CHAPTER III

THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

I

ICELAND AND THE HEROIC AGE

THE epic poetry of the Germans came to an end in different ways and at different seasons among the several nations of that stock. In England and the Continent it had to compete with the new romantic subjects and new forms of verse. In Germany the rhyming measures prevailed very early, but the themes of German tradition were not surrendered at the same time. The rhyming verse of Germany, foreign in its origin, continued to be applied for centuries in the rendering of German myths and heroic stories, sometimes in a style with more or less pretence to courtliness, as in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun;* sometimes in open parade of the travelling minstrel's "public manners" and simple appetites. England had exactly the opposite fortune in regard to verse and subject-matter. In England the alliterative verse survived the changes of inflexion and pronunciation for more than five hundred years after *Maldon*, and uttered its last words in a poem written like the *Song of Byrhtnoth* on a contemporary battle,—the poem of *Scottish Field.*[1]

[1] Ed. Robson, Chetham Society, 1855, from the Lyme MS.; ed. Furnivall and Hales, *Percy Folio Manuscript*, 1867.

There was girding forth of guns, with many great stones;
Archers uttered out their arrows and eagerly they shotten;
They proched us with spears and put many over;
That the blood outbrast at their broken harness.
There was swinging out of swords, and swapping of heads,
We blanked them with bills through all their bright armour,
That all the dale dinned of the derf strokes.

But while this poem of Flodden corresponds in its subject to the poem of *Maldon*, there is no such likeness between any other late alliterative poem and the older poems of the older language. The alliterative verse is applied in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to every kind of subject except those of Germanic tradition. England, however, has the advantage over Germany, that while Germany lost the old verse, England did not lose the English heroic subjects, though, as it happens, the story of King Horn and the story of Havelock the Dane are not told in the verse that was used for King Arthur and Gawain, for the tale of Troy and the wars of Alexander. The recent discovery of a fragment of the *Song of Wade* is an admonition to be cautious in making the extant works of Middle English literature into a standard for all that has ceased to exist. But no new discovery, even of a Middle English alliterative poem of Beowulf or of Walter of Aquitaine, would alter the fact that the alliterative measure of English poetry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, like the ancient themes of the German rhyming poems, is a survival in an age when the chief honours go to other kinds of poetry. The author of *Piers Plowman* is a notable writer, and so

are the poets of *Gawain*, and of the *Mort Arthure*, and of the *Destruction of Troy;* but Chaucer and not Langland is the poetical master of that age. The poems of the *Nibelungen* and of *Kudrun* are rightly honoured, but it was to the author of *Parzival*, and to the courtly lyrics of Walther von der Vogelweide, that the higher rank was given in the age of the Hohenstaufen, and the common fame is justified by history, so often as history chooses to have any concern with such things.

In the lands of the old Northern speech the old heroic poetry was displaced by the new Court poetry of the Scalds. The heroic subjects were not, however, allowed to pass out of memory. The new poetry could not do without them, and required, and obtained, its heroic dictionary in the *Edda*. The old subjects hold their own, or something of their own, with every change of fashion. They were made into prose stories, when prose was in favour; they were the subjects of *Rímur*, rhyming Icelandic romances, when that form came later into vogue.[1] In Denmark they were paraphrased, many of them, by Saxo in his *History;* many of them became the subjects of ballads, in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroes.

In this way some of the inheritance of the old German world was saved in different countries and languages, for the most part in ballads and chap-books, apart from the main roads of literature. But these heirlooms were not the whole stock of the heroic age. After the failure and decline of the old poetry there

[1] See below, p. 324.

remained an unexhausted piece of ground; and the great imaginative triumph of the Teutonic heroic age was won in Iceland with the creation of a new epic tradition, a new form applied to new subjects.

Iceland did something more than merely preserve the forms of an antiquated life whose day was over. It was something more than an island of refuge for muddled and blundering souls that had found the career of the great world too much for them. The ideas of an old-fashioned society migrated to Iceland, but they did not remain there unmodified. The paradox of the history of Iceland is that the unsuccessful old ideas were there maintained by a community of people who were intensely self-conscious and exceptionally clear in mind. Their political ideas were too primitive for the common life of medieval Christendom. The material life of Iceland in the Middle Ages was barbarous when compared with the life of London or Paris, not to speak of Provence or Italy, in the same centuries. At the same time, the modes of thought in Iceland, as is proved by its historical literature, were distinguished by their freedom from extravagances,—from the extravagance of medieval enthusiasm as well as from the superstitions of barbarism. The life of an heroic age—that is, of an older stage of civilisation than the common European medieval form—was interpreted and represented by the men of that age themselves with a clearness of understanding that appears to be quite unaffected by the common medieval fallacies and "idolisms." This clear self-consciousness is the distinction of Icelandic civilisation and literature.

It is not vanity or conceit. It does not make the Icelandic writers anxious about their own fame or merits. It is simply clear intelligence, applied under a dry light to subjects that in themselves are primitive, such as never before or since have been represented in the same way. The life is their own life; the record is that of a dispassionate observer.

While the life represented in the Sagas is more primitive, less civilised, than the life of the great Southern nations in the Middle Ages, the record of that life is by a still greater interval in advance of all the common modes of narrative then known to the more fortunate or more luxurious parts of Europe. The conventional form of the Saga has none of the common medieval restrictions of view. It is accepted at once by modern readers without deduction or apology on the score of antique fashion, because it is in essentials the form with which modern readers are acquainted in modern story-telling; and more especially because the language is unaffected and idiomatic, not "quaint" in any way, and because the conversations are like the talk of living people. The Sagas are stories of characters who speak for themselves, and who are interesting on their own merits. There are good and bad Sagas, and the good ones are not all equally good throughout. The mistakes and misuses of the inferior parts of the literature do not, however, detract from the sufficiency of the common form, as represented at its best. The invention of the common form of the Saga is an achievement which deserves to be judged by the best

in its kind. That kind was not exempt, any more than the Elizabethan drama or the modern novel, from the impertinences and superfluities of trivial authors. Further, there were certain conditions and circumstances about its origin that sometimes hindered in one way, while they gave help in another. The Saga is a compromise between opposite temptations, and the compromise is not always equitable.

II

MATTER AND FORM

It is no small part of the force of the Sagas, and at the same time a difficulty and an embarrassment, that they have so much of reality behind them. The element of history in them, and their close relation to the lives of those for whom they were made, have given them a substance and solidity beyond anything else in the imaginative stories of the Middle Ages. It may be that this advantage is gained rather unfairly. The art of the Sagas, which is so modern in many things, and so different from the medieval conventions in its selection of matter and its development of the plot, is largely indebted to circumstances outside of art. In its rudiments it was always held close to the real and material interests of the people; it was not like some other arts which in their beginning are fanciful, or dependent on myth or legend for their subject-matter, as in the medieval schools of painting or sculpture generally, or in the medieval drama. Its imaginative methods were formed through essays in the representation of actual life; its first artists were impelled by historical motives, and by personal and

local interests. The art of the Sagas was from the first "immersed in matter"; it had from the first all the advantage that it is given by interests stronger and more substantial than those of mere literature; and, conversely, all the hindrance that such irrelevant interests provide, when "mere literature" attempts to disengage itself and govern its own course.

The local history, the pedigrees of notable families, are felt as a hindrance, in a greater or less degree, by all readers of the Sagas; as a preliminary obstacle to clear comprehension. The Sagas differ in value, according to their use and arrangement of these matters, in relation to a central or imaginative conception of the main story and the characters engaged in it. The best Sagas are not always those that give the least of their space to historical matters, to the genealogies and family memoirs. From these the original life of the Sagas is drawn, and when it is cut off from these the Saga withers into a conventional and insipid romance. Some of the best Sagas are among those which make most of the history, and, like *Njála* and *Laxdœla*, act out their tragedies in a commanding way that carries along with it the whole crowd of minor personages, yet so that their minor and particular existences do not interfere with the story, but help it and give it substantiality. The tragedy of *Njal*, or of the *Lovers of Gudrun*, may be read and judged, if one chooses, in abstraction from the common background of Icelandic history, and in forgetfulness of its bearing upon the common fortunes of the people of the land; but these Sagas

are not rightly understood if they are taken only and exclusively in isolation. The tragedies gain a very distinct additional quality from the recurrence of personages familiar to the reader from other Sagas. The relation of the Sagas to actual past events, and to the whole range of Icelandic family tradition, was the initial difficulty in forming an adequate method of story-telling; the particulars were too many, and also too real. But the reality of them was, at the same time, the initial impulse of the Sagas; and the best of the Sagas have found a way of saving the particulars of the family and local histories, without injury to the imaginative and poetical order of their narratives.

The Sagas, with all the differences between them, have common features, but among these is not to be reckoned an equal consideration for the unity of action. The original matter of the oral traditions of Iceland, out of which the written Sagas were formed, was naturally very much made up of separate anecdotes, loosely strung together by associations with a district or a family. Some of the stories, no doubt, must have had by nature a greater unity and completeness than the rest:—history in the rough has very often the outlines of tragedy in it; it presents its authors with dramatic contrasts ready made (Richard II. and Bolingbroke, Lewis XI. and Charles the Bold, Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots); it provides real heroes. But there are many interesting things which are not well proportioned, and which have no respect for the unities; the hero is worth talking about

whether his story is symmetrical or not. The simplest form of heroic narrative is that which puts together a number of adventures, such as may easily be detached and repeated separately, adventures like that of David and Goliath, Wallace with his fishing-rod, or Bruce in the robbers' house. Many of the Sagas are mere loose strings of adventures, of short stories, or idylls, which may easily be detached and remembered out of connexion with the rest of the series. In the case of many of these it is almost indifferent at what point they may be introduced in the Saga; they merely add some particulars without advancing the plot, if there be any plot. There are all varieties of texture in the Sagas, from the extreme laxity of those that look like mere collections of the anecdotes of a country-side (*Eyrbyggja*), to the definite structure of those in which all the particulars contribute to the main action (*Hrafnkels Saga*, *Bandamanna*, *Gísla*).

The loose assemblage of stories current in Iceland before the Sagas were composed in writing must, of course, have been capable of all kinds of variation. The written Sagas gave a check to oral variations and rearrangements; but many of them in extant alternative versions keep the traces of the original story-teller's freedom of selection, while all the Sagas together in a body acknowledge themselves practically as a selection from traditional report. Each one, the most complete as well as the most disorderly, is taken out of a mass of traditional knowledge relating to certain recognisable persons, of whom any one may be

chosen for a time as the centre of interest, and any one may become a subordinate character in some one else's adventures. One Saga plays into the others, and introduces people incidentally who may be the heroes of other stories. As a result of this selective practice of the Sagas, it sometimes happens that an important or an interesting part of the record may be dropped by one Saga and picked up casually by another. Thus in the written Sagas, one of the best stories of the two Foster-brothers (or rather "Brothers by oath," *fratres jurati*) Thorgeir and Thormod the poet, is preserved not by their own proper history, *Fóstbræðra Saga*, but in the story of Grettir the Strong; how they and Grettir lived a winter through in the same house without quarrelling, and how their courage was estimated by their host.[1]

This solidarity and interconnexion of the Sagas needs no explanation. It could not be otherwise in a country like Iceland; a community of neighbours (in spite of distances and difficulties of travelling) where there was nothing much to think about or to know except other people's affairs. The effect in the written Sagas is to give them something like the system of the *Comédie Humaine*. There are new

[1] "Is it true, Thorgils, that you have entertained those three men this winter, that are held to be the most regardless and overbearing, and all of them outlaws, and you have handled them so that none has hurt another?" Yes, it was true, said Thorgils. Skapti said: "That is something for a man to be proud of; but what do you think of the three, and how are they each of them in courage?" Thorgils said: "They are all three bold men to the full; yet two of them, I think, may tell what fear is like. It is not in the same way with both; for Thormod fears God, and Grettir is so afraid of the dark that after dark he would never stir, if he had his own way; but I do not know that Thorgeir, my kinsman, is afraid of anything."—"You have read them well," says Skapti; and so their talk ended (*Grettis Saga*, c. 51).

characters in each, but the old characters reappear. Sometimes there are discrepancies; the characters are not always treated from the same point of view. On the whole, however, there is agreement. The character of Gudmund the Great, for example, is well drawn, with zest, and some irony, in his own Saga (*Ljósvetninga*); he is the prosperous man, the "rich glutton," fond of praise and of influence, but not as sound as he looks, and not invulnerable. His many appearances in other Sagas all go to strengthen this impression of the full-blown great man and his ambiguous greatness. So also Snorri the Priest, whose rise and progress are related in *Eyrbyggja*, appears in many other Sagas, and is recognised whenever he appears with the same certainty and the same sort of interest as attaches to the name of Rastignac, when that politician is introduced in stories not properly his own. Each separate mention of Snorri the Priest finds its place along with all the rest; he is never unequal to himself.

It is in the short story, the episodic chapter, that the art of Icelandic narrative first defines itself. This is the original unity; it is here, in a limited, easily comprehensible subject-matter, that the lines are first clearly drawn. The Sagas that are least regular and connected are made up of definite and well-shaped single blocks. Many of the Sagas are much improved by being taken to pieces and regarded, not as continuous histories, but as collections of separate short stories. *Eyrbyggja*, *Vatnsdæla*, and *Ljósvetninga* are collections of this sort—"Tales of

the Hall." There is a sort of unity in each of them, but the place of Snorri in *Eyrbyggja*, of Ingimund in *Vatnsdœla*, and of Gudmund the Great in the history of the House of Ljósavatn, is not that of a tragic or epic hero who compels the episodes to take their right subordinate rank in a larger story. These Sagas break up into separate chapters, losing thereby none of the minor interests of story-telling, but doing without the greater tragic or heroic interest of the fables that have one predominant motive.

Of more coherent forms of construction there are several different examples among the Sagas. In each of these cases it is the tragic conception, the tragic idea, of the kind long familiar to the Teutonic nations, that governs the separate passages of the traditional history.

Tragic situations are to be found all through the Icelandic literature, only they are not always enough to make a tragedy. There is Nemesis in the end of Gudmund the Great, when his murdered enemy haunts him ; but this is not enough to make his Saga an organic thing. The tragic problem of Alboin recurs, as was pointed out by the editors of *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, in the prelude to *Vatnsdœla Saga ;* but it stands by itself as one of the separate chapters in that history, which contains the plots of other tragedies also, without adopting any one of them as its single and overruling motive. These are instances of the way in which tragic imagination, or at any rate the knowledge and partial appreciation of tragic plots, may come short of fulfilment, and

may be employed in a comparatively futile and wasteful form of literature. In the greater works, where the idea is fully realised, there is no one formal type. The Icelandic Sagas have different forms of success in the greater works, as well as different degrees of approximation to success in the more desultory and miscellaneous histories.

Njála, which is the greatest of all the Sagas, does not make its effect by any reduction of the weight or number of its details. It carries an even greater burden of particulars than *Eyrbyggja;* it has taken up into itself the whole history of the south country of Iceland in the heroic age.

The unity of *Njála* is certainly not the unity of a restricted or emaciated heroic play. Yet with all its complexity it belongs to quite a different order of work from *Eyrbyggja.*

It falls into three divisions, each of these a story by itself, with all three combining to form one story, apart from which they are incomplete. The first, the story of Gunnar, which is a tragedy by itself, is a necessary part of the whole composition; for it is also the story of the wisdom of Njal and the dignity of Bergthora, without which the second part would be insipid, and the great act of the burning of Njal's house would lose its depth and significance. The third part is the payment of a debt to Njal, Bergthora, and Skarphedinn, for whom vengeance is required; but it is also due even more to Flosi their adversary. The essence of the tragic situation lies in this, that the good man is in the wrong, and his adversary in

the right. The third part is required to restore the balance, in order that the original wrong, Skarphedinn's slaughter of the priest of Whiteness, should not be thought to be avoided in the death of its author. *Njála* is a work of large scale and liberal design; the beauty of all which, in the story, is that it allows time for the characters to assert themselves and claim their own, as they could not do in a shorter story, where they would be whirled along by the plot. The vengeance and reconciliation in the third part of *Njála* are brought about by something more than a summary poetical justice of fines and punishments for misdeeds. It is a more leisurely, as well as a more poetical justice, that allows the characters to assert themselves for what they really are; the son of Lambi "filthy still," and Flosi the Burner not less true in temper than Njal himself.

Njála and *Laxdæla* are examples of two different ways in which inconvenient or distracting particulars of history or tradition might be reduced to serve the ends of imagination and the heroic design. *Njála* keeps up, more or less, throughout, a continuous history of a number of people of importance, but always with a regard for the principal plot of the story. In *Laxdæla* there is, on the other hand, a gradual approach to the tragedy of Kjartan, Bolli, and Gudrun; an historical prologue of the founding of Laxdale, and the lives of Kjartan's father and grandfather, before the chief part of the story begins. In *Njála* the main story opens as soon as Njal appears; of prologue there is little more than is needed to

prepare for the mischief of Hallgerda, who is the cause of the strain between the two houses of Lithend and Bergthorsknoll, and thereby the touchstone of the generosity of Njal. In *Laxdœla*, although the prologue is not irrelevant, there is a long delay before the principal personages are brought together. There is no mistake about the story when once it begins, and no question about the unity of the interest; Gudrun and Fate may divide it between them, if it be divisible. It is purely the stronger quality of this part of the book, in comparison with the earlier, that saves *Laxdœla* from the defects of its construction; by the energy of the story of Kjartan, the early story of Laxdale is thrown back and left behind as a mere prelude, in spite of its length.

