CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I

THE HEROIC AGE

THE title of Epic, or of "heroic poem," is claimed by historians for a number of works belonging to the earlier Middle Ages, and to the medieval origins of modern literature. "Epic" is a term freely applied to the old school of Germanic narrative poetry, which in different dialects is represented by the poems of Hildebrand, of Beowulf, of Sigurd and Brynhild. "Epic" is the name for the body of old French poems which is headed by the *Chanson de Roland*. The rank of Epic is assigned by many to the *Nibelungenlied*, not to speak of other Middle High German poems on themes of German tradition. The title of prose Epic has been claimed for the Sagas of Iceland.

By an equally common consent the name Romance is given to a number of kinds of medieval narrative by which the Epic is succeeded and displaced; most notably in France, but also in other countries which were led, mainly by the example and influence of France, to give up their own "epic" forms and subjects in favour of new manners.

This literary classification corresponds in general history to the difference between the earlier "heroic" age and the age of chivalry. The "epics" of Hildebrand and Beowulf belong, if not wholly to German heathendom, at any rate to the earlier and prefeudal stage of German civilisation. The French epics, in their extant form, belong for the most part in spirit, if not always in date, to an order of things unmodified by the great changes of the twelfth century. While among the products of the twelfth century one of the most remarkable is the new school of French romance, the brilliant and frequently vainglorious exponent of the modern ideas of that age, and of all its chivalrous and courtly fashions of thought and sentiment. The difference of the two orders of literature is as plain as the difference in the art of war between the two sides of the battle of Hastings, which indeed is another form of the same thing; for the victory of the Norman knights over the English axemen has more than a fanciful or superficial analogy to the victory of the new literature of chivalry over the older forms of heroic narrative. The history of those two orders of literature, of the earlier Epic kinds, followed by the various types of medieval Romance, is parallel to the general political history of the earlier and the later Middle Ages, and may do something to illustrate the general progress of the nations. The passage from the earlier "heroic" civilisation to the age of chivalry was not made without some contemporary record of the "form and pressure" of the times in the changing

fashions of literature, and in successive experiments of the imagination.

Whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy. A general distinction of this kind, whatever names may be used to render it, can be shown, in medieval literature, to hold good of the two large groups of narrative belonging to the earlier and the later Middle Ages respectively. Beowulf might stand for the one side, Lancelot or Gawain for the other. It is a difference not confined to literature. The two groups are distinguished from one another, as the respectable piratical gentleman of the North Sea coast in the ninth or tenth century differs from one of the companions of St. Louis. The latter has something fantastic in his ideas which the other has not. The Crusader may indeed be natural and brutal enough in most of his ways, but he has lost the sobriety and simplicity of the earlier type of rover. If nothing else, his way of fighting—the undisciplined cavalry charge—would convict him of extravagance as compared with men of business, like the settlers of Iceland for example.

The two great kinds of narrative literature in the Middle Ages might be distinguished by their favourite incidents and commonplaces of adventure. No kind of adventure is so common or better told in the earlier heroic manner than the defence of a narrow place against odds. Such are the stories of Hamther and Sorli in the hall of Ermanaric, of the Niblung kings in the hall of Attila, of the Fight of Finnesburh,

of Walter at the Wasgenstein, of Byrhtnoth at Maldon, of Roland in the Pyrenees. Such are some of the finest passages in the Icelandic Sagas: the death of Gunnar, the burning of Njal's house, the burning of Flugumyri (an authentic record), the last fight of Kjartan in Svinadal, and of Grettir at Drangey. The story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the English Chronicle may well have come from a poem in which an attack and defence of this sort were narrated.

The favourite adventure of medieval romance is something different,—a knight riding alone through a forest; another knight; a shock of lances; a fight on foot with swords, "racing, tracing, and foining like two wild boars"; then, perhaps, recognition—the two knights belong to the same household and are engaged in the same quest.

> Et Guivrez vers lui esperone,
> De rien nule ne l'areisone,
> Ne Erec ne li sona mot.
>
> *Erec*, l. 5007.

This collision of blind forces, this tournament at random, takes the place, in the French romances, of the older kind of combat. In the older kind the parties have always good reasons of their own for fighting; they do not go into it with the same sort of readiness as the wandering champions of romance.

The change of temper and fashion represented by the appearance and the vogue of the medieval French romances is a change involving the whole world, and going far beyond the compass of literature and

literary history. It meant the final surrender of the old ideas, independent of Christendom, which had been enough for the Germanic nations in their earlier days; it was the close of their heroic age. What the "heroic age" of the modern nations really was, may be learned from what is left of their heroic literature, especially from three groups or classes,—the old Teutonic alliterative poems on native subjects; the French *Chansons de Geste;* and the Icelandic Sagas.

All these three orders, whatever their faults may be, do something to represent a society which is "heroic" as the Greeks in Homer are heroic. There can be no mistake about the likeness. To compare the imaginations and the phrases of any of these barbarous works with the poetry of Homer may be futile, but their contents may be compared without reference to their poetical qualities; and there is no question that the life depicted has many things in common with Homeric life, and agrees with Homer in ignorance of the peculiar ideas of medieval chivalry.

The form of society in an heroic age is aristocratic and magnificent. At the same time, this aristocracy differs from that of later and more specialised forms of civilisation. It does not make an insuperable difference between gentle and simple. There is not the extreme division of labour that produces the contempt of the lord for the villain. The nobles have not yet discovered for themselves any form of occupation or mode of thought in virtue of which they are widely severed from the commons, nor have they

invented any such ideal of life or conventional system of conduct as involves an ignorance or depreciation of the common pursuits of those below them. They have no such elaborate theory of conduct as is found in the chivalrous society of the Middle Ages. The great man is the man who is best at the things with which every one is familiar. The epic hero may despise the churlish man, may, like Odysseus in the *Iliad* (ii. 198), show little sympathy or patience with the bellowings of the multitude, but he may not ostentatiously refuse all community of ideas with simple people. His magnificence is not defended by scruples about everything low. It would not have mattered to Odysseus if he had been seen travelling in a cart, like Lancelot; though for Lancelot it was a great misfortune and anxiety. The art and pursuits of a gentleman in the heroic age are different from those of the churl, but not so far different as to keep them in different spheres. There is a community of prosaic interests. The great man is a good judge of cattle; he sails his own ship.

A gentleman adventurer on board his own ship, following out his own ideas, carrying his men with him by his own power of mind and temper, and not by means of any system of naval discipline to which he as well as they must be subordinate; surpassing his men in skill, knowledge, and ambition, but taking part with them and allowing them to take part in the enterprise, is a good representative of the heroic age. This relation between captain and men may be found, accidentally and exceptionally, in later and more

sophisticated forms of society. In the heroic age a relation between a great man and his followers similar to that between an Elizabethan captain and his crew is found to be the most important and fundamental relation in society. In later times it is only by a special favour of circumstances, as for example by the isolation of shipboard from all larger monarchies, that the heroic relation between the leader and the followers can be repeated. As society becomes more complex and conventional, this relation ceases. The homeliness of conversation between Odysseus and his vassals, or between Njal and Thord Freedman's son, is discouraged by the rules of courtly behaviour as gentlefolk become more idle and ostentatious, and their vassals more sordid and dependent. The secrets also of political intrigue and dexterity make a difference between noble and villain, in later and more complex medieval politics, such as is unknown in the earlier days and the more homely forms of Society. An heroic age may be full of all kinds of nonsense and superstition, but its motives of action are mainly positive and sensible,—cattle, sheep, piracy, abduction, merchandise, recovery of stolen goods, revenge. The narrative poetry of an heroic age, whatever dignity it may obtain either by its dramatic force of imagination, or by the aid of its mythology, will keep its hold upon such common matters, simply because it cannot do without the essential practical interests, and has nothing to put in their place, if kings and chiefs are to be represented at all. The heroic age cannot dress up ideas or sentiments to play the part of characters.

