

AND INSULT CONQUERS THE SILENCE OF A THOUSAND YEARS: A *NÍÐ*  
FOR STIEG LARSSON AND THE OLD NORSE POETRY.

E L'INSULTO CONQUISTA IL SILENZIO DI MILLE ANNI: UN *NÍÐ* PER STIEG  
LARSSON E L'ANTICA POESIA NORVEGESE

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**Abstract:** In the Old Norse language, the unusual destructive power of the word, at the beginning only spoken, later fixed in writing, has a precise linguistic referent, the noun *níð*, which indicates an invective formulated in poetic form, an expression of a cultural universe where words have an evocative power, whose value and significance in terms of offence can scarcely be understood by the modern observer. The analysis will focus on the particular value of *níð* in Norse poetry, and will also include a comparison with the corresponding linguistic elements attested in other Germanic languages and a significant and original contemporary example that, over a thousand years after the first *níð*-verses, follows the theme of the particular devastating force of the poetic word in an absolutely faithful way. After the death of the Swedish writer Stieg Larsson in 1994, his lifelong companion and muse Eva Gabrielsson performed a real ritual ceremony according to the ancient Norse tradition, during which she expressed all her anger towards those who opposed and hated Stieg, declaiming a *níð*. She gave a detailed account of the event in the book where she wrote about her life with the writer, published in 2011. For Eva, it was not a reference to a poetic tradition, but a real reaffirmation of the ancient magical and sacred value of the verbal element.

**Keywords:** *níð*; Medieval Norse literature; Norwegian literature; Stieg Larsson.

**Riassunto:** Nell'antica lingua norrena l'inusitato potere di distruzione della parola, inizialmente solo pronunciata prima di essere fissata in forma scritta, ha un preciso ed unico

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referente linguistico, il sostantivo *níð*, che indica un'invettiva formulata in forma poetica, espressione di un universo culturale ove centrale è il potere evocativo della parola, il cui valore e significato in termini di capacità di offesa difficilmente possono essere compresi dall'osservatore moderno. L'analisi riguarderà il particolare valore del *níð* nell'ambito della poesia norrena, anche attraverso il confronto con gli elementi linguistici corrispondenti, attestati nelle altre lingue germaniche antiche, che, invece, definiscono l'atteggiamento, lo stato d'animo prodromico di un comportamento aggressivo. Soltanto in ambito nordico il profilo psicologico è già fatto concreto affidato ai versi, il cui potere è talmente penetrante da legittimare sanguinose ritorsioni da chi ne è stato oggetto e, addirittura, prescrizioni che ne vietano la composizione a pena di gravi sanzioni. Di questa particolare forza devastante della parola poetica si ha una significativa testimonianza in epoca contemporanea, che al *níð* fa diretto riferimento: sconvolta dal dolore per la morte del compagno di una vita, lo scrittore Stieg Larsson, Eva Gabrielsson compie una vera e propria cerimonia rituale modellata secondo l'antica tradizione norrena, durante la quale esprime tutta la sua rabbia nei confronti di coloro che hanno osteggiato Stieg, declamando un *níð*. Non si tratta solo di un richiamo ad una tradizione poetica ma di un vero e proprio tentativo di attualizzazione dell'antico valore magico e sacrale dell'elemento verbale.

**Parole chiave:** *níð*; Letteratura nordica medievale; Letteratura norvegese; Stieg Larsson.

In the Old Norse language, the unusual destructive power of the word, at the beginning only spoken, later fixed in writing, has a precise linguistic referent, the noun *níð*, which indicates an invective formulated in poetic form, an expression of a cultural universe where words have an evocative power, whose value and significance in terms of offence can scarcely be understood by the modern observer.

The analysis will focus on the particular value of *níð* in Norse poetry, and will also include a comparison with the corresponding linguistic elements attested in other Germanic languages and a significant and original contemporary example that, over a thousand years after the first *níð*-verses, follows the theme of the particular devastating force of the poetic word in an absolutely faithful way.

After the death of the Swedish writer Stieg Larsson in 1994, his lifelong companion and muse Eva Gabrielsson performed a real ritual ceremony according to the ancient Norse tradition, during which she expressed all her anger towards those who opposed and hated Stieg, declaiming a *níð*. She gave a detailed account of the event in the book where she wrote about her life with the writer, published in 2011.

The particular semantic value of *níð* comes to light if it is compared to nouns found in other ancient Germanic languages, ascribable to the same Indo-European root *\*neid*, that indicates the action of insulting and blackening.