The story of Egil Skallagrimsson, the longest of the biographical Sagas, shows exactly the opposite proportions to those of *Laxdœla*. The life of Egil is prefaced by the history of his grandfather, father, and uncle, Kveldulf, Skallagrim (Grim the Bald), and Thorolf. Unhappily for the general effect of the book, the life of Egil is told with less strength and coherence than the fate of his uncle. The most commanding and most tragic part of *Egla* is that which represents Skallagrim and Thorolf in their relations to the tyranny of Harald the king; how Thorolf's loyalty was ill paid, and how Skallagrim his brother went in defiance to speak to King Harald. This, though it is only a prelude to the story of Egil, is one of the finest imaginative passages in the whole literature. The Saga has here been able to express,

in a dramatic and imaginative form, that conflict of principles between the new monarchy and the old liberty, which led to the Icelandic migration. The whole political situation, it might be said the whole early history of Iceland and Norway, is here summed up and personified in the conflict of will between the three characters. Thorolf, Harald the king, and Skallagrim play the drama of the Norwegian monarchy, and the founding of the Icelandic Commonwealth. After this compact and splendid piece of work the adventures of Egil Skallagrimsson appear rather ineffectual and erratic, in spite of some brilliant episodes.

What was an author to do when his hero died in his bed, or survived all his feuds and enmities? or when a feud could not be wound up in one generation?

Vápnfirðinga Saga gives the history of two generations of feud, with a reconciliation at the end, thus obtaining a rounded unity, though at some cost of the personal interest in its transference from fathers to sons.

Víga-Glúms Saga is a story which, with the best intentions in the world, could not attain to tragedy like that of Gisli or of Grettir, because every one knew that Glum was a threatened man who lived long, and got through without any deadly injury. Glum is well enough fitted for the part of a tragic hero. He has the slow growth, the unpromising youth, the silence and the dangerous laughter, such as are recorded in the lives of other notable personages in heroic literature :—

Glum turned homeward; and a fit of laughing came on him. It took him in this way, that his face grew pale, and there ran tears from his eyes like hailstones: it was often so with him afterwards, when bloodshed was in his mind.

But although there are several feuds in the story of Glum, or several incidents in a feud, somehow there is no tragedy. Glum dies quietly, aged and sightless. There is a thread of romantic destiny in his story; he keeps his good luck till he parts with the gifts of his grandfather Vigfus—the cloak, the spear, and the sword that Vigfus had given him in Norway. The prayer for Glum's discomfiture, which one of his early adversaries had offered to Frey, then takes effect, when the protecting luck has been given away. The fall of Glum is, however, nothing incurable; the change in his fortune is merely that he has to give up the land which he had extorted from his adversary long before, and that he ceases to be the greatest man in Eyjafirth, though continuing to be a man of importance still. His honour and his family are not hard hit, after all.

The history of Glum, with its biographical unity, its interest of character, and its want of tragedy, is a form of story midway between the closer knit texture of *Gísla* and the laxity of construction in the stories without a hero, or with more than one, such as *Ljósvetninga* or *Vatnsdæla*. It is a biography with no strong crisis in it; it might have been extended indefinitely. And, in fact, the existing form of the story looks as if it were rather carelessly put together, or perhaps abridged from a fuller version.

The story in *Reykdœla* of Viga Skuta, Glum's son-in-law and enemy, contains a better and fuller account of their dealings than *Glúma*, without any discrepancy, though the *Reykdœla* version alludes to divergencies of tradition in certain points. The curious thing is that the *Reykdœla* version supplies information about Glum's character which supplements what is told more baldly in his own Saga. Both accounts agree about Glum's good nature, which is practised on by Skuta. Glum is constant and trustworthy whenever he is appealed to for help. The *Reykdœla* version gives a pretty confirmation of this view of Glum's character (c. 24), where Glum protects the old Gaberlunzie man, with the result that the old man goes and praises his kindness, and so lets his enemies know of his movements, and spoils his game for that time. This episode is related to *Glúma*, as the foster-brother episode of Grettir (c. 51), quoted above, is related to *Fóstbræðra Saga*.

If *Glúma* is interesting and even fairly compact, in spite of its want of any great dramatic moment, on the other hand the tragic ending is not always enough to save a story from dissipation of interest. In the story of Glum's antagonist, Viga Skuta, in the second part of *Reykdœla Saga*, there is no proportion or composition; his adventures follow one upon the other, without development, a series of hazards and escapes, till he is brought down at last. In the earlier part of the same Saga (the story of Vemund, Skuta's cousin, and Askel, Skuta's father) there is more continuity in the chronicle of wrongs and

revenges, and, if this story be taken by itself, more form and definite design. The two rivals are well marked out and opposed to one another, while the mischief-making Vemund is well contrasted with his uncle Askel, the just man and the peacemaker, who at the end is killed in one of his nephew's feuds, in the fight by the frozen river from which Vemund escapes, while his enemy is drowned and his best friend gets a death wound.

There are two Sagas in which a biographical theme is treated in such a way that the story produces one single impressive and tragical effect, leaving the mind with a sense of definite and necessary movement towards a tragic conclusion,—the story of Grettir the Strong, and the story of Gisli the Outlaw. These stories have analogies to one another, though they are not cast in quite the same manner.

In the life of Grettir there are many detached episodes, giving room for theories of adulteration such as are only too inevitable and certain in regard to the imbecile continuation of the story after Grettir's death and his brother's vengeance. The episodes in the main story are, however, not to be dismissed quite so easily as the unnecessary romance of the Lady Spes (*Grettis Saga*, cc. 90-95). While many of the episodes do little to advance the story, and some of them seem to have been borrowed from other Sagas without sufficient reason (cc. 25-27, from the *Foster-brothers*), most of them serve to accentuate the character of Grettir, or to deepen the sense of the mystery surrounding his life.

The tragedy of Grettir is one of those which depend on Accident, interpreted by the author as Fate. The hero is a doomed man, like Gisli, who sees things clearly coming on, but is unable to get out of their way. In both *Gisli* and *Grettir* there is an accompaniment of mystery and fantasy—for Gisli in the songs of the dream woman, for Grettir in various touches unlike the common prose of the Sagas. The hopelessness of his ill fortune is brought out in a sober way in his dealings with the chiefs who are unable to protect him, and in the cheerless courage of his relations with the foster-brothers, when the three are all together in the house of Thorgils Arason. It is illustrated in a quite different and more fantastic way in the scenes of his wanderings among the mountains, in the mysterious quiet of Thorisdal, in his alliance with strange deliverers, outside of the common world and its society, in the curse of Glam under the moonlight. This last is one of the few scenes in the Sagas, though not the only one, when the effect depends on something more than the persons engaged in it. The moon with the clouds driving over counts for more than a mere indication of time or weather; it is essential to the story, and lends itself to the malignity of the adversary in casting the spell of fear upon Grettir's mind. The solitude of Drangey, in the concluding chapters of *Grettis Saga*, the cliffs, the sea, and the storms, are all much less exceptional; they are necessary parts of the action, more closely and organically related to the destiny of the hero. There, in the final scenes,

although there is witchcraft practised against Grettir, it is not that, but the common and natural qualities of the foolishness of the thrall and the heroism of Grettir and his young brother on which the story turns. These are the humanities of Drangey, a strong contrast, in the art of narrative, to the moonlight spell of Glam. The notable thing is that the romantic and fantastic passages in Grettir are not obscurations of the tragedy, not irrelevant, but rather an expression by the way, and in an exceptional mood, of the author's own view of the story and his conviction that it is all one coherent piece. This certainly is the effect of the romantic interludes in *Gísla*, which is perhaps the most tragic of all the Sagas, or at any rate the most self-conscious of its tragic aim. In the story of Gisli there is an introduction and preparation, but there is no very great expense of historical preliminaries. The discrepancies here between the two extant redactions of the Saga seem to show that introductory chapters of this sort were regarded as fair openings for invention and decoration by editors, who had wits enough to leave the essential part of the story very much to itself. Here, when once the action has begun, it goes on to the end without a fault. The chief characters are presented at the beginning; Gisli and Thorkell his brother; Thorgrim the Priest and Vestein, their two brothers-in-law. A speech foretelling their disunion is reported to Gisli, and leads him to propose the oath of fellowship between the four; which proposal, meant to avert the omen, brings about its fulfilment.

And so the story goes on logically and inevitably to the death of Gisli, who slew Thorgrim, and the passionate agony of Thordis, Thorgrim's wife and Gisli's sister.

Hrafnkels Saga is a tragic idyll, complete and rounded. It is different in its design from *Njála* or *Laxdœla*, from the stories of Grettir and Gisli. It is a short story, well concentrated. For mere symmetry of design it might compete with any of the greater Icelandic works, not to speak of any modern fiction.

Hrafnkel, the proud man, did a cruel thing "for his oath's sake"; killed his shepherd Einar for riding on Freyfaxi, the horse that belonged to Frey the god, and to Hrafnkel his priest. To the father of Einar he made offers of compensation which were not accepted. Then the story, with much admirable detail (especially in the scenes at the Althing), goes on to show how Hrafnkel's pride was humbled by Einar's cousin. All through, however, Hrafnkel is represented as guilty of tragic error, not of wickedness; he is punished more than is due, and in the end the balance is redressed, and his arrogant conqueror is made to accept Hrafnkel's terms. It is a story clearly and symmetrically composed; it would be too neat, indeed, if it were not that it still leaves some accounts outstanding at the end: the original error is wasteful, and the life of an innocent man is sacrificed in the clearing of scores between Hrafnkel and his adversary.

The theory of a conglomerate epic may be applied to the Icelandic Sagas with some effect. It is plain on the face of them that they contain short stories

from tradition which may correspond to the short lays of the epic theory, which do in fact resemble in many things certain of the lays of the "Elder Edda." Many of the Sagas, like *Eyrbyggja*, *Vatnsdœla*, *Svarfdœla*, are ill compacted, and easily broken up into separate short passages. On the other hand, these broken and variegated Sagas are wanting in dignity and impressiveness compared with some others, while those others have attained their dignity, not by choosing their episodic chapters merely, but by forcing their own original and commanding thought upon all their matter. This is the case, whether the form be that of the comprehensive, large, secure, and elaborate *Njála;* of *Laxdœla*, with its dilatory introduction changing to the eagerness and quickness of the story of Gudrun; of *Grettir* and *Gisli*, giving shape in their several ways to the traditional accumulation of a hero's adventures; or, not less remarkable, the precision of *Hrafnkels Saga* and *Bandamanna*,[1] which appear to have discovered and fixed for themselves the canons of good imaginative narrative in short compass, and to have freed themselves, in a more summary way than *Njála*, from the encumbrances of traditional history, and the distracting interests of the antiquarian and the genealogist. These two stories, with that of Howard of Icefirth[2] and some others, might perhaps be taken as corresponding in Icelandic prose to the short epic in verse, such as the *Atlakviða*. They show, at any rate, that the difficulties of reluctant subject-matter and of the

[1] See below, pp. 264-269. [2] p. 248.

manifold deliverances of tradition were not able, in all cases, to get the better of that sense of form which was revealed in the older poetic designs.

In their temper also, and in the quality of their heroic ideal, the Sagas are the inheritors of the older heroic poetry.

III

THE HEROIC IDEAL

In the material conditions of Icelandic life in the "Saga Age" there was all the stuff that was required for heroic narrative. This was recognised by the story-tellers, and they made the most of it. It must be admitted that there is some monotony in the circumstances, but it may be contended that this is of no account in comparison with the results that are produced in the best Sagas out of trivial occasions. "Greatly to find quarrel in a straw" is the rule of their conduct. The tempers of the men are easily stirred; they have a general name[1] for the trial of a man's patience, applied to anything that puts a strain on him, or encroaches on his honour. The trial may come from anything—horses, sheep, hay, women, merchandise. From these follow any number of secondary or retaliatory insults, trespasses, and man-slaughters. Anything almost is enough to set the play going. What the matter in dispute may be, is almost indifferent to the author of the story. Its value depends on the persons; it is what they choose to make it.

[1] *Skapraun*, lit. *test of condition*.

The Sagas differ from all other "heroic" literatures in the larger proportion that they give to the meannesses of reality. Their historical character, and their attempts to preserve an accurate memory of the past, though often freely modified by imagination, yet oblige them to include a number of things, gross, common, and barbarous, because they are part of the story. The Sagas differ one from another in this respect. The characters are not all raised to the height of Gunnar, Njal, Skarphedinn, Flosi, Bolli, Kjartan, Gisli. In many of the Sagas, and in many scenes, the characters are dull and ungainly. At the same time their perversity, the naughtiness, for example, of Vemund in *Reykdœla*, or of Thorolf the crank old man in *Eyrbyggja*, belongs to the same world as the lives of the more heroic personages. The Sagas take an interest in misconduct, when there is nothing better to be had, and the heroic age is frequently represented by them rather according to the rules of modern unheroic story-telling than of Bossu *on the Epic Poem*. The inequitable persons (*úíjafnaðarmenn*) in the Sagas are not all of them as lordly as Agamemnon. For many readers this is an advantage; if the Sagas are thereby made inferior to Homer, they are all the closer to modern stories of "common life." The people of Iceland seem always to have been "at the auld work of the marches again," like Dandie Dinmont and Jock o' Dawstoncleugh, and many of their grievances and wrongs might with little change have been turned into subjects for Crabbe or Mr. Hardy. It requires

no great stretch of fancy to see Crabbe at work on the story of Thorolf Bægifot and his neighbour in *Eyrbyggja;* the old Thorolf, "curst with age," driven frantic by his homely neighbour's greater skill in the weather, and taking it out in a vicious trespass on his neighbour's hay; the neighbour's recourse to Thorolf's more considerate son Arnkell; Arnkell's payment of the damage, and summary method of putting accounts square again by seizure of his father's oxen; with the consequences of all this, which perhaps are somewhat too violent to be translated literally into the modern language of Suffolk or Wessex. Episodes of this type are common in the Sagas, and it is to them in a great measure that the Sagas owe their distinction from the common run of medieval narrative. But no appreciation of this "common life" in the Sagas can be just, if it ignores the essentially "heroic" nature of the moral laws under which the Icelandic narratives are conducted. Whether with good results or bad, is another question; but there can be no doubt that the Sagas were composed under the direction of an heroic ideal, identical in most respects with that of the older heroic poetry. This ideal view is revealed in different ways, as the Sagas have different ways of bringing their characters before the audience. In the best passages, of course, which are the most dramatic, the presuppositions and private opinions of the author are not immediately disclosed in the speeches of the characters. But the Sagas are not without their chorus; the general judgment of people

about their leaders is often expressed; and although the action of the Sagas is generally sufficient to make its own impression and explain itself, the author's reading of his characters is frequently added. From the action and the commentary together, the heroic ideal comes out clearly, and it is plain that its effect on the Sagas was not merely an implicit and unconscious influence. It had risen into the consciousness of the authors of the Sagas; it was not far from definite expression in abstract terms. In this lay the danger. An ideal, defined or described in set terms, is an ideal without any responsibility and without any privilege. It may be picked up and traded on by any fool or hypocrite. Undefined and undivulged, it belongs only to those who have some original strength of imagination or will, and with them it cannot go wrong. But a definite ideal, and the terms of its definition, may belong to any one and be turned to any use. So the ideal of Petrarch was formulated and abused by the Petrarchists. The formula of Amadis of Gaul is derived from generations of older unformulated heroes, and implies the exhaustion of the heroic strain, in that line of descent. The Sagas have not come as far as that, but the latter days, that have seen Amadis, and the mechanical repetitions of Amadis, may find in the Sagas some resemblances and anticipations of the formal hero, though not yet enough to be dangerous.

In all sound heroic literature there are passages that bring up the shadow of the sceptic,—passages of noble sentiment, whose phrases are capable of being

imitated, whose ideas may make the fortune of imitators and pretenders. In the Teutonic epic poetry, as in Homer, there are many noble speeches of this sort, speeches of lofty rhetoric, about which the spirit of depreciation prompts a suspicion, that perhaps they may be less weighty and more conventional than we think. False heroics are easy, and unhappily they have borrowed so much of the true, that the truth itself is sometimes put out of countenance by the likeness.

In the English and the Icelandic heroic poetry there is some ground for thinking that the process of decline and the evolution of the false heroic went to some length before it was stopped. The older poems laid emphasis on certain qualities, and made them an example and an edification. "So ought a man to do," is a phrase common to the English and the Northern schools of epic. The point of honour comes to be only too well understood—too well, that is, for the work of the imagination. Possibly the latter part of *Beowulf* is more abstract than it ought to be; at any rate there are many of the secondary Anglo-Saxon poems which, like the old Saxon *Hêliand*, show an excessive use of the poetic formulas of courage and loyalty. The Icelandic poetry had also its spurious heroic phrases, by which something is taken away from the force of their more authentic originals.

In the Sagas, as in the *Iliad*, in the *Song of Maldon*, in the *Death of Ermanaric*, there is a rhetorical element by which the ideas of absolute courage are expressed. Unhappily it is not always

easy to be sure whether the phrases are of the first or the second growth; in most cases the better opinion perhaps will be that they belong to a time not wholly unsophisticated, yet not in the stage of secondary and abstract heroic romance. The rhetoric of the Sagas, like the rhetoric of the "Poetic Edda," was taken too seriously and too greedily by the first modern discoverers of the old Northern literature. It is not, any more than the rhetoric of Homer, the immediate expression of the real life of an heroic age; for the good reason, that it is literature, and literature just on the autumnal verge, and plainly capable of decay. The best of the Sagas were just in time to escape that touch of over-reflexion and self-consciousness which checks the dramatic life and turns it into matter of edification or sentiment. The best of them also give many indications to show how near they were to over-elaboration and refinement.

Kjartan, for example, in *Laxdœla* is represented in a way that sometimes brings him dangerously near the ideal hero. The story (like many of the other Sagas) plays about between the two extremes, of strong imagination applied dramatically to the subject-matter, on the one hand, and abstract ethical reflexion on the other. In the scene of Kjartan's encounter with Olaf Tryggvason in Norway[1] there is a typical example of the two kinds of operation. The scene and the dialogue are fully adequate to the author's intention, about which there can be no mistake. What he wishes to express, is there expressed, in

[1] Translated in Appendix, Note B.

the most lively way, with the least possible encumbrance of explanation or chorus: the pride of Kjartan, his respect for his unknown antagonist in the swimming-match, his anxiety to keep clear of any submission to the king, with the king's reciprocal sense of the Icelander's magnanimity; no stroke in all this is other than right. While also it may be perceived that the author has brought into his story an ingredient of rhetoric. In this place it has its use and its effect; and, nevertheless, it is recognisable as the dangerous essence of all that is most different from sound narrative or drama.

