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THE LATER SAGAS: LITERATURE OF TRANSITION

As Pálsson and Edwards¹⁾ point out, the later legendary fiction of medieval Iceland has usually been viewed as "impoverished descendants of the great sagas," Schlauch²⁾ for example remarking that "it was lamentably inferior to the older type of literature, to be sure." The terms "impoverished descendants" and "lamentably inferior" suggest that the later works recognizably had certain qualities in common with the great sagas, and lacked others. It also suggests a point of view--that the loss is to be regretted. One gets a slightly different view if one substitutes terms such as "selection of elements",---this casts a rather favorable light on the later creative process. Another term that could be used is, of course, plagiarism--and this again, such are our modern habits of thought, is taken as pejorative. I shall consider this matter in some detail below. But be this as it may, there can be no doubt that the later works differ greatly from the classical family sagas, even though some of these, such as Njal's Saga, may not in fact have been written very much earlier, nor that both general readers and scholars have usually agreed in preferring the earlier works.

In this paper I am not at all concerned to evaluate this kind of literature; rather, I wish to attempt to deduce from it, and particularly from the processes of selection mentioned above, something of the later writers' attitude to their own and to earlier times. I shall concentrate largely on Kroka-Ref's Saga, since that seems to differ in certain interesting ways from many of its contemporaries. I shall consider first its similarities with and

1) H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland (Studia Islandica; Reykjavik, 1970) p. 7.

2) Margaret Schlauch, Romance in Iceland (Princeton University Press, 1934), p.5.

differences from the classical family sagas. I shall then compare it with the later fictional sagas, showing that it differs not only from the extremely improbable legendary fiction but also from the slightly more realistic sagas with which it is sometimes associated, particularly in those characteristics which are often mentioned as typical of the later sagas. I shall then suggest that these differences are caused by the particular aim of the writer, this being in turn caused by his attitude towards conditions in contemporary Iceland. Finally, I shall look at the ways in which Kroka-Ref's Saga anticipates later fictional developments.

What, then, does Kroka-Ref's Saga have in common with the great sagas?³⁾ It has, of course, the setting--in Iceland, Greenland, Norway, and Denmark--including a brief account of his father's leaving Norway to settle in Iceland. Ref's life follows a traditional pattern, in that he begins as a lazy good-for-nothing and suddenly emerges as an outstanding hero--indeed a type of superman with almost universal talents. This kolbátr origin is fairly common in saga literature, for example Viga-Glum, and also Thorstein in Vatnsdoela, and also in the English Jack and the Beanstalk. He emerges from his early state of lethargy in response to his mother's egging him on, and the situation which provoked her anger was partly the result of her neighbour Thorbjorn being egged on to aggressive acts by his wife Rannveig. The theme of women inciting their menfolk is also of course of fairly frequent occurrence in the sagas, one of the best examples being the way the feud between the households of Njal and Gunnar is built up and continued not by Njal and Gunnar themselves but by their wives. Similarly, Hildigunn urges on Flosi to avenge the death of Hoskuld. So here Rannveig urges Thorbjorn to slay Ref's servant, and then Thorgerd, Ref's mother, urges him to avenge the manslaughter.

Most of the slayings in this saga are activated by one of the strongest forces controlling behaviour and standing in the sagas, the need to preserve one's honour and to avenge an insult. Four different aspects of this are illustrated. Ref kills Thorbjorn,

3) All these elements are of course extremely common and I have merely selected one or two of the best known examples as illustrations

not to avenge the death of this servant (he had expressed his willingness to accept suitable compensation), but to wipe out the slur of cowardice. Gellir is slain because he had given Ref a blow, in itself an offence, and compounded this by reporting it widely in an inaccurate and exaggerated version. Thorgils and his four sons die for spreading the rumour that Ref was a coward and that he behaved like a woman every ninth night (apparently an unforgivable insult; Skarp-Héðinn taunts Flosi with this at the Thing, and thus ruins the possibility of reconciliation for the slaying of Höskuld), and Grani for his attack on Ref's wife Helga. At the end of the saga great stress is laid on the honours given to Ref and his sons. Further, it is to be noted that Rannveig, when urging Thorbjorn against Bardi, does so partly by representing it as dishonourable that his wishes should be thwarted by so insignificant an individual. Also, King Harald's expedition to Denmark to kill Ref is prompted by the need to assert his dignity against this individual who had killed two members of his court.

