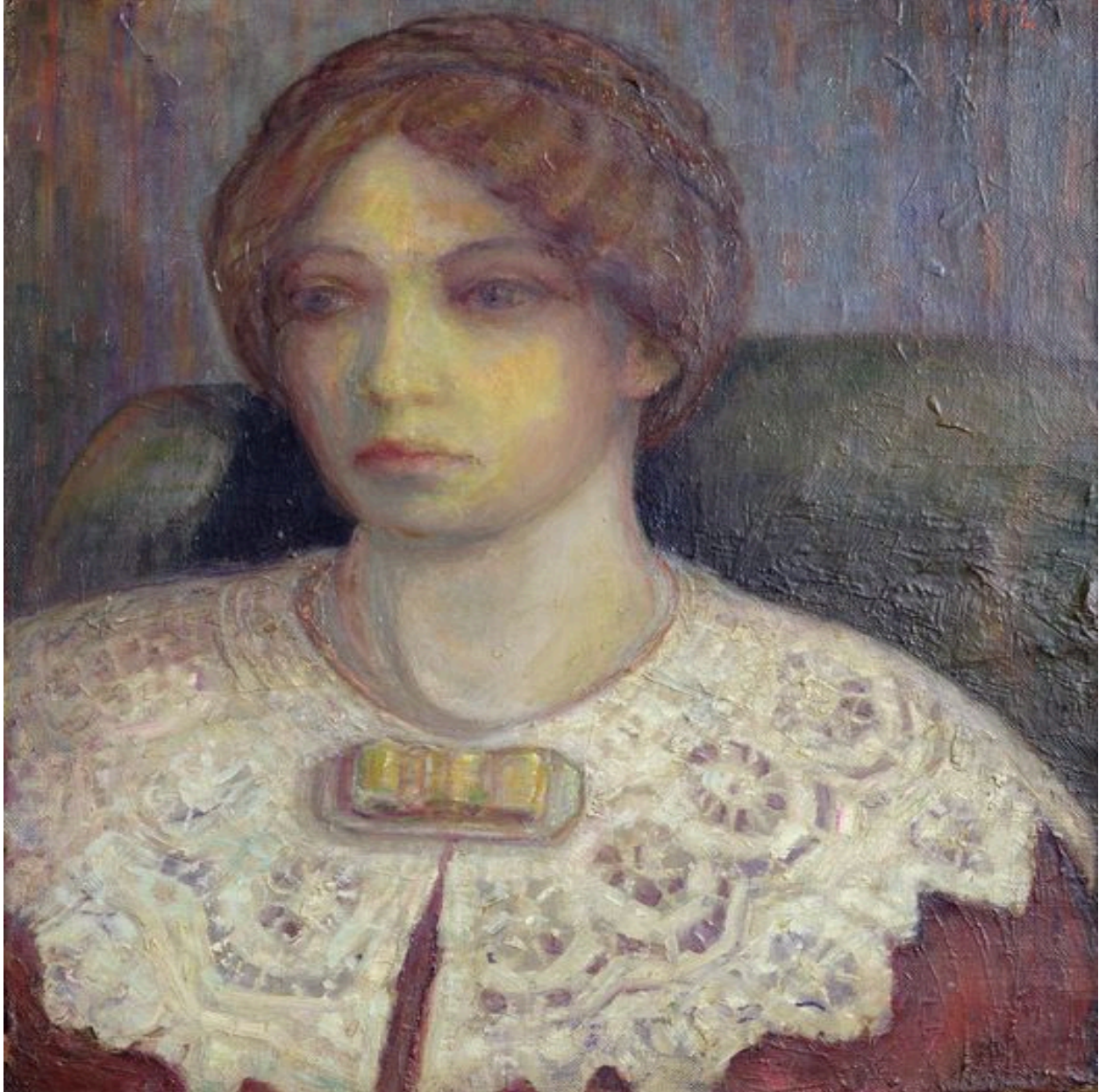


‘Olav Audunssøn IV—Winter’ Review: A Nordic Saga Concludes

Tiina Nunnally brings her translation of Sigrid Undset’s majestic quartet to its conclusion.



Sigrid Undset, 1912 (oil on canvas) O. VAERING/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

By

Brad Leithauser

Nov. 17, 2023 4:46 pm ET

A century ago, the world's most famous woman novelist lived not in Great Britain, the United States or France but in Norway. Reputations have shifted since. But back then, viewed globally, Willa Cather was a Great Plains regionalist, Virginia Woolf was the darling of a precious group of Londoners based in Bloomsbury, and Edith Wharton was an acolyte of the late and long out-of-fashion Henry James. Neither Cather nor Woolf nor Wharton had gained much international presence through translation.

Sigrid Undset, on the other hand, was clamorously popular, not only in Norway but across Scandinavia and in England, Germany and—especially—America. In 1928 she became only the third woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, awarded “principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life during the Middle Ages.”

One might assume that this commendation spoke mainly to her perennially popular trilogy, “Kristin Lavransdatter,” the final volume of which appeared in Norwegian in 1922 and in English two years later. But it also encompassed her four-book series originally known as “The Master of Hestviken.” These volumes, collectively retitled “Olav Audunssøn,” have been resurrected in a magnificent translation by Tiina Nunnally, as an artfully designed paperback quartet from the University of Minnesota Press, beginning with “Olav Audunssøn I: Vows” in 2020, continuing with “Providence” and “Crossroads” in 2021 and 2022. Now the project is complete with the publication of “Olav Audunssøn IV: Winter.” For all these tales’ dark doings, which largely unfold on an isolated Norwegian fjord in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, Ms. Nunnally’s translation bears the luster of a newly sighted constellation.