If its characters are not men they are nothing, not even thoughts or allegories; they cannot go on talking unless they have something to do; and so the whole business of life comes bodily into the epic poem.

How much the matter of the Northern heroic literature resembles the Homeric, may be felt and recognised at every turn in a survey of the ground. In both there are the *ashen spears*, there are the *shepherds of the people;* the retainers bound by loyalty to the prince who gives them meat and drink; the great hall with its minstrelsy, its boasting and bickering; the battles which are a number of single combats, while "physiology supplies the author with images"[1] for the same; the heroic rule of conduct (ἴομεν);[2] the eminence of the hero, and at the same time his community of occupation and interest with those who are less distinguished.

There are other resemblances also, but some of these are miraculous, and perhaps irrelevant. By what magic is it that the cry of Odysseus, wounded and hard bestead in his retreat before the Trojans, comes over us like the three blasts of the horn of Roland?

> Thrice he shouted, as loud as the head of a man will bear; and three times Menelaus heard the sound thereof, and quickly he turned and spake to Ajax: "Ajax, there is come about me the cry of Odysseus slow to yield; and it is like as though the Trojans had come hard upon him by himself alone, closing him round in the battle."[3]

[1] Johnson on the Epic Poem (*Life of Milton*). [2] *Il.* xii. 328.
[3] *Il.* xi. 462.

It is reported as a discovery made by Mephistopheles in Thessaly, in the classical *Walpurgisnacht*, that the company there was very much like his old acquaintances on the Brocken. A similar discovery, in regard to more honourable personages and other scenes, may be made by other Gothic travellers in a "south-eastward" journey to heroic Greece. The classical reader of the Northern heroics may be frequently disgusted by their failures; he may also be bribed, if not to applaud, at least to continue his study, by the glimmerings and "shadowy recollections," the affinities and correspondences between the Homeric and the Northern heroic world.

Beowulf and his companions sail across the sea to Denmark on an errand of deliverance,—to cleanse the land of monsters. They are welcomed by Hrothgar, king of the Danes, and by his gentle queen, in a house less fortunate than the house of Alcinous, for it is exposed to the attacks of the lumpish ogre that Beowulf has to kill, but recalling in its splendour, in the manner of its entertainment, and the bearing of its gracious lord and lady, the house where Odysseus told his story. Beowulf, like Odysseus, is assailed by an envious person with discourteous words. Hunferth, the Danish courtier, is irritated by Beowulf's presence; "he could not endure that any one should be counted worthier than himself"; he speaks enviously, a biting speech—*θυμοδακὴς γὰρ μῦθος*—and is answered in the tone of Odysseus to Euryalus.[1] Beowulf has a story to tell of his former

[1] *Od.* viii. 165.

perils among the creatures of the sea. It is differently introduced from that of Odysseus, and has not the same importance, but it increases the likeness between the two adventurers.

In the shadowy halls of the Danish king a minstrel sings of the famous deeds of men, and his song is given as an interlude in the main action. It is a poem on that same tragedy of Finnesburh, which is the theme of a separate poem in the Old English heroic cycle; so Demodocus took his subjects from the heroic cycle of Achaea. The leisure of the Danish king's house is filled in the same manner as the leisure of Phaeacia. In spite of the difference of climate, it is impossible to mistake the likeness between the Greek and the Northern conceptions of a dignified and reasonable way of life. The magnificence of the Homeric great man is like the magnificence of the Northern lord, in so far as both are equally marked off from the pusillanimity and cheapness of popular morality on the one hand, and from the ostentation of Oriental or chivalrous society on the other. The likeness here is not purely in the historical details, but much more in the spirit that informs the poetry.

If this part of *Beowulf* is a Northern *Odyssey*, there is nothing in the whole range of English literature so like a scene from the *Iliad* as the narrative of Maldon. It is a battle in which the separate deeds of the fighters are described, with not quite so much anatomy as in Homer. The fighting about the body of Byrhtnoth is described as strongly

as "the Fighting at the Wall" in the twelfth book of the *Iliad*, and essentially in the same way, with the interchange of blows clearly noted, together with the speeches and thoughts of the combatants. Even the most heroic speech in Homer, even the power of Sarpedon's address to Glaucus in the twelfth book of the *Iliad*, cannot discredit, by comparison, the heroism and the sublimity of the speech of the "old companion" at the end of *Maldon*. The language is simple, but it is not less adequate in its own way than the simplicity of Sarpedon's argument. It states, perhaps more clearly and absolutely than anything in Greek, the Northern principle of resistance to all odds, and defiance of ruin. In the North the individual spirit asserts itself more absolutely against the bodily enemies than in Greece; the defiance is made wholly independent of any vestige of prudent consideration; the contradiction, "Thought the harder, Heart the keener, Mood the more, as our Might lessens," is stated in the most extreme terms. This does not destroy the resemblance between the Greek and the Northern ideal, or between the respective forms of representation.

The creed of Maldon is that of Achilles:[1] "Xanthus, what need is there to prophesy of death? Well do I know that it is my doom to perish here, far from my father and mother; but for all that I will not turn back, until I give the Trojans their fill of war." The difference is that in the English case the strain is greater, the irony deeper, the

[1] *Il.* xix. 420.

antithesis between the spirit and the body more paradoxical.

Where the centre of life is a great man's house, and where the most brilliant society is that which is gathered at his feast, where competitive boasting, story-telling, and minstrelsy are the principal intellectual amusements, it is inevitable that these should find their way into a kind of literature which has no foundation except experience and tradition. Where fighting is more important than anything else in active life, and at the same time is carried on without organisation or skilled combinations, it is inevitable that it should be described as it is in the *Iliad*, the *Song of Maldon*, the *Song of Roland*, and the Icelandic Sagas, as a series of personal encounters, in which every stroke is remembered. From this early aristocratic form of society, there is derived in one age the narrative of life at Ithaca or of the navigations of Odysseus, in another the representation of the household of Njal or of Olaf the Peacock, and of the rovings of Olaf Tryggvason and other captains. There is an affinity between these histories in virtue of something over and above the likeness in the conditions of things they describe. There is a community of literary sense as well as of historical conditions, in the record of Achilles and Kjartan Olafsson, of Odysseus and Njal.

The circumstances of an heroic age may be found in numberless times and places, in the history of the world. Among its accompaniments will be generally found some sort of literary record of sentiments and

imaginations; but to find an heroic literature of the highest order is not so easy. Many nations instead of an *Iliad* or an *Odyssey* have had to make shift with conventional repetitions of the praise of chieftains, without any story; many have had to accept from their story-tellers all sorts of monstrous adventures in place of the humanities of debate and argument. Epic literature is not common; it is brought to perfection by a slow process through many generations. The growth of Epic out of the older and commoner forms of poetry, hymns, dirges, or panegyrics, is a progress towards intellectual and imaginative freedom. Few nations have attained, at the close of their heroic age, to a form of poetical art in which men are represented freely in action and conversation. The labour and meditation of all the world has not discovered, for the purposes of narrative, any essential modification of the procedure of Homer. Those who are considered reformers and discoverers in later times—Chaucer, Cervantes, Fielding—are discoverers merely of the old devices of dramatic narration which were understood by Homer and described after him by Aristotle.