> Then said the king, "It is well seen that Kjartan is used to put more trust in his own might than in the help of Thor and Odin."

This rings as true as the noble echo of it in the modern version of the *Lovers of Gudrun*:—

> If neither Christ nor Odin help, why then
> Still at the worst we are the sons of men.

No amount of hacking work can take away the eloquence of this phrasing. Yet it is beyond question, that these phrases, like that speech of Sarpedon which has been borrowed by many a hero since, are of a different stuff from pure drama, or any pure imaginative work. By taking thought, they may be more nearly imitated than is possible in the case of any strong dramatic scene. The words of the king about Kjartan are like the words that are used to Earl Hakon, by Sigmund of the Faroes;[1] they are on their way to become, or they have already become,

[1] "Tell me what faith you are of," said the earl. "I believe in my own strength," said Sigmund (*Færeyinga Saga*).

an ethical commonplace. In the place where they are used, in the debate between Kjartan and King Olaf, they have received the strong life of the individual persons between whom they pass, just as an actor may give life and character to any words that are put in his mouth. Yet elsewhere the phrase may occur as a commonplace formula—*Hann trúði á mátt sinn ok megin* (He trusted in his own might and main) —applied generally to those Northern pagans who were known to be *securi adversus Deos* at the time of the first preaching of Christendom in the North.

All is well, however, so long as this heroic ideal is kept in its right relation, as one element in a complex work, not permitted to walk about by itself as a personage. This right subordination is observed in the Sagas, whereby both the heroic characters are kept out of extravagance (for neither Gunnar, Kari, nor Kjartan is an abstract creature), and the less noble or the more complex characters are rightly estimated. The Sagas, which in many things are ironical or reticent, do not conceal their standard of measurement or value, in relation to which characters and actions are to be appraised. They do not, on the other hand, allow this ideal to usurp upon the rights of individual characters. They are imaginative, dealing in actions and characters; they are not ethical or sentimental treatises, or mirrors of chivalry.

IV

TRAGIC IMAGINATION

In their definite tragical situations and problems, the Sagas are akin to the older poetry of the Teutonic race. The tragical cases of the earlier heroic age are found repeated, with variations, in the Sagas. Some of the chief of these resemblances have been found and discussed by the editors of *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*. Also in many places where there is no need to look for any close resemblance in detail, there is to be seen the same mode of comprehending the tragical stress and contradiction as is manifested in the remains of the poetry. As in the older Germanic stories, so in the Sagas, the plot is often more than mere contest or adventure. As in *Finnesburh* and *Waldere*, so in *Gísla* and *Njála* and many other Icelandic stories, the action turns upon a debate between opposite motives of loyalty, friendship, kindred. Gisli kills his sister's husband; it is his sister who begins the pursuit of Gisli, his sister who, after Gisli's death, tries to avenge him. Njal has to stand by his sons, who have killed his friend. Gunnlaug and Hrafn, Kjartan and Bolli, are friends estranged by

"Fate and their own transgression," like Walter and Hagena.

The Sagas, being prose and having an historical tradition to take care of, are unable to reach the same intensity of passion as some of the heroic poems, the poems of *Helgi* and of *Sigurd*. They are all the more epic, perhaps, on that account; more equable in their course, with this compensation for their quieter manner, that they have more room and more variety than the passionate heroic poems. These histories have also, as a rule, to do without the fantasies of such poetry as *Hervor and Angantyr*, or *Helgi and Sigrun*. The vision of the Queens of the Air, the return of Helgi from the dead, the chantings of Hervor "between the worlds," are too much for the plain texture of the Sagas. Though, as has already been seen in *Grettir* and *Gisli*, this element of fantastic beauty is not wholly absent; the less substantial graces of mythical romance, "fainter and flightier" than those of epic, are sometimes to be found even in the historical prose; the historical tragedies have their accompaniment of mystery. More particularly, the story of the *Death of Thidrandi whom the Goddesses slew*, is a prose counterpart to the poetry of Sigrun and Hervor.[1]

There are many other incidents in the Sagas which have the look of romance about them. But of a number of these the distinction holds good that has been already put forward in the case of *Beowulf*: they are

[1] It is summarised in Dasent's *Njal*, i. p. xx., and translated in Sephton's *Olaf Tryggvason* (1895), pp. 339-341.

not such wonders as lie outside the bounds of common experience, according to the estimate of those for whom the stories were told. Besides some wonderful passages that still retain the visionary and fantastic charm of myth and mythical romance, there are others in which the wonders are more gross and nearer to common life. Such is the story of the hauntings at Froda, in *Eyrbyggja;* the drowned man and his companions coming home night after night and sitting in their wet clothes till daybreak; such is the ghastly story of the funeral of Viga-Styrr in *Heiðarvíga Saga.* Things of that sort are no exceptions to common experience, according to the Icelandic judgment, and do not stand out from the history as something different in kind; they do not belong to the same order as the dream-poetry of Gisli or the vision of Thidrandi.

The self-denial of the Icelandic authors in regard to myth and pure romance has secured for them, in exchange, everything that is essential to strong dramatic stories, independent of mythological or romantic attractions.

Some of the Sagas are a reduction of heroic fable to the temper and conditions of modern prose. *Laxdæla* is an heroic epic, rewritten as a prose history under the conditions of actual life, and without the help of any supernatural "machinery." It is a modern prose version of the Niblung tragedy, with the personages chosen from the life of Iceland in the heroic age, and from the Icelandic family traditions. It is not the only work that has reduced

the Niblung story to terms of matter of fact. The story of Sigurd and Brynhild has been presented as a drama by Ibsen in his *Warriors in Helgeland*, with the names changed, with new circumstances, and with nothing remaining of the mythical and legendary lights that play about the fortunes of Sigurd in the Northern poems. The play relies on the characters, without the mysteries of Odin and the Valkyria. An experiment of the same sort had been made long before. In *Laxdœla*, Kjartan stands for Sigurd: Gudrun daughter of Osvifr, wife of Bolli, is in the place of Brynhild, wife of Gunnar, driving her husband to avenge her on her old lover. That the authors of the Sagas were conscious at least in some cases of their relation to the poems is proved by affinities in the details of their language. In *Gísla*, Thordis, sister of Gisli, has to endure the same sorrow as the wife of Sigurd in the poems; her husband, like Sigurd, is killed by her brother. One of the verses put in the mouth of Gisli in the story contrasts her with Gudrun, daughter of Giuki, who killed her husband (Attila) to avenge her brothers; whereas Thordis was waking up the pursuers of her brother Gisli to avenge her husband. With this verse in his head, it is impossible that the writer of the Saga can have overlooked the resemblance which is no less striking than the contrast between the two cases.

The relation of the Sagas to the older poetry may be expressed in this way, perhaps, that they are the last stage in a progress from the earliest mythical

imagination, and the earliest dirges and encomiums of the great men of a tribe, to a consistent and orderly form of narrative literature, attained by the direction of a critical faculty which kept out absurdities, without impairing the dramatic energy of the story. The Sagas are the great victory of the Humanities in the North, at the end of a long process of education. The Northern nations, like others, had to come to an understanding with themselves about their inherited myths, their traditional literary forms. One age after another helped in different ways to modify their beliefs, to change their literary taste. Practically, they had to find out what they were to think of the gods; poetically, what they were to put into their songs and stories. With problems of this sort, when a beginning has once been made, anything is possible, and there is no one kind of success. Every nation that has ever come to anything has had to go to school in this way. None has ever been successful right through; while, on the other hand, success does not mean the attainment of any definite end. There is a success for every stage in the progress, and one nation or literature differs from another, not by reason of an ultimate victory or defeat, but in the number of prizes taken by the way.

As far as can be made out, the people of the Northern tongue got the better of the Western Teutons, in making far more than they out of the store of primeval fancies about the gods and the worlds, and in giving to their heroic poems both an intenser passion of expression and a more mysterious

grace and charm. The Western Teutons in their heroic poetry seem, on the other hand, to have been steadier and less flighty. They took earlier to the line of reasonable and dignified narrative, reducing the lyrical element, perhaps increasing the gnomic or reflective proportions of their work. So they succeeded in their own way, with whatever success belongs to *Beowulf*, *Waldere*, or *Byrhtnoth*, not to speak of the new essays they made with themes taken from the Church, in the poems of *Andreas*, *Judith*, and all the rest. Meanwhile the Northerners were having their own difficulties and getting over them, or out of them. They knew far more about the gods, and made poems about them. They had no patience, so that they could not dilute and expand their stories in the Western way. They saw no good in the leisurely methods; they must have everything emphatic, everything full of poetical meaning; hence no large poetry, but a number of short poems with no slackness in them. With these they had good reason to be content, as a good day's work in their day. But whatever advantage the fiery Northern poems may have over the slower verse of the Anglo-Saxons, they do not correspond to the same intellectual wants, and they leave out something which seems to have been attained in the Western poetry. The North had still to find out what could be done with simpler materials, and without the magical light of the companions of Sigrun. The Icelandic prose histories are the solution of this new problem, a problem which the English had already tried and

solved in their own manner in the quieter passages of their epic poetry, and, above all, in the severity of the poem of *Maldon*.

The Sagas are partly indebted to a spirit of negative criticism and restraint; a tendency not purely literary, corresponding, at any rate, to a similar tendency in practical life. The energy, the passion, the lamentation of the Northern poetry, the love of all the wonders of mythology, went along with practical and intellectual clearness of vision in matters that required cool judgment. The ironical correction of sentiment, the tone of the *advocatus diaboli*, is habitual with many of the Icelandic writers, and many of their heroes. "To see things as they really are," so that no incantation could transform them, was one of the gifts of an Icelandic hero,[1] and appears to have been shared by his countrymen when they set themselves to compose the Sagas.

The tone of the Sagas is generally kept as near as may be to that of the recital of true history. Nothing is allowed any preponderance over the story and the speeches in it. It is the kind of story furthest removed from the common pathetic fallacies of the Middle Ages. The rationalist mind has cleared away all the sentimental and most of the superstitious encumbrances and hindrances of strong narrative.

The history of the early Northern rationalism and its practical results is part of the general history of religion and politics. In some respects it may have been premature; in many cases it seems (as

[1] *Harðar Saga.*

might be expected) to have gone along with hardness and sterility of mind, and to have left an inheritance of vacuity behind it. The curious and elaborate hardness of the Icelandic Court poetry may possibly be a sign of this same temper; in another way, the prevalent coolness of Northern piety, even before the Reformation, is scarcely to be dissociated from the coolness of the last days of heathendom. The spirited acuteness of Snorri the Priest and his contemporaries was succeeded by a moderate and unenthusiastic fashion of religion, for the most part equally remote from the extravagances and the glories of the medieval Church. But with these things the Sagas have little to do; where they are in relation to this common rationalist habit of mind, it is all to their good. The Sagas are not injured by any scepticism or coolness in the minds of their authors. The positive habit of mind in the Icelanders is enough to secure them against a good deal of the conventional dulness of the Middle Ages. It made them dissatisfied with anything that seemed wanting in vividness or immediate force; it led them to select, in their histories, such things as were interesting in themselves, and to present them definitely, without any drawling commonplaces, or any makeshift rhetorical substitutes for accurate vision and clear record. It did not hinder, but it directed and concentrated the imagination. The self-repression in the Sagas is bracing. It gives greater clearness, greater resonance; it does not cut out or renounce anything that is really worth keeping.

If not the greatest charm of the Sagas, at any rate that which is perhaps most generally appreciated by modern readers is their economy of phrasing in the critical passages, the brevity with which the incidents and speeches are conveyed, the restriction of all commentary to the least available compass. Single phrases in the great scenes of the Sagas are full-charged with meaning to a degree hardly surpassed in any literature, certainly not in the literatures of medieval Europe. Half a dozen words will carry all the force of the tragedy of the Sagas, or render all the suspense and terror of their adventurous moments, with an effect that is like nothing so much as the effect of some of the short repressed phrases of Shakespeare in *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. The effect is attained not by study of the central phrase so much as by the right arrangement and selection of the antecedents; that is, by right proportion in the narrative. It is in this way that the killing of Gunnar's dog, in the attack on Lithend, is made the occasion for one of the great strokes of narrative. The words of Gunnar, when he is roused by the dog's howl—"Sore art thou handled, Sam, my fosterling, and maybe it is meant that there is not to be long between thy death and mine!"—are a perfect dramatic indication of everything the author wishes to express—the coolness of Gunnar, and his contempt for his enemies, as well as his pity for his dog. They set everything in tune for the story of Gunnar's death which follows. It is in this way that the adventures of the Sagas are raised above the common

form of mere reported "fightings and flockings," the common tedious story of raids and reprisals. This is one of the kinds of drama to be found in the Sagas, and not exclusively in the best of them. One of the conditions of this manner of composition and this device of phrasing is that the author shall be able to keep himself out of the story, and let things make their own impression. This is the result of the Icelandic habit of restraint. The intellectual coolness of the Sagas is a pride that keeps them from pathetic effusions; it does not impede the dramatic passion, it merely gives a lesson to the sensibilities and sympathies, to keep them out of the way when they are not wanted.

This is one notable difference of temper and rhetoric between the Sagas and the old English poems. One of the great beauties of the old English poetry is its understanding of the moods of lamentation—the mood of Ossian it might be called, without much error in the name. The transience and uncertainty of the world, the memory of past good fortune, and of things lost, with themes like these the Anglo-Saxon poets make some of their finest verse; and while this fashion of meditation may seem perhaps to have come too readily, it is not the worst poets who fall in with it. In the Icelandic poetry the notes of lamentation are not wanting, and it cannot be said that the Northern elegies are less sweet or less thrilling in their grief than those of England in the kindred forms of verse. It is enough to think of *Gudrun's Lament* in the "Elder Edda,"

or of *Sonatorrek*, Egil Skallagrimsson's elegy on the death of his two sons. It was not any congenital dulness or want of sense that made the Sagas generally averse to elegy. No mere writer of Sagas was made of stronger temper than Egil, and none of them need have been ashamed of lamentation after Egil had lamented. But they saw that it would not do, that the fabric of the Saga was not made for excessive decoration of any kind, and least of all for parenthesis of elegy. The English heroic poetry is more relenting. *Beowulf* is invaded by pathos in a way that often brings the old English verse very nearly to the tone of the great lament for Lancelot at the end of the *Morte d'Arthur;* which, no doubt, is justification enough for any lapse from the pure heroic. In the Sagas the sense of all the vanity of human wishes is expressed in a different way: the lament is turned into dramatic action; the author's sympathy is not shown in direct effusions, but in his rendering of the drama.[1] The best instance of this is the story of Howard of Icefirth.

Howard's son Olaf, a high-spirited and generous young man, comes under the spite of a domineering gentleman, all the more because he does some good offices of his own free will for this tyrannical person. Olaf is attacked and killed by the bully and his friends; then the story goes on to tell of the vengeance of his father and mother. The grief of

[1] The pathos of Asdis, Grettir's mother, comes nearest to the tone of the old English laments, or of the Northern elegiac poetry, and may be taken as a contrast to the demeanour of Bjargey in *Hávarðar Saga*, and an exception to the general rule of the Sagas in this respect.

the old man is described as a matter of fact; he was lame and feeble, and took to his bed for a long time after his son's death. Then he roused himself, and he and his wife went to look for help, and finally were able to bring down their enemy. In all this there is no reflexion or commentary by the author. The pathos is turned into narrative; it is conveyed by means of the form of the story, the relation of the incidents to one another. The passion of the old people turns into resolute action, and is revealed in the perseverance of Bjargey, Olaf's mother, tracking out her enemy and coming to her kinsmen to ask for help. She rows her boat round her enemy's ship and finds out his plans; then she goes to her brothers' houses, one after another, and "borrows" avengers for her son. The repression and irony of the Icelandic character are shown in the style of her address to her brothers. "I have come to borrow your nets," she says to one, and "I have come to borrow your turf-spade," to another; all which is interpreted aright by the brothers, who see what her meaning is. Then she goes home to her husband; and here comes in, not merely irony, but an intentional rebuke to sentiment. Her husband is lying helpless and moaning, and she asks him whether he has slept. To which he answers in a stave of the usual form in the Sagas, the purport of which is that he has never known sleep since the death of Olaf his son. "'Verily that is a great lie,' says she, 'that thou hast never slept once these three years. But now it is high time to be up and play the man,

if thou wilt have revenge for Olaf thy son; because never in thy days will he be avenged, if it be not this day.' And when he heard his wife's reproof he sprang out of bed on to the floor, and sang this other stave,"—of which the substance is still lamentation, but greatly modified in its effect by the action with which it is accompanied. Howard seems to throw off his age and feebleness as time goes on, and the height of his passion is marked by a note of his cheerfulness and gladness after he has killed his enemy. This is different from the method of *Beowulf*, where the grief of a father for his son is rendered in an elegy, with some beauty and some irrelevance, as if the charm of melancholy were too much for the story-teller.

The hardness of the Sagas is sometimes carried too far for the taste of some readers, and there is room for some misgiving that in places the Sagas have been affected by the contrary vice from that of effusive pathos, namely, by a pretence of courage and endurance. In some of the Northern poetry, as in *Ragnar's Death-Song*,[1] there may be detected the same kind of insincere and exaggerated heroism as in the modern romantic imitations of old Northern sentiment, now fortunately less common than in the great days of the Northern romantic movement at the beginning of this century. The old Northern poetry seems to have become at one stage too self-conscious of the literary effect of magnanimity, too quick to seize all the literary profit that was to be made out of the

[1] *Vide supra*, p. 162, and *infra*, p. 338.

conventional Viking. The Viking of the modern romantic poets has been the affliction of many in the last hundred years; none of his patrons seem to have guessed that he had been discovered, and possibly had begun to be a bore, at a time when the historical "Viking Age" had scarcely come to its close. There is little in the Icelandic Sagas to show any affinity with his forced and ostentatious bravery; but it may be suspected that here and there the Sagas have made some use of the theatrical Viking, and have thrown their lights too strongly on their death scenes. Some of the most impressive passages of the Sagas are those in which a man receives a death-wound with a light remark, and dies forthwith, like Atli in the story of Grettir, who was thrust through as he stood at his door, and said, "Those broad spears are in fashion now," as he went down. This scene is one of the best of its kind; there is no fault to be found with it. But there are possibly too many scenes and speeches of the same sort; enough to raise the suspicion that the situation and the form of phrase were becoming a conventional device, like some of the "machines" in the secondary Sagas, and in the too-much-edited parts of the better ones. This suspicion is not one that need be scouted or choked off. The worser parts and baser parts of the literature are to be detected by any means and all means. It is well in criticism, however, to supplement this amputating practice by some regard for the valid substances that have no need of it, and in this present case to look away from the scenes where there is suspicion of

journey work and mechanical processes to the masterpieces that set the standard; more especially to the story of the burning of Njal, which more than any other is full of the peculiar strength and quality of the Sagas.

