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The Ash-Lad

Classical Figure of Norwegian Ecophilosophy

BY SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

About one-third of the vast collection of traditional Norwegian fairytales and legends has one special figure that dominates, Askeladden, the Ash-Lad. Strangely, this peculiar figure hardly appears at all in the tradition of Norway's Scandinavian neighboring countries, Sweden and Denmark. He is also largely lacking in the German fairytale collection of the Brothers Grimm. Up until recently, the Ash-Lad has been regarded somewhat as a central symbol of Norwegianism—a character describing Norwegian identity. Instead of striving and strafing in the outer world, he sits by the fireplace, stirring the ashes and watching the ever-changing flames of the fire. He is fascinated by the process, how nothing is constant, and how he

can kindle and re-kindle the process but never control it. But he learns a lot of what can be useful—if he only is attentive and open to everything happening around him in nature and in society. He follows the “watchfulness of the flame” when he leaves home and wanders off to experience the complex and creative process that is the world. Here is a retelling of one version of the Ash-Lad stories.

The Ash-Lad has two brothers, Per and Paul. They live in a kingdom where the king has a problem with his daughter, she never laughs; she has never so much as displayed a smile. So

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the king announces that whosoever can make her laugh shall have her as his wife and shall inherit half of the kingdom. Immediately, Per and Paul start practicing for the contest. Per achieves mastery in a very intricate form of military march; it contains an unusual limp. Paul imitates a priest who is renowned for reciting liturgical masses at breakneck speed. Paul doubles that. Ordinary people would find both these performances both impressive and comical. But the princess does not even smile. Throughout her life at the royal court she has seen too much of regimental though ornate drill!

In contrast, the Ash-Lad shows no interest in this competition. He keeps watching his flames and wonders about the unplannable process of the world. But his mother scolds him and urges him to go out and hunt for a career [my interpretation in terms of our current world]. Getting tired of his mother's nagging, the Ash-Lad leaves home and starts on a path in the general direction of the royal abode. But instead of being directional and goal seeking, he is observant and fascinated by what presents itself along the road. The world turns out to be a fantastic realm, full of new information. All this information changes the original goal [if it existed!—This approach reminds me of Gandhi's process thinking: "The goal is the road, and the road is the goal."]

In our story, the Ash-Lad on his road has experiences that Per and Paul just missed, being fixated on a prefigured point in a future—the future as an already made map. For the Ash-Lad there is no map, but an ever-changing, complex challenge. He picks up objects that to most people are trivia, like a rounded stone and a dead bird, but to him they are wonderful and idea-giving [in one version of the Ash-Lad adventure they are used to stop the princess's haughty erudition]. He shares his meagre food with hungry old people, sits down with them and learns things that expand his grasp of the world's possibilities—all things that Per and Paul missed. He finally arrives at the king's castle—seeking work, not the competition. He is lucky and gets employed by the chief cook to carry fire-wood and water. He immediately sets off to haul water from the local well. It is like a pond,

and in it swims a many-colored, shiny fish that no one before had noticed [again, the story stresses the point that the Ash-Lad is more attentive than most.]

Diligently, the Ash-Lad catches the fish in his bucket and starts carrying it homeward. Then he meets a lady with a golden goose. They agree to trade. The lady gets the fish and the Ash-Lad gets the goose. Now the lady reveals that there is something strange about this goose. If someone comes over and touches the goose, and if the goose's owner—in this case, the Ash-Lad—then cries out, "If you want to join, just hang on!" that someone will get stuck to the goose, his hand like glued to the bird. Of course, the Ash-Lad is delighted. He tries this out; it works, and not only that, it turns out that anyone touching someone who is attached to the goose gets caught in the same way.

The first case of this is a blacksmith who runs up with a pair of pincers and pinches the back of a woman who is attached to the goose (he has an old grudge against her). The Ash-Lad reacts quickly, crying out: "If you want to join, just hang on!" Immediately, the blacksmith gets hooked to the woman through his pincers. Similar things happen to several people on the way down to the royal castle. All these suffer unexpectedly from a new situation they cannot master: being attached on one side, they are forced to move (downhill, helped by gravity). So they stumble along, falling, getting up, and bumping into each other. Being members of the environment of the well-ordered royal court, they have never experienced a challenge like this and chaos breaks out.

Finally, they are in front of the castle balcony, where the princess stands watching this Ash-Lad spectacle. Seeing well-known members of her normal entourage in a chaotic state she laughs! The Ash-Lad has revealed to her the artificiality of the regimental court life and how it fails when confronted with real life. They are rigid, lacking the elasticity of adapting to new rhythms.

MY INTERPRETATION HERE is inspired by the French process philosopher Henri Bergson. The title of one of his books is *Laughter*. His idea is that we tend to laugh

when observing someone who reacts mechanically when nature requires rhythmic elasticity. Bergson thinks this is an old survival measure. In new situations, requiring a break with previous regimentation, laughing at our stumbling is a signal to relax and get in step with a rhythm adapted to current demands—or more generally—to the rhythms of nature. In this Ash-Lad story, the royal court presents a machine-like structure, as we would say today, in contrast to nature as a creative process.