Closely connected with the concept of honour is that of revenge. I noted above that in four cases manslaughter occurs from the need to avenge an insult. Also obligatory was the need to avenge a death, though it was not necessary always to exact a life in return; Ref was at first willing to accept compensation for Bardi. Gunnar's and, later, Eirik's search for Ref, however, is made with the intention of killing him, but in both cases the attempt is unsuccessful, and in neither case does Ref kill his enemy either. In accordance with the idea that only "the slave takes vengeance at once, the coward never", Ref allows Gellir and Thorgils to spread their rumours for some time before killing them, in each case choosing a time when arrangements have been completed so that he will be able to get away with all his property (in this notably more successful than Kvedulf, Egil's ancestor, since we are told that when he left Norway no one could be found to buy the farm and land).

There are examples of loyalty, even at the cost of one's life. Bardi refuses to desert his job and his employer, even though he realizes what the consequences of opposing someone as overbearing as Thorbjorn must be. Bard stands to gain nothing from attacking Ref, as Harald repeatedly points out, but he had made a promise. (Also, of course, he had accepted Gunnar's hospitality, and pos-

sibly his own pride was involved; Ref's manner at their meeting had not been flattering.) Gunnar is loyal for a considerable time to his obligation to avenge his wife's family, though eventually he abandons his attempt.

There are other similarities with the family sagas. Friendship is acquired by means of bribes, Gunnar thus getting advice from Harald (and ceasing to send gifts when it becomes obvious that there is no further advantage in so doing), Ref asylum and support from Svein, and Eirik thinking he can in this way assure himself of Sigtrygg's help. Sigtrygg's open and unashamed demand for a monetary reward is illuminating. As in e.g. Njal's Saga and Gisla Saga, Bard and Gunnar try to kill Ref by burning him in his house. Ref puts up a heroic defence in the tradition of Gunnar or Gisli, though his method of surviving the attack is strikingly different. The hero shows no sense of fear. He is also shown as being exceptionally cunning (illustrated by his name, Crafty-Fox) and farsighted. This too occurs in the classical sagas, Gisli going to some trouble to make it appear he had not left his house and that the slaying he in fact did was an "inside job", and warming his hands so that their coldness would not awaken his victim. The rather perfunctory clerical close, with Ref going to Rome, can be paralleled; Gisli's wife Audur went to Rome after her husband's death, and Audun of the Audunar Þáttur Vestfirzka also made the pilgrimage.

Stylistically, Kroka-Ref's Saga follows the family sagas. It is written in a restrained, matter-of-fact style, and the author preserves an objective viewpoint. There is some attempt to give a colouring of historicity--for instance, there are references to various Scandinavian kings, and the writer uses conventional tags such as "it is said", "nothing is told of the journey", etc. There are, however, also many differences from the family sagas, almost all of which are differences of omission--i.e. of the writer choosing not to use elements and characteristics which were equally available to him. One of the most noticeable is that the background of family relationships is minimal. Ref is sent to Gest, his maternal uncle, and the matter of avenging Thorgils and his sons is taken up by his son-in-law Gunnar. Apart from this, the part played by the family is virtually non-existent. Helga has a fos-

ter-father Thormod, but he represents only the vestigial remains of the tradition of foster relationship. The idea is not developed, and he drops out of the saga unmentioned. Similarly, we are told that Gellir has a mother and that she is rich, but she plays no part in the story. The expectation is aroused that she will take up the matter of her son's slaying, using her wealth to gain supporters, but the incident drops completely when Ref goes to Greenland. Harald chooses to send Grani's brother, Eirik, to Denmark after Ref, but the relationship is scarcely emphasized, and the only result from it is that Ref is generous to Eirik and spares his life. Rannveig, having urged Thorbjorn to commit manslaughter, is not mentioned when Ref comes to exact compensation and kills her husband. She and Thorbjorn apparently have neither children nor relatives. We are told that Björn and Thorgils are married, but their wives neither appear nor are named. Ref and Helga appear to be only children, and we do not even know whether Gest is married or not--a surprising restraint, since, as Liestøl has remarked, the sagas often mention people who are not at all necessary to the plot and almost invariably tell you the name of a man's wife and often all of her relatives also.

Not surprising when this paucity of family relationships is considered is that the saga has no instances of family ties creating divided loyalties, of internal conflict and difficult decisions. In the family sagas we often find this, e.g. in Njal's Saga when we are told that "Ketil of Mork was Thrain's brother; but he was married to Njal's daughter, Thorgerd, and he found himself in a difficult situation",⁴⁾ or in Gisli Saga, when Thordis is torn by the necessity to avenge her husband, Thorgrim, who has been killed by her brother, Gisli. The idea of hesitation, of making a choice, is lacking completely in Kroka-Ref's Saga. Similarly, there is no build-up of feud, or retaliation back and forth. It would be impossible to proceed beyond the second return, since there would be no already established character to take up the quarrel.

