FATE AND FORTUNE IN THE WORK OF MARTIN JOENSEN AND HEDIN BRÚ

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Any Faroese asked to name the most important Faroese prose writers would include the names of Hedin Brú and Martin Joensen in his list. They would probably stand at the top of the list. They would probably be in that order. The only other name regularly to appear among the top three would be that of the much younger Jens Pauli Heinesen.

Hedin Brú and Martin Joensen have much in common. Born within a year of each other, they have both drawn widely on their knowledge of their island and its customs in their work. Both have written novels as well as short stories. Martin Joensen is particularly known for his two long novels about the life of Faroese fishermen, *Fiskimenn* and *Tad lýsir á landid*, while Hedin Brú's talents without doubt lie more in the field of the short story – his famous *Fedgar á ferd* is really as much a long novella as a short novel. In his longer novels he tends to be more schematic than Martin Joensen. In particular in the first two he moves on the borderline of realism and symbolism, and it is only by observing this careful balancing act that the reader will become aware of what the writer is seeking to achieve. There is atmosphere about these novels, as there is about the short stories, an atmosphere created by a sensitive awareness of people and countryside coupled with a lyrical linguistic ability which had never been seen in the Faroe Islands before, and which has been of decisive importance in forming the literary language of this century. Martin Joensen's work is less atmospheric and generally speaking less stylistically conscious, but there is in some people's view a greater psychological depth in his characters, coupled with a natural insight into human personality. Consequently, Martin Joensen ultimately becomes notable for the unassuming realism of his work, while Hedin Brú stands rather for drama and poetic vision.

Martin Joensen, a school teacher, started publishing his short stories in 1934. The early ones are often little more than charming

miniatures intended for publication in periodicals, often Christmas magazines. However, as Martin Joensen became more established, so his stories became longer and more ambitious, appearing in such prestige publications as *Vardin*. It is on these more ambitious works that his reputation is founded, a reputation as a perceptive psychologist working with familiar characters in familiar surroundings. His are very ordinary people consistently portrayed in situations which are compatible with day-to-day reality in the Faroe Islands, but they have sufficient distinctiveness to raise them well above the level of mere village sketches. There is the unnamed man in "Ein lívssøga", whose wife dies, leaving him with two children to bring up; but the children die of diptheria, leaving an aging, lonely father to cope as best he can and to end his days dependent on others. There is the determined Jóannes of "Manns vilja", who defies local superstition but appears to fall prey to it, leaving his wife to take up the struggle against a hostile environment. There is the crippled Elin Maria, whose best friend steals her fiancé, but who in the end takes over the children resulting from that marriage. Or there is the tragi-comic study in obsession, "Tanntongin", in which the local storekeeper, who is reputed to have certain powers as a doctor, acquires a pair of dentist's pliers, becomes obsessed with extracting teeth, and comes to a sad end as a result.

Every one of these stories, and others like them, is open to sentimental treatment. There is none. Instead, Martin Joensen dispassionately portrays his ordinary people in slightly extra-ordinary situations, and shows a profound understanding for the mental and emotional processes taking place in them. In his review of Martin Joensen's *Útrák* (1949) and *Útiseti*, Ole Jacobsen lays particular emphasis on this aspect of the volume from which all the stories mentioned above are taken: "The human types and the events described are taken from life and have a universal validity. Martin Joensen knows the art of portraying in a simple manner the feelings and thoughts of uncomplicated people." Martin Joensen's characters are all fundamentally uncomplicated and in a sense unable themselves to understand the events confronting them, though one might well wonder whether someone like Elin Maria is quite as uncomplicated as the others. She, at least, tries to find some meaning in the life which is forced on her, and in this she stands as a person who is able to cope with

disability and tragedy, but who is only able to formulate a very limited philosophy of life.

This is symptomatic of Martin Joensen's realism. In a letter to Christian Matras, quoted in Matras' *Nøkur mentafólk*, he points to some of the authors who have inspired him or, in his more modest terminology, authors he has liked: "I have been, and still am, fond of the Russian novelists, Dostojevsky in particular, Tolstoy, Gogol etc. Their characters are so familiar to us, and their realism never becomes stilted as with so many Western writers." This, then, is the sort of realism he is aiming for – and it is this kind of realism he achieves when at his best.

