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THE VALUE OF THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

BY EINAR ÓL. SVEINSSON

I

THE legal-minded Romans used to ask: Cui bono? — For whose benefit? Nowadays we say that all things are relative. When I speak of the value of the Icelandic sagas, it is only natural that I should be asked: From whose point of view? For important things are generally not equally important to all people.

In the following meditations I shall distinguish between three different points of view. They may be compared with three concentric circles. For all those within the outermost circle the Icelandic sagas have a general human value, while for those in the two inner circles they have an additional value, greatest of all for those in the innermost circle. And we shall deal with them first.

II

The value of the sagas for the Icelanders is so great and so complex that it is difficult to define it in all its aspects. We can safely say that without the classical literature, our cultural and political struggle in later times would have met with but little understanding abroad. It is true, of course, that translations of the old Icelandic literature have not found their way into everyman's book-case in other countries, much less the original texts, and it is also unlikely that the works of Konrad Maurer, W. P. Ker, James Bryce and Andreas Heusler, to mention just a few names out of many, have ever been best-sellers. But all this has nevertheless been sufficiently well known to penetrate the mind of the civilized world. Iceland is comparable to Greece insofar

1 This paper was read to the Society at a meeting in Somerville College, Oxford, on 2 November, 1936.
as its ancient civilization has made the modern world more willing to recognize the Icelanders' right to exist, their right to be free and independent.

I shall not discuss further this well-known and important fact. But our old literature, especially the sagas, has had an immense influence on the Icelanders themselves. First and foremost, the sagas relate the early history of the Icelandic people and present a memorable picture of their civilization. They have in consequence acted as a stimulus on the people, shown them the freedom and independence of the past. The old reality made our political and cultural leaders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries take their national dreams and ambitions seriously. But, besides this, the spirit of the old literature has had a deep moral influence on the individual. When Andreas Heusler travelled in Iceland at the beginning of this century, he discovered that the Icelanders, after their 'dark ages', were what he called 'Aristodemokraten'. The ethics of the sagas, their ideals of human qualities, of honour and fair play, the great serenity that prevails in them — all this is bound to have left some traces behind. And the individualism.

I shall not enlarge upon the way in which the sagas, together with the eddic poems and their successors, the rímur and other poetry, have played no mean part in the remarkable preservation of the language, without which there would be no modern Icelandic culture. And it would be a long story if I tried to describe how the old literature has acted as an inspiration for Icelandic literature of later times: I mention it only in passing. But on the whole it may be said that the sagas and the old literature are the corner-stone of the Icelandic people's existence and the inspiration of all their achievements in modern times.

III

Icelandic influence on Scandinavia is an old story. Strange as it may seem, both Saxo Grammaticus, the Danish historian, and Theodoricus, the Norwegian historian, in the late twelfth century quote the Icelanders as authorities. Later, sagas written in Iceland, especially the Sagas of the Kings and after them the fornaldrarsögur, the mythical-heroic sagas, found their way to Norway, where they evidently enjoyed a great reputation. After the Norwegians had lost their old language, in the sixteenth century and later, Snorri's Heimskringla was translated into Danish, and this legacy of the past was read by the common people of Norway, who continued to find their history in it, the picture of their old civilization in times when Norway had been an independent kingdom. Heimskringla remained a constant stimulus to them. Many scholars maintain that it was one of the great factors in their fight for freedom.