The beauty of *Njála*, and especially of the chapters about Njal's death, is the result of a harmony between two extremes of sentiment, each of which by itself was dangerous, and both of which have here been brought to terms with each other and with the whole design of the work. The ugliness of Skarphedinn's demeanour might have turned out to be as excessive as the brutalities of *Svarfdæla* or *Ljósvetninga Saga;* the gentleness of Njal has some affinities with the gentleness of the martyrs. Some few passages have distinctly the homiletic or legendary tone about them :—

> Then Flosi and his men made a great pile before each of the doors, and then the women-folk who were inside began to weep and to wail.
>
> Njal spoke to them, and said: "Keep up your hearts, nor utter shrieks, for this is but a passing storm, and it will be long before you have another such; and put your faith in God, and believe that He is so merciful that He will not let us burn both in this world and the next."
>
> Such words of comfort had he for them all, and others still more strong (c. 128, Dasent's translation).

It is easy to see in what school the style of this was learned, and of this other passage, about Njal after his death :—

> Then Hjallti said, "I shall speak what I say with all freedom of speech. The body of Bergthora looks as it was

likely she would look, and still fair; but Njal's body and visage seem to me so bright that I have never seen any dead man's body so bright as this" (c. 131).

At the other extreme are the heathenish manners of Skarphedinn, who, in the scene at the Althing, uses all the bad language of the old "flytings" in the heroic poetry,[1] who "grins" at the attempts to make peace, who might easily, by a little exaggeration and change of emphasis, have been turned into one of the types of the false heroic.

Something like this has happened to Egil, in another Saga, through want of balance, want of comprehensive imagination in the author. In *Njála*, where no element is left to itself, the picture is complete and full of variety. The prevailing tone is neither that of the homily nor that of the robustious Viking; it is the tone of a narrative that has command of itself and its subject, and can play securely with everything that comes within its scope.

In the death of Njal the author's imagination has found room for everything,—for the severity and the nobility of the old Northern life, for the gentleness of the new religion, for the irony in which the temper of Skarphedinn is made to complement and illustrate the temper of Njal.

Then Flosi went to the door and called out to Njal, and said he would speak with him and Bergthora.

Now Njal does so, and Flosi said: "I will offer thee, master Njal, leave to go out, for it is unworthy that thou shouldst burn indoors."

[1] Pp. 111 130, above.

"I will not go out," said Njal, "for I am an old man, and little fitted to avenge my sons, but I will not live in shame."

Then Flosi said to Bergthora: "Come thou out, housewife, for I will for no sake burn thee indoors."

"I was given away to Njal young," said Bergthora, "and I have promised him this, that we should both share the same fate."

After that they both went back into the house.

"What counsel shall we now take?" said Bergthora.

"We will go to our bed," says Njal, "and lay us down; I have long been eager for rest."

Then she said to the boy Thord, Kari's son: "Thee will I take out, and thou shalt not burn in here."

"Thou hast promised me this, grandmother," says the boy, "that we should never part so long as I wished to be with thee; but methinks it is much better to die with thee and Njal than to live after you."

Then she bore the boy to her bed, and Njal spoke to his steward and said:—

"Now shalt thou see where we lay us down, and how I lay us out, for I mean not to stir an inch hence, whether reek or burning smart me, and so thou wilt be able to guess where to look for our bones."

He said he would do so.

There had been an ox slaughtered, and the hide lay there. Njal told the steward to spread the hide over them, and he did so.

So there they lay down both of them in their bed, and put the boy between them. Then they signed themselves and the boy with the cross, and gave over their souls into God's hand, and that was the last word that men heard them utter.

Then the steward took the hide and spread it over them, and went out afterwards. Kettle of the Mark caught hold of him and dragged him out; he asked carefully after his father-in-law Njal, but the steward told him the whole truth. Then Kettle said:—

"Great grief hath been sent on us, when we have had to share such ill-luck together."

Skarphedinn saw how his father laid him down and how he laid himself out, and then he said:—

"Our father goes early to bed, and that is what was to be looked for, for he is an old man."

The harmonies of *Laxdœla* are somewhat different from those of the history of Njal, but here again the elements of grace and strength, of gentleness and terror, are combined in a variety of ways, and in such a way as to leave no preponderance to any one exclusively. Sometimes the story may seem to fall into the exemplary vein of the "antique poet historicall"; sometimes the portrait of Kjartan may look as if it were designed, like the portrait of Amadis or Tirant the White, "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline." Sometimes the story is involved in the ordinary business of Icelandic life, and Kjartan and Bolli, the Sigurd and Gunnar of the tragedy, are seen engaged in common affairs, such as make the alloy of heroic narrative in the *Odyssey*. The hero is put to the proof in this way, and made to adapt himself to various circumstances. Sometimes the story touches on the barbarism and cruelty, which were part of the reality familiar to the whole of Iceland in the age of the Sturlungs, of which there is more in the authentic history of the Sturlungs than in the freer and more imaginative story of Kjartan. At one time the story uses the broad and fluent form of narrative, leaving scene after scene to speak for itself; at other times it allows itself to be condensed into a significant phrase. Of these emphatic phrases there are two especially, both of them

speeches of Gudrun, and the one is the complement of the other: the one in the tone of irony, Gudrun's comment on the death of Kjartan, a repetition of Brynhild's phrase on the death of Sigurd;[1] the other Gudrun's confession to her son at the end of the whole matter.

Gudrun meets her husband coming back, and says: "A good day's work and a notable; I have spun twelve ells of yarn, and you have slain Kjartan, Olaf's son."

Bolli answers: "That mischance would abide with me, without thy speaking of it."

Said Gudrun: "I reckon not that among mischances; it seemed to me thou hadst greater renown that winter Kjartan was in Norway, than when he came back to Iceland and trampled thee under foot. But the last is best, that Hrefna will not go laughing to bed this night."

Then said Bolli in great wrath: "I know not whether she will look paler at this news than thou, and I doubt thou mightest have taken it no worse if we had been left lying where we fought, and Kjartan had come to tell of it."

Gudrun saw that Bolli was angry, and said: "Nay, no need of words like these; for this work I thank thee; there is an earnest in it that thou wilt not thwart me after."

This is one of the crises of the story, in which the meaning of Gudrun is brought out in a short passage of dialogue, at the close of a section of narrative full of adventure and incident. In all that precedes, in the relations of Gudrun to Kjartan before and after her marriage with Bolli, as after the marriage of Kjartan and Hrefna, the motives are generally left to be inferred from the events and

[1] Then Brynhild laughed till the walls rang again: "Good luck to your hands and swords that have felled the goodly prince" (*Brot Sgkv.* 10; cf. p. 119 above).

actions. Here it was time that Gudrun should speak her mind, or at least the half of her mind.

Her speech at the end of her life is equally required, and the two speeches are the complement of one another. Bolli her son comes to see her and sits with her.

The story tells that one day Bolli came to Helgafell; for Gudrun was always glad when he came to see her. Bolli sat long with his mother, and there was much talk between them. At last Bolli said: "Mother, will you tell me one thing? It has been in my mind to ask you, who was the man you loved best?"

Gudrun answers: "Thorkell was a great man and a lordly; and no man was goodlier than Bolli, nor of gentler breeding; Thord Ingwin's son was the most discreet of them all, a wise man in the law. Of Thorvald I make no reckoning."

Then says Bolli: "All this is clear, all the condition of your husbands as you have told; but it has not yet been told whom you loved best. You must not keep it secret from me longer."

Gudrun answers: "You put me hard to it, my son; but if I am to tell any one, I will rather tell you than another."

Bolli besought her again to tell him. Then said Gudrun: "I did the worst to him, the man that I loved the most."

"Now may we believe," says Bolli, "that there is no more to say."

He said that she had done right in telling him what he asked.

Gudrun became an old woman, and it is said that she lost her sight. She died at Helgafell, and there she rests.

This is one of the passages which it is easy to quote, and also dangerous. The confession of Gudrun loses incalculably when detached from the whole story, as also her earlier answer fails, by itself, to represent the meaning and the art of the

Saga. They are the two keys that the author has given; neither is of any use by itself, and both together are of service only in relation to the whole story and all its fabric of incident and situation and changing views of life.

V

COMEDY

THE Poetical Justice of Tragedy is observed, and rightly observed, in many of the Sagas and in the greater plots. Fate and Retribution preside over the stories of Njal and his sons, and the *Lovers of Gudrun*. The story of Gisli works itself out in accordance with the original forebodings, yet without any illicit process in the logic of acts and motives, or any intervention of the mysterious powers who accompany the life of Gisli in his dreams. Even in less self-consistent stories the same ideas have a part; the story of Gudmund the Mighty, which is a series of separate chapters, is brought to an end in the Nemesis for Gudmund's injustice to Thorkell Hake. But the Sagas claim exemption from the laws of Tragedy, when poetical Justice threatens to become tyrannical. Partly by the nature of their origin, no doubt, and their initial dependence on historical recollections of actual events,[1] they are driven to include a number of things that might disappoint a well-educated gallery of spectators; the drama is

[1] *Vide supra*, p. 221 (the want of tragedy in *Viga-Glúms Saga*).

not always worked out, or it may be that the meaning of a chapter or episode lies precisely in the disappointment of conventional expectations.

There is only one comedy, or at most two, among the Sagas—the story of the Confederates (*Bandamanna Saga*) with an afterpiece, the short story of Alecap (*Ölkofra þáttr*). The composition of the Sagas, however, admits all sorts of comic passages and undignified characters, and it also quietly unravels many complications that seem to be working up for a tragic ending. The dissipation of the storm before it breaks is, indeed, so common an event that it almost becomes itself a convention of narrative in the Sagas, by opposition to the common devices of the feud and vengeance. There is a good instance of this paradoxical conclusion in *Arons Saga* (c. 12), an authentic biography, apparently narrating an actual event. The third chapter of *Glúma* gives another instance of threatened trouble passing away. Ivar, a Norwegian with a strong hatred of Icelanders, seems likely to quarrel with Eyolf, Glum's father, but being a gentleman is won over by Eyolf's bearing. This is a part of the Saga where one need not expect to meet with any authentic historical tradition. The story of Eyolf in Norway is probably mere literature, and shows the working of the common principles of the Saga, as applied by an author of fiction. The sojourn of Grettir with the two foster-brothers is another instance of a dangerous situation going off without result. The whole action of *Vápnfirðinga Saga* is wound up in a reconciliation,

which is a sufficient close; but, on the other hand, the story of Glum ends in a mere exhaustion of the rivalries, a drawn game. One of the later more authentic histories, the story of Thorgils and Haflidi, dealing with the matters of the twelfth century and not with the days of Gunnar, Njal, and Snorri the Priest, is a story of rivalry passing away, and may help to show how the composers of the Sagas were influenced by their knowledge and observation of things near their own time in their treatment of matters of tradition.

Even more striking than this evasion of the conventional plot of the blood-feud, is the freedom and variety in respect of the minor characters, particularly shown in the way they are made to perplex the simple-minded spectator. To say that all the characters in the Sagas escape from the limitations of mere typical humours might be to say too much; but it is obvious that simple types are little in favour, and that the Icelandic authors had all of them some conception of the ticklish and dangerous variability of human dispositions, and knew that hardly any one was to be trusted to come up to his looks, for good or evil. Popular imagination has everywhere got at something of this sort in its views of the lubberly younger brother, the ash-raker and idler who carries off the princess. Many of the heroes of the Sagas are noted to have been slow in their growth and unpromising, like Glum, but there are many more cases of change of disposition in the Sagas than can be summed up under this old formula. There are stories of the quiet

man roused to action, like Thorarin in *Eyrbyggja*, where it is plain that the quietness was strength from the first. A different kind of courage is shown by Atli, the poor-spirited prosperous man in *Hávarðar Saga*, who went into hiding to escape being dragged into the family troubles, but took heart and played the man later on. One of the most effective pieces of comedy in the Sagas is the description of his ill-temper when he is found out, and his gradual improvement. He comes from his den half-frozen, with his teeth chattering, and nothing but bad words for his wife and her inconvenient brother who wants his help. His wife puts him to bed, and he comes to think better of himself and the world; the change of his mind being represented in the unobtrusive manner which the Sagas employ in their larger scenes.

One of the most humorous and effective contradictions of the popular judgment is that episode in *Njála*, where Kari has to trust to the talkative person whose wife has a low opinion of him. It begins like farce: any one can see that Bjorn has all the manners of the swaggering captain; his wife is a shrew and does not take him at his own valuation. The comedy of Bjorn is that he proves to be something different both from his own Bjorn and his wife's Bjorn. He is the idealist of his own heroism, and believes in himself as a hero. His wife knows better; but the beauty of it all is that his wife is wrong. His courage, it is true, is not quite certain, but he stands his ground; there is a small particle of a hero in him, enough to save him. His backing of Kari in the fight is what many have

longed to see, who have found little comfort in the discomfiture of Bobadil and Parolles, and who will stand to it that the chronicler has done less than justice to Sir John Falstaff both at Gadshill and Shrewsbury. Never before Bjorn of *Njála* was there seen on any theatre the person of the comfortable optimist, with a soul apparently damned from the first to a comic exposure and disgrace, but escaping this because his soul has just enough virtue to keep him steady. The ordeal of Bjorn contains more of the comic spirit than all the host of stage cowards from Pyrgopolinices to Bob Acres, precisely because it introduces something more than the simple humour, an essence more spiritual and capricious.

Further, the partnership of Kari and Bjorn, and Kari's appreciation of his idealist companion, go a long way to save Kari from a too exclusive and limited devotion to the purpose of vengeance. There is much to be said on behalf of this Bjorn. His relations with Kari prevent the hero of the latter part of the book from turning into a mere hero. The humorous character of the squire brings out something new in the character of the knight, a humorous response; all which goes to increase the variety of the story, and to widen the difference between this story and all the monotonous and abstract stories of chivalrous adventures.

The Sagas have comedy in them, comic incidents and characters, because they have no notion of the dignity of abstract and limited heroics; because they cannot understand the life of Iceland otherwise than

in full, with all its elements together. The one intentionally comic history, *Bandamanna Saga*, "The Confederates," which is exceptional in tone and plot, is a piece of work in which what may be called the form or spirit or idea of the heroic Saga is brought fully within one's comprehension by means of contrast and parody. *Bandamanna Saga* is a complete work, successful in every detail; as an artistic piece of composition it will stand comparison with any of the Sagas. But it is comedy, not tragedy; it is a mock-heroic, following the lines of the heroic model, consistently and steadily, and serving as a touchstone for the vanity of the heroic age. It is worth study, for Comedy is later and therefore it would seem more difficult than Tragedy, and this is the first reasonable and modern comedy in the history of modern Europe. Further, the method of narrative, and everything in it except the irony, belong to all the Sagas in common; there is nothing particularly new or exceptional in the style or the arrangement of the scenes; it is not so much a parody or a mock-heroic, as an heroic work inspired with comic irony. It is not a new kind of Saga, it is the old Saga itself put to the ordeal by the Comic Muse, and proving its temper under the severest of all strains.

This is the story of the Confederates.—There was a man named Ufeig who lived in Midfirth, a free-handed man, not rich, who had a son named Odd. The father and son disagreed, and Odd, the son, went off to make his own fortune, and made it, without taking any further notice of his father. The two men are

contrasted; Ufeig being an unsuccessful man and a humorist, too generous and too careless to get on in the world, while Odd, his son, is born to be a prosperous man. The main plot of the story is the reconciliation of the respectable son and the prodigal father, which is brought about in the most perfect and admirable manner.

Odd got into trouble. He had a lawsuit against Uspak, a violent person whom he had formerly trusted, who had presumed too much, had been disgraced, and finally had killed the best friend of Odd in one of the ways usual in such business in the Sagas. In the course of the lawsuit a slight difficulty arose—one of Odd's jurymen died, and another had to be called in his place. This was informal, but no one at first made anything of it; till it occurred to a certain great man that Odd was becoming too strong and prosperous, and that it was time to put him down. Whereupon he went about and talked to another great man, and half persuaded him that this view was the right one; and then felt himself strong enough to step in and break down the prosecution by raising the point about the formation of the jury. Odd went out of the court without a word as soon as the challenge was made.

While he was thinking it over, and not making much of it, there appeared an old, bent, ragged man, with a flapping hat and a pikestaff; this was Ufeig, his father, to whom he had never spoken since he left his house. Ufeig now is the principal personage

in the story. He asks his son about the case and pretends to be surprised at his failure. "Impossible! it is not like a gentleman to try to take in an old man like me; how could you be beaten?" Finally, after Odd has been made to go over all the several points of his humiliation, he is reduced to trust the whole thing to his father, who goes away with the comforting remark that Odd, by leaving the court when he did, before the case was finished, had made one good move in the game, though he did not know it. Ufeig gets a purse full of money from his son; goes back to the court, where (as the case is not yet closed) he makes an eloquent speech on the iniquity of such a plea as has been raised. "To let a man-slayer escape, gentlemen! where are your oaths that you swore? Will you prefer a paltry legal quibble to the plain open justice of the case?" and so on, impressively and emotionally, in the name of Equity, while all the time (equity + x) he plays with the purse under his cloak, and gets the eyes of the judges fixed upon it. Late in the day, Odd is brought back to hear the close of the case, and Uspak is outlawed.