In Gothic *neip* indicates envy and in Anglo-Saxon *nīþ* also relates to envy but others meanings are also apparent, always in the description of strong negative moods, such as hostility, grudge, hate and wickedness.

Hate is also the chief characteristic of the corresponding word in Old High German, the noun *nid*, as can be seen in the *Hildebrandslied*. In Middle High German the noun *nît* identifies the mind of those who want to kill their enemy at all costs. This meaning is combined with those already found in other linguistic areas, hatred and envy, as can be seen in the *Nibelungenlied*.

If we look closely, the semantic content of the term *níð* in the Old Norse language, we can immediately observe that the psychological profile, the attitude, the prodromal mood of an aggressive act is already concrete action, expressed by verses: in the *Icelandic-English Dictionary* by Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson (1874, p. 455), *níð* is defined as “a libel, liable to outlawry”. This emphasises both the behavioural and not purely intentional nature of *níð*, and the form in which it becomes clear, as defamation exists if insulting words are spoken or written. Moreover, it is immediately stated that illegality is an essential element, and of this very important point more will be said below.

The definition in the *Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* by Geir T. Zoëga (1967, p. 314), emphasises the aspect of “contumely, derision”. In addition to this, it places the element of ‘libel’ mentioned above and nonverbal aspects in which the insult can take shape, “by carving a person's likeness on an upraised post or pole” (Zoëga, 1967, p. 314).

In this last meaning, these are material acts, elements of the particular ceremonial associated with the declamation of insulting verses, included in the notion of *níð* advocated by

Walter Baetke (2005, p. 444): “All that is necessary for insult and mockery, either word or deed”.

The definition in the *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* by Johan Fritzner appears more complex: “Scorn, in which someone is presented as a person who deserves the contempt of every man and he is marked as the most despicable among men [...] and this mockery can be performed by pronouncing words (*tunguníð*) or raising the curse-pole (*trénið*)” (Fritzner, 1891, p. 817).

Here the value judgement is the most important element; not every kind of insult falls into the category of *níð*, but only that which identifies the recipient as a subject not worthy of being part of the social community.

This is an element that we also find in the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*: “Particular disgrace or defamation, feeling of hatred or strong envy, poetic composition expressing such states of mind, defamatory strophe” (Ordbog, *níð*).

If the *níð* is a matter of offensive action and not offensive intention, and this action is performed with the word, the constitutive elements are represented by the subject who formulates the offensive message and the form in which the message is expressed.

The poet is defined in Old Norse language *skáld*. The etymology of the name a subject of debate and it is believed that the term is derived from the protogermanic *\*skeldan* whose meaning should be ‘insulting with words’, hence the elements in the Germanic languages: Old High German, *skeltan*, Middle High German, *schelten*, Middle Low German, *schelden*.

The offensive capacity of the poetry is also a danger for the community, as highlighted by the laws that provide for penalties the insulting verses.

In the ancient legal texts of the Norwegian area such as the *Gulatingslova*, slander is defined as *tunguníð*, literally “offence formulated with the tongue” (Eithun; Rindal; Ulset, 1994, p. 105), and the penalty provided for is outlawry, with patrimonial forfeit and, above all, civil death. Anyone found guilty can be killed by anyone without any penalty, *utlagr oc uheilagr* (Eithun; Rindal; Ulset, 1994, p. 105).

A very detailed regulation is found in Iceland, in the law named *Grágás*: the rule provides a differentiated and complex set of offences, all related to the composition of insulting verses, *scaldscap* (Finsen, 1852, p. 183), and the provisions are framed with particular

legal logic and technical level, not far from that present in contemporary criminal laws. The poetic creation is prosecuted by law and, in this context, the harshest penalties are provided for the composition of satirical or insulting verses. The penalty is full outlawry not only for those who compose the verses, but also for those who teach poetry and the recipients of this teaching, as well as those who spread verses composed by others.

Full outlawry is the penalty if a man composes half a stanza on someone with defamation or mockery in it.

Why half a stanza, i.e. four lines? In skaldic poetry, each stanza (*vísa*) consists of eight lines and is divided into two half-stanzas (*helmingar*). The half-strophe or *helmingr* is also the minimal semantic and syntactic unit.

The regulation, therefore, refers directly to the main structural characteristics of poetry: the single linguistic element does not amount to a crime, even if it is abusive and offensive; the law requires a poetic unit because it, and only it, amounts to absolute proof that demonstrates offensive intent, that which in modern terms we would define the specific intent of the crime.