Another surprising characteristic of Kroka-Ref's Saga is the absence of topographical details. The settings are not localized

⁴⁾ Trans. by Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson (Penguin, 1960), p.204.

at all, and Ref's ride to Gest at Bardastrand is passed over as briefly as possible--we are given no idea of the relative position of the two places. This is in striking contrast with such an extreme example as Hrafnkel's Saga, where the writer seems to delight in describing various routes through the countryside. Social background and customs are lacking. There is no reference to a goði or godórn, to any of the Things or to any process of arbitration or law, yet litigation is one of the traditional concerns of Icelandic heroes. If the conventional ending is ignored, religious matters, either heathen or Christian, are not touched on (with the exception of Gest's vague reference to "the one who made the sun"). It at most seems as if the story could have been written by someone who had never seen any of the countries. (Perhaps an exception should be made of the Greenland incidents; there the saga does give a description of the geography.)

There is very little emphasis on fate. Gest, saying farewell to Ref, prophesies that a glorious future is predestined for him, Harald believes that Bard will be killed if he persists in his pursuit of Ref, and Ref states he is not fated to be killed by a Greenlander or by Harald. None of these statements, however, seem to be based on a definite belief in inexorable fate, but to be more similar to modern expressions of the "I guess it's just fated" type. Similarly, Stein and Harald mention premonitions, but there is no instance of anyone's being genuinely feigr as Njal was before his death by burning, nor of anyone having premonitory dreams. Gratuitous cruelty and the description of injuries are avoided. There are no parallels to Hrafnkel and his men being hung up by their legs, or Egil putting out eyes, or Gisli's intestines falling out. All Ref's killings are described with the minimum of detail, with no maimings; in one case we are told simply that "Ref came there and killed them both."

A very striking difference from the accounts of such well-known outlaws as Gisli and Grettir is the happy ending. Ref settles down to a comfortable existence, and we are given a brief outline of the rosy future in store for his sons. It should be remembered, however, that Hrafnkel also re-established himself, lived a comfortable life and was succeeded by his sons. Similarly, both Egil and Glum die a quiet death, both aged and blind, which is consid-

ered an aesthetic flaw by Ker,⁵⁾ who says: "What was an author to do when his hero died in his bed, or survived all his feuds and enmities?"

There are no long genealogies, and there is economy in the introduction and close. Kroka-Ref Saga is primarily the story of one man, like the sagas of Egil and Gisli. In these, however, a fair amount of background is given; Gisli first appears in Chapter 2, after a brief account of his father, uncles and grandfather has been given, and in Egil's Saga we are given a lengthy account of the history of his grandfather Kvedulf, his father Skallagrim, and his uncle Thorolf; in contrast, Ref is introduced in the third sentence and dies only four sentences from the end. Like Hrafnkel's Saga, the number of characters is limited; there are only about thirty in all, of whom only one, Gellir's mother Sigrid, plays no part in the action. Some, such as Gest's friend, Gellir's companions, and the Norwegian and his son who had stayed with Gest, are not even named.

There are also some striking chronological difficulties. Liestol⁶⁾ notes that the family sagas sometimes have faulty chronology, but this is nothing compared with the vagueness and, indeed, impossibility, that we find in Kroka-Ref's Saga. Ref's father, Stein, goes out to Iceland in the reign of Hakon the Good, Athelstane's fosterson, i.e. 936-961. Ref is a young man when he goes to Greenland, where he remains about seventeen years, before sailing to Norway. Yet by this time we are in the reigns of Harald Sigurd's son, 1046-1066, and Svein Estrid's son, 1047-74, that is, at least 85 years later. Coupled with the lack of topographical and genealogical detail, this means that the story floats in a geographical, chronological, and social void, instead of giving an appearance, even if spurious, of being firmly based on historical events in the Republic.

It can be seen, therefore, that Kroka-Ref's Saga differs in some

5) W.P. Ker, Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), p.193

6) Knut Liestol, The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas (Oslo, 1930), Chapter VII.

respects from the family sagas⁷⁾; it has, however, even less in common with the lygisögur. The adventures which befall the typical hero of one of these romances are not true of Ref. As an infant he is not exposed or offered as a sacrifice, nor is he raised in exile or at a distance from his father, thus providing an opportunity for conflict between the two, unaware of their relationship. Nor is he exposed to the wiles of an amorous or vindictive stepmother--in fact, he has a normal, straightforward origin and upbringing. He does not formally set out to seek adventure, he rescues no maiden from monsters, either human or fabulous, goes on no treasure-hunt, falls under no spells, goes to no holmgang meetings, and has no dealings with magic, sorcerers, dragons, trolls, berserks, princesses, etc. Bard is inclined to think Ref protects his Greenland fortress from fire by witchcraft, but this is explained by the apparatus which, however, improbable in the circumstances and period, requires no supernatural help. In addition, unlike the legendary fiction discussed and translated by Pálsson and Edwards (and other European romances, e.g. the Pèlerinage de Charlemagne), the saga lacks sexual exploits, and though Ref travels a lot he confines himself to Scandinavia rather than wandering through all the known world and even beyond. It can be seen, then, that where Kroka-Ref's Saga diverges from the family sagas, it does not do so in the direction of romance.

