

Sveinn Bergsveinsson, "The Saga and the Hard-Boiled Novel." *Edda* 29 (1942): 56 - 62.

[translated by Jan Geir Johansen, Humanities Department, Augustana Campus, University of Alberta, Camrose, AB, Canada.

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One should at first glance think that there would not be many similarities between the old, technologically primitive, Icelandic peasant society and traditionless but technologically highly developed America. This should then also apply to literature to the degree that it can be thought to reflect the spiritual and social life of a historical period. However true this lack of similarity might turn out to be with reference to external circumstances, including also certain historically specific spiritual currents, we cannot apply this when it concerns general human problems, humanity's limited possibilities of reacting to life in its limitless diversity. It will therefore not surprise us to now and then encounter similarities in the world of literature even where an influence from one part on the other must be regarded as certainly impossible. As an instance of this, we find a striking similarity of both content and form between the classical Icelandic sagas and the American hard-boiled novel now so often discussed. That the writers in the latter genre, with Hemingway in the forefront, should have sought models in the old Icelandic literature is highly improbable. The similarity can also not be explained by a shared cultural foundation. It must be explained on other grounds.

But before we go further to decide what factors determine the similarity between literary genres so widely separated in time and space, we must make clear what the similarity itself consists of.

What first and foremost characterizes the saga as well as the hard-boiled novel is their concise and objective style. The artistic effect is achieved not only by what is said but also, and not least, by what is not said. Both avoid the tragic depiction of life's events. [57] They do not go into the life of the soul to describe the effects events exert on people, but present things in such a light that one experiences the tragedy oneself, thereby increasing its effect. We do not get tragedy's effects served up along with the author's subjective interpretation, but we participate in it and with our imagination alone plumb the tragic depths of events as we are forced to do in life itself. Both genres are hard and pitiless in all their objectivity. Of tenderness and sympathy we get only weak glimpses, but we do see them – as if through holes in the skull.

In contrast to propaganda novels/novels with a purpose [*Tendensromanerne*], in the sagas it is not people but fate itself that is behind the annihilating events. When one for example reads in *Laxdæla Saga* about the death of Kjartan, in which Kjartan, who is superior to all others in his skill with weapons, throws away his sword to receive his death-wound from his sworn brother, Bolli, because he himself does not want to be responsible for Bolli's death, one is gripped by the same intense tragic feeling as when George in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* shoots his best friend in the neck while he is promising his simple friend the fulfillment of his most cherished dream. The shot is certainly a mercy-killing to free Lenny from an even more gruesome death.

This hard-boiledness often borders on a bitter cynicism. In the novel we encounter it in the painfully exact description of external facts, unimportant in and of themselves, expressed with an apparent indifference when human life is at risk, indeed already doomed. The saga speaks the same way, with a touch of irony. Thus Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld's dying reply at the Battle of Stiklestad, where St. Olaf dies, when Þormóður with his own hand pulls the fatal arrow from his heart: "Well has King Olaf fed us this winter, since there is still fat at the roots of my heart."

Both the saga and the hard-boiled novel emphasise the outer, visible facts in order to reveal the inner life, the human psyche. Behind a brief remark, a facial expression, which is mentioned in the saga as if in passing, there may lie the deepest emotional turmoil which often is of decisive significance for the whole story's development. It is precisely a similar silence about an individual's inner struggle which above all else characterizes the hard-boiled novel. The hard-boiled novel requires no education in psychology, but it presupposes greater psychological familiarity and human experience to understand and appreciate it than do [58] most other literary genres. One must fill the empty spaces, the unsaid, with one's own life experience.

Another shared characteristic of the saga and the hard-boiled novel is the narrator's, i.e. the author's or the hero's, point of view. The saga sees events with the eyes of a possible observer. Its sobriety forbids it from reporting anything other than what can be seen or heard by a neutral observer who, so to speak, stands outside the events but brings them unmediated into our lives. In the novel the detailed observation and representation of facts is used as a conscious artistic means by which the observer himself is as a rule positioned in the midst of events.

Overall there are naturally many and large differences between the saga and the hard-boiled novel. First and foremost the highly time-specific choice of topic, the saga's historical aspect with exact representation of places and people, constitutes a natural difference. But this difference is more or less of a peripheral kind. For a writer it is not the actual subject-matter, the assembled material, which is decisive as to whether they are able to create a perfected work of art or not, but the shaping of this material. It is the form or, from the perspective of the authors themselves, their mastery of form.

