

VI

THE ART OF NARRATIVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After that the brothers and their men rode west again.

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

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

And so it had to be as Thorkell wished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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