Kroka-Ref's Saga is sometimes mentioned in connection with two other late fictional sagas, Þorðar Saga Hreðu and Finnboga Saga. But it differs strikingly even from these in that they include elements not used by the writer of Kroka-Ref's Saga. Finnbogi, for example, is exposed as a child, reared in ignorance of his true parentage, and is supernaturally strong at a very early age. Further influence from romances is shown in the vocabulary, e.g. dubba (= dubbing) to equip, and kurteisi. Thord's Saga has a sword to which a tabu is attached. In fact, though Thord disregards the tabu no ill results, showing no strong belief in it, but Kroka-Ref's Saga has no such elements. Thord's Saga also has premonitory dreams, has a strong aristocratic flavour (Thord and his brothers

7) I return below to further comparisons with the classical sagas.

kill a king, Thord distributes gold rings to those who help him), and the foster-relationship, and the conflict it can cause, is strongly developed with Thord, Eid, and Sveinn. We have more conflicts as a result of the two brothers, Asbjorn and Orm, both wanting Sigrid, Thord's sister. We also get Sigrid promised to Asbjorn for the traditional three years.

In these respects, then, these two sagas have elements of both the family and the legendary sagas absent from Kroka-Ref's Saga. But the three do have elements in common, notably the concentration on one person and the happy ending, with the hero dying in his bed --indeed, the identical words are used of Thord and of Finnbogi; each "varð söttdauðr". These qualities they have, of course, in common with e.g. Egil's Saga and Viga-Glum's Saga. Both of these sagas have been criticized by Ker⁸⁾, who remarks of the first that "the life of Egil is told with less strength and coherence than the fate of his uncle ... the adventures of Egil Skallagrimsson appear rather ineffectual and erratic, in spite of some brilliant episodes", and, of Viga-Glum, criticizes "its want of tragedy ... It is a biography with no strong crisis in it, it might have been extended indefinitely".

But those who composed the fictional sagas about Kroka-Ref, Thord and Finnbogi do not seem to have shared in this opinion. A saga dealing with the successful life of one man and leaving him to die eventually of old age apparently had a strong attraction. They saw no problem for an author in a hero who died in his bed. On the contrary, such a story was to be emulated. Indeed, in the case of Kroka-Ref's Saga one might I think claim plagiarism, since there are striking similarities to Egil's Saga. Kroka-Ref is always successful, becomes rich, and dies in his bed. He is a skald (though his ability is limited by the ability of his creator), a man of many talents, strong and cunning. The story is not tied to a particular district, and much of the action (in fact about 70%) takes place outside Iceland. There is even a dispute about cattle grazing and the boundaries of pasturage.

However, I think the most interesting case of the influence of Egil's Saga on Kroka-Ref's Saga is what is perhaps the most striking

8) Op. cit. pp. 192-3, 194

incident in the story--certainly one of the most implausible. This is Ref's visit to Norway after his stronghold in Greenland has been destroyed. It is difficult to see how this could have been concluded in any way other than an emergency requiring his immediate departure. Since Ref was on bad terms with King Harald, and had killed his man Bard; he cannot have intended to remain there long, living in temporary, not very comfortable circumstances, with his men some distance away in the ship, presumably guarding and feeding the animals later presented to Sveinn. The writer can have introduced this episode only because he was aware of the means he intended to use to terminate it, since it could not have been prolonged for any length of time or with any very constructive purpose on Ref's part. As it is, it is a serious flaw in the characterization of Ref as cunning and far-sighted.

Within the saga itself there is no possible motivation for this incident. But if we look at Egil's Saga and assume some influence from this, then I think we can find an explanation. For the incident does bear a strong resemblance to Egil's involuntary visit to Eirik Bloodaxe and Gunnhild at York, in which he ransomed his life by the astounding feat of composing a long poem in honour of Eirik overnight. In this saga Egil's going to York is explained in terms of a spell cast by Gunnhild; as we have already seen, Kroka-Ref's Saga makes no use of magic, and his going to Norway is inexplicable. But once there, he has the opportunity of paralleling Egil's poetic feat by demonstrating a tremendous linguistic ability in his spontaneous punning riddle speech, by means of which he manages to proclaim the slaying of Grani, thus reducing it to manslaughter, while yet concealing the offence from the king and his men long enough to enable him and his men to escape to Denmark. There is of course no proof that this incident is modelled on Egil's Saga, but it seems to me extremely likely, and provides one more example of the extent to which the author admired both Egil's Saga and Egil himself.

