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## DEEP INNER LIVES, INDIVIDUALISM AND PEOPLE OF HONOUR

*William Ian Miller\**

With the exception of St Augustine and perhaps Abelard, often praised as modern before their time, it is not unusual to find it maintained that the individual was not available in any serious conceptual, psychological or even sociological way before the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Our thick and deep self, according to this view, is thus a rather recent phenomenon. Some more expansive souls find the individual already emerging a century earlier, during the Reformation.<sup>2</sup> Within the last three decades, medievalists, chagrined at being contemned by classicists on one flank and an alliance of Renaissance scholars, early modernists, modernists and post-modernists on the other, claimed for the twelfth century the honour of providing the setting for the emergence of the individual. But few non-medievalists believe them and even some medievalists question the emphases in the claim.<sup>3</sup> The fact is that many serious-minded people believe that an interesting psychological life was a historical near impossibility from AD 500 to AD 1500.

\* Thanks to Phoebe Ellsworth, Heidi Feldman, Don Herzog and Kathy Koehler for valuable comments.

<sup>1</sup> Thus it is that Charles Taylor can write, 'On the way from Plato to Descartes stands Augustine', see C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> See Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, 1973), p. 40; and Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

<sup>3</sup> Some key contributions making the claim for the twelfth-century discovery of the individual are Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1970); Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven, 1977); Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050–1200* (New York, 1972); R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, 1959), pp. 219–57; Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore 1966). Caroline Bynum, however, skilfully casts doubts on some key features of the claims implicit in these works; see C. Bynum, 'Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?', in C. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 82–109; see also Sverre Bagge, 'The Autobiography of Abelard and Medieval Individualism', *Journal of Medieval History*, 19 (1993), pp. 327–50.

Medieval people still suffer greatly at the hands of us moderns.<sup>4</sup> That the age produced Dante and the cathedrals still, we feel, does not excuse Chaucer's retraction. Those of us who do not simply ignore the Middle Ages as a wasteland between the classical and the modern are often drawn to it by a kind of perverse delight in what is perceived as strange, benighted, irrational and insentient. We commonly understand medieval people to be little more than automatons: slaves to oppressive norms, oppressive churchmen and oppressive lords; blind believers with little if any inner life, with few emotions outside fear and anger; impractical, dim and generally unable to calculate advantage except for the few diabolical churchmen who, smart before their time, were able to fleece their dumb and docile flocks of what wretched surpluses they were able to extract from the blighted earth. (Even medievalists are tempted by thin caricatures of medieval people that are largely a product of either philo-Catholicism or gothic strains in Romanticism.) Medieval people fare badly in the estimation of most moderns, not only because of the view we have of their lack of autonomy, the restrictiveness and intrusiveness that their religion imposed, but also because those who managed to keep an ironic distance from the shackling constraints of religious belief only broke away to fall into the pit of honour, the fierce competition for esteem and status. To the irrationality of religion we add the irrationality of revenge, of self-destructive posturing, of wasteful display, of living on the edge and courting danger and risk. It is almost as if medieval man thus imagined is a psychological and ideological necessity for us. He, more than Hobbes's prepolitical brute with the short nasty life, is what we have overcome; he is our Other, the person we can congratulate ourselves on having transcended.<sup>5</sup> The Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment ganged up on their ancestor, medieval man, and he has never recovered from the mugging.

I work with medieval sources — the Icelandic sagas — that readily reveal the strategic, the rational, the practical, the political, the just plain smartness of social actors even as they try to fulfil the ruthless demands of an ethic of

<sup>4</sup> The awe which classical times inspires saves some ancient Greeks from being treated like medieval people. But even classicists have had to overcome their Snells; see Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, trans. T.G. Rosenmeyer (New York, 1953), who goes so far as to deny Homeric man the ability to see himself and others as agents. Bernard Williams sensibly disposes of such foolishness in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 21–49.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbes's brutish man is not presocial however; he was socialized quite well in the cultural and social expectations of the norms of honour and glory. For a compelling reappraisal of the standard line on Hobbes that makes this point and many others see Don Herzog, *Without Foundations* (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 29–67; and D. Herzog, *Happy Slaves* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 72–109.

honour.<sup>6</sup> The sagas have the virtue, for the modern reader, of being immediately accessible and gripping without requiring the assistance of specialized training. Their accessibility is more than a consequence of the practical presentation of the heroic: it is also a function of their manifest literary excellence, of our still flourishing attraction to notions of honour, ‘face’ and revenge,<sup>7</sup> and of the relatively non-clerical, a-religious, a-Christian sentiment and style of their narration. Accessibility helps prompt our sympathy, making us somewhat less likely to dismiss these people as mechanical automatons, but it also runs the risk of making these same characters a little too thin in another way, a thinness of a distinctly modern cast. What does one gain by winning back rationality, practicality and astute strategy for medieval people if all that is claimed is that these characters are rational in the way economists and rational choice theorists conceive of rationality? We will thus have left them without complex emotions, without the deep inner life that makes us interesting rather than rational.