Then the jealousy of the great men comes to a head, and a compact is formed among eight of them to make an end of Odd's brand-new prosperity. These eight are the Confederates from whom the Saga is named, and the story is the story of Ufeig's ingenuity and malice as applied to these noble Pillars of Society. To tell it rightly would be to repeat the Saga. The skill with which the humorist plays

upon the strongest motives, and gets the conspirators to betray one another, is not less beautifully represented than the spite which the humorist provokes among the subjects of his experiments. The details are finished to the utmost; most curiously and subtly in some of the indications of character and disposition in the eight persons of quality. The details, however, are only the last perfection of a work which is organic from the beginning. Ufeig, the humorist, is the servant and deputy of the Comic Muse, and there can be no doubt of the validity of his credentials, or of the soundness of his procedure. He is the ironical critic and censor of the heroic age; his touch is infallible, as unerring as that of Figaro, in bringing out and making ridiculous the meanness of the nobility. The decline and fall of the noble houses is recorded in *Sturlunga Saga;* the essence of that history is preserved in the comedy of the *Banded Men.*

But, however the material of the heroic age may be handled in this comedy, the form of heroic narrative comes out unscathed. There is nothing for the comic spirit to fix upon in the form of the Sagas. The Icelandic heroes may be vulnerable, but Comedy cannot take advantage of them except by using the general form of heroic narrative in Iceland, a form which proves itself equally capable of Tragedy and Comedy. And as the more serious Icelandic histories are comprehensive and varied, so also is this comic history. It is not an artificial comedy, nor a comedy of humours, nor a purely satirical comedy. It is no

more exclusive or abstract in its contents than *Njála*; its strict observance of limit and order is not the same thing as monotony; its unity of action is consistent with diversities of motive. Along with, and inseparable from, the satirical criticism of the great world, as represented by the eight discomfited noble Confederates, there is the even more satisfactory plot of the Nemesis of Respectability in the case of Odd; while the successful malice and craft of Ufeig are inseparable from the humanity, the constancy, and the imaginative strength, which make him come out to help his prosaic son, and enable him, the bent and thriftless old man, to see all round the frontiers of his son's well-defined and uninteresting character. Also the variety of the Saga appears in the variety of incident, and that although the story is a short one. As the solemn histories admit of comic passages, so conversely this comic history touches upon the tragic. The death of Vali, slain by Uspak, is of a piece with the most heroic scenes in Icelandic literature. Vali the friend of Odd goes along with him to get satisfaction out of Uspak the mischief-maker. Vali is all for peace; he is killed through his good nature, and before his death forgives and helps his assailant.

And when with the spring the days of summons came on, Odd rode out with twenty men, till he came near by the garth of Svalastead. Then said Vali to Odd: "Now you shall stop here, and I will ride on and see Uspak, and find out if he will agree to settle the case now without more ado." So they stopped, and Vali went up to the house. There was no one outside; the doors were open and Vali went in. It was dark within, and suddenly there leapt a man out of the side-room and

struck between the shoulders of Vali, so that he fell on the spot. Said Vali: "Look out for yourself, poor wretch! for Odd is coming, hard by, and means to have your life. Send your wife to him; let her say that we have made it up, and you have agreed to everything, and that I have gone on about my own gear down the valley!" Then said Uspak: "This is an ill piece of work; this was meant for Odd and not for you."

This short heroic scene in the comedy has an effect corresponding to that of the comic humours in the Icelandic tragedies; it redresses the balance, it qualifies and diversifies what would otherwise be monotonous. Simple and clear in outline as the best of the short Icelandic stories are, they are not satisfied unless they have introduced something, if only a suggestion, of worlds different from their own immediate interests, a touch to show where their proper story branches out into the history of other characters and fortunes. This same story of the Confederates is wound up at the end, after the reconciliation of the father and son, by a return to the adventures of Uspak and to the subordinate tragic element in the comedy. The poetical justice of the story leaves Uspak, the slayer of Vali, dead in a cave of the hills; found there, alone, by shepherds going their autumn rounds.

VI

THE ART OF NARRATIVE

THE art of the Sagas will bear to be tested in every way: not that every Saga or every part of one is flawless, far from it; but they all have, though in different measure, the essentials of the fine art of story-telling. Except analysis, it is hardly possible to require a story from anything which will not be found supplied in some form or other in the Sagas. The best of them have that sort of unity which can hardly be described, except as a unity of life—the organic unity that is felt in every particular detail. It is absurd to take separately the details of a great work like *Njála*, or of less magnificent but not less perfect achievements such as the story of Hrafnkel. There is no story in the world that can surpass the *Bandamanna Saga* in the liveliness with which each particular reveals itself as a moment in the whole story, inseparable from the whole, and yet in its own proper space appearing to resume and absorb the life of the whole. Where the work is elaborated in this way, where every particular is organic, it is not possible to do much by way of illustration, or to

exhibit piecemeal what only exists as a complete thing, and can only be understood as such. It is of some importance in the history of literature that the rank and general character of these Icelandic works should be asserted and understood. It would be equally laborious and superfluous to follow each of them with an exposition of the value of each stroke in the work. There are difficulties enough in the language, and in the history, without any multiplication of commentaries on the obvious; and there is little in the art of the Sagas that is of doubtful import, however great may be the lasting miracle that such things, of such excellence, should have been written there and then.

There is one general quality or characteristic of the Sagas which has not yet been noticed, one which admits of explanation and illustration, while it represents very well the prevailing mode of imagination in the Sagas. The imaginative life of the Sagas (in the best of them) is intensely strong at each critical point of the story, with the result that all abstract, makeshift explanations are driven out; the light is too strong for them, and the events are made to appear in the order of their appearance, with their meaning gradually coming out as the tale rolls on. No imagination has ever been so consistently intolerant of anything that might betray the author's knowledge before the author's chosen time. That everything should present itself first of all as appearance, before it becomes appearance with a meaning, is a common rule of all good story-telling; but no

historians have followed this rule with so complete and sound an instinct as the authors of the Sagas. No medieval writers, and few of the modern, have understood the point of view as well as the authors of the story of Njal or of Kjartan. The reserve of the narrator in the most exciting passages of the Sagas is not dulness or want of sensibility; it is a consistent mode of procedure, to allow things to make their own impression; and the result is attained by following the order of impressions in the mind of one of the actors, or of a looker-on. "To see things as they are" is an equivocal formula, which may be claimed as their own privilege by many schools and many different degrees of intelligence. "To see things as they become," the rule of Lessing's *Laocoon*, has not found so many adherents, but it is more certain in meaning, and more pertinent to the art of narrative. It is a fair description of the aim of the Icelandic authors and of their peculiar gift. The story for them is not a thing finished and done with; it is a series of pictures rising in the mind, succeeding, displacing, and correcting one another; all under the control of a steady imagination, which will not be hurried, and will not tell the bearing of things till the right time comes. The vivid effect of the Saga, if it be studied at all closely, will be found to be due to this steadiness of imagination which gives first the blurred and inaccurate impression, the possibility of danger, the matter for surmises and suspicions, and then the clearing up. Stated generally in this way, the rule is an elementary one, but

it is followed in the Sagas with a singular consistency and success, and with something more than a compulsory obedience. That both the narrators and their audience in that country had their whole lives filled with momentous problems in the interpretation of appearances may well be understood. To identify a band of riders in the distance, or a single man seen hurrying on the other side of the valley, was a problem which might be a matter of life or death any day; but so it has been in many places where there is nothing like the narrative art of Iceland. The Icelandic historian is like no other in putting into his work the thrill of suspense at something indistinctly seen going on in the distance—a crowd of men moving, not known whether friends or enemies. So it was in *Thorgils Saga* (one of the later more authentic histories, of the Sturlung cycle), when Thorgils and his men came down to the Althing, and Bard and Aron were sent on ahead to find out if the way was clear from the northern passes across the plain of the Thing. Bard and Aron, as they came down past Armannsfell, saw a number of horses and men on the plain below just where Haflidi, the enemy, might have been expected to block the way. They left some of their band to wait behind while they themselves went on. From that point a chapter and more is taken up with the confused impression and report brought back by the scouts to the main body. They saw Bard and Aron ride on to the other people, and saw the others get up to meet them, carrying weapons; and then Bard and Aron went out

of sight in the crowd, but the bearers of the report had no doubt that they were prisoners. And further, they thought they made out a well-known horse, Dapplecheek, and a gold-mounted spear among the strangers, both of which had belonged to Thorgils, and had been given away by him to one of his friends. From which it is inferred that his friend has been robbed of the horse and the spear.

The use of all this, which turns out to be all made up of true eyesight and wrong judgment, is partly to bring out Thorgils; for his decision, against the wish of his companions, is to ride on in any event, so that the author gets a chapter of courage out of the mistake. Apart from that, there is something curiously spirited and attractive in the placing of the different views, with the near view last of all. In the play between them, between the apprehension of danger, the first report of an enemy in the way, the appearance of an indistinct crowd, the false inference, and the final truth of the matter, the Saga is faithful to its vital principle of variety and comprehensiveness; no one appearance, not even the truest, must be allowed too much room to itself.

This indirect description is really the most vivid of all narrative forms, because it gives the point of view that is wanting in an ordinary continuous history. It brings down the story-teller from his abstract and discursive freedom, and makes him limit himself to one thing at a time, with the greatest advantage to himself and all the rest of his story. In that way the important things of the story may

be made to come with the stroke and flash of present reality, instead of being prosed away by the historian and his good grammar.

There is a very remarkable instance of the use of this method in the Book of Kings. Of Jehoram, son of Ahab, king of Israel, it is told formally that "he wrought evil in the sight of the Lord," with the qualification that his evil was not like that of Ahab and Jezebel. This is impressive in its formal and summary way. It is quite another mode of narrative, and it is one in which the spectator is introduced to vouch for the matter, that presents the king of Israel, once for all, in a sublime and tragic protest against the sentence of the historian himself, among the horrors of the famine of Samaria.

So we boiled my son and did eat him: and I said unto her on the next day, Give thy son that we may eat him, and she hath hid her son.

And it came to pass when the king heard the words of the woman, that he rent his clothes; and he passed by upon the wall, and the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth within upon his flesh.

No more than this is told of the unavailing penance of Jehoram the son of Ahab. There is no preparation; all the tragedy lies in this notice of something casually seen, and left without a commentary, for any one to make his own story about, if he chooses. There is perhaps nothing anywhere in narrative quite so sudden as this. The Northern writers, however, carry out consistently the same kind of principles, putting their facts or impressions forward in a right order and leaving them to take care of themselves; while in the

presentation of events the spectator within the story has a good deal given him to do. Naturally, where the author does not make use of analysis and where he trusts to the reader's intellect to interpret things aright, the "facts" must be fairly given; in a lucid order, with a progressive clearness, from the point of view of those who are engaged in the action.

There is another and somewhat different function of the spectator in the Sagas. In some cases, where there is no problem, where the action is straightforward, the spectator and his evidence are introduced merely to give breadth and freedom to the presentment, to get a foreground for the scene. This is effected best of all, as it happens, in a passage that called for nothing less than the best of the author's power and wit; namely, the chapter of the death of Kjartan in *Laxdæla*.

And with this talk of Gudrun, Bolli was made to magnify his ill-will and his grievance against Kjartan; and took his weapons and went along with the others. They were nine altogether; five sons of Osvifr, that is to say Ospak and Helgi, Vandrad, Torrad, and Thorolf; Bolli was the sixth, Gunnlaug the seventh, sister's son of Osvifr, a comely man; the other two were Odd and Stein, sons of Thorhalla the talkative. They rode to Svinadal and stopped at the gully called Hafragil; there they tied their horses and sat down. Bolli was silent all the day, and laid him down at the edge of the gully, above.

Kjartan and his companions had come south over the pass, and the dale was opening out, when Kjartan said that it was time for Thorkell and his brother to turn back. Thorkell said they would ride with him to the foot of the dale. And when they were come south as far as the bothies called the North Sheilings, Kjartan said to the brothers that they were not to ride further.

"Thorolf, the thief, shall not have this to laugh at, that I was afraid to ride on my way without a host of men."

Thorkell Whelp makes answer: "We will give in to you and ride no further; but sorry shall we be if we are not there and you are in want of men this day."

Then said Kjartan: "Bolli my kinsman will not try to have my life, and for the sons of Osvifr, if they lie in wait for me, it remains to be seen which of us shall tell the tale afterwards, for all that there may be odds against me."

After that the brothers and their men rode west again.

Now Kjartan rides southward down the valley, he and the two others, An the Swart and Thorarinn. At Hafratindr in Svinadal lived a man called Thorkell. There is no house there now. He had gone to look after his horses that day, and his shepherd along with him. They had a view of both companies; the sons of Osvifr lying in wait, and Kjartan's band of three coming down along the dale. Then said the herd lad that they should go and meet Kjartan; it would be great luck if they could clear away the mischief that was waiting for them.

"Hold your tongue," said Thorkell; "does the fool think he can give life to a man when his doom is set? It is but little I grudge them their good pleasure, though they choose to hurt one another to their hearts' content. No! but you and I, we will get to a place where there will be no risk, where we can see all their meeting and have good sport out of their play. They all say that Kjartan has more fighting in him than any man; maybe he will need it all, for you and I can see that the odds are something."

And so it had to be as Thorkell wished.

The tragic encounter that follows, the last meeting of the two friends, Kjartan throwing away his weapons when he sees Bolli coming against him, Bolli's repentance when he has killed his friend, when he sits with his knee under Kjartan's head,—all this is told as well as may be; it is one of the finest passages in all the Sagas. But even this passage has something to gain from the episode of the churl and his more generous servant who looked on at the fight. The scene opens out; the spaces of the valley are shown

as they appear to a looker-on; the story, just before the critical moment, takes us aside from the two rival bands and gives us the relation between them, the gradually-increasing danger as the hero and his companions come down out of the distance and nearer to the ambush.

In this piece of composition, also, there goes along with the pictorial vividness of the right point of view a further advantage to the narrative in the character of the spectator. Two of the most notable peculiarities of the Icelandic workmanship are thus brought together,—the habit of presenting actions and events as they happen, from the point of view of an immediate witness; and the habit of correcting the heroic ideal by the ironical suggestion of the other side. Nothing is so deeply and essentially part of the nature of the Icelandic story, as its inability to give a limited or abstract rendering of life. It is from this glorious incapacity that there are derived both the habit of looking at events as appearances, before they are interpreted, and the habit of checking heroics by means of unheroic details, or, as here, by a suggestion of the way it strikes a vulgar contemporary. Without this average man and his commentary the story of the death of Kjartan would lose much. There is first of all the comic value of the meanness and envy in the mind of the boor, his complacency at the quarrels and mutual destruction of the magnificent people. His intrusion on the scene, his judgment of the situation, is proof of the variety of the life from which the Saga is drawn.

More than that, there is here a rather cruel test of the heroics of *Laxdæla*, of the story itself; the notable thing about this spectator and critic is that his boorish judgment is partly right, as the judgment of Thersites is partly right—"too much blood and too little brains." He is vulgar common sense in the presence of heroism. In his own way a critic of the heroic ideals, his appearance in Svinadal as a negative and depreciatory chorus in the tragedy of Kjartan is a touch of something like the mood of *Bandamanna Saga* in its criticism of the nobles and their rivalries; although the author of *Laxdæla* is careful not to let this dangerous spirit penetrate too far. It is only enough to increase the sense of the tragic vanity of human wishes in the life and death of Kjartan Olafsson.

Everything in the Sagas tends to the same end; the preservation of the balance and completeness of the history, as far as it goes; the impartiality of the record. The different sides are not represented as fully as in *Clarissa Harlowe* or *The Ring and the Book*, but they are allowed their chance, according to the rules, which are not those of analytical psychology. The Icelandic imagination is content if the character is briefly indicated in a few dramatic speeches. The brevity and externality of the Saga method might easily provoke from admirers of Richardson a condemnation like that of Dr. Johnson on those who know the dial-plate only and not the works. The psychology of the Sagas, however, brief and superficial as it may be, is yet of the sort that

may be tested; the dials keep time, though the works are not exposed. It may be doubtful at any moment how Skarphedinn will act, but when his history is in progress, and when it is finished, the reader knows that Skarphedinn is rightly rendered, and furthermore that it is impossible to deal with him except as an individual character, impressing the mind through a variety of qualities and circumstances that are inexplicably consistent. It is impossible to take his character to pieces. The rendering is in one sense superficial, and open to the censures of the moralist —"from without inwards"—like the characters of Scott. But as in this latter case, the superficiality and slightness of the work are deceptive. The character is given in a few strokes and without elaboration, but it is given inevitably and indescribably; the various appearances of Skarphedinn, different at different times, are all consistent with one another in the unity of imagination, and have no need of psychological analysis to explain them.

The characters in the best of the Sagas grow upon the mind with each successive appearance, until they are known and recognised at a hint. In some cases it looks almost as if the author's dramatic imagination were stronger and more just than his deliberate moral opinions; as if his characters had taken the matter into their own hands, against his will. Or is it art, and art of the subtlest order, which in Kjartan Olafsson, the glorious hero, still leaves something of lightness, of fickleness, as compared both with the intensity of the passion of Gudrun and the dogged

resolution of Bolli? There is another Saga in which a hero of the likeness of Kjartan is contrasted with a dark, malevolent, not ignoble figure,—the story of the Faroes, of Sigmund Brestisson and Thrond of Gata. There, at the end of the story, when Thrond of Gata has taken vengeance for the murder of his old enemy, it is not Sigmund, the glorious champion of King Olaf, who is most thought of, but Thrond the dark old man, his opponent and avenger. The character of Thrond is too strong to be suppressed, and breaks through the praise and blame of the chronicler, as, in another history, the character of Saul asserts itself against the party of David. The charge of superficiality or externality falls away to nothing in the mind of any one who knows by what slight touches of imagination a character may be brought home to an audience, if the character is there to begin with. It is not by elaborate, continuous analysis, but by a gesture here and a sentence there, that characters are expressed. The Sagas give the look of things and persons at the critical moments, getting as close as they can, by all devices, to the vividness of things as they appear, as they happen; brief and reserved in their phrasing, but the reverse of abstract or limited in their regard for the different modes and aspects of life, impartial in their acknowledgment of the claims of individual character, and unhesitating in their rejection of conventional ideals, of the conventional romantic hero as well as the conventional righteous man. The Sagas are more solid and more philosophical than any romance or legend.