It is clearly necessary to distinguish between the relative simplicity of the characters in the stories and the sophistication of their author. It may be that Elin Maria cannot formulate much of a philosophy of life, but that does not mean that Martin Joensen is unable to do so, or that his works do not in a way express a view which, if not profound, is in keeping with the workings of the minds of the people portrayed. The same applies to the whole of the novel *Fiskimenn*, in which various of the principal characters discuss views of life, politics, religion, free-thinking, in a way entirely consistent with their own innate simplicity, but with an authorial authority indicative of a more sophisticated mind behind them.

However, whatever the view held or sensed by the various characters, they are generally speaking notable for their passivity in the face of the events confronting them. Their behaviour and attitude to life are characterised by a deterministic attitude, whether it is one based on religious belief – in particular sectarian beliefs in *Fiskimenn* – or a fatalistic acceptance of what life has to send. In their acceptance of the social status quo the majority of the fishermen, too, reflect the same passiveness, to which the only contrast is the activities of those who are politically conscious. At the same time the obvious fatalistic tendency of the fishermen to accept social conditions as they are is accompanied on the one hand by a similar fatalism with regard to the results of their work, and on the other by a religious determinism on the part of the girl, Astrid, with whom the central character Símun falls in love for a time.

A clear distinction is made in terminology. The fishermen use, and have used of them, "*eydna*", a word which dictionaries translate by "fate", but which implies a benevolent fate not far removed from good fortune. Símun himself is referred to as an "*eydnamadur*" – a lucky chap – but in his dealings with the sectarian Astrid he talks of "*skepna*", a word identified in the dictionaries with "*lagna*" – also commonly used in Martin Joensen's work, and meaning purely and simply fate. Why, he wonders, does he feel so attracted to this girl whom he has only just met? – "Fate, perhaps ... The old folk were always talking of fate ...Perhaps it was something that emerged and manipulated everyone at will." He uses the same word when discussing with Astrid the reason for their meeting, though she herself avoids it and is content to say that it is God who has wanted this to happen. It seems possible in the novel to talk of three fate concepts: one refers to the amount of luck following a man or a ship, one to the general feeling that human lives are determined by some transcendental power, and finally the Christian sectarian view that all human actions are determined by God. In all cases it is assumed that the events to which people are subjected are determined by outside forces over which they have no influence.

The question of "*eydna*", fortune, is uppermost in the minds of the fishermen during their first days at sea, and to some extent it determines their actions and attitudes throughout their voyage. Símun does badly at first, and yet in his own eyes and those of his shipmates he is an "*eydnamadur*", and his is convinced that his luck will turn. His fortune can change according to where he is standing on the boat, and no one appears to confuse his luck with skill. Likewise Mortan, the skipper, is a man blessed with good fortune, a fact which the ship-owner, Kristiansen, makes play with when Mortan asks to be transferred to a bigger ship which Kristiansen is about to buy. Kristiansen, himself a man said to enjoy "*eydna*", seems reluctant to transfer him, and his reason also appear to be related to the entire concept of "*eydna*":

> "But why change ship? ...Haven't you had good luck on *Ørnin*? A lot of people who change ship lose their good fortune. You mustn't go and think of such things. You mustn't play around with fortune. If it leaves you, it won't come back. *Ørnin* is a good ship, a lucky ship." ... "I know some examples of how fortune can take umbrage and desert people."

Mortan is not deterred, but however much Kristiansen can be accused of cant in some of his actions, there can be little doubting his sincerity in this case. Moreover, as he owns the ship, he is obviously to some extent moved by self-interest.

The novel describes two voyages by *Ørnin*. The first is successful, and a good catch is quickly made. The second is from the start dogged by *bad* luck. First, the ship is delayed by repairs, then by a strike amongst the shore workers; then the fish prove elusive, and *Ørnin* has to spend as much time looking for them as catching them. Fourthly, the cook is taken ill and has to be put ashore in Iceland. Only then does fortune change, so that a catch can be made, as good as that made by other ships, but a fortnight later. There is no indication of whether the author accepts the crew's belief that this is determined by fate, and it seems most likely that he is consciously staying in the background, content merely to record the views of those he is portraying.