The Icelandic sagas may still not alter the common view of medieval people that I have somewhat parodically drawn. The sagas may only justify reclassifying medieval Scandinavians as proto-modern. But the sagas also remind us of something almost too obvious to bear saying. Our image of a period depends not only on what written material survives but also on who wrote that material in what style, for what purposes, under what constraints. Constructing a story about the geography of the self that only looks at one tradition of ‘high’ philosophical texts may paint a strange story indeed. (Here I clearly take issue with the account in Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* and with other work in the high intellectual-historical and political-theoretical tradition.) These texts pride themselves on the appearance of timelessness, on exclusion of the daily and local; they consciously attempt to talk across time to each other rather than to contemporaries writing or talking in different genres and different styles. I suspect that it just might be the case that the philosophers had been anticipated in their discovery of the self by the poets, even by some wily heroes in the mould of Odysseus or King David or King Saul, that grand melancholic. One may well suspect that the discovery and constitution of the self was more a product of influences percolating up than trickling down.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> On these themes and their extraordinary durability see W.I. Miller, *Humiliation* (Ithaca, NY, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor displays some noteworthy anxieties on this score; see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 199–207. My strawmen are not just philosophers whom I single out somewhat unfairly. More precisely my implicit polemic has in mind those practitioners of various styles of cultural and intellectual history (1) that tell sweeping historicized tales about the rise and fall of certain psychological capacities as if the Middle Ages did not exist; and (2) that make their strawmen from an oversimplified and psychologically implausible view of the heroic ethic of honour-based cultures.

Let me make some important qualifications. I do not want to be understood as ahistorically denying difference, denying change and denying the social and cultural construction of personality. Nevertheless, I am inclined to be wary of a scholarly construction of a type of personality available to a prior age that so easily allows the present age to congratulate itself on the neatness, not to say the dramatic and self-serving nature, of the contrast it constructs for itself. A commitment to historicism is surely not a commitment to a belief in the thinness and shallowness of psychic life in cultures which did not indulge in opining about the dignity of Man writ large, the virtues of privacy, the ideology of individual uniqueness and self-development and self-fulfilment. I do not think those things are bad things either, and I am not claiming that all life is infinitely rich and meaningful no matter what its cultural setting. I am willing to believe that life can be richer in some cultures than in others, that some cultures provide much better conditions in which more people can flourish. Nor do I mean to deny that there is some big obvious truth in the contrast between Us and Them. But still one can imagine and even come near to proving the possibility of a rich and interesting (even deep?) inner life for people in an honour-based culture.

What I want to do in this short paper is sketch out a claim for a kind of richness and depth to social, emotional and inner life in a culture of honour, for that is what the sagas talk about.<sup>9</sup> It is also the case that honour and glory have come in for especially harsh treatment in the standard classics of liberal political theory, a tradition which continues unabated in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. Heroic people are shallow men of straw, a necessary Other, Hobbes's prepolitical man again.<sup>10</sup> Is it possible to characterize the inner life of a person engaged in the acquisition and maintenance of honour as deep? Can we characterize it as interesting? Can it be one and not the other? Implicit in the notion of depth or in the opposition of deep/shallow are other notions and oppositions that are either understood as subsumed in the notion of depth or bearing significant points of overlap. There is the opposition of interesting vs. dull inner lives as just noted. There is self-knowledge vs. self-preoccupation, which may vary from an acceptable style of self-concern to a less attractive

<sup>9</sup> To the extent I try to make the case for an interesting inner life for those who subscribe to an honour ethic I am pursuing a distinctly different path from those medievalists who have tried to claim twelfth-century origins for modern individualism where Abelard and changes in styles of devotion figure greatly.

<sup>10</sup> I am making an elision here that I wish to remark on briefly. The honour and glory of a seventeenth-century noble did not work in quite the same way as the honour of a saga hero. The latter is situated in a community with only weak juridical and status distinctions among free men, the other flourishes in conditions of a strong notion of 'estates'. On estates theory in the late middle ages see the very interesting treatment by Howard Kaminsky, 'Estate, Nobility, and the Exhibition of Estate in the Later Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 68 (1994), pp. 684–709.

self-indulgence. There is the smart and strategic, an alertness to the intentions and motives of others versus the dumb and passive, with a dim appreciation of the internal lives of others as these affect you. There is the capacity for self-mockery and certain styles of self-directed irony, even wit and humor versus self-importance, gravity and various styles of deference eliciting poses. What connection do these things have with various emotional economies, with shame and guilt, for instance, or with the capacity to articulate inner states?

Lurking here are big moral and even empirical questions that we will not be able to touch upon. For instance, is there any correlation, positive or negative, between the psychological and cognitive style of ‘radical reflexivity’ — the awareness of one’s awareness, the experience of our process of experiencing and concern for others?<sup>11</sup> As Taylor and others note there is a sense that the make-up of the self is connected with what we hold to be the good, with what we think is worth striving for; and it is also clear that we consider a person’s depth, moral depth in this case, but with a strong spillover into what we perceive as psychological depth, to depend on the substance of that person’s self-defining goals. Those that seek happiness in material objects we perceive as shallow, as indeed those who seek happiness in the sense of feeling good; and seeking salvation — and honour? Where do we put those who care about honour? I also want to touch on a few loose issues that find themselves inextricably tied to notions of the construction of the individual. I will thus take a brief excursus into notions of blame, legal liability and the depiction of outlawry. Once there I will hazard a few observations about privacy, loneliness and individualism.