Scholars in Denmark and Sweden in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found in sagas written in Iceland stories about their kings in olden times. This added to their self-respect. But the Danes had their Saxo, and although the Icelandic interest of the Scandinavians of those days sprang partly from political motives, the importance of the sagas in Denmark and Sweden was in no way comparable to their importance in Norway. On the other hand, it is not advisable to minimize their importance in the cultural and literary field. In the late Middle Ages Denmark and to a less degree Sweden were subject to a very thorough-going Low German influence, and later, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, part of the kingdom of Denmark was German-speaking, and German was the language of many of the aristocracy. An Icelandic student meditating on Danish civilization in, say, the seventeenth or eighteenth century may be inclined to think of it as half Continental-European and only half Northern. There are many factors which helped the Danes to preserve Northern characteristics and the will to be a Northern nation — amongst them, no doubt, are the Icelandic sagas.
With the advent of Romanticism in the nineteenth century it can be seen that the sagas, their subject-matter and sometimes their form and their spirit, have exerted a profound influence on the literature of these countries. It is enough to mention such names as Oehlenschläger, Grundtvig, Tegnér, Bjørnson, Ibsen, Sigrid Undset. Of course, every period interpreted the old literature in its own way, and accepted from it what was to its liking. And it is only natural that an Icelandic finds a wide gulf between the Scandinavian works of the nineteenth century and the sagas themselves. But of all the Scandinavian authors I think that Henrik Ibsen shows the closest affinity to the Icelandic sagas, and when I say this, I am not thinking specially of his historical plays but of his plays with modern themes.

IV

Now we leave the second circle. We are no longer discussing the value of the sagas for the Icelanders themselves, or for the Scandinavians who read about their early history and civilization in them. Now I wish to examine their more universal value.

Among all nations and at all times there has existed an abundance of story material, for the compass of story is comprehensive, it can comprise both the outer and the inner world, the world of reality as well as the world of imagination. The material for stories exists always in plenty. But there must be eyes to see and tongues to tell. The existence of such eyes and tongues may be periodic, centuries apart even. For the gifts of Fortune to mankind are often mere fragments — it happens but seldom that we are given anything whole and complete.

In their literature, and especially in the sagas, the Icelanders of the old Commonwealth succeeded in creating a living picture of their world, first and foremost of their own national life and that of neighbouring peoples. Although more is told about some countries than others, the sagas have something to say about all the areas then inhabited by the Northern peoples. And their horizon is even wider, embracing all Europe and even going still further afield. The sagas have therefore much historical value: they display the civilization and ideas of the Northern peoples at that period, and some of them preserve the heroic literature of the Germanic peoples in better and more complete form than exists anywhere else. And if we include the Eddas, we have here the greatest part of our knowledge of the heathen religion of the Germanic peoples.

V

Nothing would be further from the truth than to call this literature merely a collection of sources for history and mythology, of an exclusively academic interest. They could be that even if they were imperfect in art. But they are so profound that they have a universal, human value: they reveal man, his life, his soul, his fate. When we consider this, the historical and geographical settings become a raiment lending the contents a particular hue; but the contents themselves are humanity, independent of time and place.

This picture which the sagas present is both comprehensive and profound.

Here we see people of all walks of life, the chief and the slave, the farmer and the tramp, the farmhand and the sailor. We meet people of all ages, from the child in its cradle to the blind old man. We see men and women. We meet these people under the most varied circumstances of life. We hear joyous speeches and lamentations, we feel hatred and love, hope and despair and most things that move the human heart.

In his Poetics Aristotle says that tragedy is an imitation, not of people, but of action and life. The Icelandic sagas begin by relating events — but, almost before we realize it, their main purpose turns out to be to describe people.
They never neglect the events, but people are described as they manifest themselves in the events, through their actions and words. People are described from without as if an intelligent witness were telling the story. The story-teller restrains himself, he takes care not to intrude or to relate too much the thoughts of his characters, he pretends not to have any hand in it at all, pretends to be objective, takes care not to point with his finger in order to draw the moral. He presents his work in such a way that the reader or listener can see the drama in his mind’s eye. The famous words of Gustave Flaubert describe exactly the attitude of the saga-writer: ‘L’artiste ne doit pas plus apparaître dans son œuvre que Dieu dans la sienne.’ But then the saga-writer also expects much from his audience. The listener must concentrate, the story-teller does not shout at him like a newspaper-vendor in the street. The reader, or listener, must have sensitivity and a vivid imagination: and if he has, then all this human life in the sagas, with its force and diversity, its misery and glory, becomes clear to him.