The Ash-Lad has been the hero of Norwegian youngsters for hundreds of years. Why didn't the children of Denmark and Sweden have a leading figure like this one? My explanation has to do with historical and political circumstances. Norway was occupied and trampled underfoot by Denmark for 400 years up to 1814, and thereafter forcefully brought into union with Sweden for another 100 years (ended in 1905). Throughout this time, especially under Denmark, the majority of the Norwegians were poor, surviving only through an intimate knowledge of nature, inventive resourcefulness and a highly developed ability to improvise. These qualities came about as the answer to naked necessities under harsh, often unpredictable natural conditions. (We see the same qualities developed among materially poor people elsewhere in the world.) They (the Ash-Lads) saw resources where the Danish (Per and Paul) overlords just marched by ignoring their environment.

It should also be noted that in this period most Norwegians were farmers and fishermen. Their properties were tiny but quite independent entities; they were not serfs under a feudal system, as were the lot of farmers in Denmark and Sweden. Although the Norwegians were heavily taxed by the Danish kings, they had their "Ash-Lad" methods—and their children learned survival by being told the stories of a poor peasant boy who won over the rich and mighty through nature knowledge and cunning.

In contrast to Norwegian agriculture—crawling up mountains and creeping along fjords—Danish and Swedish food production happened in vast fertile

plains, the kind of landscape that furthered feudalism. The majority of people were caught up in a system tantamount to slavery where any Ash-Lad method would have had no chance. Additionally, the vast flatness of Denmark and southern Sweden gave the feudal overlords easy opportunities to reach out quickly and strike down any embryonic uprising among the serfs. The craggy Norway offered few opportunities of this kind.

And a Norwegian tradition of cherishing local and national independence and distrusting foreign regimentation has survived among the majority of people to this day. An illustration of this is Norway's saying "No" to joining the European Union (at two referendums, 1972 and 1994) while both Denmark and Sweden said "Yes" and are both union members—imprisoned as many Norwegians see it.

In 1960 an American psychiatrist, Herbert Hendin, was looking through statistics showing the rates of



Living in the Earth ILLUSTRATION: SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

suicide in various countries. He was surprised to see an enormous difference between the three Scandinavian countries: Denmark had the world's highest rate (together with Japan), while Norway was at the very bottom. Sweden was also high. Hendin's reaction was that since the differences were so great it must signal a basic difference in culture. This view was, of course, in conflict with the standard opinion that the three nations more or less shared the same culture. Hendin's scientific curiosity was raised so much that he went to Scandinavia and spent four years there, learning to speak Swedish and Norwegian and doing research. In 1964 he published a book, *Suicide and Scandinavia*.^[1] To make a long and complex story short, Hendin's one main conclusion was that children in Denmark and Sweden were brought up under a pressure of regimentation and career pursuit, producing a number of persons unable to live up to the demands, thus viewing themselves as failures. In contrast, Hendin found that such pressures were weak in Norwegian families; children were allowed to main around and experiment, while taking part in farming and fishing—"learning by looking and participating," not by being instructed. In a relaxed way, self-reliance was built up, thereby avoiding feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Interestingly, Hendin also took note of the differences in the historical backgrounds of the three countries and, connected to that, the differences in the kind of stories told to children. Actually, he is the one who made me notice the prevalence of Ash-Lad tales in Norwegian tradition, in contrast to those of Denmark and Sweden. The heroes in Danish and Swedish fairytales win out in contests through magic and miracles, while the Norwegian Ash-Lad wins by his own knowledge-seeking and inventive actions. In other words, the Ash-Lad is an ideal model, inspiring practical and self-reliant activity and a concomitant distrust in higher spirits as helpers in difficult situations.

The Ash-Lad type of approach was still the living star in Norway during the German occupation of the

1940–45 World War. Hendin compares the different reactions to the German expansion in the three Nordic countries: the Danes gave in, the Swedes protected their neutrality, while Norway's mountains sheltered guerrilla resistance. Actually the resistance movement strengthened the Ash-Lad ideology. It also inspired the rebuilding of Norway's industry, farming and fisheries in the two decades after the war. Professor Sigmund Borgan at the Norwegian University of Agriculture has shown that the surprisingly quick restoration of Norwegian industry following the war was made possible through a workforce recruited from youngsters with backgrounds in small-scale farming and fishing. These individuals shared the "Ash-Lad approach," and in many cases solved problems through advising practical short cuts where the academically trained engineers had become stuck in theoretical deliberations. However, these youngsters participated in building a trap for themselves and their children, as soon as Norwegian industry reached a sophistication and size of interest in the international capitalist markets. Stressing the principle of "compete or die," Norway's economic structure changed its character. Today, small farms and fishing hamlets have lost their "rationality," and grand scale centralization and urbanization is happening. The mass media and the schools are preaching individualistic competition as the way to the future. Small-scale farming and fishing is being replaced by a tourist economy where exotic folklore on abandoned farms is taking the place of food production and computer games are replacing real games. It should be of interest to note that exactly in parallel with this development the rate of suicides has grown tremendously in Norway, now being one of the highest in the world.

However, some of the Ash-Lad mentality lingers. We still have a majority saying "No" to joining the European Union—and the present shift in the world climate might soon change all priorities, bringing the Ash-Lads back.

1. Herbert Hendin (1964). *Suicide and Scandinavia*. New York: Anchor Books.