The growth of Epic, in the beginning of the history of the modern nations, has been generally thwarted and stunted. It cannot be said of many of the languages of the North and West of Europe that in them the epic form has come fully to its own, or has realised its proper nature. Many of them, however, have at least made a beginning. The history of the older German literature, and of old French, is the

history of a great number of experiments in Epic; of attempts, that is, to represent great actions in narrative, with the personages well defined. These experiments are begun in the right way. They are not merely barbarous nor fantastic. They are different also from such traditional legends and romances as may survive among simple people long after the day of their old glories and their old kings. The poems of *Beowulf* and *Waldere*, of *Roland* and *William of Orange*, are intelligible and reasonable works, determined in the main by the same essential principles of narrative art, and of dramatic conversation within the narrative, as are observed in the practice of Homer. Further, these are poems in which, as in the Homeric poems, the ideas of their time are conveyed and expressed in a noble manner: they are high-spirited poems. They have got themselves clear of the confusion and extravagance of early civilisation, and have hit upon a way of telling a story clearly and in proportion, and with dignity. They are epic in virtue of their superiority to the more fantastic motives of interest, and in virtue of their study of human character. They are heroic in the nobility of their temper and their style. If at any time they indulge in heroic commonplaces of sentiment, they do so without insincerity or affectation, as the expression of the general temper or opinion of their own time. They are not separated widely from the matters of which they treat; they are not antiquarian revivals of past forms, nor traditional vestiges of things utterly remote and separate

from the actual world. What art they may possess is different from the "rude sweetness" of popular ballads, and from the unconscious grace of popular tales. They have in different degrees and manners the form of epic poetry, in their own right. There are recognisable qualities that serve to distinguish even a fragment of heroic poetry from the ballads and romances of a lower order, however near these latter forms may approach at times to the epic dignity.

II

EPIC AND ROMANCE

It is the nature of epic poetry to be at ease in regard to its subject matter, to be free from the strain and excitement of weaker and more abstract forms of poetry in dealing with heroic subjects. The heroic ideal of epic is not attained by a process of abstraction and separation from the meannesses of familiar things. The magnificence and aristocratic dignity of epic is conformable to the practical and ethical standards of the heroic age; that is to say, it tolerates a number of things that may be found mean and trivial by academicians. Epic poetry is one of the complex and comprehensive kinds of literature, in which most of the other kinds may be included—romance, history, comedy; *tragical, comical, historical, pastoral* are terms not sufficiently various to denote the variety of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The "common life" of the Homeric poems may appeal to modern pedantic theorists, and be used by them in support of Euripidean or Wordsworthian receipts for literature. But the comprehensiveness of the greater kinds of poetry, of Homer and Shake-

speare, is a different thing from the premeditated and self-assertive realism of the authors who take viciously to common life by way of protest against the romantic extreme. It has its origin, not in a critical theory about the proper matter of literature, but in dramatic imagination. In an epic poem where the characters are vividly imagined, it follows naturally that their various moods and problems involve a variety of scenery and properties, and so the whole business of life comes into the story.

The success of epic poetry depends on the author's power of imagining and representing characters. A kind of success and a kind of magnificence may be attained in stories, professing to be epic, in which there is no dramatic virtue, in which every new scene and new adventure merely goes to accumulate, in immortal verse, the proofs of the hero's nullity and insignificance. This is not the epic poetry of the heroic ages.

Aristotle, in his discussion of tragedy, chose to lay stress upon the plot, the story. On the other hand, to complete the paradox, in the epic he makes the characters all-important, not the story. Without the tragic plot or fable, the tragedy becomes a series of moral essays or monologues; the life of the drama is derived from the original idea of the fable which is its subject. Without dramatic representation of the characters, epic is mere history or romance; the variety and life of epic are to be found in the drama that springs up at every encounter of the personages.

"Homer is the only poet who knows the right proportions of epic narrative; when to narrate, and when to let the characters speak for themselves. Other poets for the most part tell their story straight on, with scanty passages of drama and far between. Homer, with little prelude, leaves the stage to his personages, men and women, all with characters of their own." [1]

Aristotle wrote with very little consideration for the people who were to come after him, and gives little countenance to such theories of epic as have at various times been prevalent among the critics, in which the dignity of the subject is insisted on. He does not imagine it the chief duty of an epic poet to choose a lofty argument for historical rhetoric. He does not say a word about the national or the ecumenical importance of the themes of the epic poet. His analysis of the plot of the *Odyssey*, but for the reference to Poseidon, might have been the description of a modern realistic story.

"A man is abroad for many years, persecuted by Poseidon and alone; meantime the suitors of his wife are wasting his estate and plotting against his son; after many perils by sea he returns to his own country and discovers himself to his friends. He

[1] "Ομηρος δὲ ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἄξιος ἐπαινεῖσθαι καὶ δὴ καὶ ὅτι μόνος τῶν ποιητῶν οὐκ ἀγνοεῖ ὃ δεῖ ποιεῖν αὐτόν. αὐτὸν γὰρ δεῖ τὸν ποιητὴν ἐλάχιστα λέγειν· οὐ γάρ ἐστι κατὰ ταῦτα μιμητής. οἱ μὲν οὖν ἄλλοι αὐτοὶ μὲν δι' ὅλου ἀγωνίζονται, μιμοῦνται δὲ ὀλίγα καὶ ὀλιγάκις· ὁ δὲ ὀλίγα προοιμιασάμενος εὐθὺς εἰσάγει ἄνδρα ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ ἄλλο τι ἦθος καὶ οὐδέν' ἀήθη ἀλλ' ἔχοντα ἤθη. — ARIST. *Poet.* 1460 a 5.

falls on his enemies and destroys them, and so comes to his own again."

The *Iliad* has more likeness than the *Odyssey* to the common pattern of later sophisticated epics. But the war of Troy is not the subject of the *Iliad* in the same way as the siege of Jerusalem is the subject of Tasso's poem. The story of the *Aeneid* can hardly be told in the simplest form without some reference to the destiny of Rome, or the story of *Paradise Lost* without the feud of heaven and hell. But in the *Iliad*, the assistance of the Olympians, or even the presence of the whole of Greece, is not in the same degree essential to the plot of the story of Achilles. In the form of Aristotle's summary of the *Odyssey*, reduced to "the cool element of prose," the *Iliad* may be proved to be something quite different from the common fashion of literary epics. It might go in something like this way :—

"A certain man taking part in a siege is slighted by the general, and in his resentment withdraws from the war, though his own side is in great need of his help. His dearest friend having been killed by the enemy, he comes back into the action and takes vengeance for his friend, and allows himself to be reconciled."

It is the debate among the characters, and not the onset of Hera and Athena in the chariot of Heaven, that gives its greatest power to the *Iliad*. The *Iliad*, with its "machines," its catalogue of the forces, its funeral games, has contributed more than the *Odyssey* to the common pattern of manufactured

epics. But the essence of the poem is not to be found among the Olympians. Achilles refusing the embassy or yielding to Priam has no need of the Olympian background. The poem is in a great degree independent of "machines"; its life is in the drama of the characters. The source of all its variety is the imagination by which the characters are distinguished; the liveliness and variety of the characters bring with them all the other kinds of variety.

It is impossible for the author who knows his personages intimately to keep to any one exclusive mode of sentiment or one kind of scene. He cannot be merely tragical and heroic, or merely comical and pastoral; these are points of view to which those authors are confined who are possessed by one kind of sentiment or sensibility, and who wish to find expression for their own prevailing mood. The author who is interested primarily in his characters will not allow them to be obliterated by the story or by its diffused impersonal sentiment. The action of an heroic poem must be "of a certain magnitude," but the accessories need not be all heroic and magnificent; the heroes do not derive their magnificence from the scenery, the properties, and the author's rhetoric, but contrariwise: the dramatic force and self-consistency of the *dramatis personae* give poetic value to any accessories of scenery or sentiment which may be required by the action. They are not figures "animating" a landscape; what the landscape means for the poet's audience is determined by the character of his personages.

All the variety of epic is explained by Aristotle's remark on Homer. Where the characters are true, and dramatically represented, there can be no monotony.