The Norwegian writer, Hans E. Kinck, has somewhere said that an uncanny knowledge of the human mind is revealed in the sagas. This, I think, every reader will discover for himself if he studies them closely, even if the objectivity, the artistic illusion, may at first conceal the fact. But it is also evident that there is no attempt to describe the inner feelings: the diverse motives are not analysed, the nuances of emotions are not described nor the stream of consciousness. But a great deal of a person’s mind can be revealed through his actions, his physical appearance or his words, which is exactly the method used in the sagas. Their point of view is dramatic, just as their movements and suspense are often dramatic also.

These strict rules were second nature to a whole group of saga-writers in a certain period: it seems to have been quite natural for them to abide by these rules, just as a great composer creates his works of art in conformity with strict rules of which he may or may not be aware. And in this way the saga-writers created on vellum a great number of characters, many of whom are drawn with a masterly touch, impressive, true and profound. We can classify these characters according to the main types: some, for example, are intelligent, others impulsive, and so on, but we soon discover how diverse the characters are in each class. And if we wanted to classify them thoroughly according to their idiosyncrasies, the classes would be just as many as the characters themselves. This means, in other words, that the characters are individuals. Jakob Burckhart, in his famous work Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien, says that with the Italian Renaissance a new understanding and appreciation of man as an individual emerged, a fresh appreciation of the idiosyncrasies which distinguish him from other people of the same class or type. In this respect, the Icelanders were ahead of the Italians, a fact of which this great scholar was not aware. If he had known the sagas, he would have been impressed by what is to be seen there.

The tendency to imitate reality by describing complex characters, by painting with mixed colours, can sometimes make the reader’s sympathy balance as if on a knife’s edge, as is the case when he is confronted by Egil Skalla-Grímsson and Viga-Glúm. At other times the personalities are so complex that we are faced with problem-characters — like Hamlet’s; Skarphó sin is one of them. The realism of these descriptions of character is so great that the parts where they occur are not only impressive but are also often endowed with the mystery of the unknown. Here, in my opinion, we have methods of presenting character which are entirely different from those used by the Greeks or Romans. And the same applies to the few cases where development of character is portrayed, Saint Ólaf in Snorri’s Heimskringla, Njal in the Story of Burnt Njal. In all these respects the sagas
are the forerunners of Western literature of later times.

As I mentioned earlier, however, the descriptions of human characters in the sagas never lead the author so far astray that he forgets to tell the story, to describe the events. Often we see a peculiar relationship, an interplay, between events and characters. This interplay clearly arouses the interest of the author — it is as if he often looks with wonder, and sometimes undoubtedly with horror, at human life. The sagas are an essay on man.

VI

In Iceland we call the era of the Commonwealth fornöld — 'Ancient Times' — and the following period midöld, 'Middle Ages'. In European history both periods belong to the Middle Ages, to their latter half, since Iceland's history began when a third of the Middle Ages had already passed. By European terminology, therefore, our ancient literature is to be called medieval. This difference in definition shows two different ways of looking at things. We may say that the Icelandic phrase shows a narrower outlook, but even so it is not entirely wrong. It simply means that the clock in Iceland was not the same as in Europe at that time.

Iceland, of course, belonged to Europe, whose medieval Catholicism and learning were brought to Iceland and with them the art of writing. Some scholars want to ascribe as much as possible of our old civilization to foreign influences. I shall not try to solve that problem, nor to discuss the part played by the Church in the creation of Icelandic literature. Of the sagas I wish to say this: What is most remarkable in them is something that cannot be traced to medieval Europe. Perhaps my translation of Le Roman de Tristan et Isolde and a book called Lei og súður til lands show some love of medieval literature and give me some justification for saying that the things I like best in the Icelandic sagas are those which are not medieval. I take delight in the saga-writers' fondness for intelligence and common sense, their appreciation of lucidity, of cool, unprejudiced judgement and sound suspicion, and I often think of the credulity of the Middle Ages and their faith in authority. And secondly, I enjoy the purity of the sagas: the people they describe are hard without being cruel, a fact which, in my opinion, is far too often ignored; the characters of the sagas are natural people, very seldom sensual or lustful, whereas cruelty and sensuality spoil many a medieval work. I like the objective attitude in our sagas, their realism, their understanding of people as they are. It happens but rarely that saga-characters are presented as glazed pictures or dark shadows, they are not divided into angels and devils, as is so often the case in medieval literature.