We may now pause to ask why the authors of certain of the later fictional sagas preferred Egil's Saga to e.g. Njal's Saga or Gret-tir's Saga as a model, and why the author of Kroka-Ref's Saga in particular is so highly selective in the elements he chooses to

borrow. Schlauch notes ⁹⁾ that the classical sagas had spells, witches, prophetic visions etc., but that "in the less historic or purely fictitious tales dealing with Icelandic characters there is an increase in the use of strange, fantastic and supernatural motives." But Kroka-Ref's Saga rigorously eschews such elements, even those (such as a spell, or an ancestral shapechanger, or rescuing a maiden from a forced marriage with a berserk) which occur in Egil's Saga. Even the seemingly miraculous indestructability of Ref's stronghold is given a rational explanation. It may be improbable--to install his sprinkler system he has to conduct water in a buried channel, presumably dug through the permanently frozen ground (though the Danish archaeologist, C.L. Vebaek has found traces of something like this in Greenland), and then construct a very exact system of pipes and plugs that can be removed instantaneously, and Gunnar and his men later dig a draining channel, apparently in one day. This large, perfectly constructed fort was apparently built very quickly, with the help of only a few men, and to engineering limits that would be difficult with precision instruments. But there is nothing about it that requires the suspension of the laws of nature.

Similarly, the willingness and ability of twelve men with, presumably, farms and families of their own, to drop everything at a moment's notice to join Ref for an unspecified period of time, is highly unlikely--but not impossible. Sveinsson notes ¹⁰⁾ that in the thirteenth century some chieftains got oaths of allegiance from others, who then became in fact subject to them, but he also ¹¹⁾ says that farmers refused to go on expeditions supporting chieftains, and would only defend their own district. Ref appears to have been unusually successful with the oaths he obtained--an instance presumably of his powers of leadership. Sveinsson also ¹²⁾ suggests a possible reason for the change in literary tastes. "When men set

9) Op. cit., p.12

10) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, The Age of the Sturlungs, trans. J.S. Hannesson (Islandica, Vol. XXXVI; Cornell University Press, 1953), p.12.

11) Ibid., p.11

12) Ibid., p.28

so high a value upon the realities of human life around them, there is less need for the compensation to be found in stories of extravagant and fantastical wish-fulfillment, and accordingly such stories are inconspicuous in Iceland until the thirteenth century..." Elsewhere¹³⁾ he says that "... a predilection for the fantastic and supernatural ... implies discontent with reality, escape from it. It signifies the collapse of the appreciation of reality and realism ... The cause must be something in people's outlook, in their society and culture." He notes that after the fall of the Icelandic Republic the hero develops "into the insensitive prize-fighter ... The interest in magic and supernatural happenings increases." The romantic sagas are seen then as resulting not just from the influence of English and Continental literature, but also from a desire to escape from the brutality and turmoil of the Sturlung Age or from the drabness of the age that followed.

But a writer may desire to escape, not into the "extravagant and fantastical wish-fulfillment" of a romantic world--as we have seen, this is precisely what the writer of Kroka-Ref's Saga is not interested in--but instead to give way to a nostalgic longing for earlier conditions, for a lost Golden Age. Sveinsson¹⁴⁾ refers to "the Commonwealth outlook or habit of mind. A consciousness of freedom, of amounting to something, of having some control over the affairs of oneself and others ..." and this is surely what the creator of Kroka-Ref craves. That is, it seems that the desire for escape literature bifurcates--or, indeed, trifurcates--since we have the true sagas of older times, which contain elements of the gods and of magic, the romantic sagas, and more down-to-earth fictional sagas set in the same kind of background as the classical sagas, though often concerned with a slightly later period, of which Kroka-Ref's Saga is surely an extreme, possibly the purest, quintessential example. For, as we have seen, this work is in many ways unlike the other fictional sagas. The hero is not displayed just as an "insensitive prizefighter"; unlike Finnbogi, Ref is characterized

13) Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Dating the Icelandic Sagas, trans. G. Turville-Petre (Viking Society for Northern Research; University College, London, 1958), p. 125.