In the different kinds of Northern epic literature—German, English, French, and Norse—belonging to the Northern heroic ages, there will be found in different degrees this epic quality of drama. Whatever magnificence they may possess comes mainly from the dramatic strength of the heroes, and in a much less degree from the historic dignity or importance of the issues of the story, or from its mythological decorations.

The place of history in the heroic poems belonging to an heroic age is sometimes misconceived. Early epic poetry may be concerned with great historic events. It does not necessarily emphasise—by preference it does not emphasise—the historic importance or the historic results of the events with which it deals. Heroic poetry implies an heroic age, an age of pride and courage, in which there is not any extreme organisation of politics to hinder the individual talent and its achievements, nor on the other hand too much isolation of the hero through the absence of any national or popular consciousness. There must be some unity of sentiment, some common standard of appreciation, among the people to whom the heroes belong, if they are to escape oblivion. But this common sentiment must not be such as to make the idea of the community and its life predominant over the individual genius of its

members. In such a case there may be a Roman history, but not anything approaching the nature of the Homeric poems.

In some epic poems belonging to an heroic age, and not to a time of self-conscious and reflective literature, there may be found general conceptions that seem to resemble those of the *Aeneid* rather than those of the *Iliad*. In many of the old French *Chansons de Geste*, the war against the infidels is made the general subject of the story, and the general idea of the Holy War is expressed as fully as by Tasso. Here, however, the circumstances are exceptional. The French epic with all its Homeric analogies is not as sincere as Homer. It is exposed to the touch of influences from another world, and though many of the French poems, or great part of many of them, may tell of heroes who would be content with the simple and positive rules of the heroic life, this is not allowed them. They are brought within the sphere of other ideas, of another civilisation, and lose their independence.

Most of the old German heroic poetry is clearly to be traced, as far as its subjects are concerned, to the most exciting periods in early German history, between the fourth and the sixth centuries. The names that seem to have been most commonly known to the poets are the names that are most important to the historian—Ermanaric, Attila, Theodoric. In the wars of the great migration the spirit of each of the German families was quickened, and at the same time the spirit of the whole of Germany, so that each

part sympathised with all the rest, and the fame of the heroes went abroad beyond the limits of their own kindred. Ermanaric, Attila, and Theodoric, Sigfred the Frank, and Gundahari the Burgundian, are heroes over all the region occupied by all forms of Teutonic language. But although the most important period of early German history may be said to have produced the old German heroic poetry, by giving a number of heroes to the poets, at the same time that the imagination was stirred to appreciate great things and make the most of them, still the result is nothing like the patriotic epic in twelve books, the *Aeneid* or the *Lusiad*, which chooses, of set purpose, the theme of the national glory. Nor is it like those old French epics in which there often appears a contradiction between the story of individual heroes, pursuing their own fortunes, and the idea of a common cause to which their own fortunes ought to be, but are not always, subordinate. The great historical names which appear in the old German heroic poetry are seldom found there in anything like their historical character, and not once in their chief historical aspect as adversaries of the Roman Empire. Ermanaric, Attila, and Theodoric are all brought into the same Niblung story, a story widely known in different forms, though it was never adequately written out. The true history of the war between the Burgundians and the Huns in the fifth century is forgotten. In place of it, there is associated with the life and death of Gundahari the Burgundian king a story which may have been

vastly older, and may have passed through many different forms before it became the story of the Niblung treasure, of Sigfred and Brynhild. This, which has made free with so many great historical names, the name of Attila, the name of Theodoric, has little to do with history. In this heroic story coming out of the heroic age, there is not much that can be traced to historical as distinct from mythical tradition. The tragedy of the death of Attila, as told in the *Atlakviða* and the *Atlamál*, may indeed owe something to the facts recorded by historians, and something more to vaguer historical tradition of the vengeance of Rosamund on Alboin the Lombard. But, in the main, the story of the Niblungs is independent of history, in respect of its matter; in its meaning and effect as a poetical story it is absolutely free from history. It is a drama of personal encounters and rivalries. This also, like the story of Achilles, is fit for a stage in which the characters are left free to declare themselves in their own way, unhampered by any burden of history, any purpose or moral apart from the events that are played out in the dramatic clashing of one will against another.

It is not vanity in an historian to look for the historical origin of the tale of Troy or of the vengeance of Gudrun; but no result in either case can greatly affect the intrinsic relations of the various elements within the poems. The relations of Achilles to his surroundings in the *Iliad*, of Attila and Ermanaric to theirs, are freely conceived by the several poets,

and are intelligible at once, without reference to anything outside the poems. To require of the poetry of an heroic age that it shall recognise the historical meaning and importance of the events in which it originates, and the persons whose names it uses, is entirely to mistake the nature of it. Its nature is to find or make some drama played by kings and heroes, and to let the historical framework take care of itself. The connexion of epic poetry with history is real, and it is a fitting subject for historical inquiry, but it lies behind the scene. The epic poem is cut loose and set free from history, and goes on a way of its own.

Epic magnificence and the dignity of heroic poetry may thus be only indirectly derived from such greatness or magnificence as is known to true prosaic history. The heroes, even if they can be identified as historical, may retain in epic nothing of their historical character, except such qualities as fit them for great actions. Their conduct in epic poetry may be very far unlike their actual demeanour in true history; their greatest works may be thrust into a corner of the epic, or barely alluded to, or left out altogether. Their greatness in epic may be quite a different kind of greatness from that of their true history; and where there are many poems belonging to the same cycle there may be the greatest discrepancy among the views taken of the same hero by different authors, and all the views may be alike remote from the prosaic or scientific view. There is no constant or self-consistent opinion about the character of Charles the

Emperor in old French poetry: there is one view in the *Chanson de Roland*, another in the *Pèlerinage*, another in the *Coronemenz Loois:* none of the opinions is anything like an elaborate or detailed historical judgment. Attila, though he loses his political importance and most of his historical acquisitions in the Teutonic heroic poems in which he appears, may retain in some of them his ruthlessness and strength; at other times he may be a wise and peaceful king. All that is constant, or common, in the different poetical reports of him, is that he was great. What touches the mind of the poet out of the depths of the past is nothing but the tradition, undefined, of something lordly. This vagueness of tradition does not imply that tradition is impotent or barren; only that it leaves all the execution, the growth of detail, to the freedom of the poet. He is bound to the past, in one way; it is laid upon him to tell the stories of the great men of his own race. But in those stories, as they come to him, what is most lively is not a set and established series of incidents, true or false, but something to which the standards of truth and falsehood are scarcely applicable; something stirring him up to admiration, a compulsion or influence upon him requiring him to make the story again in his own way; not to interpret history, but to make a drama of his own, filled somehow with passion and strength of mind. It does not matter in what particular form it may be represented, so long as in some form or other the power of the national glory is allowed to pass into his work.

This vagueness and generality in the relation of heroic poetry to the historical events and persons of an heroic age is of course quite a different thing from vagueness in the poetry itself. Gunther and Attila, Roland and Charlemagne, in poetry, are very vaguely connected with their antitypes in history; but that does not prevent them from being characterised minutely, if it should agree with the poet's taste or lie within his powers to have it so. The strange thing is that this vague relation should be so necessary to heroic poetry; that it should be impossible at any stage of literature or in any way by taking thought to make up for the want of it.

The place of Gunther the Burgundian, Sigfred the Frank, and Attila the Hun, in the poetical stories of the Niblung treasure may be in one sense accidental. The fables of the treasure with a curse upon it, the killing of the dragon, the sleeping princess, the wavering flame, are not limited to this particular course of tradition, and, further, the traditional motives of the Niblung story have varied enormously not only in different countries, but in one and the same language at the same time. The story is never told alike by two narrators; what is common and essential in it is nothing palpable or fixed, but goes from poet to poet "like a shadow from dream to dream." And the historical names are apparently unessential; yet they remain. To look for the details of the Niblung story in the sober history of the Goths and Huns, Burgundians and Franks, is like the vanity confessed by the author of the *Roman de*

Rou, when he went on a sentimental journey to Broceliande, and was disappointed to find there only the common daylight and nothing of the Faerie. Nevertheless it is the historical names, and the vague associations about them, that give to the Niblung story, not indeed the whole of its plot, but its temper, its pride and glory, its heroic and epic character.