The similarity between the saga and the novel is then not to be sought in subject matter as such or in a shared culture but in their form. And for a deeper understanding of this we must pursue the question further regarding what stands behind or conditions the structure, the work of art in its final form. A work of art's immediate origin, the powers that shape it, are naturally to be found first and foremost in the artist himself, his aesthetic orientation towards his subject matter, or life itself since the subject matter is either identical or analogous to life. We can, however, not be content with this explanation as a final answer to the question. One will rather ask further, what determines precisely this aesthetic orientation rather than some other? Is the aesthetic orientation to be understood as individual and independent of any world-view which exists, or at least has at some time existed, in the historical world? By no means. Experience shows us that the greatest literary works must not only be understood on the basis of a sometime-or-other existing world-view. They are as a rule called forth by actual problems of the present day as they are seen by the present day's eyes, or at least by the eyes of part of the present day. When a particular world-view shows itself to be widespread in – perhaps characteristic of – an entire

generation, the cause [59] must be sought in the life of society. A generation does not learn an orientation to life if the latter is not in harmony with an already existing and socially determined world-view.

We are now in a position to determine the orientation to life which conditions and characterizes the hard-boiled novel: briefly, the surrender of all previously existing ideals without their being replaced by new ones. But life as such is not surrendered. There is no trace of a flight from reality into illusion. In rootlessness and aimless searching, often without a belief that there can be found anything which is worth searching for, one looks the facts in the eye and accepts one's lot whatever it may be. One has difficulty seeing life from established moral perspectives, whether positive or negative, but is for good and ill transfixed by one's own fate. This dissolution and re-valuation of all traditional life-values has been ascribed, not without reason, to the terrifying events of the First World War. A pitiless reality breeds spiritual hard-boiledness.

But what, then, do we know about the world-view of the saga authors or about the social relationships and spiritual currents of their time which would condition their world-view? Quite a lot, in fact. The saga literature itself bears witness to distinctive fundamental assumptions. That literature was unique in the Europe of its time and inconceivable in any other place but Iceland. French literature, which set the tone for and influenced Germanic literature on the continent, had courtliness and knighthood as its fundamental assumptions. It was suffused with ethical and aesthetic ideals. In this way Christianity's ideals gained pre-eminence in the Parzival and Grail romances, personified in the knight Parzival himself. New life-values rather than the old occupy the minds of characters, thus giving the literature a marked distinctiveness.

That the ideals Christianity brought with it did not in any significant way affect saga-writing in the classic saga-period (which one thinks of as the 13th century) we understand from the information we have about Christianity's introduction and spread in Iceland. From the information originating from two different sources, we know that Christianity was adopted at the Althing in 1000 CE like any other law, with the unique compromise between the two conflicting parties, the heathen and the Christian, that some of the heathen practices were for the time being permitted and further that one could practice one's heathen religion as long as one did it secretly so [60] that the practice could not be testified to by witnesses. Such a compromise was only possible because the power of the European church had no foothold in Iceland. Through the centuries the church came to be in the hands of the worldly chieftains who also played a part in the country's rule and whose interests were primarily of a worldly nature. It is also characteristic of Christianity in Iceland in the first period after its introduction that it was referred to as "the Christian practice." One considered it more as outward ceremonies than as a revolutionizing conception of life. But the influence of the new "practice" was great enough – and it can be detected already in the last century before Christianity's official introduction – to dethrone the old, heathen gods. The belief in the gods had already lost its living essence. One stood a little disoriented, trusted most readily in *mátt og megin* [power and might], i.e. one's own strength. One had, in short, lost the old life-values, the forefathers' belief in Odin and Thor, without having had these values replaced by new ones. This orientation to life reminds one – despite its distance in time and space – very much of the spiritual *habitus* of the modern post-war [i.e. World War I] generation. It can be regarded as an intermezzo between two positive orientations

to life. We may say the same about our contemporary younger generation's orientation, though we still await a fullblown concrete fulfilment, inasmuch as it still revolves about the dead point. Here we have to reckon with history's eternal rhythmic laws.

In addition to the religious deadwater during the time of the sagas' composition there is the period's social circumstances. This period, the 13th century, is precisely the Sturlunga age, when the country's chieftains fought against each other with armies of hundreds and thousands, which resulted in the country losing its independence and coming under the rule of the Norwegian king. Though Iceland had been ruled by chieftains without a king, these feuds should nevertheless be seen in the context of the power struggle that took place in Europe between the nobility and the kings.