I have written recently on the affective life of the heroic as it is manifested in the Icelandic saga literature.<sup>12</sup> There are no real surprises as to what one would imagine the emotional economy to be. Shame of course is central, as indeed is envy and contempt, and I think boredom too — not ennui, but boredom. Shame in tandem with contempt maintains the ethic of courage and face; envy drives the ethic of competitiveness that urges one into situations that risk the contempt of others and hence one’s own shame. Honour is scarce. There is never enough to go round, by definition, since if everyone had it it would not serve to confer distinction. Moreover, there is an anxiety that the

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the term from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 130, who defines it as follows: ‘In our normal dealings with things, we disregard this dimension of experience and focus on the things experienced. But we can turn and make this our object of attention, become aware of our awareness, try to experience our experiencing, focus on the way the world is *for* us. This is what I call taking a stance of radical reflexivity or adopting the first-person standpoint.’

<sup>12</sup> See Miller, *Humiliation*, pp. 93–130, in which I construct a fuller account of the emotions of self-assessment and how these play out in the maintenance of ‘face’ in routine day-to-day interaction.

amount is diminishing over time, since inevitably the heroes who are one's contemporaries are never quite as heroic as the heroes of the past. But honour-based cultures tend to suffer material scarcity also, whether in saga Iceland or the American inner-city ghetto. The scarcity of things elicits boredom, but this boredom helps fuel the engine of honour by making others — what you think of them and they of you — more interesting than they would otherwise be.<sup>13</sup> Scarce honour gives others the capacity to interest one independently of their being the beneficiaries of that rare and random talent of being able to captivate with personality. So paradoxically, boredom from lack of things makes people more interesting than they would otherwise be. But our question is: does this make someone interesting to him or herself? Does the concern even arise?

We moderns posit guilt as an emotion that gives our inner lives depth. Is shame any less able to prompt deep internal soundings? Try as one might it is very hard to distinguish consistently and coherently those two emotions in spite of the rough feel we have about the difference between shame and honour cultures.<sup>14</sup> Racked by shame, tormented by guilt: both experiences involve extreme self-attention and self-assessment. We usually think of the one — guilt — as more 'inner' because we tell ourselves it involves the activities we have come to call conscience, whereas shame, we feel, has less to do with internal sanctions than the sanctions imposed by the opinions of those who shame us. Yet we need no audience of shamers to feel shame. We have already internalized their judgments by having accepted the standards and norms of the community. Is this capacity of internalization really any different from the internalization of values and norms that produces the capacity to feel guilt? Does not, in other words, something very like conscience figure in shame? Both these emotions, as I just mentioned, are emotions of self-assessment, which

<sup>13</sup> A different account needs to be given for honour and glory among the European nobility. In that setting it could be claimed that the very superfluity of things make them absent in a special way. I perhaps should abandon the risky claim about honour and material scarcity and recast it differently. The fact is that honour cultures are usually distinguished by males having a lot of time on their hands, work being something that occupies the lives of women and slaves.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Gibbard rather ingeniously finesses the difficulty of the shame/guilt distinction by pairing each, shame or guilt, opposite the emotion in the second party it is a response to. Thus shame is a response to derision and contempt, guilt to anger and since anger and contempt are easily distinguishable the shame/guilt distinction can piggy-back on the easy separability of anger and contempt. See Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 136 ff. The shame/guilt distinction has been rightly and roundly criticized; see among others, G. Piers and M. Singer, *Shame and Guilt: A Psychoanalytic and Cultural Study* (1953; New York, 1971). Yet despite this we still feel it captures a difference between cultures in which the individual is bounded, autonomous, unique, with a rich inner life and those in which the person is more weakly individuated, defined by social context, status, group membership and role.

usually must also involve the consciousness of being thus self-assessing. Shame (and even guilt, *pace* Freudians) requires consciousness of the very experience of shame (and guilt) or it is not shame (or guilt). This is ancient folk wisdom, as the account of the fall from Eden attests.

Depth of inner life, in the sense of moral self-examination, does not seem to be *necessarily* related to any difference between shame and guilt cultures. I do not mean to suggest that the emotional life of medieval people looked exactly like ours. I would be very surprised if it did. But it does not appear justified, based on what evidence we have, to imagine their emotional life as less ‘deep’ without a serious examination of what assumptions lurk within the notion of depth. I have discussed elsewhere the relation of the quality of emotional life (as distinct from intellectual life) to the means the culture has at its disposal to talk about feelings and emotions.<sup>15</sup> How rich is the specifically dedicated vocabulary of emotions; are there norms that favour or disfavour talking about feelings; are there elaborately coded indirect ways to articulate motive and emotion?

We might, for instance, follow the lead of certain philosophers (Rorty, Taylor) who suggest that the capacity to articulate inner states goes a long way to creating the inner self. At its most vulgar the claim is that rich vocabularies make for rich inner lives. Let us examine this briefly. We might imagine a wrestling fan at one extreme and Proust at the other. Most, with a guilty nod at the élitism implicit in the claim, would assume that Proust has a somewhat richer emotional life than the wrestling fan. But is it the case that ever richer vocabularies produce ever richer sensibilities, or ever richer experiences in linear variation? Surely, the Philistine (and Romantic) view that overideation kills sentiment would suggest that somewhere along the road to Proust we become so hyper-intellectual, so self-involved, so hyper-analytical that we lose the capacity for experience, except the experience of angst at the loss of simpler more immediate experience. Vocabulary and a grand capacity for articulation then may make emotional life richer up to a point, at which point returns diminish and the capacity to articulate kills the capacity to have articulatable experiences.<sup>16</sup>

Old Norse, or at least saga diction, did not cut the emotional world too finely. Moreover, it was generally bad form for these tough guys to discuss their feelings. But it takes no great sensitivity as a reader to see saga people bursting

<sup>15</sup> See Miller, *Humiliation*, pp. 98–101, 175–201.