But the most significant element is that the law itself legitimises the killing of the author of verses by the recipient if the latter is defined as womanish or passive subject of a homosexual relationship.

In the Norwegian area, the aforementioned *Gulatingsslova* also contains a precise regulation of the verbal action, aimed at striking the recipient:

There is a defamatory lie when a man says of another that, which is impossible that exists in the present, cannot exist in the future and has never existed in the past. It is said, for example, that another acquires feminine nature every nine nights and has given birth to a child [...] In this case the guilty party is outlawed (Eithun; Rindal; Ulset, 1994, p. 105).

The charge related to homosexuality which constitutes one of the essential elements of these legal texts is mentioned in one of the most significant poetic documents concerning insulting verses, an anonymous composition reported in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, in which the Icelandic community expresses its hatred against the Danish king Haraldr Gormsson, since a ship belonging to Icelandic men had landed on the coast of Denmark, and the Danes had seized all that it contained, citing as a pretext that it was a wreck.

The bailiff of the Danish king, named Birgir, was the guilty party, but the insulting verses were addressed to both the sovereign and the bailiff. The most original and significant element is that for the first (and perhaps only) time in the history of the European legal systems, a real right to insult in a poetic way those who are considered the enemies of the country was established by law. The text states that ‘it was made law in Iceland that an insulting verse should be composed about the king of the Danes for every nose that was in the country’, that is as many as the inhabitants of the country (Finlay; Faulknes, 2011, p. 167).

The poetic element, feared for its dangers, was no longer the instrument in the hands of individuals, used to settle a personal controversy for their own benefit, but had become a collective asset, a common self-defence weapon and, at the same time, an issue of community cohesion. The composition is defined as *níð* in the text:

When the battle-famed Haraldr kicked against the heath of Maurnir from the south in the form of a stallion, the killer of the Wends was then nothing but wax; and the powerless Birgir, deserving to be driven out by the deities of the rock-hall in the land, [was] in front in the shape of a mare; people saw that. (Adapted from Whaley, 2012, p. 1073).

The Danish king is branded as a man who gained fame by killing (*morðkunnr*) and as a slaughterer of people (*Vinða myrðir*), with reference to the Wends, a Slavic population settled in an area roughly bounded on the west by the Elbe and east by the Oder.

In the offensive symbolism Haraldr appears as a steed (*í ham faxa*) and, in this shape, he mates with Birgir, his bailiff, identified with the mare. The king appears as if he were wax (*vas eitt vax*), a condition which could be compared to the weakness following the fulfillment of a sexual act, fitting within the figurative description of the carnal conjunction between King Haraldr and Birgir.

The latter, the passive subject of the relationship, is called *óríkr*, “lacking in power”, that is, devoid of his own will, a pure instrument for the satisfaction of the brutal instinct of the king. The bailiff is an outcast, banished not by an earthly authority but by the guardian spirits of the country: *bergsalar bönd* (the deities of the rock-hall).

The charge of homosexuality was considered so infamous that it legitimised extreme retaliation: “Then the king of the Danes was going to sail the force to Iceland and avenge the insult with which all the Icelanders had insulted him” (Finlay; Faulknes, 2011, p. 167).

The violent reaction of the addressee of the verses, which often culminates in author’s murder, is a recurring theme in the sources, especially when the invective expressed in poetic form is real evidence of social conflicts within the Nordic societies, as in the case of the introduction of Christianity to Iceland.

The churchman Þangbrandr, sent by king Óláfr Tryggvason to bring Christianity to Iceland, is defined, in a *níð* composed by Þorvaldr *inn veili*, literally ‘the shabby’, *guðs arggr vargr*, effeminate wolf of God (Halldórsson, II, 1958-2000, p. 158).

The blasphemous offence pronounced by the poet, faithful follower of the traditional religion and therefore a proud opponent of the new Christian faith, associates, in an oxymoron of rare effectiveness, the Christian God with two elements that had pivotal importance in the pre-Christian cultural universe.

The term *vargr* indicates the wolf, synonymous with aggressiveness, but the noun is also used to define a criminal: *vargr í véum* (wolf in the sanctuary) is someone said who to have performed a foul deed, especially if it is a violation related to the sacral sphere, such as the destruction of a temple.