VII

EPIC AND HISTORY

In the close of the heroic literature of Iceland a number of general causes are to be found at work. The period of the Sagas comes to an end partly by a natural progress, culmination, and exhaustion of a definite form of literary activity, partly through external influences by which the decline is hastened. After the material of the early heroic traditions had been all used up, after the writers of the thirteenth century had given their present shapes to the stories of the tenth and the eleventh centuries, two courses were open, and both courses were taken. On the one hand the form of the Saga was applied to historical matter near the writer's own time, or actually contemporary, on the other hand it was turned to pure fiction. The literature divides into history and romance. The authentic history, the Sturlung cycle in particular, is the true heir and successor of the heroic Saga. The romantic Sagas are less intimately related to the histories of Njal or Gisli, though those also are representative of some part of the essence of the Saga, and continue in a shadowy way something of its

original life. The Northern literatures in the thirteenth century were invaded from abroad by the same romantic forces as had put an end to the epic literature of France; translations of French romances became popular, and helped to change the popular taste in Norway and Iceland. At the same time the victory of Romance was not entirely due to these foreigners; they found allies in the more fanciful parts of the native literature. The schools of Northern prose romance, which took the place of the older Sagas, were indebted almost as much to the older native literature as to Tristram or Perceval; they are the product of something that had all along been part, though hardly the most essential part, of the heroic Sagas. The romantic story of Frithiof and the others like it have disengaged from the complexity of the older Sagas an element which contributes not a little, though by no means everything, to the charm of *Njála* and *Laxdœla*.

The historical work contained in the *Sturlunga Saga* is a more comprehensive and thorough modification of the old form. Instead of detaching one of the elements and using it in separation from the rest, as was done by the author of *Frithiof*, for example, the historian of the Sturlungs kept everything that he was not compelled to drop by the exigencies of his subject. The biographical and historical work belonging to the *Sturlunga Saga* falls outside the order to which *Njal* and *Gisli* belong; it is epic, only in the sense that a history may be called epic. Nevertheless it is true that this historical work shows,

even better than the heroic Sagas themselves, what the nature of the heroic literature really is. In dealing with a more stubborn and less profitable subject it brings out the virtues of the Icelandic form of narrative.

The relation of the Saga to authentic history had always been close. The first attempt to give shape, in writing, to the traditions of the heroic age was made by Ari Thorgilsson (*ob.* 1148), especially in his *Landnámabók*, a history exact and positive, a record in detail of all the first settlers of the island, with notes of the substance of the popular stories by which their fame was transmitted. This exact history, this positive work, precedes the freer and more imaginative stories, and supplies some of them with a good deal of their matter, which they work up in their own way. The fashion of writing, the example of a written form of narrative, was set by Ari; though the example was not followed closely nor in all points by the writers of the Sagas: his form is too strict for them.

It was too strict for his greatest successor in historical writing in Iceland. Snorri Sturluson is the author of *Lives of the Kings of Norway*, apparently founded upon Ari's *Book of Kings*, which has been lost as an independent work. Snorri's *Lives* themselves are extant in a shape very far from authentic; one has to choose between the abridged and inconvenient shape of *Heimskringla*, in which Snorri's work appears to have been cut down and trimmed, and the looser form presented by such compilations as the longer Saga of Olaf Tryggvason, where more

of Snorri appears to have been retained than in *Heimskringla*, though it has to be extricated from all sorts of irrelevant additions and interpolations. But whatever problems may still remain unsolved, it is certain enough that Snorri worked on his historical material with no intention of keeping to the positive lines of Ari, and with the fullest intention of giving to his history of Norway all the imaginative force of which he was capable. This was considerable, as is proved by the stories of the gods in his *Edda;* and in the histories of Olaf Tryggvason and of Saint Olaf, kings of Norway, he has given companions to the very noblest of the Sagas dealing with the Icelandic chiefs. Between the more scientific work of Ari and the more imaginative work of Snorri, comes, half-way, the *Life of King Sverre* (*ob.* 1202), written at the king's own dictation by the Abbot Karl of Thingeyri.

Ari collected the historical materials, both for Iceland and Norway, and put them together in the extant *Landnámabók* and the lost *Kings' Lives*. Snorri Sturluson treated the *Kings' Lives* in the spirit of the greater Icelandic Sagas; his *Lives* belong to heroic literature, if there is any meaning in that name. The *Life of Sverre* is not so glorious as the *Life* of either Olaf. Abbot Karl had not the same interests or the same genius as Snorri, and his range was determined, in most of the work, by the king himself. King Sverre, though he could quote poetry to good effect when he liked, was mainly practical in his ideas.

The Sturlung history, which is the close of the heroic literature of Iceland, has resemblances to the work of all three of the historians just named. It is like Ari in its minuteness and accuracy; like *Sverris Saga*, it has a contemporary subject to treat of; and it shares with Snorri his spirit of vivid narrative and his sympathy with the methods of the greater Sagas of Iceland. If authors were to be judged by the difficulty of their undertakings, then Sturla, the writer of the Sturlung history, would certainly come out as the greatest of them all. For he was limited by known facts as much, or even more than Ari; while he has given to his record of factions, feuds, and anarchy almost as much spirit as Snorri gave to his lives of the heroic kings, and more than Abbot Karl could give to the history of Sverre and his political success. At the same time, however, the difficulty of Sturla's work had been a good deal reduced in the gradual progress of Icelandic literature. He had to represent modern history, the history of his own time, in the form and with the vividness of the imaginative Sagas. In undertaking this he was helped by some examples of the same sort of thing, in Sagas written before his time, and forming an intermediate stage between the group of which *Njála* is the head, and Sturla's history of his own family. The biographies of Icelanders in the twelfth century, like that of Thorgils and Haflidi quoted above, which form an introduction to the Sturlung history, are something more authentic than the heroic Sagas, but not much less spirited. It is

difficult to draw a decided line anywhere between the different classes; or, except by the date of its subject, to mark off the story of the heroic age from the story of the rather less heroic age that followed it. There was apparently an accommodation of the Saga form to modern subjects, effected through a number of experiments, with a result, complete and admirable, in Sturla's history of the Sturlung fortunes.

It may be said, also, that something of the work was done ready to the author's hand; there was a natural fitness and correspondence between the Icelandic reality, even when looked at closely by contemporary eyes in the broad daylight, and the Icelandic form of representation. The statue was already part shapen in the block, and led the hand of the artist as he worked upon it. It is dangerous, no doubt, to say after the work has been done, after the artist has conquered his material and finished off his subject, that there was a natural affinity between the subject and the author's mind. In the case of Iceland, however, this pre-existent harmony is capable of being proved. The conditions of life in Iceland were, and still are, such as to exclude a number of the things that in other countries prevent the historian from writing epic. There were none of the large, abstract considerations and problems that turn the history into a dissertation on political forces, on monarchy, on democracy, on diplomacy; there were none of the large, vague multitudes of the people that impose themselves on the historian's attention, to the detriment of his individual characters. The

public history of Iceland lies all in the lives of private characters; it is the life of a municipality, very much spread out, it is true, but much more like the life of a country town or a group of country neighbours, than the society of a complex state of any kind that has ever existed in Europe. Private interests and the lives of individual men were what they had to think about and talk about; and just in so far as they were involved in gossip, they were debarred from the achievements of political history, and equally inclined to that sort of record in which individual lives are everything. If their histories were to have any life at all, it must be the life of the drama or the dramatic narrative, and not that of the philosophical history, or even of those medieval chronicles, which, however unphilosophical, are still obliged by the greatness of their subject to dwarf the individual actors in comparison with the greatness of Kingdoms, Church, and Empire. Of those great impersonalities there was little known in Iceland; and if the story of Iceland was not to be (what it afterwards became) a mere string of trivial annals, it must be by a deepening of the personal interest, by making the personages act and talk, and by following intently the various threads of their individual lives.

So far the work was prepared for authors like Sturla, who had to enliven the contemporary record of life in Iceland; it was prepared to this extent, that any other kind of work was unpromising or even hopeless. The present life in Sturla's time was, like

the life of the heroic age, a perpetual conflict of private wills, with occasional and provisional reconciliations. The mode of narrative that was suitable for the heroic stories could hardly fail to be the proper mode for the contemporary factions of chiefs, heroic more or less, and so it was proved by Sturla.

Sturlunga Saga contains some of the finest passages of narrative in the whole of Icelandic literature. The biographical Sagas, with which it is introduced or supported, are as good as all but the best of the heroic Sagas, while they are not out of all comparison even with *Njála* or *Gísla*, with *Hrafnkels Saga* or *Bandamanna*, in the qualities in which these excel.

The story of Thorgils and Haflidi has already been referred to in illustration of the Icelandic method of narrative at its best. It is a good story, well told, with the unities well preserved. The plot is one that is known to the heroic Sagas—the growth of mischief and ill-will between two honourable gentlemen, out of the villainy of a worthless beast who gets them into his quarrels. Haflidi has an ill-conditioned nephew whom, for his brother's sake, he is loth to cast off. Thorgils takes up one of many cases in which this nephew is concerned, and so is brought into disagreement with Haflidi. The end is reconciliation, effected by the intervention of Bishop Thorlak Runolfsson and Ketill the priest, aided by the good sense of the rivals at a point where the game may be handsomely drawn, with no dishonour to either side. The details are given with great

liveliness. One of the best scenes is that which has already been referred to (p. 273); another may be quoted of a rather different sort from an earlier year. In the year 1120 at the Althing, Thorgils was with difficulty dissuaded from breaking the peace as they stood, both parties, by the door of the Thingvalla church on St. Peter's Day. Thorgils' friend Bodvar had to use both arguments and unction to make him respect the sanctity of the Althing, of the Church, and of the Saint to whom the day belonged. Afterwards Thorgils said to his friend, "You are more pious than people think."

> Bodvar answered: "I saw that we were penned between two bands of them at the church door, and that if it broke into a fight we should be cut to pieces. But for that I should not have cared though Haflidi had been killed in spite of the peace of Church and Parliament."

The intervention at the end is very well given, particularly Ketill the priest's story of his own enemy.

Sturlu Saga, the story of the founder of the great Sturlung house, the father of the three great Sturlung brothers, of whom Snorri the historian was one, is longer and more important than the story of Thorgils and Haflidi. The plot is a simple one; the rivalry between Sturla and Einar, son of Thorgils. The contest is more deadly and more complicated than that of Thorgils himself against Haflidi; that was mainly a case of the point of honour, and the opponents were both of them honourable men, while in this contest Sturla is politic and unscrupulous, and

his adversary "a ruffian by habit and repute." There is a considerable likeness between the characters of Sturla and of Snorri the priest, as that is presented in *Eyrbyggja* and elsewhere. A comparison of the rise of Snorri, as told in *Eyrbyggja*, with the life of Sturla will bring out the unaltered persistence of the old ways and the old standards, while the advantage lies with the later subject in regard to concentration of interest. The *Life of Sturla* is not so varied as *Eyrbyggja*, but it is a more orderly piece of writing, and at the same time more lively, through the unity of its plot. Nor are the details spoiled by any tameness. Notable is the company of rogues maintained by Einar; they and their ways are well described. There was Geir the thief, son of Thorgerda the liar; he was hanged by the priest Helgi. There was Vidcuth, son of stumpy Lina (these gentry have no father's name to them); he was a short man and a nimble. The third was Thorir the warlock, a little man from the North country. This introduction serves to bring on the story of a moonlight encounter with the robbers in snow; and in this sort of thing the history of Sturla is as good as the best. It is worth while to look at the account of the last decisive match with Einar—another snow piece. It may be discovered there that the closer adhesion to facts, and the nearer acquaintance with the persons, were no hindrance to the Icelandic author who knew his business. It was not the multitude and confusion of real details that could prevent him from making a good thing out of his subject, if only his subject

contained some opportunity for passion and conflict, which it generally did.

In this scene of the midnight raid in which the position of the two rivals is decided, there is nothing at all heightened or exaggerated, yet the proportions are such, the relations of the incidents are given in such a way, as could not be bettered by any modern author dealing with a critical point in a drama of private life. The style is that of the best kind of subdued and sober narrative in which the excitement of the situations is not spent in rhetoric.

It fell at Hvamm in the winter nights (about Hallowmass) of the year 1171 that a man passed through, an old retainer of Sturla's; and Sturla did not like his manner. As it turned out, this man went west to Stadarhol, the house of Sturla's enemy, and told Einar all the state of Sturla's house, how there were few men there.

There was dancing at Hvamm that night, and it was kept up late. The night was still, and every now and then some would look out and listen, but they could hear no one stirring.

The night after that Einar set out. He avoided Hvamm, but came down on another steading, the house of Sturla's son-in-law Ingjald, and drove off the cows and sheep, without any alarm; it was not till the morning that one of the women got up and found the beasts gone. The news was brought at once to Hvamm. Sturla had risen at daybreak and was looking to his haystacks; it was north wind, and freezing. Ingjald came up, and, "Now he is

coming to ask me to buy his wethers," says Sturla; for Sturla had warned him that he was in danger of being raided, and had tried to get Ingjald to part with his sheep. Ingjald told him of the robbery. Sturla said nothing, but went in and took down his axe and shield. Gudny his wife was wakened, and asked what the news was. "Nothing so far; only Einar has driven all Ingjald's beasts." Then Gudny sprang up and shouted to the men: "Up, lads! Sturla is out, and his weapons with him, and Ingjald's gear is gone!"

Then follows the pursuit over the snow, and the fight, in which Ingjald is killed, and Einar wounded and driven to beg for quarter. After which it was the common saying that Einar's strength had gone over to Sturla.

It is a piece of clean and exact description, and particularly of the succession of scenes and moods in life. The revels go on through the calm night with an accompaniment of suspense and anxiety. There is no better note in any chronicle of the anxieties of a lawless time, and the steady flow of common pleasures in spite of the troubles; all the manners of an heroic or a lawless time are summed up in the account of the dance and its intermittent listening for the sound of enemies. Sturla in the early light sees his son-in-law coming to him, and thinks he knows what his errand is,—the author here, as usual, putting the mistaken appearance first, and the true interpretation second. In the beginning of the pursuit there is the silence and the repression

of a man in a rage, and the vehement call of his wife who knows what he is about, and finds words for his anger and his purpose. The weather of the whole story is just enough to play into the human life—the quiet night, the north wind, and the frosty, sunless morning. The snow is not all one surface; the drifts on the hill-sides, the hanging cornice over a gully, these have their place in the story, just enough to make the movements clear and intelligible. This is the way history was written when the themes were later by two centuries than those of the heroic Sagas. There is not much difference, except in the "soothfastness"; the author is closer to his subject, his imagination is confronted with something very near reality, and is not helped, as in the older stories, by traditional imaginative modifications of his subject.

It is the same kind of excellence that is found in the other subsidiary parts of *Sturlunga*, hardly less than in the main body of that work. There is no reason for depressing these histories below the level of any but the strongest work in the heroic Sagas. The history of Bishop Gudmund and the separate lives of his two friends, Hrafn and Aron, are not less vivid than the stories of the men of Eyre or the men of Vatzdal. The wanderings of Aron round Iceland are all but as thrilling as those of the outlaw Gisli or Grettir, whose adventures and difficulties are so like his own. It is not easy to specify any element in the one that is not in the other, while the handling of the more authentic stories is not weak or faltering in comparison with the others. No single incident

in any of the Sagas is much better in its way, and few are more humane than the scene in which Eyjolf Karsson gets Aron to save himself, while he, Eyjolf, goes back into danger.[1]

The *Islendinga* or *Sturlunga Saga* of Sturla Thordarson, which is the greatest of the pure historical works, is in some things inferior to stories like those of the older Sturla, or of Hrafn and Aron. There is no hero; perhaps least of all that hero, namely the nation itself, which gives something like unity to the Shakespearean plays of the Wars of the Roses. Historically there is much resemblance between the Wars of the Roses and the faction fights in Iceland in which the old constitution went to pieces and the old spirit was exhausted. But the Icelandic tragedy had no reconciliation at the end, and there was no national strength underneath the disorder, fit to be called out by a peacemaker or a "saviour of society" like Henry VII. There was nothing but the family interests of the great houses, and the *Sturlunga Saga* leaves it impossible to sympathise with either side in a contest that has no principles and no great reformer to distinguish it. The anarchy is worse than in the old days of the Northern rovers; the men are more formal and more vain. Yet the history of these tumults is not without its brightness of character. The generous and lawless Bishop Gudmund belongs to the story; so do his champions Eyjolf, Hrafn, and Aron. The figure of Snorri Sturluson is there, though he is rather disappointing in his nephew's view of

[1] Translated in Appendix, Note C.

him. His enemy, Gizur the earl, is a strong man, whose strength is felt in the course of the history; and there are others.

The beauty of *Sturlunga* is that it gives a more detailed and more rational account than is to be found elsewhere in the world of the heroic age going to the bad, without a hero. The kind of thing represented may be found in countless other places, but not Froissart has rendered it so fully or with such truth, nor the *Paston Letters* with more intimate knowledge and experience. It is a history and not an epic; the title of epic which may be claimed for *Njála* and *Gísla*, and even in a sense transferred to the later biographies, does not rightly belong to Sturla's history of Iceland. It is a record from year to year; it covers two generations; there is nothing in it but faction. But it is descended from the epic school; it has the gift of narrative and of vision. It represents, as no prosaic historian can, the suspense and the shock of events, the alarm in the night, the confusion of a house attacked, the encounter of enemies in the open, the demeanour of men going to their death. The scenes are epic at least, though the work as a whole is merely historical.