<sup>16</sup> I do not mean to say that Proust did not feel, and at times exquisitely. But what he felt was the force of and the mayhem caused by the super-refinement of his analytical consciousness. Even though one could argue that all emotions have a necessary and defining cognitive aspect, one suspects that the cognitive aspect he brought to the other components of the emotion was ‘de trop’ and interfered with the experience of, say, love (surely), anger (surely), regret (surely), embarrassment (not at all), wistfulness (hardly).



at the seams with feeling.<sup>17</sup> (We have a bad habit of assuming reticence implies having nothing to say.) Some emotional expression gets ‘articulated’ by bodily reaction, but most is recovered by inference from actions that only make sense if a complex motivation is implied. It is not just we who make these inferences. Astute saga characters were remarkably skilful in discerning motive and intention in others; no worse at it, it seems, than philosophers were likely to have been. When, for instance, Gudrun talks with easy normality — with, that is, the standard smiles of regular conversation — to the men who had just killed her husband, we find some of those men remarking on how little she was affected by her husband’s death. Not so, says another: ‘It’s not my view that Gudrun doesn’t care about Bolli’s death; I think that she chatted with us because she wanted to know absolutely for sure the identity of the men who made up this expedition. It’s not exaggerating to say that Gudrun is the most fearless and determined of women. And it is to be expected that she would be upset at Bolli’s death.’<sup>18</sup> Here we have a recognition that some people are better at reading motivation than others; we have a view as to the appropriateness of certain emotional displays, that is, whether a woman’s sense of the duty to take revenge must necessarily make use of the conventionally feminine markers of grief (tears and displays of sadness) or whether the wider range of grief behaviours available to warrior-aged men may not also be available to her. The scene also shows Gudrun in the process of self-enacting, that is playing herself as she would if she were unmoved, and even offers a theory of such self-enactment.<sup>19</sup> Self-enactment figures greatly in the sagas (we tend to forget how socially and psychologically complex the notion of dissimulation is). Characters thus take care to control their facial expressions so as not to give away inner states such as fear (of course) but also joy: ‘Don’t betray your satisfaction, because if Einar, with his sharp eye, sees that you have a change of mood, he will find a trick to thwart the plan.’<sup>20</sup> Some of the best-known saga heroes — Njal and Snorri the Chieftain — are not known for their martial skills but for their skill

<sup>17</sup> I do not mean to imply that feelings and emotions are quite the same thing. We might, for instance, want to accord a larger cognitive component to an emotion and then distinguish that from the feeling. But I think, even in loose accepted usage, it is not altogether clear that feelings are merely the preverbal inarticulatable aspect of emotion, but that feelings also are intertwined with cognition.

<sup>18</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslensk Fornrit*, Vol. 5 (Reykjavík, 1934). The translation is my own, but for a convenient English translation see Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *Laxdaela Saga* (Harmondsworth, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> On self-enactment see Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (New York, 1971), pp. 268–77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ljósvefninga saga*, C: Ch. 17, trans. T.M. Andersson and W.I. Miller, in *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland* (Stanford, 1989).

in strategy, with its necessary concomitant of the ability to discern motive and intention in others better than others could.

How did saga characters develop this talent to understand others as agents better than those others understood themselves? These are the smart social actors, the good politicians, the people who are savvy at maintaining honour without having to give up entirely on prudence. We tell ourselves two competing stories about how to understand the inner lives of such people. In both accounts they are intelligent, but in one they are intelligent in the way of a gamesman, a game-theoretician for that matter, and we all know that these people can be very smart without themselves believing in deep inner lives, let alone actually having them. By the other account, we believe that these smart actors are skilful at understanding others because they are extraordinarily good at understanding themselves, their own motives, their own intentions, their own meanings, and at how these things play among themselves and play before others. These people would seem to have a capacity for reflection and self-understanding for which the word ‘deep’ might not be inappropriate. They might well be seen as not only having inner lives worthy of the name, but as having the capacity for having interesting inner lives as well.

What then makes one want to confer on someone like Augustine of Hippo or on any modern academic or poet the capacity for radical reflexiveness, but not the same on, say, Sturla of Hvamm, that supreme ironist, astute self-promoter, sardonic, wise and ruthless?<sup>21</sup> We still want to say there is a difference. It is not that Sturla did not have a deep inner self; it is whether he had the consciousness of having a deep inner self that would make him an individual and self in the modern mould. We have already indicated how shame-culture itself makes for intense self-consciousness, but this is not the same consciousness of self as the consciousness of having a *deep inner* self. Saga self-consciousness was the consciousness of seeing yourself as others saw you, of how you stacked up against others in the competition for scarce honour; it was sociologically astute more than psychologically indulgent.