The adjective *arggr* confirms the issue of sexual insult. We can only mention the main meanings of the attribute: effeminate, cowardly, despicable. *Arggr* is the most infamous offence that can be expressed, according to the value system of ancient Nordic society.

The churchman takes vengeance for the *níð* composed by Þorvaldr, and for other insulting verses, composed by the *skald* Vetrliði, by killing both poets.

An equally violent half-strophe was aimed at the bishop Friðrek and his assistant Þorvaldr: “The bishop has borne nine children; Þorvaldr’s father of them all” (Translation from Halldórsson, I, 1958-2000, p. 293).

The peculiarity of these verses lies in the fact that the name of the author was not indicated, a very unusual element in the context of the Scaldic poetry.

In the saga in which the quoted verses are transmitted, we read only that some Icelandic notables asked the poets to compose insulting verses about the bishop and his assistant.

It would therefore be the manifestation in poetic form of a collective feeling where the identity of the author of the verses was not important, as in the conflict with the Danish ruler.

The curse could be directed not only against the Christian faith but also against royal power. In the saga dedicated to him, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, an Icelandic skald of the tenth century, expresses hatred towards the sovereign power that has deprived him of his hereditary rights and hurls his curse, evoking the guardian spirits of the country: “This curse I turn also on the guardian-spirits who dwell in this land, that they may all wander astray, nor reach or find their home till they have driven out of the land king Eriríkr and Gunnhildr” (Translation from Nordal, 1933, p. 171).

These are the same deities who, in the poetic composition of the peoples of Iceland, had banished the bailiff of the Danish king because of his indecent behaviour.

Although the invective is not pronounced in poetic form, this feature is highlighted by the formulaic language (*sný ek þessu níði*) and by the alliteration (*villar vega - engi hendi nor hitti*), elements belonging to poetry, necessary for declamation, to give a particular strength *sub specie aeternitatis*, through the repetition of the same sound in the first syllabic element.

Exactly these structural and substantive elements of Nordic poetry are present when Eva Gabrielsson brings alive the spirit of the *níð*, as reported in the book where she remembers her life with the writer:

Then, sensing that I might find a way to grapple with my depression, I turned to mythology for a violent raw, unflinching way to express all this, something that it would measure up to my suffering [...] I realized that my catharsis would pass through the writing of a *níð*, a traditional curse which I would recite during a magic ceremony. I set the date: December 31. (Gabrielsson, 2011).

She immediately states that she composed a *níð*: “I am reading a *níð* for Stieg. I am reading a *níð* for you who were against him [...] This *níð* is for you, evil, sly cowardly [...] You the evil ones who wished to rob Stieg of life” (Gabrielsson, 2011).



The *níð* is addressed to those who, in old Norse tradition, are identified with a compound that has *níð* as constitutive element: *níðingr*, defined in a source

[...] the most despicable of all men, who can never take part in the assembly of honest and upright men, against which the wrath of the gods will be invoked and will be referred to as the one who broke the sacred oath of truce during a conflict. (Translation from Sveinsson, 1939, p. 88).

Also in the poem composed by Eva, as in the verses of the *skald* Egill, the strength of the *níð* is nourished by the evocation of divine powers, entrusted to the verses. In Eva Gabrielsson' verses, the reference is to the deities of the northern pantheon:

I hope that the trickster Loki spellbinds your eyes [...] That hammer-wielding Thor will shatter your strength [...] That Lord Odin and our three fates Urd, Skuld, Verdandi, strike you with confusion sinking your careers and ill-gotten gains [...] That Freyr and Freyja, fertility, fruitfulness and love and light-bearing Baldr strip away your joy in life, turning bread, beer and desire into stones, muddy water, and dejection. (Gabrielsson, 2011).

It is significant that in the verses composed by Egill Skalla-Grimsson there is a very similar reference: "A god will have to make justice - may the deities drive the king away from this kingdom, assaults the wrath of Odin and the Powers - [...] may Freyr and Njörðr banish the tyrant from the land, from his possessions" (Translation from Nordal, 1933, p. 163).

Moreover, Eva Gabrielsson mentions the names of the three Norns, *Urðr* ('fate'), *Verðandi* ('that which is happening') and *Skuld* ('due'), deities who preside over fate. In this way, Eva seals the ineluctability to her curse, just as in old Norse culture the fate of those who were affected by insulting verses was inexorably marked.

But the most relevant element is the ritual within which the declamation of the verses took place. In Norse tradition, the invective is a constitutive part of a magic-mystery rite, aimed at updating the demiurgic capacity of the verses and this can only take place if, as already noted, the verses evoke higher powers.