Another feature I like about the Icelandic sagas is their social range. The admiration for manly deeds and valour is exactly the same in the romances of chivalry as in our sagas. Chivalry and drengskapr are two related ideas, and it is difficult to say which is more pronounced, chivalry in the romances or drengskapr in the sagas. But in the romances of chivalry the people are divided into two classes: the knights and the common people, or rather, the knights are people, while the socially inferior are despicable and ridiculous figures, hardly classed as human beings at all. The knights are the exclusive heroes of these romances, while the common people are for the most part not in view. When we compare the romances with the Icelandic sagas the difference is obvious. Any free person can be the hero of a saga, and even people in bondage are spoken of with dignity, provided they possess manly virtues, as may be seen from the anecdotes about Vífin, Ingólf's slave, or Atli, Geirmund's slave, or Bóthild, Ingjald's bondwoman. In the sagas we often come across people at work, the heroes no less than the others, even chieftains like Skálfa-Grím and Arneck goði. We
see the romantic lover, Björn Breiðvíkinga-kappi, at carpentry out in the field, and Kormak, the love-poet, was once on his way to the mountains to drive home the duncoloured sheep, only he preferred to remain at Gnúpsdal in Steingerð's company — and who could blame him for that? Scholars speak rightly of the aristocratic element in early Icelandic civilization, but we must not forget the democratic features which are so evident in politics, culture and literature. For this reason it often seems as if the society depicted in the sagas is a classless one, since the prevalent attitude in them is so utterly human. In this connection I shall refer only to the saga of Gísli the outlaw: how indifferent it is to the power and glory of the chieftain, yet at the same time how completely devoid of any plebeian sentiment. For here the indomitable human spirit is manifest in all its nobility and greatness. It is enough to remind you of the scene when Ólaf the Stout arrives with a band of men and orders the farmer at Hergeisla to deliver up the outlaw, the killer of Ólaf’s brother, and receives the following reply: “My clothes are in tatters, and I won’t be sorry if I wear them out no more, and I will sooner die than fail to give Gísli all the help I can and protect him from trouble.” We should have to search far and wide to find a more magnanimous reply than this.

VII

As I mentioned earlier, particular rules dominated the way in which the sagas were told, and by observing these rules their authors achieve certain special results, weave a peculiar magic spell. The selecting of methods and of modes of expression is sometimes called ‘style’, in the wider sense of the word. All the different aspects of the form, however intricate they may be, must be in harmony. If we study the narrative method of the sagas and their formal tendencies, we are bound to notice that as a literary genre they are original and clearly distinguishable from all other kinds of literature. Their form is unique, peculiar only to them, they present their picture of human life in their own particular way. What is unique need not necessarily be perfect, but the best sagas achieve some sort of perfection. There is an integral relationship between the saga-writers’ attitude to life and the manner in which they represent life in their works. Both attitude and manner are original, and it is by virtue of their combination that the picture of human life presented in the sagas achieves its perfection. There are other genres of literature, with a different vision, different methods and forms, each of them having its own kind of virtue. But no literary genre is so comprehensive that it can embrace everything: there are always limitations, and limitations in vision and form can be partly responsible for the achievement of a certain perfection.

The term ‘style’ is not only used in this wide sense, but also in the narrow sense of ‘diction’. The narrative method of the sagas enhances their artistic value, because of its uniqueness, and the same is true of the diction. In the Middle Ages three kinds of diction were distinguished: solemn, humble and medium. It is easy to fit the saga-style into this system. The saga-style is in a way a reflection of the national life, where the contrasts collaborate, as it were, where godi and pingmodr take each other by the hand as two free partners, nobility and commons form a unity which is in fact ‘medium’, deriving its merits from both parties. The style is natural and refined at the same time, endowed with passion and yet restrained. It is just as if the authors of these sagas had consulted Prince Hamlet: “In the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness”.