There is a return in this to the original nature of the Saga, in some respects. It was in the telling of adventures that the Sagas began, separate adventures attaching to great names of the early days. The separate adventures of Gisli were known and were told about before his history was brought into the form

and unity which it now possesses, where the end is foreknown from the beginning. Many of the heroic Sagas have remained in what must be very like their old oral form—a string of episodes. *Eyrbyggja*, *Vatnsdæla*, *Flóamanna*, *Svarfdæla*, are of this sort. *Sturlunga* has not more unity than *Eyrbyggja*, perhaps not as much, unless the rise of Gizur may be reckoned to do for it what is done for the older story by the rise of Snorri the Priest. But while the scenes thus fall apart in *Sturlunga*, they are more vivid than in any other Icelandic book. In no other is the art of description so nearly perfect.

The scenes of *Sturlunga* come into rivalry with the best of those in the heroic Sagas. No one will ever be able to say, much less to convince any one else, whether the burning of Njal's house or the burning of Flugumyri is the better told or the more impressive. There is no comparison between the personages in the two stories. But in pure art of language and in the certainty of its effect the story of Flugumyri is not less notable than the story of Bergthorsknoll. It may be repeated here, to stand as the last words of the great Icelandic school; the school which went out and had no successor till all its methods were invented again, independently, by the great novelists, after ages of fumbling and helpless experiments, after all the weariness of pedantic chronicles and the inflation of heroic romance.

Sturla had given his daughter Ingibjorg in marriage to Hall, son of Gizur, and had come to the wedding at Flugumyri, Gizur's house at the

foot of the hills of Skagafjord, with steep slopes behind and the broad open valley in front, a place with no exceptional defences, no fortress. It was here, just after the bridal, and after the bride's father had gone away, that Gizur's enemy, Eyjolf, came upon him, as he had threatened openly in men's hearing. Sturla, who had left the house just before, tells the story with the details that came to him from the eye-witnesses, with exact particular descriptions. But there is no drag in the story, and nothing mean in the style, whatever may have been the brutal reality. It is, once again, the great scene of Epic poetry repeated, the defence of a man's life and of his own people against surrounding enemies; it is the drama of Gunnar or of Njal played out again at the very end of the Northern heroic age, and the prose history is quick to recognise the claims upon it.

This is the end of the wedding at Flugumyri, in October of the year 1253, as told by Sturla:—

THE BURNING OF FLUGUMYRI

Eyjolf saw that the attack was beginning to flag, and grew afraid that the countryside might be raised upon them; so they brought up the fire. John of Bakki had a tar-pin with him; they took the sheepskins from the frames that stood outside there, and tarred them and set them on fire. Some took hay and stuffed it into the windows and put fire to it; and soon there was a great smoke in the house and a choking heat. Gizur lay down in the hall by one of the rows of pillars, and kept his nose on the floor. Groa his wife was near him. Thorbjorn Neb was lying there too, and he and Gizur had their heads close together. Thorbjorn could hear Gizur praying to God in many ways and fervently, and thought he had never

before heard praying like it. As for himself, he could not have opened his mouth for the smoke. After that Gizur stood up and Groa supported him, and he went to the south porch. He was much distressed by the smoke and heat, and thought to make his way out rather than be choked inside. Gizur Glad was standing at the door, talking to Kolbein Grön, and Kolbein was offering him quarter, for there was a pact between them, that if ever it came to that, they should give quarter to one another, whichever of them had it in his power. Gizur stood behind Gizur Glad, his namesake, while they were talking, and got some coolness the while. Gizur Glad said to Kolbein, "I will take quarter for myself, if I may bring out another man along with me." Kolbein agreed to this at once, excepting only Gizur and his sons.

Then Ingibjorg, Sturla's daughter, came to Groa at the door; she was in her nightgown, and barefoot. She was then in her fourteenth year, and tall and comely to see. Her silver belt had tangled round her feet as she came from her bedroom. There was on it a purse with many gold rings of hers in it; she had it there with her. Groa was very glad to see her, and said that there should be one lot for both of them, whatever might befall.

When Gizur had got himself cooled a little, he gave up his thought of dashing out of the house. He was in linen clothes, with a mail-coat over them, and a steel cap on his head, and his sword *Corselet-biter* in his hand. Groa was in her nightgown only. Gizur went to Groa and took two gold rings out of his girdle-pocket and put them into her hand, because he thought that she would live through it, but not he himself. One ring had belonged to Bishop Magnus his uncle, and the other to his father Thorvald.

"I wish my friends to have the good of these," he says, "if things go as I would have them."

Gizur saw that Groa took their parting much to heart.

Then he felt his way through the house, and with him went Gudmund the Headstrong, his kinsman, who did not wish to lose sight of him. They came to the doors of the ladies' room; and Gizur was going to make his way out there. Then he heard outside the voices of men cursing and swearing, and turned back from there.

Now in the meantime Groa and Ingibjorg had gone to the door. Groa asked for freedom for Ingibjorg. Kolbein heard that, her kinsman, and asked Ingibjorg to come out to him. She would not, unless she got leave to take some one out along with her. Kolbein said that was too much to ask. Groa besought her to go.

"I have to look after the lad Thorlak, my sister's son," says she.

Thorlak was a boy of ten, the son of Thorleif the Noisy. He had jumped out of the house before this, and his linen clothes were all ablaze when he came down to the ground: he got safe to the church. Some men say that Thorstein Genja pushed Groa back into the fire; she was found in the porch afterwards. Kolbein dashed into the fire for Ingibjorg, and carried her out to the church.

Then the house began to blaze up. A little after, Hall Gizur's son [the bridegroom] came to the south door, and Arni the Bitter, his henchman, with him. They were both very hard put to it, and distressed by the heat. There was a board across the doorway, half-way up. Hall did not stop to look, but jumped straight out over the hatch. He had a sword in one hand, and no weapon besides. Einar Thorgrimsson was posted near where he leapt out, and hewed at his head with a sword, and that was his death-wound. As he fell, another man cut at his right leg below the knee and slashed it nearly off. Thorleif the monk from Thverá, the brewer, had got out before, and was in the yard; he took a sheepskin and put it under Hall when Einar and the others went away; then he rolled all together, Hall and the sheepskin, along to the church when they were not looking. Hall was lightly clad, and the cold struck deep into his wounds. The monk was barefoot, and his feet were frostbitten, but he brought himself and Hall to the church at last.

Arni leapt out straight after Hall; he struck his foot on the hatch (he was turning old) and fell as he came out. They asked who that might be, coming in such a hurry.

"Arni the Bitter is here," says he; "and I will not ask for quarter. I see one lying not far away makes me like it well enough if I travel the same road with him."

Then said Kolbein: "Is there no man here remembers Snorri Sturluson?"[1]

They both had a stroke at him, Kolbein and Ari Ingimund's son, and more of them besides hewed at him, and he came by his death there.

Then the hall fell in, beginning from the north side into the loft above the hall. Now all the buildings began to flare up, except that the guest-house did not burn, nor the ladies' room, nor the dairy.

Now to go back to Gizur: he made his way through the house to the dairy, with Gudmund, his kinsman, after him. Gizur asked him to go away, and said that one man might find a way of escape, if fate would have it so, that would not do for two. Then Parson John Haldorsson came up; and Gizur asked them both to leave him. He took off his coat of mail and his morion, but kept his sword in his hand. Parson John and Gudmund made their way from the dairy to the south door, and got quarter. Gizur went into the dairy and found a curd-tub standing on stocks; there he thrust the sword into the curds down over the hilts. He saw close by a vat sunk in the earth with whey in it, and the curd-tub stood over it and nearly hid the sunken vat altogether. There was room for Gizur to get into it, and he sat down in the whey in his linen clothes and nothing else, and the whey came up to his breast. It was cold in the whey. He had not been long there when he heard voices, and their talk went thus, that three men were meant to have the hewing of him; each man his stroke, and no hurry about it, so as to see how he took it. The three appointed were Hrani and Kolbein and Ari. And now they came into the dairy with a light, and searched about everywhere. They came to the vat that Gizur was in, and thrust into it three or four times with spears. Then there was a wrangle among them; some said there was something in the vat, and others said no. Gizur kept his hands over his belly, moving gently, so that they might be as long as possible in finding out that there was anything there. He had grazes on his hands, and all down to his knees skin wounds, little and many. Gizur

[1] Arni Beiskr (the Bitter) in company with Gizur murdered Snorri Sturluson the historian at his house of Reykholt, 22nd September 1241.

said afterwards that before they came in he was shaking with cold, so that it rippled in the vat, but after they came in he did not shiver at all. They made two searches through the dairy, and the second time was like the first. After that they went out and made ready to ride away. Those men that still had life in them were spared, to wit, Gudmund Falkason, Thord the Deacon, and Olaf, who was afterwards called Guest, whose life Einar Thorgrimsson had attempted before. By that time it was dawn.

There is one passage in the story of Flugumyri, before the scene of the burning, in which the narrative is heightened a little, as if the author were conscious that his subject was related to the matter of heroic poetry, or as if it had at once, like the battle of Maldon, begun to be magnified by the popular memory into the likeness of heroic battles. It is in the description of the defence of the hall (*skáli*) at Flugumyri, before the assailants were driven back and had to take to fire, as is told above.

Eyjolf and his companions made a hard assault on the hall. Now was there battle joined, and sharp onset, for the defence was of the stoutest. They kept at it far into the night, and struck so hard (say the men who were there) that fire flew, as it seemed, when the weapons came together. Thorstein Gudmund's son said afterwards that he had never been where men made a braver stand; and all are agreed to praise the defence of Flugumyri, both friends and enemies.

The fire of the swords which is here referred to by the way, and with something like an apology for exaggeration, is in the poem of *Finnesburh* brought out with emphasis, as a proper part of the composition :—

swurdléoma stód,
Swylce eall Finnesburh fýrenu wǽre.
The sword-light rose, as though all Finnsburgh were aflame.

It is characteristic of the Icelandic work that it should frequently seem to reflect the incidents of epic poetry in a modified way. The Sagas follow the outlines of heroic poetry, but they have to reduce the epic magnificence, or rather it would be truer to say that they present in plain language, and without extravagance, some of the favourite passages of experience that have been at different times selected and magnified by epic poets. Thus the death of Skarphedinn is like a prose rendering of the death of Roland; instead of the last stroke of the hero in his agony, cleaving the rock with Durendal, it is noted simply that Skarphedinn had driven his axe into the beam before him, in the place where he was penned in, and there the axe was found when they came to look for him after the burning. The moderation of the language here does not conceal the intention of the writer that Skarphedinn's last stroke is to be remembered. It is by touches such as these that the heroic nature of the Sagas is revealed. In spite of the common details and the prose statement, it is impossible to mistake their essential character. They are something loftier than history, and their authors knew it. When history came to be written as it was written by Sturla, it still retained this distinction. It is history governed by an heroic spirit; and while it is closely bound to the facts, it is at the same time controlled and directed by the

forms of an imaginative literature that had grown up in greater freedom and at a greater distance from its historical matter. Sturla uses, for contemporary history, a kind of narrative created and perfected for another purpose, namely for the imaginative reconstruction and representation of tradition, in the stories of Njal, Grettir, and Gisli.

There is no distortion or perversion in this choice and use of his instrument, any more than in Fielding's adaptation of the method of *Joseph Andrews* to the matter of the *Voyage to Lisbon*. In the first place, the imaginative form of narrative obliges the author to take his subject seriously and treat it with dignity; he cannot leave it crude and unformed. In the second place, there is a real affinity, in Iceland, between the subject-matters of the true history and the heroic Saga; the events are of the same kind, the personages are not unlike.

The imaginative treatment of the stories of Njal and Gisli had been founded on real knowledge of life; in *Sturlunga* the history of real life is repaid for its loan. In Sturla's book, the contemporary alarms and excursions, the midnight raids, the perils and escapes, the death of the strong man, the painful ending of the poor-spirited, all the shocks and accidents of his own time, are comprehended by the author in the light of the traditional heroics, and of similar situations in the imaginative Sagas; and so these matters of real life, and of the writer's own experience, or near it, come to be co-ordinated, represented, and made intelligible through imagina-

tion. *Sturlunga* is something more than a bare diary, or a series of pieces of evidence. It has an author, and the author understands and appreciates the matter in hand, because it is illuminated for him by the example of the heroic literature. He carries an imaginative narrative design in his head, and things as they happen fall into the general scheme of his story as if he had invented them.

How much this imaginative kind of true history is bound and indebted to its native land, how little capable of transportation, is proved in a very striking and interesting way by Sturla's other work, his essay in foreign history, the *Life of King Hacon of Norway*. The *Hákonar Saga*, as compared with *Sturlunga*, is thin, grey, and abstract. It is a masterly book in its own kind; fluent and clear, and written in the inimitable Icelandic prose. The story is parallel to the history of Iceland, contemporary with *Sturlunga*. It tells of the agonies of Norway, a confusion no less violent and cruel than the anarchy of Iceland in the same sixty years; while the Norwegian history has the advantage that it comes to an end in remedy, not in exhaustion. There was no one in Iceland like King Hacon to break the heads of the disorderly great men, and thus make peace in an effective way. *Sturlunga*, in Iceland, is made up of mere anarchy; *Hákonar Saga* is the counterpart of *Sturlunga*, exhibiting the cure of anarchy in Norway under an active king. But while the political import of Sturla's *Hacon* is thus greater, the literary force is much less, in comparison

with the strong work of *Sturlunga*. There is great dexterity in the management of the narrative, great lucidity; but the vivid imagination shown in the story of Flugumyri, and hardly less in other passages of *Sturlunga*, is replaced in the life of Hacon by a methodical exposition of facts, good enough as history, but seldom giving any hint of the author's reserve of imaginative force. It is not that Sturla does not understand his subject. The tragedy of Duke Skule does not escape him; he recognises the contradiction in the life of Hacon's greatest rival, between Skule's own nobility and generosity of temper, and the hopelessness of the old scrambling misrule of which he is the representative. But the tragedy of the *Rival Kings* (*Kongsemnerne*) is left for Ibsen to work out in full; the portraits of Skule and Hacon are only given in outline. In the part describing Hacon's childhood among the veterans of the Old Guard (Sverre's men, the "ancient Birchlegs"), and in a few other places, there is a lapse into the proper Icelandic manner. Elsewhere, and in the more important parts of the history especially, it would seem as if the author had gone out of his way to find a sober and colourless pattern of work, instead of the full and vivid sort of story that came natural to him.

After Sturla, and after the fall of the Commonwealth of Iceland, although there were still some interesting biographies to be written—the *Life of Bishop Arne*, the *Life of Bishop Laurence*—it may be reckoned that the heroic strain is exhausted.

After that, it is a new world for Iceland, or rather it is the common medieval world, and not the peculiar Icelandic version of an heroic age. After the fourteenth century the historical schools die out into meagre annals; and even the glorious figure of Jón Arason, and the tragic end of the Catholic bishop, the poet, the ruler, who along with his sons was beheaded in the interests of the Reformed Religion and its adherents, must go without the honours that were freely paid in the thirteenth century to bishops and lords no more heroic, no more vehement and self-willed. The history of Jón Arason has to be made out and put together from documents; his Saga was left unwritten, though the facts of his life and death may seem to prove that the old spirit lived long after the failure of the old literature.

The thirteenth century, the century of Snorri Sturluson and of Sturla his nephew, is also the age of Villehardouin and Joinville. That is to say, the finished historical work of the Icelandic School is contemporary with the splendid improvisations and first essays of French historical prose. The fates of the two languages are an instance of "the way that things are shared" in this world, and may raise some grudges against the dispensing fortune that has ordered the *Life of St. Louis* to be praised, not beyond its deserts, by century after century, while the Northern masterpieces are left pretty much to their own island and to the antiquarian students of the Northern tongues. This, however, is a considera-

tion which does not touch the merits of either side. It is part of the fate of Icelandic literature that it should not be influential in the great world, that it should fall out of time, and be neglected, in the march of the great nations. It is in this seclusion that its perfection is acquired, and there is nothing to complain of.

A comparison of the two contemporaries, Sturla and Joinville, brings out the difference between two admirable varieties of history, dealing with like subjects. The scenery of the *Life of St. Louis* is different from that of *Sturlunga*, but there is some resemblance in parts of their themes, in so far as both narrate the adventures of brave men in difficult places, and both are told by authors who were on the spot themselves, and saw with their own eyes, or heard directly from those who had seen. As a subject for literature there is not much to choose between St. Louis in Egypt in 1250 and the burning of Flugumyri three years later, though the one adventure had all the eyes of the world upon it, and the other was of no more practical interest to the world than floods or landslips or the grinding of rocks and stones in an undiscovered valley. Nor is there much to choose between the results of the two methods; neither Sturla nor Joinville has anything to fear from a comparison between them.

Sometimes, in details, there is a very close approximation of the French and the Icelandic methods. Joinville's story, for example, of the moonlight adventure of the clerk of Paris and the

three robbers might go straight into Icelandic. Only, the seneschal's opening of the story is too personal, and does not agree with the Icelandic manner of telling a story :—

> As I went along I met with a wagon carrying three dead men that a clerk had slain, and I was told they were being brought for the king to see. When I heard this I sent my squire after them, to know how it had fallen out.

The difference between the two kinds is that Joinville, being mainly experimental and without much regard for the older precedents and models of historical writing, tells his story in his own way, as memoirs, in the order of events as they come within his view, revealing his own sentiments and policy, and keeping a distinction between the things he himself saw and the things he did not see. Whereas Sturla goes on the lines that had been laid down before him, and does not require to invent his own narrative scheme ; and further, the scheme he receives from his masters is the opposite of Joinville's personal memories. Though Sturla in great part of his work is as near the reality as Joinville, he is obliged by the Icelandic custom to keep himself out of the story, except when he is necessary ; and then he only appears in the third person on the same terms as the other actors, with nothing except perhaps a greater particularity in description to show that the author is there himself in the thick of it. To let the story take care of itself is the first rule of the Icelandic authors. If they have any emotion or sentiment of their own, it must go into the story im-

personally; it must inform or enliven the characters and their speeches; it must quicken the style unobtrusively, or else it must be suppressed. The parts of the Sagas that are most touching, such as the death of Njal, and the parting of Grettir and his mother, though they give evidence of the author's sensibility, never allow him a word for himself. The method is the method of Homer—δόλῳ δ' ὅ γε δάκρυα κεῦθεν—"he would not confess that he wept."