In the short stories the idea of fate is not always so directly expressed, and the words like "*eydna*" and "*skepna*" are not so common as they are in *Fiskimenn*. Nevertheless, a kind of fatalism does seem to be present in many of the stories, sometimes vaguely perceived by the protagonists, sometimes merely implicit in their actions. In the best of them there is a dichotomy between a primitive fatalistic belief and the psychological explanation implicit in the action as seen from the author's point of view. Whatever the real explanation of the action, however, there is a striking number of instances in which the principal characters accept adversity without really giving any thought to struggling against it.

Take, for instance, "Ein lívssøga", the old man, whose funeral is the immediate cause of the story, is nameless, whereby he perhaps is given a touch of general significance. He loses his wife in childbirth and is left with two children to bring up. They die within a short space of time, an experience expressly said to age him more than the passing of many years. He now remains isolated and has in time to give up his freedom in order to be partly looked after by others. He dies virtually a pauper, is given a very modest funeral and is quickly forgotten once he is buried. It is a moving story of a basically uneventful life, illustrating a kind of resignation, an acceptance without question of what is sent.

The same is true of "Húsvillur", another tragic story, this time with social overtones, of a middle-aged man who has failed in life, and who has to leave the home he has sought to build up. However much he has struggled, he has been unable to earn enough to keep himself going. One senses an ineffectual man, but his wife is obviously at the same time a spendthrift, and she blames their situation on bad luck: "We've had very little "*eydna*"." In their way both the man and his wife accept their situation as one that has been sent, though there are sufficent authorial overtones to indicate that they lack the moral fibre to better themselves.

These two stories are both consistently tragic. "Tanntongin", on the other hand, starts by being humorous, though it ends on a tragic note. Sakaris' actions are, from the reader's point of view determined by his psychological make-up, a mixture of the childish and the paternal, a natural ability to heal and an obsessive streak which takes him over completely when he lays his hands on pair of dentist's pliers. After accidentally maltreating a boy Sakaris knows that he has been unfortunate, but he nevertheless loses his ability to heal, and he withdraws completely into himself. His behaviour is not difficult to explain, and the psychological process is easy to see – but the villagers have their own view: they come to the conclusion that the father of the injured boy has cast a spell on Sakaris. *Their* explanation is the oversimplified one, the superstitious suggestion of magic. Yet, whether the reader accepts the superstition or the psychological process (and here there can surely be no doubt as to which the author believes), Sakaris is and remains a man who passively accepts a "fate". If he has any strength of his own, it is the strength of passivity.

In "Madurin Umbord" the fatalistic element is very clear indeed, though in this quite sophisticated story the author has compounded the various views and events in such a way that the reader is left in doubt as to whether a supernatural event has occurred or not. The story is based on a common Faroese superstition that there is a ghost aboard every ship. It will help it when it is in difficulties, but it will leave when disaster looms. Some members of the crew believe they see signs of the "ghost", and though the narrator is and remains a doubter, he is even doubtful of his own doubts; when the supposed ghost does leave the ship, and when disaster does occur, the reader shares the narrator's

doubt and confusion, but others of the crew are completely convinced that the ghost has been there. Like the other stories, this reveals a strange mixture of superstition, fatalism and rational explanation.

