

The Scandinavian Destiny

That the destiny of nations can be no less interesting and poignant than that of individuals is a thing Homer did not know, but Virgil did, and the Hebrews felt it intensely. Another problem (the Platonic problem) is that of investigating whether nations exist in a verbal or a real way, whether they are collective words or eternal entities; the fact is that we can imagine them, and Troy's misfortune can touch us more than Priam's. Lines such as this one from the *Purgatorio*:

Vieni a veder la tua Roma che piagne
[Come see your Rome that weeps]

are proof of the poignancy of the generic, and Manuel Machado has successfully lamented, in an unquestionably beautiful poem, the melancholy destiny of the Arab lineages "*que todo lo tuvieron y todo lo perdieron*" [who had everything and lost everything]. Here, we might briefly recall the differential traits of this destiny: the revelation of Divine Unity that almost fourteen centuries ago brought together the shepherds in a desert and plunged them into a battle that has not ceased and whose limits were Aquitaine and the Ganges; the cult of Aristotle, which the Arabs taught Europe, perhaps without entirely understanding it, as if they were repeating or transcribing a coded message. . . . All that aside, it is the common vicissitude of peoples to have and to lose. To be on the verge of having everything and to lose everything is the tragic destiny of Germany. Rarer and more dreamlike is the Scandinavian destiny, which I shall attempt to define.

Jordanes, towards the middle of the sixth century, said of Scandinavia that this island (the Latin cartographers and historians took it for an island) was like the workshop or seedpod of nations; Scandinavia's sudden eruptions at the most heterogenous points of the globe would seem to confirm

this viewpoint, from which De Quincey inherited the phrase *officina gentium*. In the ninth century, the Vikings invaded London, demanded from Paris a tribute of seven thousand pounds of silver, and pillaged the ports of Lisbon, Bordeaux, and Seville. Hasting, by a wily stratagem, took control of Luna, in Etruria, put its defenders to the knife, and burned down the city, in the belief that he had seized Rome. Thorgils, chief of the White Foreigners (Finn Gaill), ruled the north of Ireland; after the libraries were destroyed, the clerics fled; one of the exiles was John Scotus Erigena. Rurik, a Swede, founded the kingdom of Russia, whose capital city, before it was called Novgorod, was called Holmgard. Toward the year 1000, the Scandinavians, under Leif Eriksson, reached the coast of America. No one bothered them, but one morning (as *Erik the Red's Saga* tells it) many men disembarked from canoes made of leather and stared at them in a kind of stupor. "They were dark and very ill-looking, and the hair on their heads was ugly; they had large eyes and broad cheeks." The Scandinavians gave them the name of *skraelingar*, inferior people. Neither the Scandinavians nor the Eskimos knew that the moment was historic; America and Europe looked upon each other in all innocence. A century later, disease and the inferior people had done away with the colonists. The annals of Iceland say: "In 1121, Erik, Bishop of Greenland, departed in search of Vinland." We know nothing of his fate; both the bishop and Vinland (America) were lost.

Viking epitaphs are scattered across the face of the earth on runic stones. One of them reads:

Tola erected this stone in memory of his son Harald, brother of Ingvar. They departed in search of gold, and went far and sated the eagle in the East. They died in the South, in Arabia.

Another says:

May God have pity on the souls of Orm and Gunnlaug, but their bodies lie in London.

This one was found on an island in the Black Sea:

Grani built this barrow in memory of Karl, his friend.

And this one was engraved on a marble lion found in Piraeus, which was moved to Venice:

Warriors carved the runic letters . . . Men of Sweden put it on the lion.

Conversely, Greek and Arab coins and gold chains and old jewels brought from the Orient are often discovered in Norway.

Snorri Sturluson, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, wrote a series of biographies of the kings of the North; the geographic nomenclature of this work, which covers four centuries of history, is another testimony to the breadth of the Scandinavian sphere; its pages speak of Jorvik (York); of Biarmaland, which is Archangel or the Urals; of Nörvesuud (Gibraltar); of Serkland (Land of the Saracens), which borders the Islamic kingdoms; of Blaaland (Blue Land, Land of Blacks), which is Africa; of Saxland or Saxony, which is Germany; of Helluland (Land of Smooth Stones), which is Labrador; of Markland (Land of Forests), which is Newfoundland; and of Miklagard (Large Population), which is Constantinople, where, until the fall of the East, the Byzantine Emperor's guardsmen were Swedes and Anglo-Saxons. Despite the vastness of this list, the work is not the epic of a Scandinavian empire. Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro conquered lands for their king: the Vikings' prolonged expeditions were individual. "They lacked political ambitions," as Douglas Jerrold explains. After a century, the Normans (men of the North) who, under Rolf, settled in the province of Normandy and gave it their name, had forgotten their language, and were speaking French. . . .