One of the characteristics of this style is a clarity which is reminiscent of the mountains of Iceland on a bright day.
The air is clear, all outlines are well defined, but at the same time there is evident a sensitive feeling for nuances, within the limits dictated by the restrictions of discipline. A marvellous skill is displayed by the better authors in knowing what to say and when to say it, and when to make the reader or listener deduce things for himself. In this respect the reader is shown much trust and respect by the writer. Finally, we can truly say that here we have prose in its purity, devoid of anything appertaining to poetry, as the spoken language always is. The spoken language with its rhythm and vividness is an essential factor in the creation of this style, while the diction is condensed and purified of empty words according to the dictates of art. In this manner the diction of the sagas displays to every reader who understands their language an enchanting beauty, which is unique and cannot be recreated, being the fruits of a particular society and period, which was once and will never come again.

VIII

Once, when Árni Magnússon, the Icelandic scholar and rationalist, was defining the subject-matter of the Icelandic sagas, he said: “Farmers having a scrap”. This statement is similar to those that can often be heard in club-conversation, when people amuse themselves by making things look oblique in order to see them from a new angle. The sagas, it is true, take place in a farming society and tell nothing of lords and ladies in their castles. And it is evident that if the warfare described in the Icelandic sagas is compared with warfare elsewhere then it becomes rather insignificant, and people are apt to exaggerate its importance. But it is certainly something more than ‘having a scrap’, because here human lives are always at stake, and the presence of death magnifies and deepens everything. It is easy to pick out descriptions of fights which are nothing but sheer barbarism — I may mention the stories about Viga-Styr as an example — but on the whole human nature is disciplined and conforms to the ideal of honour, and it is precisely a characteristic of civilization that human conduct is disciplined by a moral code. In the sagas, revenge, which belongs in the same complex of ideas, often seems to be due to obligation rather than to innate vengefulness. Honour is the root of heroism, and honour was no more pronounced among the courtly knights than it was among these farmers. So delicate and sensitive are the stories of the old Icelandic idea of honour that they remind us of the descriptions of love in later literature.

It is not necessary to explain to the present audience that the complex of ideas that centred round the concept of honour also had its darker side in this early society. Of all this the sagas give a picture and, of course, in such a way that in one saga a certain aspect is more noticeable than in another — a picture which is comprehensive and inspired, where everything is understood from within even though it is described from without. And certainly something would be lacking in the picture of human life they present, if the current ideas of ethics were not the main strand, or indeed the vital nerve, of their presentation.

The sagas, of course, differ in quality, as is evident if they are carefully read. But in most cases we can notice, directly or indirectly, that whatever the subject-matter of a saga is, it is related with a certain ethical equipoise. The magnetic needle always points in the right direction, whatever happens; we can read between the lines the author’s abhorrence of base deeds and pusillanimity and his admiration for magnanimity, nobleness, loyalty and dregshapr. Of all these it is perhaps the idea of dregshapr — fair play — which is most worthy of discussion. It is an Icelandic and Northern democratic parallel to chivalry, unassuming, strong and true — an ideal which has exerted a great influence on Icelanders of all times.
The heroism of the sagas originates in a certain conception of greatness which values certain things above life itself. But, even so, it is not in the clouds, it is in a peculiar way blended with realism. So that even here we can discern a harmony of contrasts.

IX

Earlier in this paper I called the sagas 'an essay on man'. Very few of the sagas, I think, are composed on the basis of a preconceived idea. But in the 'essay' people and events often arrange themselves in the author's vision into systems, where a single idea, or complex of ideas, prevails, as in the saga of Grettir the outlaw where the essence of the saga is summarized in the following sentence: "Happiness and accomplishments are two different things". In most cases the main ideas in the sagas have their origin in the observation of experience and, in fact, represent a kind of layman's philosophy. And because these ideas are only to a very slight extent of foreign origin, they differ from those of the Hebrew-Hellenist-Roman civilization and consequently people often fail to realize that there are thoughts of a philosophical kind in the sagas at all. It is so easy to find what is common and known everywhere that people are apt to miss what is different. And to this we may add the fact that the authors of the sagas very seldom draw any moral conclusion from their stories. The reader must himself draw the conclusion from the 'essay on man' by close observation of the work itself, and sometimes he will find himself left with a question rather than with a conclusion.