14) Age of the Sturlungs, p. 60

more by his skills and his cunning. What the author really seems to admire is his sheer virtuosity. And we may ask why, when copying the classical sagas, did he omit so many elements which would have added verisimilitude? Why, when writing a purely fictional saga, did he omit so many elements (often derived from the classical sagas) which are precisely those which are taken as typical of the fictional sagas? Kroka-Ref's Saga is obviously an exception to the claims of e.g. Schlauch and Sveinsson about the later works; even though one cannot say that the saga is realistic, the author has gone to a lot of trouble to make the implausible episodes explainable by non-supernatural means.

It seems possible that Kroka-Ref's Saga was written during the second quarter of the 14th century¹⁵⁾; that is, perhaps fifty years after the Icelandic Commonwealth had come completely under Norwegian control, after all the disturbances of the Sturlung Age. Bearing this in mind, and also the choice the saga-writer made from the range of literature available to him to copy (and it is obvious that much in the saga is based on other models, rather than being original creation), we can I think see what it is that he wants to create and why. He is writing at a time when the frontiers have closed, and life in Iceland is in many ways different from that represented in the family sagas. Politically, the days of individual freedom are over. His ancestors could leave Norway to escape domination by Harald Fairhair, but that choice is no longer open; strong national kings have established themselves in Scandinavia, England, France, and there is no way of moving beyond their reach. In the three centuries since Christianity has been accepted in Iceland the church had established itself. Ethics of behaviour had changed, and again one of the major changes must have been to limit individuality, since Christianity is above all a socialized religion, emphasizing man in the community--moreover, in mediaeval times, most often man in his fixed hierarchical place in the community. Further, the church would normally also be against rebellion against the lay government. Finally, there has been a loss of freedom in the physical, geographical sense. The land in Iceland has long been taken

15) Foreword to J. Halldórsson (ed.), Kjalnesinga Saga (Íslensk Fornrit, Vol. XIV; Reykjavík, 1959), citing Maurer.

up and ownership established. Greenland is less hospitable a country to settle in, and the Icelanders do not seem to have found North America very suitable for settlement. So that in virtually all aspects of life there has been a considerable contraction of freedom, an increase in the external constraints, and an emphasis on conformity. They no longer have any "consciousness of freedom, of amounting to something, of having some control over the affairs of oneself"--but they must surely have had a sense of having had these, and of having lost them.

It should be remembered also that Iceland (like North America later) had originally been populated by people who were dissatisfied, who had been prepared to pull up stakes and move on when conditions were unsatisfactory. Now that this was no longer possible, this frame of mind must surely have encouraged the remembering and writing down of the older poems and stories about the earlier period, with varying degrees of verisimilitude and historicity, or an escape into an impossible world which never could have existed, but in which one's desires are not constrained as they are in the real world, so that we get the development also of the romantic fiction. And in the fourteenth century, this time of graveyard quiet, it must have seemed particularly desirable to create a hero who was outstandingly alive, and particularly pleasant to show him, an Icelander, successfully defying the King of Norway.¹⁶⁾

To offer these alternate modes of wish-fulfillment is of course an extremely common feature of escape literature. Notice how little popular reading tastes have changed between fourteenth-century Iceland and modern North America (and probably elsewhere).¹⁷⁾ When one goes into a library in the United States or Canada one finds separate sections for detective stories and for science fiction. The same is true for stores that specialize in the sale of second-hand paperback books, with the addition that they usually have also

¹⁶⁾ This is of course also found in the classical sagas; cf. discussion in Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece, ed. and trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 34-5.

¹⁷⁾ The immense popularity of Tolkien's work surely has affinities with the appeal of the legendary fiction of mediaeval Iceland.

a section for historical novels. Writers such as Ian Fleming and Len Deighton, whose books are really crime adventure rather than straight detection, are strictly speaking out of this category, but are nevertheless shelved with them, presumably as the nearest genre. But they have certain qualities in common with a further category, also shelved separately in libraries and bookstores, and that is the Western. For the detective story emphasizes rather the charm of a fixed, ordered universe, in which right always triumphs, whereas the Western adds to this (for surely in the classical Western the goodies always win over the baddies) the appeal of the strong, attractive, resourceful, successful individual, and the freedom he has to achieve his aims--and, often, his disregard of established authority--and this is true also of the two authors mentioned above.