In such a time it was only natural that one was interested in the struggles and conflicts of the earlier Viking- and saga-periods, which, looking back from some centuries later, could be seen in a romantic light, especially when present circumstances had such great similarities after almost a hundred years of peace and stability. One must also be permitted to suggest that the tumult and insecurity which people constantly lived in left their mark on the literature of the period. They were always alert, watching for the arrival of the enemy. We know that many of the authors of the period's literature [61] were in the midst of the power-struggles' chaos and in the end had to pay for it with their lives. Thus, the best known figure of the classic literature, Snorri Sturluson, the author of *Heimskringla*, was murdered by the king's messengers when he showed no sign of wanting to fulfill the promise, coerced from him by the king, to surrender Iceland into the king's hand.

This social dissolution and Ragnarok-like situation would inevitably bring with it a restless feeling of insecurity and a blind fatalism. *Eitt sinn skal hverr deyja*. Everyone must die sometime, it was said. No one can avoid his or her fate. But nevertheless, and perhaps exactly for that reason, one was strongly preoccupied by the fate of one's fellow human beings. It is as if one wanted to examine it closely, to come to an understanding of its capricious and twisted pathways. And it ends by becoming a kind of game, in which concern for the game is greater than empathy for those forced out of the game. With a phlegmatic soberness and painful clarity the saga describes the individual's defeat in the battle against his or her own fate. I will mention one of the most famous examples. Gunnar Hliðarendi, the hero of the greatest saga, *Njál's Saga*, is by nature peaceful and good-natured. But in addition he has another quality which was not seen as less necessary for the protection of one's life in a dangerous time: Gunnar had the greatest skill with weapons of all his contemporaries. But this showed itself to be insufficient. Gunnar's fate widely evokes even today many tears from pubescent men and women throughout the country. Against his will his life is lost in battle against numerically superior enemies and with consequently complex murder trials. When he finally must pay for some murders with a three-year exile, his horse stumbles under him on the way to the ship. He looks back at his farm and utters the famous words: "Beautiful is the hillside – never before has it seemed so lovely to me as now, with its pale fields and mown meadows." Gunnar cannot tear himself away from his home but goes back despite his friends' warnings and is surrounded and killed one night when his enemies know he is home alone.

It requires courage, a spiritually trained strength, to look the grievous facts of one's fate in the

eyes. The saga never goes beyond the hard world of reality. Objectivity and truthfulness became the foundations of saga-writing.

However, tempting it might be to explain saga literature and its foundations on the basis of ethnic character and social circumstances, [62] it must first and foremost be seen in the context of the time's circumstances, as a product of its own time. It could not have been written by the same people in the same land at any time whatsoever. But placed in its historical context we see the final struggle between two ideologies as its background. Christianity is the advancing victorious power over against the doomed and retreating heathen belief. The Christian church has decisively disarmed the old gods, but has as yet not taken their place in people's minds. The individual stands alone therefore and without the support of either an inner or outer power. And when the mind is bereft of its gods it must turn itself inward – against itself. Through this ideological liberation the earthly (i.e. secular) foundation for spiritual fruitfulness and tolerance was already established. What one lost in ideological life values, one won back in human clarity of vision and self-knowledge.

When we thus on the basis of these spiritual foundations consider the saga-writer's own life which often perhaps was in danger but simultaneously was a suspenseful struggle, then we better understand the objective orientation with which he follows and deepens his saga-characters' fates. No one understood better than he the individual's powerlessness in life's unpredictable game. But this was not to be complained about. The individual's struggle, victory and defeat must be described as it is. The saga-writer stands before the saddest fate with the same sober curiosity that a doctor has in the face of a new illness on the operating table. It is the situation as such which interests him – the distinctive feature of hard-boiled literature.

From this we understand the spiritual kinship between the saga and the hard-boiled novel. It has to do with a simple psychological law: A person always reacts in a similar way to similar phenomena. In this respect, time and space and external social features play relatively small roles. The individual orientation to life always stands in a particular dependence – imitative or reactive – on the strongest powers in spiritual and social life. With artists in relation to their material, this becomes an aesthetic orientation which they realize in their work of art. If these powers in different places and at different times are in their innermost essence similar to one another, then there is nothing more natural than to find shared features in the art.