As an example of the way in which the ideas in the sagas are closely linked with experience, I shall mention the idea of gipta, good fortune, which is a kind of mental and physical vital force, a faculty for enjoying and succeeding in everything which falls to one's lot. And since this idea is based on experience, it represents something more than a transient conception. Some American must undoubtedly have written on the 'psychology of success', which is a similar thing.

Before I leave this subject, I want to mention briefly one fact. In many of the sagas there is apparent a strong belief in fate. But this belief is derived from the impact made by life itself rather than from rational thought. The old Icelandic idea of fate implies influence on events, rather than on the human will and the human mind. The early Icelanders thus believed in the power of man, much in the same way as the Stoics did. Fate was often severe. It was hard to suffer sorrow, hard to have to die at a certain moment. But fate was not actually cruel. There was no Goddess of Destiny who would rejoice at the humiliations of man. Thus there prevails in this world a peculiar calm neutrality. To the early Icelanders fate could be something more than a burden, it could also be a challenge to the free mind not to give up and not to fail to accept with courage whatever falls to one's lot. This did not imply arrogance or self-deception: on the contrary, realism and a courageous acceptance of adversity are its chief characteristics. This faith in human freedom against fate made life an art, human behaviour was subject to certain aesthetic laws. This is most evident in the stories of how people accepted death. "They are fashionable now, the broad spears," said Atli, Grettir's brother, as he received the fatal wound. "Now I delayed, but you hurried," were Helgi Droplaugarson's last words. In this manner the moment of death became the most glorious moment in life, when man was exalted above his own fate, above life and death.

X

I have now tried to expound the value of the Icelandic sagas from various points of view, but this subject is so
vast that in a single lecture I can do no more than merely touch on some of the most important points. I have tried to describe the wide human range of the sagas, their presentation in their own independent way of a picture of human life and human fate, their peculiar vision and methods.

Art is diverse, and you may sometimes feel as if you were entering a new world when you go from one sphere of art to another, or even from one artist to another. It is rewarding to acquaint oneself with the various kinds of art: a wider outlook, a deeper understanding, is gained. No branch of literature is superfluous if it has reached any kind of perfection in its own class. This is like many different instruments in a mighty orchestra, where all the diversity is harmonized in a great symphony. The subject of this symphony is the 'essay on man'. It is composed on the themes of human happiness and suffering, human hopes and despair, the eternal and inextinguishable longings of the human heart. And I like to think that this symphony is played to the glory of eternity, as a holy gift, a divine offering.

PATTERN IN NJÁLS SAGA

By I. R. MAXWELL

In his Preface to Paradise Lost C. S. Lewis says that if you want to judge anything, from a cathedral to a hen coop, the first thing is to know what it is. It is when confronted by a new form that we realize the truth of this half-forgotten truism. I remember, thirty or forty years ago, idly turning the pages of Orkneyinga saga to find out where the story began. Later, when I read a few sagas in English, I found that I had been looking for the wrong sort of story. These were different stories, with rules of their own; and, although some made complex and beautiful wholes, their form was not what I should have expected in epic or novel. My first crude error arose from not knowing what a saga was — and at what stage can one be quite sure that one has found this out? All of us must at least have observed others judging amiss because they were not looking for the excellences possible in this form and proper to it.

There is one excellence that sagas possess as a class. They all tell a story well enough to make even poor stuff tolerably lively. When I was ploughing my way through the riff-raff of Islendingasögur I did find that the mind retired in time before a new tale of the young hólbir who trounces the berserk and breaks the spine of the king's negro wrestler. And yet, when the berserk actually swaggered up to the earl's high-seat — although, like Tiresias, I had foresuffered all — I always stayed to see what happened. And the reason was obvious. The sagas, like our ballads, have the art of casting their story into scenes presented with dramatic economy. This is how they galvanize even the stalest trolly into some semblance of entertainment; this is how they give life to