We can now see why a saga dealing with the life of a single man would be likely to appeal to a saga writer in the fourteenth century, and why he would be particularly attracted by a saga in which the hero is successful. Egil was a man of great and various abilities, who triumphed over adversity, who refused to let his life be controlled even by kings. And in Ref we have this principle carried as far as it can go. As I mentioned earlier, he is a type of superman with almost universal talents. He is strong, skilled in fighting and in fight strategy, in engineering, agriculture, craftsmanship, disguise, finance, poetry, and an outstanding leader. But he is never the aggressor; he fights only to avenge a wrong. Furthermore, he owes nothing of his success to any kind of supernatural intervention; all is achieved through his own talents. The writer seems to wish to glorify human abilities, to demonstrate the utmost that can be achieved with purely human resources, unassisted by gods and unhampered by the restrictions of any kind of governmental or legal control. Thus magic, religion, litigation, the social position and power of the godar, are omitted entirely, and the kings are there either to be outmanoevred or to reward Ref and his descendants. And note also the absolute lack of aristocratic elements in Ref's life, the lack of any kind of what we would now call conspicuous consumption, the absence of any mention of

clothes, music or food, so common in Icelandic legendary fiction¹⁸⁾ and in medieval romance generally¹⁹⁾. I think the only exception is the brief reference to Grani's blue clothes when he goes to try to seduce Helga. There is perhaps something wistful in the writer's attitude--even an ordinary man, pure Icelandic, with no French culture, no magic, no gods, if strong, talented, industrious, brave, could in those earlier times be successful, independent, even safe, and live to a ripe old age.

I referred earlier to certain similarities between mediaeval Icelandic literature of escape and today's genres. I return now to a closer examination of some of these genres. I said that in the fourteenth century the frontiers had closed. This produced, in works such as Kroka-Ref's Saga, works looking back to a frontier society, though not always very accurately. In the popular Western novels of this century we have a similar phenomenon, produced by similar conditions. The United States was settled largely by people who were more vigorous and/or dissatisfied than the majority. They had left their homeland and made a considerable sea journey, and were then prepared to continue to move on in search of land where they could settle in freedom and farm. Inevitably perhaps there developed a society in which the individual had great freedom, as compared with elsewhere, to choose his land and to arrange his life, very little hampered (or helped) by the law which, however it existed in theory, in practice could for some time not be administered in the areas farthest west, so that might (or good shooting ability) usually won, and the individual protected himself as best he could. (This is not to say that the American people had no respect for law; it is interesting to note that, just as the Icelanders set up a code of laws modelled on the Norwegian laws, the American republic began with a written constitution which attempted to define and protect the rights of the individual--something which the Western European countries certainly did not have.) I do not want to draw too close an analogy between the two situations. But it is interesting that with the close of the American frontier,

18) As noted by Pálsson and Edwards, pp. 97-98

19) cf. also Fleming and Deighton for this, versus the simple life of the typical cowboy hero.

now that there is nowhere else to move onto, and the government can reach everywhere, there has developed a large body of literature recreating what people would like to think frontier life was like. We find formalization and simplification of characterization, lack of historical verisimilitude, topographical and chronological vagueness. We also find the concept of the outlaw, who is not common in European literature (I am not forgetting Hereward the Wake and Robin Hood), but who reemerges in all his glory in the American West, so that to most English-speaking people the primary associations of the term are with figures such as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and the Dalton brothers. The (usually idealized) image of such men is still very much alive, so that travellers in the United States will find marked on their itineraries the location of the Dalton hideout (open to the public at specified hours), and they are considered suitable subjects still for new movies and television series. Ref surely has much in common with the idealized, honest, simple, clean-cut, chivalrous young cowboy who can ride and shoot better than his companions, sings, can design and construct an artesian well, rope and brand cattle and break horses, has a non-existent sex life except for his honest intentions of marrying his stereotyped sweetheart, whose virtue and reputation he will defend with his life, and with whom he will settle down on a homestead and raise herds of cattle and a family of healthy sons.

All the issues in such a story are clear-cut--in the classical Western we always have the goodies vs. the baddies, and there is rarely any doubt as to which group each character belongs to--and, as in Kroka-Ref's Saga, we do not get internal conflict. This may perhaps be the result of wishing to put the blame for all problems of life on external things, the contemporary situation, believing that in an earlier, perhaps simpler time, such problems would not have existed. Or it may be a real failure of the imagination; the writer of the saga may honestly have thought that most of his difficulties would not have existed then, and that a man like Ref would be bound to succeed --though I think this improbable, since he was obviously acquainted with earlier saga literature.

Be this as it may, it is I think not difficult to deduce what he found attractive about an earlier period in his country's history,

and presumably lacking in the Iceland of his time. We can also see what he had no interest in--litigation, the supernatural, luxury, Christianity (since the clerical close is about as perfunctory it could be).

