

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 name¹ 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 meanesses 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 *Reykdale*, 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 (*újafnaðarmenn*) 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 *Héliand*, 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 *Laxdæla* 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 Norway¹ 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 Icclander'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 (*Fereyinga 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.