Heroic poetry is not, as a rule, greatly indebted to historical fact for its material. The epic poet does not keep record of the great victories or the great disasters. He cannot, however, live without the ideas and sentiments of heroism that spring up naturally in periods like those of the Teutonic migrations. In this sense the historic Gunther and Attila are necessary to the Niblung story. The wars and fightings of generation on generation went to create the heroism, the loftiness of spirit, expressed in the Teutonic epic verse. The plots of the stories may be commonplace, the common property of all popular tales. The temper is such as is not found everywhere, but only in historical periods of great energy. The names of Ermanaric and Attila correspond to hardly anything of literal history in the heroic poems; but they are the sign of conquests and great exploits that have gone to form character, though their details are forgotten.

It may be difficult to appreciate and understand in detail this vague relation of epic poetry to the national life and to the renown of the national heroes, but the general fact is not less positive or less capable of verification than the date of the battle of Châlons, or

the series of the Gothic vowels. All that is needed to prove this is to compare the poetry of a national cycle with the poetry that comes in its place when the national cycle is deserted for other heroes.

The secondary or adopted themes may be treated with so much of the manner of the original poetry as to keep little of their foreign character. The rhetoric, the poetical habit, of the original epic may be retained. As in the Saxon poem on the Gospel history, the *Hêliand*, the twelve disciples may be represented as Thanes owing loyalty to their Prince, in common poetic terms befitting the men of Beowulf or Byrhtnoth. As in the French poems on Alexander the Great, Alexander may become a feudal king, and take over completely all that belongs to such a rank. There may be no consciousness of any need for a new vocabulary or a new mode of expression to fit the foreign themes. In France, it is true, there is a general distinction of form between the *Chansons de Geste* and the romances; though to this there are exceptions, themes not French, and themes not purely heroic, being represented in the epic form. In the early Teutonic poetry there is no distinction of versification, vocabulary, or rhetoric between the original and the secondary narrative poems; the alliterative verse belongs to both kinds equally. Nor is it always the case that subjects derived from books or from abroad are handled with less firmness than the original and traditional plots. Though sometimes a prevailing affection for imported stories, for Celtic or Oriental legend, may be accompanied by a relaxa-

tion in the style, the superiority of national to foreign subjects is not always proved by greater strength or eloquence. Can it be said that the Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, for instance, is less heroic, less strong and sound, than the somewhat damaged and motley accoutrements of Beowulf?

The difference is this, that the more original and native kind of epic has immediate association with all that the people know about themselves, with all their customs, all that part of their experience which no one can account for or refer to any particular source. A poem like *Beowulf* can play directly on a thousand chords of association; the range of its appeal to the minds of an audience is almost unlimited; on no side is the poet debarred from freedom of movement, if only he remember first of all what is due to the hero. He has all the life of his people to strengthen him.

A poem like the *Hêliand* is under an obligation to a literary original, and cannot escape from this restriction. It makes what use it can of the native associations, but with whatever perseverance the author may try to bend his story into harmony with the laws of his own country, there is an untranslated residue of foreign ideas.

Whatever the defects or excesses of *Beowulf* may be, the characters are not distressed by any such unsolved contradiction as in the Saxon *Hêliand*, or in the old English *Exodus*, or *Andreas*, or the other poems taken from the Bible or the lives of saints. They have not, like the personages of the second order of poems, been translated from one realm of

ideas to another, and made to take up burdens and offices not their own. They have grown naturally in the mind of a poet, out of the poet's knowledge of human nature, and the traditional ethical judgments of which he is possessed.

The comparative freedom of *Beowulf* in its relation to historical tradition and traditional ethics, and the comparative limitation of the *Hêliand*, are not in themselves conditions of either advantage or inferiority. They simply mark the difference between two types of narrative poem. To be free and comprehensive in relation to history, to summarise and represent in epic characters the traditional experience of an heroic age, is not the proper virtue of every kind of poetry, though it is proper to the Homeric kind. The freedom that belongs to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is also shared by many a dismal and interminable poem of the Middle Ages. That foreign or literary subjects impose certain limitations, and interfere with the direct use of matter of experience in poetry, is nothing against them. The Anglo-Saxon *Judith*, which is thus restricted as compared with *Beowulf*, may be more like Milton for these restrictions, if it be less like Homer. Exemption from them is not a privilege, except that it gives room for the attainment of a certain kind of excellence, the Homeric kind; as, on the other hand, it excludes the possibility of the literary art of Virgil or Milton.

The relation of epic poetry to its heroic age is not to be found in the observance of any strict historical duty. It lies rather in the epic capacity for bringing

together all manner of lively passages from the general experience of the age, in a story about famous heroic characters. The plot of the story gives unity and harmony to the composition, while the variety of its matter is permitted and justified by the dramatic variety of the characters and their interests.

By its comprehensiveness and the variety of its substance, which are the signs and products of its dramatic imagination, epic poetry of the heroic age is distinguished from the more abstract kinds of narrative, such as the artificial epic, and from all kinds of imagination or fancy that are limited in their scope.

In times when "the Epic Poem" was a more attractive, if not more perilous theme of debate than it now is, there was a strong controversy about the proper place and the proper kind of miraculous details to be admitted. The question was debated by Tasso in his critical writings, against the strict and pedantic imitators of classical models, and with a strong partiality for Ariosto against Trissino. Tasso made less of a distinction between romance and epic than was agreeable to some of his successors in criticism; and the controversy went on for generations, always more or less concerned with the great Italian heroic poems, *Orlando* and *Jerusalem*. Some record of it will be found in Dr. Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762). If the controversy has any interest now, it must be because it provided the most extreme statements of abstract literary principles, which on account of their thoroughness

are interesting. From the documents it can be ascertained how near some of the critics came to that worship of the Faultless Hero with which Dryden in his heroic plays occasionally conformed, while he guarded himself against misinterpretation in his prefaces.

The epic poetry of the more austere critics was devised according to the strictest principles of dignity and sublimity, with a precise exclusion of everything "Gothic" and romantic. Davenant's Preface to *Gondibert*—"the Author's Preface to his much Honour'd friend, Mr. Hobs"—may show how the canon of epic was understood by poets who took things seriously; "for I will yield to their opinion, who permit not *Ariosto*, no, not *Du Bartas*, in this eminent rank of the *Heroicks;* rather than to make way by their admission for *Dante*, *Marino*, and others."

It is somewhat difficult to find a common measure for these names, but it is clear that what is most distasteful to the writer, in theory at any rate, is variety. Epic is the most solemn, stately, and frigid of all kinds of composition. This was the result attained by the perverse following of precepts supposed to be classical. The critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were generally right in distinguishing between Epic and Romance, and generally wrong in separating the one kind from the other as opposite and mutually exclusive forms, instead of seeing with Tasso, in his critical discourses, that romance may be included in epic. Against the manifold perils of the Gothic fantasy they set

up the image of the Abstract Hero, and recited the formulas of the decorous and symmetrical abstract heroic poem. They were occasionally troubled by the "Gothic" elements in Homer, of which their adversaries were not slow to take advantage.

