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.