This fusion between ritual feature and poetic composition was highlighted by Stefán Einarsson (1957, p. 61), who defined *níð* as a "black magic spell". Thus Egil's Saga describes the ritual performed by the *skald* Egill Skalla-Grimsson:

He took in his hand a hazel-pole, and went to a rocky eminence that looked inward to the mainland. Then he took a horse's head and fixed it on the pole. After that, in solemn form of curse, he thus spoke:

Here set I up a curse-pole, and this curse I turn on king Eric and queen Gunnhildr. (Here he turned the horse's head landwards.) [...] This spoken, he planted the pole down in a rift of the rock, and let it stand there. The horse's head he turned inwards to the mainland; but on the pole he cut runes, expressing the whole form of curse. (Translation from Nordal, 1933, p. 171.

The symbolism concentrated in the 'curse-pole' summarises the essential elements that give magical power to the invective: the runes, symbol of knowledge and higher powers, and, above all, the presence of the horsehead, a phallic symbol linked to the infamous accusation of homosexuality, a theme that is made explicit by the representation in a wooden form of the coupling between two men in the description contained in other sources.

In the ritual celebrated by Eva Gabrielsson the declamation of the verses took place before the material act. She recalled what was reported in ancient sources.

In Scandinavian mythology, the níð written in Skaldic poetry (perhaps the most complex verse form created in the West) is a kind of taunting curse hurled at one's enemies. It was read or carved in runic alphabet on a stake of hazel wood known as "the staff of infamy", which was driven into the ground. A horse was sacrificed and its head stuck on top of the stake, turned toward the poet's mortal enemies [...] A thousand years ago, at this stage of the ceremony, a horse was beheaded with a sword in sacrifice. To the Vikings of those days, the animal was sacred: their friend, companion and precious guarantor of their happiness and survival. (Gabrielsson, 2011).

We read in the *Vatnsdæla saga*: "They took a pole [...] Jökull engraved, at the end of the pole, a man's head and carved the runes [...] Then Jökull quartered a mare, opened the chest, and they skewered the mare on the pole" (Translation from Sveinsson, 1939, p. 91).

Eva Gabrielsson did not slaughter a horse. She had in her hands two ceramic horses fused together: "With a sharp blow I separated the two animals, and turning toward the water, I threw one of them into this lake, once sailed by Vikings (Gabrielsson, 2011).

The absence of the bloody element does not efface the symbolic identity between the ritual described in the saga and that performed by Eva Gabrielsson, an identity confirmed by the following act made by Eva:

In the darkness I slipped of to our place to fetch some glasses and single malt Scotch. When I returned, I poured a small libation into the lake before serving my friends. Barley, from which this whisky is made, is also fed to horses, so I symbolically gave strength to my horse to speed him on his mission of revenge. And also assured, according to mythology, that the níð itself, would be protected [...] I brought the second horse home with me from the lake and will keep him, even though he cannot stand up anymore on his own. (Gabrielsson, 2011).

The horse is not only a symbol of fertility, but also an animal able to move in different dimensions apart from the human one.

It is on horseback that the supreme deity, Óðinn, reaches the underworld where many of the dead dwell, to know about the fate of his son Baldr:

Up rose Óðinn, men's sacrifice,  
and he laid the saddle on Sleipnir.  
He rode from there, down  
to mist-hell;  
he met a dog,  
which came out of hell.

(Translation from Kuhn, 1983, p. 277)

And it is to the horse that Eva entrusts her níð, so that it explains its destructive power even in the 'other' dimension, different from the earthly one as we read in Eva's verses:

I sacrifice this horse in Lake Mälaren, so that this níð may course upstream through fresh water, and downstream to the sea, to reach all the lands of the earth, and all evil, sly and cowardly souls. And so that the horse I offer, may give renewed power to the níð, in the spring thaw, the summer rains, the hail of autumn and the winter snows, to pour down on you year in and out, to find you, wherever you may hide. (Gabrielsson, 2011).

The end of Eva's ritual shows that a cathartic meaning is closely related to the offensive element: "I felt free and at peace. My ceremony was my therapy, just as the *Millennium* Trilogy was for Stieg. Now I could envisage going on living without him" (Gabrielsson 2011).

The *níð*, herald of vengeance and death, thus won over death. For Eva, it was not a reference to a poetic tradition, but a real reaffirmation of the ancient magical and sacred value of the verbal element.

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