One of the most orthodox of all the formalists, who for some reason came to be very much quoted in England, Bossu, in his discourse on the Epic Poem, had serious difficulties with the adventures of Ulysses, and his stories told in Phaeacia. The episodes of Circe, of the Sirens, and of Polyphemus, are *machines;* they are also not quite easy to understand. "They are necessary to the action, and yet they are not humanly probable." But see how Homer gets over the difficulty and brings back these *machines* to the region of human probability. "Homère les fait adroitement rentrer dans la Vraisemblance humaine par la simplicité de ceux devant qui il fait faire ses récits fabuleux. Il dit assez plaisamment que les Phéaques habitoient dans une Isle éloignée des lieux où demeurent les hommes qui ont de l'esprit. εἶσεν δ' ἐν Σχερίῃ ἔκας ἀνδρῶν ἀλφηστάων. Ulysses les avoit connus avant que de se faire connoître à eux: et aiant observé qu'ils avoient toutes les qualités de ces fainéans qui n'admirent rien avec plus de plaisir que les aventures Romanesques: il les satisfait par ces récits accommodez à leur humeur. Mais le Poëte n'y a pas oublié les Lecteurs raisonnables. Il leur a donné en ces Fables tout le plaisir que l'on peut tirer des véritez Morales, si agréablement déguisées sous ces miracu-

leuses allégories. C'est ainsi qu'il a réduit ces Machines dans la vérité et dans la Vraisemblance Poëtique."[1]

Although the world has fallen away from the severity of this critic, there is still a meaning at the bottom of his theory of machines. He has at any rate called attention to one of the most interesting parts of Epic, and has found the right word for the episodes of the Phaeacian story of Odysseus. Romance is the word for them, and Romance is at the same time one of the constituent parts and one of the enemies of epic poetry. That it was dangerous was seen by the academical critics. They provided against it, generally, by treating it with contempt and proscribing it, as was done by those French critics who were offended by Ariosto and perplexed by much of the Gothic machinery of Tasso. They did not readily admit that epic poetry is as complex as the plays of Shakespeare, and as incongruous as these in its composition, if the different constituents be taken out separately in the laboratory and then compared.

Romance by itself is a kind of literature that does not allow the full exercise of dramatic imagination; a limited and abstract form, as compared with the fulness and variety of Epic; though episodes of romance, and romantic moods and digressions, may have their place, along with all other human things, in the epic scheme.

[1] *Traité du Poëme Épique*, par le R. P. Le Bossu, Chanoine Régulier d Sainte Geneviève; MDCLXXV (p. 166).

The difference between the greater and the lesser kinds of narrative literature is vital and essential, whatever names may be assigned to them. In the one kind, of which Aristotle knew no other examples than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the personages are made individual through their dramatic conduct and their speeches in varying circumstances; in the other kind, in place of the moods and sentiments of a multitude of different people entering into the story and working it out, there is the sentiment of the author in his own person; there is one voice, the voice of the story-teller, and his theory of the characters is made to do duty for the characters themselves. There may be every poetic grace, except that of dramatic variety; and wherever, in narrative, the independence of the characters is merged in the sequence of adventures, or in the beauty of the landscape, or in the effusion of poetic sentiment, the narrative falls below the highest order, though the art be the art of Ovid or of Spenser.

The romance of Odysseus is indeed "brought into conformity with poetic verisimilitude," but in a different way from that of Bossu *On the Epic Poem*. It is not because the Phaeacians are romantic in their tastes, but because it belongs to Odysseus, that the Phaeacian night's entertainment has its place in the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is the story of his home-coming, his recovery of his own. The great action of the drama of Odysseus is in his dealings with Penelope, Eumaeus, Telemachus, the suitors. The Phaeacian story is indeed episodic; the interest of

those adventures is different from that of the meeting with Penelope. Nevertheless it is all kept in harmony with the stronger part of the poem. It is not pure fantasy and "Faerie," like the voyage of Maelduin or the vigil in the castle of Busirane. Odysseus in the house of Alcinous is not different from Odysseus of the return to Ithaca. The story is not pure romance, it is a dramatic monologue; and the character of the speaker has more part than the wonders of the story in the silence that falls on the listeners when the story comes to an end.

In all early literature it is hard to keep the story within limits, to observe the proportion of the *Odyssey* between strong drama and romance. The history of the early heroic literature of the Teutonic tongues, and of the epics of old France, comes to an end in the victory of various romantic schools, and of various restricted and one-sided forms of narrative. From within and without, from the resources of native mythology and superstition, and from the fascination of Welsh and Arabian stories, there came the temptation to forget the study of character, and to part with an inheritance of tragic fables, for the sake of vanities, wonders, and splendours among which character and the tragic motives lost their pre-eminent interest and their old authority over poets and audience.

III

ROMANTIC MYTHOLOGY

BETWEEN the dramatic qualities of epic poetry and the myths and fancies of popular tradition there must inevitably be a conflict and a discrepancy. The greatest scenes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have little to do with myth. Where the characters are most vividly realised there is no room for the lighter kinds of fable; the epic "machines" are superfluous. Where all the character of Achilles is displayed in the interview with Priam, all his generosity, all his passion and unreason, the imagination refuses to be led away by anything else from looking on and listening. The presence of Hermes, Priam's guide, is forgotten. Olympus cannot stand against the spell of words like those of Priam and Achilles; it vanishes like a parched scroll. In the great scene in the other poem where the disguised Odysseus talks with Penelope, but will not make himself known to her for fear of spoiling his plot, there is just as little opportunity for any intervention of the Olympians. "Odysseus pitied his wife as she wept, but his eyes were firm as horn or steel,

unwavering in his eyelids, and with art he concealed his tears."[1]

In passages like these the epic poet gets clear away from the cumbrous inheritance of traditional fancies and stories. In other places he is inevitably less strong and self-sustained; he has to speak of the gods of the nation, or to work into his large composition some popular and improbable histories. The result in Homer is something like the result in Shakespeare, when he has a more than usually childish or old-fashioned fable to work upon. A story like that of the *Three Caskets* or the *Pound of Flesh* is perfectly consistent with itself in its original popular form. It is inconsistent with the form of elaborate drama, and with the lives of people who have souls of their own, like Portia or Shylock. Hence in the drama which uses the popular story as its ground-plan, the story is never entirely reduced into conformity with the spirit of the chief characters. The caskets and the pound of flesh, in despite of all the author's pains with them, are imperfectly harmonised; the primitive and barbarous imagination in them retains an inconvenient power of asserting its discordance with the principal parts of the drama. Their unreason is of no great consequence, yet it is something; it is not quite kept out of sight.

The epic poet, at an earlier stage of literature

[1] αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
θυμῷ μὲν γοόωσαν ἐὴν ἐλέαιρε γυναῖκα,
ὀφθαλμοὶ δ' ὡς εἰ κέρα ἔστασαν ἠὲ σίδηρος
ἀτρέμας ἐν βλεφάροισι· δόλῳ δ' ὅ γε δάκρυα κεῦθεν.
Od. xix. 209.

than Shakespeare, is even more exposed to this difficulty. Shakespeare was free to take his plots where he chose, and took these old wives' tales at his own risk. The epic poet has matter of this sort forced upon him. In his treatment of it, it will be found that ingenuity does not fail him, and that the transition from the unreasonable or old-fashioned part of his work to the modern and dramatic part is cunningly worked out. "He gets over the unreason by the grace and skill of his handling,"[1] says Aristotle of a critical point in the "machinery" of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus is carried ashore on Ithaca in his sleep. There is a continual play in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* between the wonders of mythology and the spirit of the drama. In this, as in other things, the Homeric poems observe the mean: the extremes may be found in the heroic literature of other nations; the extreme of marvellous fable in the old Irish heroic legends, for example; the extreme of plainness and "soothfastness" in the old English lay of *Maldon*. In some medieval compositions, as in *Huon of Bordeaux*, the two extremes are brought together clumsily and without harmony. In other medieval works again it is possible to find something like the Homeric proportion—the drama of strong characters, taking up and transforming the fanciful products of an earlier world, the inventions of minds not deeply or especially interested in character.

