughter Catherine was, like her mother, canonized, and that her granddaughter, Ingegerd Knutsdotter, became the first recognized abbess of Vadstena, the Brigittine abbey founded by her grandmother.)

Rangfrid, unlike the mother of St. Birgitta’s vision, does not foster in young Kristin an inordinate love for worldly things. But because she is absorbed by her sorrowful past, she offers Kristin little in the way of instruction or guidance, leaving her young daughter vulnerable to the less than salu-

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tary influence of Fru Aashild, the controversial “healer” who advises young Kristin to pursue worldly pleasures: “Good days can last a long time”, she tells Kristin, “if one tends to things with care and caution.” Because Rangfrid cannot accept God’s mercy for her own past sins (which only come to light fully when Kristin’s sin is revealed), she is unable to guide her own daughter properly and thus contributes indirectly to Kristin’s ungoverned pursuit of pleasure with Erlend.

In the opening volume, we see an emerging “family resemblance” between Kristin and Rangfrid, who both behave with a streak of northern self-reliance, attempting to dictate their terms to God: “God help you, Rangfrid Ivarsdatter”, says the parish priest Sira Eirik, shaking his head. “You want nothing more from all your prayers and fasting than to force your will on God. Does it surprise you, then, that it has accomplished so little good?”

Like Rangfrid, Kristin continually believes herself beyond the reach of mercy, even though both on some level desire it.

Throughout the novel, priests and friars continually rebuke Kristin for her spiritual pride: “Monks and priests had pointed out remorse and repentance as the way home to peace, but she had chosen strife rather than give up her precious sin.” There are several moments early in the novel in which Kristin receives a berating from a priest for attempting to force God’s hand in a manner similar to that of her mother. The first is Kristin’s self-imposed “trial by ordeal” over the dead body of Kristin’s childhood friend Arne, whose mother has accused Kristin of sexual impropriety with Arne’s killer, Bentein:

“May God my Savior help me, that is a lie!” She put out her hand and held it over the nearest candle on the bier

It looked as if the flame wavered and moved aside. Kristin felt everyone’s eyes upon her—for a very long time, it seemed. Then she suddenly noticed a searing pain in her palm, and with a piercing shriek she collapsed onto the floor.

As Sira Eirik tells her: “this was not the way to ask God to bear witness”. A little later, when the parish church burns down, Kristin passionately protests to Sira Eirik that God has allowed this destruction because of her sin with Erlend. The priest responds with fiery rage:

Do you think God cares so much about the way you sluts surrender and throw yourselves away that He would burn down a beautiful and honourable church for your sake? Rid yourself of your pride and do not cause your mother and Lavrans a sorrow from which they would scarcely recover. . . . Everyone has his sins to answer for; no doubt that is why this misfortune has been brought upon us all.

Closer to her delivery date, Kristin complains to Erlend’s brother Gunnulf: “I must be like a leper in God’s eyes . . . Such as I am, infected with sin.” Gunnulf rightly calls her out for her inordinate pride and self-will: “Kristin”, he says sternly, “Are you so arrogant that you think yourself capable of sinning so badly that God’s mercy is not great enough?”

The answer, at this point in the novel, is a resounding “yes”, but as Our Lady reminds St. Birgitta in the *Revelations*, “There is none who is so great a sinner but I am

ready to help him; and my Son to give him grace, if he ask mercy with charity.” Kristin, thankfully, does not remain stubborn and defiant in her denial of God’s mercy, unlike Fru Aashild, who proudly declares, “I have never asked for his mercy when I went against his commandments”, or the mother in Hell of St. Birgitta’s vision. Instead, Kristin begs God’s forgiveness and asks Him to spare her son.

It is almost comically suggestive of God’s unsurpassed mercy that the actual “fruit” of Kristin’s sin, then, is so abundant. Those who have read the novel know that instead of dying in childbirth, or giving birth to a hideously deformed child, Kristin receives an answer to her prayer and gives birth to a healthy son, “fresh as an apple, pink and white like a rose . . . with clear, sweet eyes”. She makes a pilgrimage of repentance and thanksgiving to the Shrine of St Olaf, and later gives birth to another son, and then another, and another, and another—with a set of twins thrown into the mix—until she has a tribe of seven sons to carry on Erlend’s lineage. (God obviously knows exactly what kind of atonement Kristin needs.)