We still recognize a certain self-conscious interiority, a willingness to articulate interior states, that we do not see in sharp operators like Sturla. When Sturla dealt with his own inner states it was with manifest irony and embarrassment. Consider this example also involving grief displays, here of going to bed which in the sagas is the conventional display of grief and frustration available to men too old to take revenge. When Sturla heard that his old enemy, a woman named Thorbjorg who had once tried to gouge out his eye, had died he took to his bed

<sup>21</sup> See *Hvamm-Sturlu saga* in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík, 1946), Vol. II, pp. 104–226; trans. Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas, *Sturlunga saga* (2 vols., New York, 1970–4), Vol. 1, pp. 59–113.

as was his usual practice when he was depressed. People asked him why he was doing so and he answered, ‘I have just heard some news which I consider quite distressing.’ ‘We hardly believe that you would grieve Thorbjorg’s passing’, they responded. ‘There’s another reason why I am suffering. I figured that there would always be grounds against her and her sons while she lived, but now it wouldn’t look good if I continued hounding them once she’s dead.’<sup>22</sup>

Sturla’s brief descent into interiority is not for purposes of gaining self-knowledge or for an evaluation of his own desires, values or goals. He is manifestly clear about those. He simply cannot resist the joke that his own depression enables. He thus stages a dark comedy in which he manipulates the cultural meanings of a particular emotion display. Like other old men, Sturla takes to bed out of grief for someone’s death and in despair at his inability to take revenge. But Sturla is inverting all the moral and emotional valences involved. He does not grieve for Thorbjorg, but for the loss of pretext her existence had given him to justify attacking her sons. Yet there is a psychology here, not just politics. Sturla is aware that we need the people we hate as much as the people we love in order to maintain our sense of personhood and purpose. As in the cultural motif he is parodying, his depression is owing to the fact that he will now be unable to take revenge, not only because her death costs him the moral justification for action, but because it undoes his desire for it. The feud is motivated by his desire to annoy her and with her dies his pleasure for the process. That Sturla can joke in the midst of depression shows his kinship to other great wits, but it also reveals again just how reluctant these people were to talk seriously about their own inner states.

This is not radical reflexiveness and it strikes us as not altogether inappropriate to call that style inner and deep to distinguish it from Sturla’s style — sharp, ironical, witty and practical. But if we concede the use of the term deep to describe reflexiveness we also must note that such depth can be shallow without that being a contradiction. Consider as proof the psycho-babble of the American self-esteem movement and the various styles of identity politics. We are now all adept in aping the postures that mark us as people of depth. That is the farcical side of the discovery of our unique selves. But there are also risks in real depth. We feel that the real thing carries a very strong risk of self-indulgence, that radical reflexiveness may need a healthy dose of irony to keep it from being pompous or dull, especially dull. The relevant standard may not be deep and shallow, but dull and interesting. Not all deep inner lives are interesting, even if we must concede that most shallow ones are dull.

In fact, depth and dullness may have a stronger affinity for each other than at first blush seems likely. Depth and triviality can also go hand-in-hand (the

<sup>22</sup> *Hvamm-Sturlu saga*, ch. 36.

example that follows will show that this is not the same as the shallowness I mentioned in the preceding paragraph). Radical reflexiveness does not guarantee interesting consequences. Let me hazard some examples: take so-called depth psychology, the Freudian analytic style. It delves deep inside, past the rich detail of surface manifestations, past the multitudinous variety of particular experience, to yield the same old master narrative at the deepest core where Oedipus pines away in guilt and desire in all of us. So depth need not produce individuation at all. Just sameness. Depth can not only lead to trivial repetition across 'unique' individuals, it can be tedious too. This is a consequence of the risk of self-indulgence in focusing so intently on our own experiencing, on our own thinking.<sup>23</sup> We cut ourselves off from others with whom we need to make frequent contact to make sure our language is still capable of communicating; we lose the irony in self-presentation that makes all that depth palatable to others. At root there is a sense that eventually reflexiveness, rather than focusing on the grand and great problems, ends up by obsessing on the micro, ends up being neurasthenic.

Depth has a way of implying seriousness and gravity. While there is no reason one cannot be deep and ironic, in fact, we often have to suffer the deep inwardness of others with reverence, gravity, worshipfulness and oppressive displays of deference and respect. Compare Augustine and Hume. Both are deep. Only one is insistently ironic; and it is not hard to guess who would be the most companionable. This is unfair, since Hume, by all accounts, was sweeter than any saint could ever be and unfailingly unzealous — as a saint could never be.

Saga people were not dull, but they were not radically reflexive in the modern way or in Augustine's way either. Some were extraordinarily smart social actors, and I have tried to provide a brief account which would make that a quality that must necessarily involve no small amount of cognitive and psychological complexity, if not quite depth in the radically reflexive style. Is it that I am over-valuing the irony and wit of the smart saga actors? Irony comes in all kinds of styles and shapes. It is usually associated with intelligence, but need not be. It seems to have no special connection to deep and moody interiority, but I still cannot rid myself of a desire to see irony as an assisting component to radical reflexiveness. One wonders how it could be kept out of radical reflexiveness. Does it not invite irony in the grand existential style?