The defining and shaping of myths in epic poetry

[1] νῦν δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀγαθοῖς ἀφανίζει ἡδύνων τὸ ἄτοπον.
ARISTOT. *Poet.* 1460 b.

is a process that cannot go on in a wholly simple and unreflecting society. On the contrary, this process means that the earlier stages of religious legend have been succeeded by a time of criticism and selection. It is hard on the old stories of the gods when men come to appreciate the characters of Achilles and Odysseus. The old stories are not all of equal value and authority; they cannot all be made to fit in with the human story; they have to be tested, and some have to be rejected as inconvenient. The character of the gods is modified under the influence of the chief actors in the drama. Agamemnon, Diomede, Odysseus, Ajax, and Achilles set the standard by which the gods are judged. The Homeric view of the gods is already more than half-way to the view of a modern poet. The gods lose their old tyranny and their right to the steam of sacrifice as they gain their new poetical empire, from which they need not fear to be banished; not, at any rate, for any theological reasons.

In Shakespearean drama, where each man is himself, with his own character and his own fortune to make, there is small scope for any obvious Divine interposition in the scene. The story of human actions and characters, the more fully it is developed, leaves the less opportunity for the gods to interfere in it. Something of this sort was felt by certain medieval historians; they found it necessary to begin with an apologetic preface explaining the long-suffering of God, who has given freedom to the will of man to do good or evil. It was felt to be on the

verge of impiety to think of men as left to themselves and doing what they pleased. Those who listen to a story might be tempted to think of the people in it as self-sufficient and independent powers, trespassing on the domain of Providence. A pious exculpation was required to clear the author of blame.[1]

In the *Iliad* this scrupulous conscience has less need to deliver itself. The gods are not far away; the heroes are not left alone. But the poet has already done much to reduce the immediate power of the gods, not by excluding them from the action, certainly, nor by any attenuation of their characters into allegory, but by magnifying and developing the characters of men. In many occasional references it would seem that an approach was being made to that condition of mind, at ease concerning the gods, so common in the North, in Norway and Iceland, in the last days of heathendom. There is the great speech of Hector to Polydamas—"we defy augury"[2]—there is the speech of Apollo himself to Aeneas[3] about those who stand up for their own side, putting trust

[1] "In the events of this history may be proved the great long-suffering of God Almighty towards us every day; and the freedom of will which He has given to every man, that each may do what he will, good or evil."—*Hrafns Saga*, Prologue (*Sturlunga Saga*, Oxford, 1878, II. p. 275).

"As all good things are the work of God, so valour is made by Him and placed in the heart of stout champions, and freedom therewithal to use it as they will, for good or evil."—*Fóstbræðra Saga* (1852), p. 12: one of the sophistical additions to the story: see below, p. 315.

The moral is different in the following passage:—

"And inasmuch as the Providence of God hath ordained, and it is His pleasure, that the seven planets should have influence on the world, and bear dominion over man's nature, giving him divers inclinations to sin and naughtiness of life: nevertheless the Universal Creator has not taken from him the free will, which, as it is well governed, may subdue and abolish these temptations by virtuous living, if men will use discretion."—*Tirant lo Blanch* (1460), c. i.

[2] *Il.* xii. 241.

[3] *Il.* xvii. 327.

in their own strength. But passages like these do not touch closely on the relations of gods and men as they are depicted in the story. As so depicted, the gods are not shadowy or feeble abstractions and personifications; yet they are not of the first value to the poem, they do not set the tone of it.

They are subsidiary, like some other of the most beautiful things in the poem; like the similes of clouds and winds, like the pictures on the Shield. They are there because the whole world is included in epic poetry; the heroes, strong in themselves as they could be if they were left alone in the common day, acquire an additional strength and beauty from their fellowship with the gods. Achilles talking with the Embassy is great; he is great in another way when he stands at the trench with the flame of Athena on his head. These two scenes belong to two different kinds of imagination. It is because the first is there that the second takes effect. It is the hero that gives meaning and glory to the light of the goddess. It is of some importance that it is Achilles, and not another, that here is crowned with the light of heaven and made terrible to his enemies.

There is a double way of escape for young nations from their outgrown fables and mythologies. They start with enormous, monstrous, and inhuman beliefs and stories. Either they may work their way out of them, by gradual rejection of the grosser ingredients, to something more or less positive and rational; or else they may take up the myths and transmute them into poetry.

The two processes are not independent of one another. Both are found together in the greater artists of early times, in Homer most notably; and also in artists less than Homer; in the poem of *Beowulf*, in the stories of Sigfred and Brynhild.

There are further, under the second mode, two chief ways of operation by which the fables of the gods may be brought into poetry.

It is possible to take them in a light-hearted way and weave them into poetical stories, without much substance or solemnity; enhancing the beauty that may be inherent in any part of the national legend, and either rejecting the scandalous chronicle of Olympus or Asgard altogether, or giving it over to the comic graces of levity and irony, as in the Phaeacian story of Ares and Aphrodite, wherein the Phaeacian poet digressed from his tales of war, in the spirit of Ariosto, and with an equally accomplished and elusive defiance of censure.[1]

There is another way in which poetry may find room for fable.

It may treat the myths of the gods as material for the religious or the ethical imagination, and out of them create ideal characters, analogous in poetry to the ideal divine or heroic figures of painting and sculpture. This is the kind of imagination in virtue of which modern poets are best able to appropriate the classical mythology; but this modern imagina-

[1] The censure is not wanting :—

"L'on doit considérer que ce n'est ni le Poëte, ni son Héros, ni un honnête homme qui fait ce récit: mais que les Phéaques, peuples mols et effeminez, se le font chanter pendant leur festin."—Bossu, *op. cit.* p. 152.

tion is already familiar to Homer, and that not only in direct description, as in the description of the majesty of Zeus, but also, more subtly, in passages where the character of the divinity is suggested by comparison with one of the human personages, as when Nausicaa is compared to Artemis,[1] a comparison that redounds not less to the honour of the goddess than of Nausicaa.

In Icelandic literature there are many instances of the trouble arising from inconsiderate stories of the gods, in the minds of people who had got beyond the more barbarous kind of mythology. They took the boldest and most conclusive way out of the difficulty; they made the barbarous stories into comedy. The *Lokasenna*, a poem whose author has been called the Aristophanes of the Western Islands, is a dramatic piece in which Loki, the Northern Satan, appearing in the house of the gods, is allowed to bring his railing accusations against them and remind them of their doings in the "old days." One of his victims tells him to "let bygones be bygones." The gods are the subject of many stories that are here raked up against them, stories of another order of belief and of civilisation than those in which Odin appears as the wise and sleepless counsellor. This poem implies a great amount of independence in the author of it. It is not a satire on the gods; it is pure comedy; that is, it belongs to a type of literature which has risen above prejudices and which has an air of levity because it is pure sport—or pure art—and therefore

[1] *Od.* vi. 151.

is freed from bondage to the matter which it handles. This kind of invention is one that tests the wit of its audience. A serious-minded heathen of an older school would no doubt have been shocked by the levity of the author's manner. Not much otherwise would the poem have affected a serious adversary of heathendom, or any one whose education had been entirely outside of the circle of heathen or mythological tradition. An Englishman of the tenth century, familiar with the heroic poetry of his own tongue, would have thought it indecent. If chance had brought such an one to hear this *Lokasenna* recited at some entertainment in a great house of the Western Islands, he might very well have conceived the same opinion of his company and their tastes in literature as is ascribed by Bossu to Ulysses among the Phaeacians.

This genius for comedy is shown in other Icelandic poems. As soon as the monstrosities of the old traditions were felt to be monstrous, they were overcome (as Mr. Carlyle has shown) by an appreciation of the fun of them, and so they ceased to be burdensome. It is something of this sort that has preserved old myths, for amusement, in popular tales all over the world. The Icelandic poets went further, however, than most people in their elaborate artistic treatment of their myths. There is with them more art and more self-consciousness, and they give a satisfactory and final poetical shape to these things, extracting pure comedy from them.