"Elin Maria" is the story of a woman who bears her fate within herself, and as such it betokens an interesting development. Elin Maria is a cripple and therefore preordained to live a life outside the general run of things; her elderly parents instil their own religious fatalism in her: "She could not help the disability that God had placed upon her; it was He who ordained, and He know what He was doing." Nevertheless, as she grows older, Elin Maria starts to take part in ordinary life, and she becomes engaged to a craftsman who has been working on her parents' house. Harald finishes his job and leaves, after which it emerges that he and Elin Maria's best friend, Sigrid, have been going together all along. They marry, and Elin Maria withdraws and lives a life of resignation much akin to that of the unnamed man in "Ein lívssøga". However, Sigrid for her part seems to be fated to unhappiness: she urges Harald to go to sea for a season to earn money by fishing; he does so and is drowned. Sigrid is then taken ill with breast cancer, and is obviously going to die. Finally, Elin Maria goes to see her former friend and offers to take over one of her children, despite her own mother's stern disapproval. This story, one of Martin Joensen's best, is a complex mixture of more than one fate theme: the fate that befalls Sigrid and her husband to whom she has no moral right, and that encountered and opposed by the crippled Elin Maria. After an initial acceptance of her lot, she makes not so much an attempt to engage in a heroic defiance of fate as a move morally to overcome it.

If we now turn to Hedin Brú, the obvious parallel – though at the same time a contrast – to Elin Maria is Bolli á Grágerdi. He, too, is a cripple, a psychological cripple. But he deals very differently with his situation.

Bolli is subject also to a power which he does not understand, a power symbolised on the very first page by the remark that the newly-born baby, who is scarcely expected to live, sucks like a leach when placed on his mother's breast. She dies; he survives, to be brought up in proverty and defiance by his grandmother, who teaches him to beg,

to lie, to exploit and to take revenge on those who thwart him. The result is that he is ostracised and worse, hounded by the villagers whose anger he has roused, and finally, after crippling one of them for life, Bolli chooses to commit suicide rather than accept the judgement of his fellow men, for whom he has little respect.

It will be obvious from this very much condensed version that Hedin Brú's story is far more dramatic than those of Martin Joensen. But the drama is more than a series of external events. Bolli's entire behaviour is determined by his innate intransigence and the way in which he has been brought up by his grandmother, a mixture of inherited characteristics and milieu. He is subject in this way to an inner fate, something coming from within himself, and although his behaviour is thus treated in as deterministic a manner as that of Martin Joensen's characters, it is a very different brand of determinism, for there is never any question of Bolli's submitting to an external fate.

Like Martin Joensen, Hedin Brú does distinguish to some extent between what his characters think and what the reader must think. His characters, too, are simple folk who cannot always express themselves fluently – but who have their feelings none the less. When Bolli is prevented by his father-in-law from burning down his arch-enemy's house in order to take revenge, he experiences an enormous sense of relief. When the two arrive home there is an unexpressed sense of emotion at what has happened, and silence falls upon the entire family: "They had no words, these were not people who could express themselves, but they sat and felt they were together, felt they were close to each other, and they sensed no lack of words." After this experience Bolli turns to God, and although his first prayer is admittedly for vengeance, he tries, but fails, to live in humility. At this stage he himself begins to appreciate the inevitability that the reader has long felt, but he puts it down to a different reason: "But he was more troubled in his mind than ever; for now he felt he was battling against God as well, he felt that God was angry." His conviction grows that God is not on his side, and when he then goes on to perform those violent actions at the end, which are still determined by his personality, he believes that both man and God are against him, and he has only one other choice: "the black mountain".

To some extent Bolli's tragedy is brought on by the village acting as a sort of collective fate. One of the elements in this story is without doubt the power of the villagers taken together, the group mentality that forces the catastrophe on. The same element is central to the story of "Búravnurin", in which a well-meaning but naive schoolteacher misjudges the mood of the village in which he works, gets at cross purposes with Per, the storekeeper, is subject to a slander campaign started by Per, and finally has to leave. There are signs that half the villagers do not believe the slander going around, but they still act as though they did, and Per is seen as the village instrument of fate. Indeed, he sees himself as a kind of external fate against which it is hopeless to fight, while the teacher sees him as a monster, a freak. He cannot entirely blame Per for his actions, for he was, he suggests, not his own creator, but the creation of a blind nature. Thereby the teacher seems to accept the idea of some external fate that has blindly created the instrument of his own undoing. Per seems to be the tool of fate, though the teacher is more able to produce a sophisticated formulation of this than many of the other characters in Hedin Brú's and Martin Joensen's work.