In Joinville, on the contrary, all the epic matter of the story is surveyed and represented not as a drama for any one to come and look at, and make his own judgment about it, but as the life of himself, the Sire de Joinville, Seneschal of Champagne, known and interpreted to himself first of all. It is barely possible to conceive the *Life of St. Louis* transposed into the mood of the *Odyssey* or of *Njála*. It is hard to see who would be a gainer thereby—certainly not St. Louis himself. He would be deprived, for instance, of what is at once the most heroic and the most trifling of all the passages in his story, which belongs altogether to Joinville, and is worth nothing except as he tells it, and because he tells it. The story of Joinville's misunderstanding of the king, and the king's way of taking it, on occasion of the Council at Acre and the question whether to return or to stay and recover the prisoners from the Saracens, is not only the whole *Life of St. Louis* summed up and put into one chapter, but it is also one of those rarest passages of true history in which a character whom we

thought we knew is presented with all his qualities intensified in a momentary act or speech. It is as if the dulness of custom were magically broken, and the familiar character stood out, not different from himself, but with a new expression. In this great scene the Barons were for returning home, and put forward Guy Malvoisin their foreman to state their opinion. Joinville took the other side, remembering the warning of a kinsman of his own not to return in a hurry and forget the Lord's poor servants (*le peuple menu Nostre Signour*). There was no one there but had friends in prison among the Saracens, "so they did not rebuke me," says Joinville; but only two ventured to speak on his side, and one of these was shouted at (*mout felonessement*) by his uncle, the good knight Sir Jehan de Beaumont, for so doing. The king adjourned the Council for a week. What follows is a kind of narrative impossible under the Homeric or the Icelandic conditions—no impersonal story, but a record of Joinville's own changes of mind as he was played upon by the mind of the king; an heroic incident, but represented in a way quite different from any epic manner. Joinville describes the breaking up of the Council, and how he was baited by them all: "The king is a fool, Sire de Joinville, if he does not take your advice against all the council of the realm of France"; how he sat beside the king at dinner, but the king did not speak to him; how he, Joinville, thought the king was displeased; and how he got up when the king was hearing grace, and went to a window in a

recess and stuck his arms out through the bars, and leant there gazing out and brooding over the whole matter, making up his mind to stay, whatever happened to all the rest; till some one came behind him and put his hands on his head at the window and held him there, and Joinville thought it was one of the other side beginning to bother him again (*et je cuidai que ce fust mes sires Phelippes d'Anemos, qui trop d'ennui m'avoit fait le jour pour le consoil que je li avoie donnei*), till as he was trying to get free he saw, by a ring on the hand, that it was the king. Then the king asked him how it was that he, a young man, had been bold enough to set his opinion against all the wisdom of France; and before their talk ended, let him see that he was of the same mind as Joinville.

This personal kind of story, in which an heroic scene is rendered through its effect on one particular mind, is quite contrary to the principles of the Icelandic history, except that both kinds are heroic, and both are alive.

Joinville gives the succession of his own emotions; the Icelandic narrators give the succession of events, either as they might appear to an impartial spectator, or (on occasion) as they are viewed by some one in the story, but never as they merely affect the writer himself, though he may be as important a personage as Sturla was in the events of which he wrote the Chronicle. The subject-matter of the Icelandic historian (whether his own experience or not) is displayed as something in which he is not more

nearly concerned than other people; his business is to render the successive moments of the history so that any one may form a judgment about them such as he might have formed if he had been there. Joinville, while giving his own changes of mind very clearly, is not as careful as the Icelandic writers are about the proper order of events. Thus an Icelander would not have written, as Joinville does, "the king came and put his hands on my head"; he would have said, "John found that his head was being held"; and the discovery by means of the ring would have been the first direct intimation who it was. The story as told by Joinville, though it is so much more intimate than any of the Sagas, is not as true to the natural order of impressions. He follows out his own train of sentiment; he is less careful of the order of perception, which the Icelanders generally observe, and sometimes with extraordinary effect.

Joinville's history is not one of a class, and there is nothing equal to it; but some of the qualities of his history are characteristic of the second medieval period, the age of romance. His prose, as compared with that of Iceland, is unstudied and simple, an apparently unreserved confession. The Icelandic prose, with its richness of contents and its capability of different moods, is by comparison resolute, secure, and impartial; its authors are among those who do not give their own opinion about their stories. Joinville, for all his exceptional genius in narrative, is yet like all the host of medieval writers except the Icelandic school, in his readiness to give his opinion, to improve

the occasion, and to add to his plain story something like the intonation of the preacher. Inimitable as he is, to come from the Icelandic books to Joinville is to discover that he is "medieval" in a sense that does not apply to those; that his work, with all its sobriety and solidity, has also the incalculable and elusive touch of fantasy, of exaltation, that seems to claim in a special way the name of Romance.

VIII

THE NORTHERN PROSE ROMANCES

THE history of the Sturlungs is the last great work of the classical age of Icelandic literature, and after it the end comes pretty sharply, as far as masterpieces are concerned. There is, however, a continuation of the old literature in a lower degree and in degenerate forms, which if not intrinsically valuable, are yet significant, as bringing out by exaggeration some of the features and qualities of the older school, and also as showing in a peculiar way the encroachments of new "romantic" ideas and formulas.

One of the extant versions of the *Foster-brothers' Story* is remarkable for its patches of euphuistic rhetoric, which often appear suddenly in the course of plain, straightforward narrative. These ornamental additions are not all of the same kind. Some of them are of the alliterative antithetical kind which is frequently found in the old Northern ecclesiastical prose,[1] and which has an English counterpart in the

[1] *Fóstbr.* (1852) p. 8: "Því at ekki var hjarta hans seen fóarn í fugli: ekki var þat blóðfullt svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu, heldr var þat herdt af enum hæsta höfuðsmið í öllum hvatleik." ("His heart was not fashioned like the crop in a fowl: it was not gorged with blood that it should flutter with fear, but was tempered by the High Headsmith in all alacrity.")

alliterative prose of Ælfric. Others are more unusual; they are borrowed not from the Latin ecclesiastical school of prose, but from the terms of the Northern poetry, and their effect is often very curious. For instance, on page 13 there is a sudden break from the common, unemphatic narrative of a storm at sea ("they were drenched through, and their clothes froze on them") into the incongruous statement that "the daughters of Ran (the sea-goddess) came and wooed them and offered them rest in their embraces,"—a conceit which might possibly be mistaken by a modern reader for the fancy of Hans Andersen, but which is really something quite different, not "pathetic fallacy," but an irruption of metaphorical rhetoric from the poetical dictionary. There is another metaphorical flare-up on the next page, equally amazing, in its plain context:—

> She gave orders to take their clothes and have them thawed. After that they had supper and were shown to bed. They were not long in falling asleep. Snow and frost held all the night through; *all that night the Dog* (*devourer*) *of the elder-tree howled with unwearying jaws and worried the earth with grim fangs of cold.* And when it began to grow light towards daybreak, a man got up to look out, and when he came in Thorgeir asked what sort of weather it was outside;

and so on in the ordinary sober way. It is not surprising that an editor should have been found to touch up the plain text of a Saga with a few ornamental phrases here and there. Considering the amount of bad taste and false wit in the contemporary poetry, the wonder is that there should be such a

consistent exclusion of all such things from the prose of the Sagas. The *Fóstbræðra* variations show the beginning of a process of decay, in which the lines of separation between prose and poetry are cut through.

Except, however, as an indication of a general decline of taste, these diversions in *Fóstbræðra Saga* do not represent the later and secondary schools of Icelandic narrative. They remain as exceptional results of a common degeneracy of literature; the prevailing forms are not exactly of this special kind. Instead of embroidering poetical diction over the plain text of the old Sagas, the later authors preferred to invent new stories of their own, and to use in them the machinery and vocabulary of the old Sagas. Hence arose various orders of romantic Saga, cut off from the original sources of vitality, and imitating the old forms very much as a modern romanticist might imitate them. One of the best, and one of the most famous, of these romantic Sagas is the story of Frithiof the Bold, which was chosen by Tegnér as the ground-work of his elegant romantic poem, a brilliant example of one particular kind of modern medievalism. The significance of Tegnér's choice is that he went for his story to the secondary order of Sagas. The original *Frithiof* is almost as remote as Tegnér himself from the true heroic tradition; and, like Tegnér's poem, makes up for this want of a pedigree by a study and imitation of the great manner, and by a selection and combination of heroic traits from the older authentic literature. Hence Tegnér's work, an ingenious rhetorical adaptation of

all the old heroic motives, is already half done for him by the earlier romanticist; the original prose Frithiof is the same romantic hero as in the Swedish poem, and no more like the men of the Icelandic histories than Raoul de Bragelonne is like D'Artagnan. At the same time, it is easy to see how the authentic histories have supplied materials for the romance; as has been shown already, there are passages in the older Sagas that contain some suggestions for the later kind of stories, and the fictitious hero is put together out of reminiscences of Gunnar and Kjartan.

The "romantic movement" in the old Northern literature was greatly helped by foreign encouragement from the thirteenth century onward, and particularly by a change of literary taste at the Court of Norway. King Sverre at the end of the twelfth century quotes from the old Volsung poem; he perhaps kept the Faroese memory for that kind of poetry from the days of his youth in the islands. Hakon Hakonsson, two generations later, had a different taste in literature and was fond of French romances. It was in his day that the work of translation from the French began; the results of which are still extant in *Strengleikar* (the Lays of Marie de France), in *Karlamagnus Saga*, in the Norwegian versions of Tristram, Perceval, Iwain, and other books of chivalry.[1] These cargoes of

[1] "The first romantic Sagas"—*i.e.* Sagas derived from French romance—"date from the reign of King Hakon Hakonsson (1217-1263), when the longest and best were composed, and they appear to cease at the death of King Hakon the Fifth (1319), who, we are expressly told, commanded many translations to be made" (G. Vigfusson, Prol. § 25).

foreign romance found a ready market in the North; first of all in Norway, but in Iceland also. They came to Iceland just at the time when the native literature, or the highest form of it at any rate, was failing; the failure of the native literature let in these foreign competitors. The Norwegian translations of French romances are not the chief agents in the creation of the secondary Icelandic School, though they help. The foreigners have contributed something to the story of Frithiof and the story of Viglund. The phrase *náttúra amorsins* (=*natura amoris*) in the latter work shows the intrusion even of the Romance vocabulary here, as under similar conditions in Germany and England. But while the old Northern literature in its decline is affected by the vogue of French romance, it still retains some independence. It went to the bad in its own way; and the later kinds of story in the old Northern tongue are not wholly spurious and surreptitious. They have some claim upon *Njála* and *Laxdæla;* there is a strain in them that distinguishes them from the ordinary professional medieval romance in French, English, or German.

When the Icelandic prose began to fail, and the slighter forms of Romance rose up in the place of Epic history, there were two modes in which the older literature might be turned to profit. For one thing, there was plenty of romantic stuff in the old heroic poetry, without going to the French books. For another thing, the prose stories of the old tradition had in them all kinds of romantic motives

which were fit to be used again. So there came into existence the highly-interesting series of Mythical Romances on the themes of the old Northern mythical and heroic poetry, and another series besides, which worked up in its own way a number of themes and conventional motives from the older prose books.

Mythical sagas had their beginning in the classical age of the North. Snorri, with his stories of the adventures of the gods, is the leader in the work of getting pure romance, for pure amusement, out of what once was religious or heroic myth, mythological or heroic poetry. Even Ari the Wise, his great predecessor, had done something of the same sort, if the *Ynglinga Saga* be his, an historical abstract of Northern mythical history; though his aim, like that of Saxo Grammaticus, is more purely scientific than is the case with Snorri. The later mythical romances are of different kinds. The *Volsunga Saga* is the best known on account of its subject. The story of Heidrek, instead of paraphrasing throughout like the Volsung book, inserts the poems of Hervor and Angantyr, and of their descendants, in a consecutive prose narrative. *Halfs Saga* follows the same method. The story of *Hrolf Kraki*, full of interest from its connexion with the matter of *Beowulf* and of Saxo Grammaticus, is more like *Volsunga Saga* in its procedure.[1]

The other class[2] contains the Sagas of *Frithiof*

[1] The Mythical Sagas are described and discussed by Vigfusson, Prol. § 34.

[2] *Ibid.* § 11, "Spurious Icelandic Sagas" (*Skrök-Sögur*). For *Frithiof*, see § 34.

and *Viglund*, and all the fictitious stories which copy the style of the proper Icelandic Sagas. Their matter is taken from the adventures of the heroic age; their personages are idealised romantic heroes; romantic formulas, without substance.

Among the original Sagas there are some that show the beginning of the process by which the substance was eliminated, and the romantic *eidolon* left to walk about by itself. The introductions of many of the older Sagas, of *Gisli* and *Grettir* for example, giving the adventures of the hero's ancestors, are made up in this way; and the best Sagas have many conventional passages—Viking exploits, discomfiture of berserkers, etc.—which the reader learns to take for granted, like the tournaments in the French books, and which have no more effect than simple adjectives to say that the hero is brave or strong. Besides these stock incidents, there are ethical passages (as has already been seen) in which the hero is in some danger of turning into a figure of romance. Grettir, Gisli, Kjartan, Gunnlaug the Wormtongue, Gunnar of Lithend, are all in some degree and at some point or other in danger of romantic exaggeration, while Kari has to thank his humorous squire, more than anything in himself, for his preservation. Also in the original Sagas there are conventions of the main plot, as well as of the episodes, such as are repeated with more deliberation and less skill in the romantic Sagas.

The love-adventures of Viglund are like those of Frithiof, and they have a common likeness, except

in their conclusion, to the adventures of Kormak and Steingerd in *Kormaks Saga*. Kormak was too rude and natural for romance, and the romancers had to make their heroes better-looking, and to provide a happy ending. But the story of the poet's unfortunate love had become a commonplace.

The plot of *Laxdæla*, the story of the *Lovers of Gudrun*, which is the Volsung story born again, became a commonplace of the same sort. It certainly had a good right to the favour it received. The plot of *Laxdæla* is repeated in the story of Gunnlaug and Helga, even to a repetition of the course of events by which Kjartan is defrauded. The true lover is left in Norway and comes back too late; the second lover, the dull, persistent man, contrasted with a more brilliant but less single-minded hero, keeps to his wooing and spreads false reports, and wins his bride without her goodwill. Compared with the story of Kjartan and Gudrun, the story of Gunnlaug and Helga is shallow and sentimental; the likeness to *Frithiof* is considerable.

The device of a false report, in order to carry off the bride of a man absent in Norway, is used again in the story of *Thorstein the White*, where the result is more summary and more in accordance with poetical justice than in *Laxdæla* or *Gunnlaug*. This is one of the best of the Icelandic short stories, firmly drawn, with plenty of life and variety in it. It is only in its use of what seems like a stock device for producing agony that it resembles the more pretentious romantic Sagas.

Another short story of the same class and the same family tradition (Vopnafjord), the story of *Thorstein Staffsmitten*, looks like a clever working-up of a stock theme—the quiet man roused.[1] The combat in it is less like the ordinary Icelandic fighting than the combats in the French poems, more especially that of Roland and Oliver in *Girart de Viane;* and on the whole there is no particular reason, except its use of well-known East-country names, to reckon this among the family histories rather than the romances.

Romantic Sagas of different kinds have been composed in Iceland, century after century, in a more or less mechanical way, by the repetition of old adventures, situations, phrases, characters, or pretences of character. What the worst of them are like may be seen by a reference to Mr. Ward's Catalogue of MS. Romances in the British Museum, which contains a number of specimens. There is fortunately no need to say anything more of them here. They are among the dreariest things ever made by human fancy. But the first and freshest of the romantic Sagas have still some reason in them and some beauty; they are at least the reflexion of something living, either of the romance of the old mythology, or of the romantic grace by which the epic strength of *Njal* and *Gisli* is accompanied.

There are some other romantic transformations of the old heroic matters to be noticed, before turning away from the Northern world and its "twilight of

[1] Translated by Mr. William Morris and Mr. E. Magnússon, in the same volume as *Gunnlaug*, *Frithiof*, and *Viglund* (*Three Northern Love Stories*, etc., 1875).

the gods" to the countries in which the course of modern literature first began to define itself as something distinct from the older unsuccessful fashions, Teutonic or Celtic.

The fictitious Sagas were not the most popular kind of literature in Iceland in the later Middle Ages. The successors of the old Sagas, as far as popularity goes, are to be found in the *Rímur*, narrative poems, of any length, in rhyming verse; not the ballad measures of Denmark, nor the short couplets of the French School such as were used in Denmark and Sweden, in England, and in High and Low Germany, but rhyming verse derived from the medieval Latin rhymes of the type best known from the works of Bishop Golias.[1] This rhyming poetry was very industrious, and turned out all kinds of stories; the native Sagas went through the mill in company with the more popular romances of chivalry.

They were transformed also in another way. The Icelandic Sagas went along with other books to feed the imagination of the ballad-singers of the Faroes. Those islands, where the singing of ballads has always had a larger share of importance among the literary and intellectual tastes of the people than anywhere else in the world, have relied comparatively little on their own traditions or inventions for their ballad themes. Natural and popular as it is, the ballad poetry of the Faroes is derived from Icelandic

[1] Vigfusson, Prol. p. cxxxviii. *C.P.B.*, ii. 392. The forms of verse used in the *Rímur* are analysed in the preface to *Riddara Rímur*, by Theodor Wéisn (1881).

literary traditions. Even Sigmund Brestisson, the hero of the islands, might have been forgotten but for the *Færeyinga Saga;* and Icelandic books, possibly near relations of *Codex Regius*, have provided the islanders with what they sing of the exploits of Sigurd and his horse Grani, as other writings brought them the story of Roncesvalles. From Iceland also there passed to the Faroes, along with the older legends, the stories of Gunnar and of Kjartan; they have been turned into ballad measures, together with *Roland* and *Tristram*, in that refuge of the old songs of the world.