And in other ways I think Kroka-Ref's Saga looks forward to later literature, showing in what direction fourteenth century tastes in Iceland were moving. I mentioned the writings of Ian Fleming earlier, and I did so because I find some similarity. The technical improbabilities of a fortress with such an advanced sprinkler system, or a wheeled boat that drops so accurately into its channel and runs away to the sea, are surely ingenious devices rather like an Aston-Martin with an ejection seat, or a plan for stealing the gold at Fort Knox by drugging the water supply. Greenland had a water supply, and some people had conducted it in channels, and fortress-burning is quite common in the sagas; the author simply put them together. Similarly, an Aston-Martin is an existing (if not common) car, and we have ejection seats--though not usually in cars; Fleming put them together. There is in the saga what we like to think of as a modern interest in technology and engineering, the total lack of interest in magical explanation. Ref is himself the kind of character found in many modern cartoon strips, television and radio series, and popular novel and film sequences. He is not cruel, never aggressive, fights only to defend his honour and his life, and is an able and always victorious fighter--necessarily so, since he must appear in the next episode. (And the saga is constructed episodically, with no causal relation between most of the episodes, except that Ref has to move on to a new environment. Only the final episode in Denmark is motivated at all by what has happened before, in Greenland and in Norway.) Finally, he will retire to a peaceful and honoured old age, but chronology and growing old play little part in the active parts of his life. As quoted above, Ker criticized Viga-Glum's Saga because "It is a biography with no strong crisis in it, it might have been extended indefinitely." Aesthetically, I think his judgement is correct. But I think that Kroka-Ref's Saga anticipates a far different genre, that of the picaresque hero, of which one of the most striking characteristics is that he does always bob up again, successful and cheerful, is continually embroiled in fresh difficulties and

as continually extricates himself unscathed, often by improbable methods, surviving to a placid old age. This may be an inferior genre, but it has certainly proved a lasting one.

Finally, let me make a more flattering claim for the writer of Kroka-Ref's Saga, or, rather, for the view of man that is I think expressed in his work, however crudely and naively. He has lost the aesthetic view of life and the stoicism that we find (and like) in the classical sagas. His aims are comparatively superficial; one could emphatically not speak of his "keen desire to see and understand human life and to relate and interpret it".²⁰⁾ Altogether, Kroka-Ref's Saga is in concept a simple work; there is no suspense²¹⁾, since after his first success we expect him to repeat it. Further, he completely lacks the kind of conflict between native and foreign ideals which we find in Njal's Saga²²⁾; humility and submission are qualities conspicuously absent from Ref's character. Rather, the author presents an overflowing, enthusiastic faith in man's innate capacities, his potential for growth into anything he desires and it is this he glorifies in his idealized picture of "frontier man." This is again similar to what we find in the classical sagas, Sveinsson²³⁾ noting the important role in Njal's Saga of "man himself ... his individuality, his achievements, his personality," and later²⁴⁾ remarking that "the ideal of Njåla is ... the able and accomplished individual human being," and pointing out the author's preoccupation with physical and intellectual accomplishments (instancing "the author's love of the art of words"), and moral values. This last quality is apparently not so important to the author of Kroka-Ref's Saga²⁵⁾, and instead we find him stressing Ref's business ability and skill in carpentry. But there is still much in common with the concept of gæfa as defined by

20) Sveinsson, Njål's Saga, p. 181

21) Ibid., pp. 62-63

22) Ibid., pp. 34-35

23) Ibid., p. 63

24) Ibid., p. 186

25) Though there are traces of it in the portrayal of Ref's father, Sveinn, and of Bard.

Sveinsson²⁶⁾:

Gæfa is a sort of spiritual and physical capacity which makes it possible for an individual to accomplish what he undertakes to do; it enables him to attain to wealth and prosperity, health of body and soul, and other natural benefits and blessings.

And here again Kroka-Ref's Saga looks forward also, since this faith in man's potential emerges strongly in writers of the following century, who were also to believe "that the root of man's excellence and dignity lies in the fact that man is the maker of his own nature. Man may be what he wishes to be; he makes himself what he chooses".²⁷⁾ The writer of Kroka-Ref's Saga had perhaps a limited concept of what it was desirable for man to grow to be, but he also had ample faith in his ability to do so.

26) Njáls Saga, p. 191. But although I am here pointing out the similarities, there remains the obvious disparity in achievement. It is significant that when discussing Njáls Saga Sveinsson uses analogies in Aeschylus, Goethe, Shakespeare, while I use Ian Fleming, Len Deighton, and cowboy stories. This does not reflect a difference between my reading habits and Sveinsson's, but between the two works, Njal's Saga and Kroka-Ref's Saga, and possibly between the audiences they were directed to.

27) p. xiv of the Introduction to Pico della Mirandola, On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, Heptaplus (No. 227. Library of Liberal Arts; Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1965).