Medieval art is inherently allegorical; thus, in the *Vita nuova*, an autobiographical narrative, the chronology of events is subordinated to the number 9, and Dante speculated that Beatrice herself was a nine, "that is, a miracle, whose root is the Trinity." That happened around 1292; a hundred years earlier, the Icelanders had written the first sagas,¹ which are realism in its most perfect form, as this sober passage from *Grettir's Saga* proves:

Days before St. John's eve, Thorbjörn rode his horse to Bjarg. He had a

¹The *Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spain* (1947) reads: "Saga (from the German *sage*, legend) f. Each one of the poetic legends contained mainly in the two collections of early heroic and mythological traditions of ancient Scandinavia, called the Eddas." This entry is an almost inextricable amalgamation of errors. *Saga* is derived from the Icelandic verb *segja* (to say), not from *sage*, a word which did not mean "legend" in medieval German; the sagas are prose narratives, not poetical legends; they are not contained in "*los dos Eddas*" [the two Eddas] (and whose gender is feminine). The most ancient songs of the Edda date from the ninth century; the most ancient sagas, from the twelfth.

helmet on his head, a sword in his belt, and a lance in his hand, with a very wide blade. At daybreak it rained. Among Atli's serfs, some were reaping hay; others had gone fishing to the North, to Hornstrandir. Atli was in his house, with few other people. Thorbjörn arrived around midday. Alone, he rode to the door. It was closed and there was no one outside. Thorbjörn knocked and hid behind the house so as not to be seen from the door. The servants heard the knock and a woman went to open the door. Thorbjörn saw her but did not let himself be seen, because he had another purpose. The woman returned to the chamber. Atli asked who was outside. She said she had seen no one and as they were speaking of it, Thorbjörn pounded forcefully.

Then Atli said: "Someone is looking for me and bringing a message that must be very urgent." He opened the door and looked out: there was no one. By now it was raining very hard, so Atli did not go out; with a hand on the doorframe, he looked all around. At that moment, Thorbjörn jumped out and with both hands thrust the lance into the middle of his body.

As he took the blow, Atli said: "The blades they use now are so wide." Then he fell face down on the threshold. The women came out and found him dead. From his horse, Thorbjörn shouted that he was the killer and returned home.

The classical rigor of this prose coexisted (the fact is remarkable) with a baroque poetry; the poets did not say "raven" but "red swan" or "bloody swan"; they did not say "corpse" but "meat" or "corn" of "the bloody swan." "Sword's water" or "death's dew" were their words for blood; "pirate's moon" for a shield. . . .

The realism of the Spanish picaresque suffers from a sermonizing tone and a certain prudishness regarding sexual matters, though not with respect to excrement; French realism oscillates between erotic stimulation and what Paul Groussac termed "garbage dump photography"; the realism of the United States goes from mawkishness to cruelty; that of the sagas represents an impartial observation. With fitting exaltation, William Paton Ker wrote: "The great achievement of the older world in its final days was in the prose histories of Iceland, which had virtue enough in them to change the whole world, if they had only been known and understood" (*English Literature, Medieval*, 1912), and on another page of another book he recalled "the great Icelandic school, the school that died without an heir until all its methods

were reinvented, independently, by the great novelists, after centuries of floundering and uncertainty" (*Epic and Romance*, 1896).

These facts suffice, in my understanding, to define the strange and futile destiny of the Scandinavian people. In universal history, the wars and books of Scandinavia are as if they had never existed; everything remains isolated and without a trace, as if it had come to pass in a dream or in the crystal balls where clairvoyants gaze. In the twelfth century, the Icelanders discovered the novel—the art of Flaubert, the Norman—and this discovery is as secret and sterile, for the economy of the world, as their discovery of America.

[1953]

[EA]