Undset came naturally by her obsession with the Middle Ages. Her father Ingvald was an archaeologist based in the Norwegian capital of Kristiania (now called Oslo), and her childhood was steeped in medieval lore. Ingvald died when Sigrid was 11; she had to abandon her education to become a secretary in an engineering firm. But at the age of 22 she completed a first novel (rejected by publishers) planted in medieval times. From the outset, her imagination showed a firm backward tilt.

Nominally a Lutheran, raised an atheist, Undset somewhat scandalously converted to Catholicism in her 40s. This coincided with the composing of “Olav Audunssøn,” a series whose novels can profitably be viewed as an extended sojourn within the castle-keep of a “pure” Christianity, as yet undisturbed by the knockings of Luther and Calvin. Distantly, papal Rome reigns over the world of her characters, but secular ambitions are constantly butting up against religious doctrine, adumbrating the schisms to come.

Undset’s approach to spiritual issues is plain-spoken and direct, conceding but hardly dissecting the mysteries within, as displayed in this confrontation between father and son: “Eirik stood motionless as he stared at his father. Again he felt surprised. Everything his father had said was true, yet Eirik knew that the truth was something entirely different.”

If Undset had one foot fixed in Rome, she had another lodged across the sea in Iceland: Its medieval sagas were the “Iliad” and “Odyssey” of her bookish youth. As in the sagas, Undset

offers landscapes dominated by Law, both worldly and celestial. The Law broods over her tetralogy as unignorably as the storm clouds amassing on a fiord's horizon, whose powerful caprices might sink a ship or lay waste to a farm. Today the term "outlaw" carries a romantic appeal—the salty rogue, the likable scoundrel. But in "Olav Audunssøn," as in the medieval sagas, it's a terrifying concept: You've been cast outside all societal shelter and can be killed with impunity by anybody.

Olav, the tetralogy's titular character, is outlawed after taking a sword to a distant kinsman during a dispute over Olav's betrothal to his childhood love, Ingunn. The two eventually are able to marry, and through incremental acts of reparation Olav must edge his way back into society. There's much legalistic parsing of statutory phrase and concept here, for the Law's peremptory clauses are the protective chain mail that wards off the world's bladed savagery.

The four novels track Olav from childhood to death—a stretch of more than half a century. Early on, during a stint as a soldier, he's little troubled by the shedding of blood. But later he murders a romantic rival, Teit, and Olav's days are darkened forever. His crime goes "unconfessed," a word that might serve as an alternative title to the tetralogy. Olav, his family, friends and rivals all manifest a stubborn taciturnity. Much heated brooding occurs alongside those icy fjords.

Teit had earlier impregnated Ingunn during one of Olav's lengthy exiles due to outlawry, and Ingunn's inextinguishable guilt, about behavior that many modern readers would dismiss as a one-time dalliance, cankers the rest of her life. Initially she plans to murder her unwanted son at birth. Later, suffering a change of heart, she arranges to banish the boy to faraway foster parents. But distance in no way cleanses her conscience.

There's a brief pastoral interlude in their marriage when Olav and Ingunn appear happy with each other. They are a young and handsome couple, prosperous and hopeful. But there are obvious problems for their union: his jealousy; her guilt; his surliness; her emotional and physical frailty; as well as a string of stillborn boys that both parents accept as divine retribution. Their incompatibilities seem both unplumbable and unbudgeable. In Undset's fiction, the rendezvous of any two lovers is likely an ill-lit place, where souls seeking to commingle instead stumble over each other in the dark.

Olav eventually retrieves Ingunn's son and establishes him, dishonestly, as his legitimate heir. Dishonesty, infidelity, betrayal, compounded by endless rounds of self-destructive penance—an abyss opens for Olav and Ingunn. Their tale's scale is titanic; the mood, tragic; the misunderstandings, touching.

In the final volume, "Winter," we find that Olav, who was once "the most handsome and manly of men in the world," is grizzled and disfigured by combat; one side of his face has been stove in. His primary remaining challenge is his twofold legacy: the preservation of the estates he has pledged his life to and the fate of his Christian soul. The dispatching of his worldly property turns out to be a mixed triumph at best. The destination of his soul is left uncertain.

The modern reader, residing in an everyday environment of offices and telephones and errands, inhabits a world of steadily ticking clocks. Then there's the world that a novel introduces—where time may proceed by errant pulses, where an instant may dilate into lengthy minutes or a decade pass with the fan-like flick of a paragraph. The novelist temporarily seeks to make a book's calendar seem more real and urgent than your own.

A work like "Olav Audunssøn" brings this contending of calendars to an exaggerated, pleasurable pitch. For over 1,000 pages the flow of time—not yet mechanized—follows the sweep of the sun, planets and stars. Readers are restored to a world otherwise lost forever: an unprogressing world. Unlike us, Olav and Ingunn have every expectation that their children's lives will mirror their own. Their children will face similar trials and travails while seeking to preserve their imperiled souls. Why, then, should this muddled, momentary world of ours be any different?

By the time you immerse yourself in Olav's world, Undset's furthest ambition should be inspiringly apparent. The woman intends, for a time, to stop all the clocks around you.

Mr. Leithauser is the author, most recently, of "Rhyme's Rooms: The Architecture of Poetry." He was inducted into Iceland's Order of the Falcon for his writing about Nordic literature.

Copyright ©2023 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
87990cbe856818d5eddac44c7b1cdeb8

Appeared in the November 18, 2023, print edition.