The view of Magnus, the farmer in "Krákudóttir" is less sophisticated, though he, too, appears to sense some kind of fate behind the events in which he is caught up. However, as has been seen elsewhere, he attributes to an external fate of an indeterminate nature what in fact is a fate within himself. In the confrontation between him and his wife and sister-in-law, he, the weak man, is fated to lose to the passive opposition of his wife and the ruthlessness of his sister-in-law. Twice he refers to the sister-in-law as his evil genius (*lagna*), while he once talks of himself as being fettered by an unhappy fate. What he does realise, of course, is the inevitability of the events in which he is involved, and he has somehow to explain them. This he can do only by attributing them to an external fate, though the reader is aware that the situation is far more complex.

In this story, as in the other two, evil triumphs, despite the efforts of the central character in two of the three to oppose it. There is a sense – and perhaps more than a sense – of some kind of fate at work. These villages are more dramatic than those of Martin Joensen, and the characters are more active, more dynamic than his. However, the

dichotomy between the two completely different concepts of fate – that of the characters and that of the authors – is very much the same in each case.

To complete this comparison it will be appropriate to look at Hedin Brú's first novel sequence, which has much in common with Martin Joensen's *Fiskimenn*, and then at his most famous novel, *Fedgar á ferd*.

The first two novels, *Lognbrá* and *Fastatøkur*, show many affinities with Martin Joensen's novels, and so, if there really is any question of determinism, it is likely to emerge here by a comparison between the two writers. At first sight there is very little to indicate determinism of any kind in Hedin Brú's novels: words such as those found in Martin Joensen only appear occasionally, and Høgni seems to be master of his own fate. Like the figures in the short stories, he is a more active character than those commonly found in Martin Joensen's work, and the entire idea of *Fastatøkur* is precisely that of taking a firm grip on life and fashioning it. Certainly Høgni's friend, Torkil, does make a few comments which can be seen in a deterministic light, comments much in keeping with those heard from the more religious members of Martin Joensen's portrait gallery: "God has arranged it so that he is aboard, and God decides everything that happens at any time," he says, making the now well-established identification between God and the external providence. Likewise, when Høgni has made a poor catch, Torkil is quick to relate this to God's will: "You'd probably have complained in any case; it's best for the man who has learned to see God's will in all things, to thank Him for everything and to accept both the good and the bad as God's good gifts."

However, Torkil's words bear no relation to Høgni's actions, there is no sign whatever in the text that they have to be taken as more than Torkil's view. Moreover, the fact that he sees that Høgni will complain in any case does seem to indicate that Høgni at least does not see it this way.

Yet there is a kind of determinism in the novels, related to Høgni, which is entirely in keeping with what has already been seen as the kind of determinism at work in Hedin Brú's short stories. It may be that

Høgni himself does not believe in an external fate of any kind, but his mother does, and as is made clear at the very beginning of *Lognbrá*, she sees the choice of the very name of Høgni for her child as being unfortunate. Those in the family who have had it before have been unlucky in one way or another, and Gudrun, who is noticeably superstitious, sees its choice as a sign that Høgni is doomed to come to a sorry end. Partly as a consequence of this, but partly because of her own nature, she chastises, not to say persecutes, him throughout his childhood, so much so that even at the age of five he is only thinking of getting away from home, a resolve which stays with him until he is old enough to do so. In this sense Høgni's life and attitudes are determined by an outside source, not least because he is a sensitive boy who is an enigma to his mother. He is not prepared to submit to her, and this factor determines his childhood and youth. "You are a weakling, you'll never be a man," is her judgement of him, to which his reaction is: "It's always like that; I fail in whatever I do, whether it is in a fight or anything else." This is what he seems fated to, thanks to a combination of his mother's fatalistic view and his own sensitivity, and much of the action of the novel hinges on his own resolve to oppose such a fate. In this sense the novel *is* deterministic.