Let us at least rid ourselves once and for all of the idea that honour-based culture produces shallow inner lives in the sense of dull, unself-aware and unself-evaluating. If anxiety about one's moral and social being is a sign of psychic depth, then honour cultures are good at making people dig deep. In

<sup>23</sup> The philosophical style seeks to avoid self-indulgence by adopting conventions of universalism even as it is being radically reflexive. It is not my ideas and thoughts, but ideas and thinking in general.

them one's social and moral being is on the line all the time. The stakes are simply higher than mulling things over in one's study can ever make them. To the extent that irony assists depth, they had that too. One style was internalist irony. It did not question the value of honour; it only questioned one's own and others' claims to it. This was the irony of the wry remark, the subtle insult, the self-mocking of the self-confident. It is the hallmark of the saga style in which all conversation hovers on the edge of insult. Irony in this style is a means for evaluating others and also oneself. It recognizes that hurting with words and wit imputes to the target of the insult psychological as well as social anguish, even if it is the social that impels the psychological: 'for once Einar actually managed to kindle a fire that took' says Sturla upon hearing that his farm had been attacked and burned while he was away.<sup>24</sup> Such irony also provided the means of self-overcoming in the struggle to deny the fear of death. Dying well meant being wittily dismissive about death, and one trained a lifetime so as to be able to succeed at it. This is not the labour of insentient brutes. But they also knew externalist irony, the irony that questioned the value of honour itself. Consider Thorkell of Hafratindar, a poor farmer, perched behind a rocky crag watching the saga hero ride down the valley unaware of the ambush laid for him. Thorkell's servant boy asks whether they should warn the hero. Thorkell finds heroism nothing short of a pretentious joke:

Be quiet. Will your foolish prattle save a man's life if he is fated to die? To tell the truth, I could care less whether they do each other as much harm as it pleases them to. I think it a good idea to find ourselves a safe place from where we can see the fight and have some fun watching the sport.<sup>25</sup>

Honour is a lonely business. If the demands of kin and household pushed saga personhood more towards a 'shallow' role-based sense of self, a non-individualist self, a self of weaker individuation, the demands of a punctilious sense of honour pushed more towards a very keen sense of autonomous individualism. One obtained the presumption of honour by being born to honourable parents or having honourable brothers, or having honourable associates, but that presumption made a demand on you to live up to it, because the presumption was a very rebuttable one. You would ultimately only be as good as your actions; and you would be watched by others, jealous of their position

<sup>24</sup> *Hvamm-Sturlu saga*, ch. 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 49. I would be misrepresenting the Icelandic culture if I failed to provide Thorkell of Hafratindar's fate. He was killed for having failed to warn the target of the ambush *and* for having ridiculed them. But that is not the point really. The point is that the saga writer would create such a character, as Homer could allow Thersites his say in counsel before being silenced by his betters. The sagas and the characters within them are also intensely aware of the costs and social tragedy that inheres in honour and feud.

relative to you if above you, and envious of yours relative to them if below you. You would be judging too, both them and yourself. All this judging and being judged made for a certain anxiety. Even unambivalently great heroes doubted themselves. Thus Gunnar Hámundarson, who is not even portrayed as especially intelligent: ‘I wonder if I am less brave than other men because I am troubled by killing people.’<sup>26</sup> The life of honour was always caught up in comparisons of the relative value of the people you judged and who judged you. If this were the comparisons of *things*, of material wealth, we would have the shallowness of keeping up with the Jones’s. But this is a comparison of one’s mettle, one’s capacity for grand action, one’s capacity for right action. This means psychic life, if not guaranteed the capacity for inner depth, surely exists in a setting that makes depth possible. Hamlet’s thoughts about honour, revenge and feud do not look to me unthinkable or unrecognizable to saga heroes. They just felt it was bad form to let anyone hear them talk that way. It would cost them honour to talk so much.

A few more words on the autonomous individual in saga Iceland. Remember this was a frontier society with little if any formal hierarchy. The laws only made distinctions between free and slave. Wergild — the compensation due from the killer and his kin to the victim’s kin — was the same for all free men and women. In spite of these rough egalitarian assumptions (or maybe even because of them) autonomy was valued positively. If there was not quite an ideology of autonomy there was a definite notion that some people were more autonomous than others and to be such was a good thing. In saga Iceland heads of households were clearly more individuated than their servants, men were more individuated than women, the rich more than the poor. The ideal of autonomy was never divorced from the material and social conditions which made it possible.<sup>27</sup>

Then too there are the sagas of the outlaws. Outlawry, the deprivation of judicial immunity, obligated the person who secured the outlawry judgment to kill his outlaw. Others could do so with impunity and were themselves subject to possible outlawry claims if they assisted the outlaw. It was, in short, a death sentence. But, then as now, the successful, enterprising, long-lived heroic

<sup>26</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslensk Fornrit*, Vol. 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *Njal’s Saga* (Harmondsworth, 1960).