But even after most of her sons are grown, Kristin still lets “all the old, bitter thoughts” rise up “like good friends”. Unlike Fru Aashild (whose gruesome end almost matches the torments of the unrepentant mother of St. Birgitta’s vision), she has made some progress in the spiritual life, to be sure. But well into the final volume, the narrator is still telling us, “She would humble herself before God and Holy Olav with a burning fervor; she would hasten to do good, striving to force tears of true remorse from her eyes as she prayed. But each time she would feel that unfrozen discontent in her heart.” At this point, the reader is likely to grow quite frustrated with Kristin’s inability to follow through on her “firm purpose of amendment”. Isn’t the spiritual life supposed to be one of progress, a gradual ladder of ascent, so that each time one falls, one is at least a little further up the steep climb?

But anyone who has experienced the typical life of a Christian will recognize a familiar pattern:

Disobedience in this life . . . was long, for when I went one step forward in meekness and confession, I slid backward a step . . . as does he who slides upon ice; because my will was cold and would not get up and flee from the

things which delighted me. So therefore when I went a step forward, confessing my sins, I slid a step backward; because I would fall again to those sins and delectations that delighted me of which I had made a confession.

These are not Kristin’s words, but the words of the daughter in Purgatory in St. Birgitta’s vision. They ring as true for Kristin as they do for many Christians in all ages. For the purgatorial daughter of St. Birgitta’s vision, the final detachment from “precious sins” does not occur until the moments before death, when she finally thinks of Christ’s passion and is overwhelmed with contrition. “O you son of the Virgin”, she pleads, “have mercy upon me for your bitter Passion.” And “in that point of time there was lit and kindled in my heart a spark of charity”, she tells St. Birgitta, “and so then burst my heart”. Readers of *Kristin Lavransdatter* well know the final resolution to Kristin’s own lifelong attachment to sin, and her subsequent journey home; they are too wise and deep to summarize or excerpt here.

The Fierce Dispute

Rather than chronicling the discovery of a great literary work, in another of Keats’ sonnets, “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again”, the poet expresses the need to return to one: “once again”, he says, “the fierce dispute, / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay / Must I burn through”. If Keats had—and perhaps he should have—said “the fierce dispute / betwixt *salvation* and impassion’d clay”, he would have given us a perfect description of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, which places Kristin’s stubborn self-will in opposition to God’s abundant mercy and which, like the works of Shakespeare and all great writers, repays not only that first absorbing reading experience, but a lifetime of slow and patient rereading.

All fires burn out sooner or later. This phrase is repeated several times toward the close of *Kristin Lavransdatter*. That fierceness of spirit, that intense longing so characteristic of the pagan North—and so obviously destructive to Kristin when channeled toward her own passionate will—when finally directed toward Christ, produces something beautiful: conversion, salvation, peace. The earthly fire of self-will will be replaced by the heavenly fire of eternal love. That northern fire, then, might just be the spark our modern secular age

needs to kindle the flames of charity rather than stockpile the bitter wood of resentment or worse, cold indifference. Perhaps this provides a partial answer to what Ingeld has to do with Christ. Perhaps it also helps us understand why Tolkien painstakingly studied Old Norse and, in a “single very fine decorated manuscript”, as his son Christopher tells us, translated part of the Eddaic poem *Völuspá* (*The Prophecy of the Seeress*) on the death and return of Balder. Tolkien’s version concludes with a lyrical vision that has its obvious fulfillment in Christ’s death and Resurrection:

Unsown shall fields of wheat grow
white
when Baldur cometh after night;
the ruined halls of Odin’s host,
the windy towers on heaven’s coast,
shall golden be rebuilt again,
all ills be healed in Baldur’s reign.

So I urge readers to take up and read, and reread, *Kristin Lavransdatter*. In order to appreciate the novel and Undset’s unparalleled artistry more fully, to come to know her better, to better familiarize yourself with the medieval Northern Christian imagination, consider reading what Undset herself read. Read *Njal’s Saga*; read the *Revelations* of St. Birgitta of Sweden; read as many of the old ballads (particularly the Danish) you can lay your hands on. Whenever I come across a piece of writing by or about Sigrid Undset, or discover some new aspect of her life—her deep friendship with Willa Cather, her housing of priests at her beautifully landscaped estate of Bjerkebak, her donation of her Nobel Prize money to further the cause of Finnish refugees during the Second World War (while fellow Norwegian Knut Hamsun gave his to Hitler’s propagandist Goebbels)—I feel even more intensely the longing to know her life and work better, to know what motivated and influenced her, to discover what nurtured and sustained her on her own earthly pilgrimage. Such sympathy between reader and writer is rare and precious, and I remain grateful to this inspiring Norwegian woman for introducing me not only to her writings and her difficult and holy life, but to a rich and varied body of literature that can help guide us toward our ultimate Home.

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