On the whole, the deterministic view has been directly expressed in the works of both Martin Joensen and Hedin Brú by simple people, while both authors have indicated a view of life in which the determinism is of a much more subtle kind. In *Fedgar á ferd*, however, Hedin Brú shifts the balance and portrays the conflict between two generations, one of which has a deterministic view of life, while the other does not. Ketil's generation, the older generation now disappearing, believes implicitly in God's will as determining its actions – and thereby becomes as submissive as Martin Joensen's characters – while his sons and their wives, mercenary as they may be, are convinced that they will only get on by their own efforts, and that God is unlikely to intervene. They do not even seriously consider the possibility of God's playing any part in their lives. Having got himself into difficulties by buying more whalemeat than he can afford, Ketil looks around desperately for a way of paying for it, and while his wife sees savings as their only possiblity, Ketil hopes that God will find a way for them. "Perhaps God knows of something for us" is Ketil's philosophy.

Meanwhile, there are others who also see the hand of God in everything that happens, and in this tragi-comedy it is interesting to see how Hedin Brú plays with a deterministic view which he has treated seriously elsewhere. In partricular Klávus, the rascal of the piece, is a representative of the religious determinism often met elsewhere. When he has made an unsuccessful and by no means entirely convincing attempt to commit suicide, his comment is that God has obviously intended him to forget the rope. Only one page later, he is talking of humbly drinking from the cup which the Lord has placed before him. The question is, of course, whether he really believes in what he is saying. The reader does not, and is inclined to suspect him of hypocrisy, of being a parasite, though there is no direct evidence that he himself is conscious of this side of his nature, and when he goes out scavenging in a gale one evening, his thoughts are quite plain: "He thought it might always please God to upturn a store shed on a night like this." It appears that he really may believe in some kind of providence watching over his own dishonesty.

Ketil is not guilty of this kind of self-deception, and he really does believe that he is being watched over by Providence. It helps him to accept his situation, to the disgust of his son: "A poor man is a poor man. It's God who decides," says Ketil to his eldest son, to which the son replies: "We have learned to feel ourselves as men, we have learned that life is not simply dry bread, we have learned to demand more. You couldn't demand anything. And you daren't. Every time you wanted to raise your heads a little, you thought that God was angry and that the Devil was rubbing his hands."

The question of determinism and non-determinism is left open, and the reader will sense a sympathy with both generations – though a comparison between these passages and what Hedin Brú says elsewhere in his work does seem to indicate that determinism for him is something more than an external fate, be it of a Christian or profane variety. Although it might be a comfort to Ketil to believe that it is God's will that he should break his net while out fowling, the reader is unlikely to be convinced.

Meanwhile, Ketil turns up with yet another variation on the deterministic theme, though one which still does not enjoy the author's

entire sympathy. Lias Berint and Ketil have been across the sound , partly on Ketil's errand and partly to fetch Lias Berint's belongings. On the way home Lias Berint's things blow away in a gale, and he is killed in trying to retrieve them. Despite village gosip to the effect that Ketil has murdered his friend, he is obviously in no way responsible for the death, and yet he begins to look for signs of his own responsibility. It was because of a rumour of measles in the village that he decided he must cross the sound and do some errands, and it was because of this that Lias Berint went with him. Consequently, in his subsequent effort to find a reason for Lias Berint's death, he finds a chain of cause and event which once more brings back the responsibility to his own door. He rejects the idea, and so must the reader, but the deterministic view is again examined, even if it is once more rejected as invalid.

Both Martin Joensen and Hedin Brú are clearly very conscious of the deterministic element which is a part of the mental and social make-up of a society so much at the mercy of nature as the one which they portray. They do not appear deliberately to examine the question in depth, but it does seem from their work that determinism in its various forms keeps emerging and playing a part in the action and the thought of their work. Neither of them accepts it in its simplest form, but both toy with the idea. Martin Joensen on the whole is content to portray without comment, while Hedin Brú is much more inclined to seek a sophisticated explanation of the role played in his characters' minds by what in fact is an age-old concept. It may be that determinism is not at the very centre of their work, and indeed it is not difficult to find stories in plenty written by either of them in which it plays no part at all – but its consistent re-emergence in their novels and short stories seems clearly to indicate that it is one subject with which they have both been preoccupied.