

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 *Laxdæla*, 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 storyteller'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 *Vatnsdala*, 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 *Vatnsdala 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 *Laxdæla*, 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 *Laxdæla* 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 *Laxdæla*. 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.

Viga-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 *Reykðæla* 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 *Reykðæla* version alludes to divergencies of tradition in certain points. The curious thing is that the *Reykðæla* 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 *Reykðæla* 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 *Reykðæla 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 *Gisla*, 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 *Laxdæla*, 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*, *Vatnsdæla*, *Svarfdæla*, 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 *Laxdæla*, 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 Icefirth² 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.