<sup>27</sup> There is a great risk in talking about an entire culture’s sense of personhood, or sense of self or individuation. The risk is to assume that all people within a culture are governed by the same view. This is not so, even among cultures committed to the individualist ideology. See Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 155–6, for an indication of how practical kinship computation recognized that although in theory everyone was the computational starting point for computing their own bilateral kindred, in fact only well-heeled heads of household were used as such starting points.

outlaw gripped people's imaginations. The sagas of the outlaws are in-depth social and psychological studies of what people imagined it meant to be alone, without support, to have autonomy thrust upon you. There is a nice paradox here. The conditions for the denial of social life just might produce the conditions for the deepest psychological life. Our saga outlaws dream obsessively; they have nightmares that terrorize them; they fear the dark; they long for kin and companionship; they suffer from an almost existential-style angst.<sup>28</sup> It may well be that part of the real terror of outlawry is that it forces psychic depth upon you, with depth here meaning the capacity to be self-concerned, self-aware, self-making and neurasthenically self-involved. You are now an individual like it or not. The saga authors worried about this and constructed the tragic psychology that the jural condition elicited. The outlaw sagas can thus be read to show that something approaching a concern with deep inwardness was available to them, but as something to be feared rather than celebrated. They feared what they felt to be its implicit a- or anti-sociality. For them, the concern was that social richness and psychological depth were locked in a zero-sum relation. If this is indeed the case, their view is rather deeply opposed to our commonly received notions that psychological depth is in some profound way a consequence of social complexity.

Outlawry suggests other legal matters that may be relevant to our subject which I want to touch upon briefly. What are the connections between the assignments of blame and praise, the attribution of legal responsibility and theories of individualism? Although the concept of accidents existed in saga Iceland there were strong social and cultural pressures against its use. If you tripped over someone's legs it was not for you to say it was an accident.<sup>29</sup> That was only something the person whose legs you tripped over could say, and if he said it with too much alacrity he looked like a coward fearful of the consequences of admitting his intention. There were very powerful cultural and social psychological forces that conferred intentionality on events we would now think of as accidents or acts of God, like avalanches and shipwrecks. In those days someone would be blamed for causing them. We might claim that this is a much richer sense of human agency than we with our cult of individuality will allow for. While we glorify our unique individual self-making and self-directing selves we have at the same time lowered many of the costs of such romanticized individualism. If we give people anti-depressants the better able to self-develop and self-fulfil, the same anti-depressant will be raised as a

<sup>28</sup> See *Gisla saga* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, available in translation as *The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw*, trans. George Johnston (Toronto, 1963); and *Grettir's Saga*, trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> See the discussion in Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 61–8.

defence to excuse the murder that our self-expressing individual saw himself free to commit.

An economist might explain the lack of an openly expressed individualist ideology in saga Iceland as a natural consequence of the individual costs being too high given the native theories of causation and rules of blame attribution. With only a little smirk the economist might suggest that individualism can flourish as an ideology among us because we have insulated the individual from accountability for the harms he inflicts. For us, individualism comes cheap and easy. Our profound interiority, our individualism of self-fulfilment, is heavily subsidized by theories of causation and rules of blaming that place responsibility for individual action onto either broad abstractions, like 'society', or onto an infinite regress of parents of parents of parents, who are always just beyond the reach of legal process for any of the failings attributable to them. The Icelanders knew that real autonomy meant accountability for actions; and it just might be that a serious theory of human dignity, self-fulfilment and autonomy depends on incurring the risk of blame for what we are.<sup>30</sup>

I need to complicate this a little more. In saga Iceland we need to distinguish the rules by which blame is assigned from the rules by which punishment it meted out. While these two sets of rules nearly coincide among us, they diverged rather sharply in a culture of feud. Suppose I trip over your feet. I feel wronged because people laugh. I can kill you for making a fool of me, but it would not be unthinkable that I might kill your honourable brother instead. It is practices like these that seem to prove to us that these people had no conception of the boundedness, of the autonomy, of the dignity of persons, but that one person shaded off by degrees into another. But just what justifications must I offer for killing the brother?

Killing is a pretty serious business in any culture, and so some kind of justificatory argument must usually be offered. The Icelandic avenger might make any of several arguments. One: I can blame the person I kill, the ostensibly innocent brother, for having a brother who is so clumsy. I will justify the blame by noting that in my culture brothers consult, aid, support one another and if not before the act in question, then necessarily he will advise and aid his brother as to how to deal with the consequences. In other words I can blame him for complicity. In this case punishment still coincides with blame and does not disconfirm individuation. Two: I can take cognizance of my honour. It does me no good to balance my honour with the corpse of an inferior vengeance target if he were in fact a less honourable man than myself. Since the brother (I

<sup>30</sup> I am being a little too much of a cheerleader here. Holding people accountable for bad weather, avalanches and famine, that is, an entire system of witchcraft accusation, hardly makes for a great society. Somewhere between excusing everyone because causation is always located somewhere outside them and excusing no one because causation is manipulable and can be attributed to anyone lies a reasonable mean.



am supposing) is a man of higher standing than his clumsy sibling and my social value not only as claimed by me but also as confirmed by others is more commensurate with the honoured brother, then it would be a disparagement of my own social and moral value to value myself lower than my worth. Punishment, to the extent it is even a coherent concept in this kind of regime, now parts company with blame, but to the enhancement of a sense of individual distinctiveness.

Finally three, which places us firmly in the practical world of feud: if I kill the man who tripped me, then I will have to deal with his honoured brother anyway since this man will be the avenger of his clumsy brother. One of the firm principles of vengeful feud is that it has a my turn–your turn rhythm. Once I get tripped it is my turn to respond; once I respond it is the other side’s turn and I must sit and wait in anxious concern. It might be that your brother is much more formidable an opponent than you are. It then behoves me, merely as a matter of smart strategy, to kill him when I have the right to be on the offensive and then take my turn on defence with you, the weakling, on the attack. In this account a very keen respect is paid to a certain quality of persons. My strategy requires me to make very fine distinctions in the quality of people in the other group. I am only a fool if I cannot distinguish among my enemies and see them all instead as one undifferentiated horde.<sup>31</sup> The smart feuder is a keen respecter of persons; each is studied for his particular strengths and weaknesses. Under this theory no one blames the vengeance target for the wrong. In one sense he is being honoured by being selected as a worthy target. Nor does it make much sense to think of him as being punished either. His killer is looking to the future, not the past. The game is thus no longer properly describable in legal and jurisprudential categories. It is politics.<sup>32</sup>

I want to close with a few observations about the connection between inner life and privacy.<sup>33</sup> Does the inner life need real private space, a room of one’s

<sup>31</sup> See the discussion about choosing vengeance targets in Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 197–202.

<sup>32</sup> In fact the psychology of vengeance-taking is multiply motivated. Punishment is meted out, politics are carried on, honour is gained and lost, all in the same action and consideration of all these things go to motivating and justifying the action taken. In this regard, notice how the justification under point one above collapses into the political and prudential justifications of point three. In the world of feud I can hold the non-offending brother complicit because he will of necessity have to be involved in opposition to me later.

<sup>33</sup> Lukes, among others, has noted the intimate connection between privacy and individualism (Lukes, *Individualism*, pp. 9–66). See also Richard A. Shweder and Edmund J. Bourne, ‘Does the Concept of the Person Vary Cross Culturally?’, in *Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology*, ed. Richard A. Shweder (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 113–55.

own to thrive? Or can it thrive in the little inner space we make for ourselves even in the presence of others? In the saga world there was no space of one's own; and this fed into the obsessive nature of maintaining face, the fear of shame. One's honour was at stake almost every second. There was no relief. One was always, so to speak, performing. The conditions under which self-assessment took place were rather unlike what they are when privacy is obtainable.<sup>34</sup> But then consider that most of our self-assessing takes place on the fly, in actual interactions with others. This is the work done by the emotions of embarrassment, shame, humiliation and various awkwardnesses and anxieties we experience in the presence of others. We also take leave of others even as our bodies remain co-present. Daydreams, abstraction, happen with us and presumably happened to saga souls too.<sup>35</sup> But what the saga characters lacked in private space they seem to have made up for with time. They had a lot of time to think because there was so little to do. One can do an awful lot of thinking as one lies awake unable to sleep with others sleeping all around. It may in fact be the presence of sleeping others that makes us more self-reflective than if we were up in our study all alone. For the one thought that leads to deep thought is the self-doubt, the self-questioning, of the non-sleeper as to why she or he cannot find repose when those others can.

I have gone off in quite a few directions in this brief essay. Not all the points I have made quite mesh with each other but I have meant to sketch out a way in which we can think of the inner lives of saga people as (1) inner and (2) interesting if not quite deep in the way of radical reflexivity. Nevertheless, I have tried to make a claim that there was no reason why shame cultures could not have generated such depth. To the extent that 'deep' inner lives require self-knowledge, self-mockery, self-doubt and self-assessment these people had

<sup>34</sup> Norbert Elias makes us think about the private in an interesting way. Elias's story is that private space in the sense of a room of one's own, the freedom from the presence of others, is parasitical on the creation of a particular kind of inner life. With manners, civility and shame of bodily functions comes inner constraint, repression, the anxiety and neurosis of sublimated emotion and instinct. We now need private space to avoid the eye of the Other. The inner life that one succeeds in nourishing in this space then is fed by all that repressed energy that must find an outlet somewhere.

<sup>35</sup> Behaving abstractly in a deep way called attention to itself in saga culture. For certain kinds of self-styled prophets, among whom we might count Njál, this behaviour was part of their public assertion of their role as seers or prophets. In romance literature such abstraction was often a symptom of love and/or melancholia. Such abstraction is, among us, a kind of rudeness given that we have actual spaces we can retire to. It was to Lord Chesterfield an unbecoming trait in his son whom he lectures constantly about the importance of not being *absent*, that is, on being attentive, engaged and observant at all times only Newton, Locke and about six others in the history of the world, according to Chesterfield, can be excused for being preoccupied (to his son 9 October 1746); *Lord Chesterfield's Letters*, ed. David Roberts (Oxford, 1992), p. 46.

the capacity for deep inner lives. What they did not have was the ideology of ‘deep inner lives’. This surely makes a difference, for without the ideology they had no overarching theory that prompted them to talk about inner lives as deep or as inner. This cannot be dismissed lightly for it makes a difference. I have also suggested that the ability to read others’ motivations, the ability to plan astutely around and in light of others in a hostile world, rather than making one too embattled to be a good psychologist, provides the conditions for making one a good psychologist. It just might be that that might not be a bad starting point for developing a sense of one’s inner life and the profound spaces within it.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Taylor lists three major facets of modern identity: ‘modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths and the connected notion that we are “selves”’; the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period; the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source’ (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. x). I have spent most of my time suggesting that, depending how one conceives of depth, the first facet may have been more available to saga Icelanders than the orthodox account assumes. But we also might find in the fact of the sagas themselves — their choice of worthy subject — something that looks like an affirmation of ordinary life. The saga writers found that their heroes were their nextdoor neighbours and their grandfathers and even grandmothers. This should not be pushed too far. The sagas, after all, are heroic literature; these were not average nextdoor neighbours.