The perfection of this ironical method is to be

found in the *Edda*, a handbook of the Art of Poetry, written in the thirteenth century by a man of liberal genius, for whom the Æsir were friends of the imagination, without any prejudice to the claims of the Church or of his religion. In the view of Snorri Sturluson, the old gods are exempt from any touch of controversy. Belief has nothing to do with them; they are free. It may be remembered that some of the greatest English writers of the seventeenth century have come short of this security of view, and have not scrupled to repeat the calumny of the missionaries and the disputants against the ancient gods, that Jupiter and Apollo were angels of the bottomless pit, given over to their own devices for a season, and masking as Olympians.

In this freedom from embarrassing and irrelevant considerations in dealing with myth, the author of the *Edda* follows in his prose the spirit of mythological poems three centuries older, in which, even before the change of faith in the North, the gods were welcomed without fear as sharing in many humorous adventures.

And at the same time, along with this detached and ironical way of thinking there is to be found in the Northern poetry the other, more reverent mode of shaping the inherited fancies; the mode of Pindar, rejecting the vain things fabled about the gods, and holding fast to the more honourable things. The humours of Thor in the fishing for the serpent and the winning of the hammer may be fairly likened to the humours of Hermes in the Greek hymn. The *Loka-*

senna has some likeness to the Homeric description of the brawls in heaven. But in the poems that refer to the death of Balder and the sorrow of the gods there is another tone; and the greatest of them all, the *Sibyl's Prophecy*, is comparable, not indeed in volume of sound, but in loftiness of imagination, to the poems in which Pindar has taken up the myths of most inexhaustible value and significance—the Happy Islands, the Birth of Athena.

The poet who lives in anything like an heroic or Homeric age has it in his power to mingle the elements of mythology and of human story—Phaeacia and Ithaca—in any proportion he pleases. As a matter of fact, all varieties of proportion are to be found in medieval documents. At the one extreme is the mythological romance and fantasy of Celtic epic, and at the other extreme the plain narrative of human encounters, in the old English battle poetry or the Icelandic family histories. As far as one can judge from the extant poems, the old English and old German poetry did not make such brilliant romance out of mythological legend as was produced by the Northern poets. These alone, and not the poets of England or Saxony, seem to have appropriated for literature, in an Homeric way, the histories of the gods. Myth is not wanting in old English or German poetry, but it does not show itself in the same clear and delightful manner as in the Northern poems of Thor, or in the wooing of Frey.

Thus in different places there are different modes in which an inheritance of mythical ideas may be

appreciated and used. It may become a treasury for self-possessed and sure-handed artists, as in Greece, and so be preserved long after it has ceased to be adequate to all the intellectual desires. It may, by the fascination of its wealth, detain the minds of poets in its enchanted ground, and prevent them from ever working their way through from myth to dramatic imagination, as in Ireland.

The early literature, and therewith the intellectual character and aptitudes, of a nation may be judged by their literary use of mythology. They may neglect it, like the Romans; they may neglect all things for the sake of it, like the Celts; they may harmonise it, as the Greeks did, in a system of imaginative creations where the harmony is such that myth need never be felt as an encumbrance or an absurdity, however high or far the reason may go beyond it in any direction of art or science.

At the beginning of modern literature there are to be found the attempts of Irish and Welsh, of English and Germans, Danes and Northmen, to give shape to myth, and make it available for literature. Together with that, and as part of the same process, there is found the beginning of historical literature in an heroic or epic form. The results are various; but one thing may be taken as certain, that progress in literature is most assured when the mythology is so far under control as to leave room for the drama of epic characters; for epic, as distinguished from romance.

Now the fortunes of these people were such as

to make this self-command exceedingly difficult for them, and to let in an enormous extraneous force, encouraging the native mythopoetic tendencies, and unfavourable to the growth of epic. They had to come to an understanding with themselves about their own heathen traditions, to bring the extravagances of them into some order, so as to let the epic heroes have free play. But they were not left to themselves in this labour of bringing mythology within bounds; even before they had fairly escaped from barbarism, before they had made a fair beginning of civilisation and of reflective literature on their own account, they were drawn within the Empire, into Christendom. Before their imaginations had fully wakened out of the primeval dream, the cosmogonies and theogonies, gross and monstrous, of their national infancy, they were asked to have an opinion about the classical mythology, as represented by the Latin poets; they were made acquainted with the miracles of the lives of saints.

More than all this, even, their minds were charmed away from the labour of epic invention, by the spell of the preacher. The task of representing characters —Waldere or Theodoric or Attila—was forgotten in the lyrical rapture of devotion, in effusion of pathos. The fascination of religious symbolism crept over minds that had hardly yet begun to see and understand things as they are; and in all their reading the "moral," "anagogical," and "tropological" significations prevailed against the literal sense.

One part of medieval history is concerned with

the progress of the Teutonic nations, in so far as they were left to themselves, and in so far as their civilisation is home-made. The *Germania* of Tacitus, for instance, is used by historians to interpret the later development of Teutonic institutions. But this inquiry involves a good deal of abstraction and an artificial limitation of view. In reality, the people of Germania were never left to themselves at all, were never beyond the influence of Southern ideas; and the history of the influence of Southern ideas on the Northern races takes up a larger field than the isolated history of the North. Nothing in the world is more fantastic. The logic of Aristotle and the art of Virgil are recommended to people whose chief men, barons and earls, are commonly in their tastes and acquirements not very different from the suitors in the *Odyssey*. Gentlemen much interested in raids and forays, and the profits of such business, are confronted with a literature into which the labours of all past centuries have been distilled. In a society that in its native elements is closely analogous to Homer's Achaeans, men are found engaged in the study of Boethius *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, a book that sums up the whole course of Greek philosophical speculation. Ulysses quoting Aristotle is an anachronism; but King Alfred's translation of Boethius is almost as much of a paradox. It is not easy to remain unmoved at the thought of the medieval industry bestowed on authors like Martianus Capella *de Nuptiis Philologiae*, or Macrobius *de Somnio Scipionis*. What is to be said

of the solemnity with which, in their pursuit of authoritative doctrine, they applied themselves to extract the spiritual meaning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and appropriate the didactic system of the *Art of Love?*

In medieval literature, whatever there is of the Homeric kind has an utterly different relation to popular standards of appreciation from that of the Homeric poems in Greece. Here and there some care may be taken, as by Charlemagne and Alfred, to preserve the national heroic poetry. But such regard for it is rare; and even where it is found, it comes far short of the honour paid to Homer by Alexander. English Epic is not first, but one of the least, among the intellectual and literary interests of King Alfred. Heroic literature is only one thread in the weft of medieval literature.

There are some curious documents illustrative of its comparative value, and of the variety and complexity of medieval literature.

Hauk Erlendsson, an Icelander of distinction in the fourteenth century, made a collection of treatises in one volume for his own amusement and behoof. It contains the *Volospá*, the most famous of all the Northern mythical poems, the Sibyl's song of the doom of the gods; it contains also the *Landnámabók*, the history of the colonisation of Iceland; *Kristni Saga*, the history of the conversion to Christianity; the history of *Eric the Red*, and *Fóstbræðra Saga*, the story of the two sworn brethren, Thorgeir and Thormod the poet. Besides these records of the

history and the family traditions of Iceland and Greenland, there are some mythical stories of later date, dealing with old mythical themes, such as the life of Ragnar Lodbrok. In one of them, the *Heidreks Saga*, are embedded some of the most memorable verses, after *Volospá*, in the old style of Northern poetry — the poem of the *Waking of Angantyr*. The other contents of the book are as follows: geographical, physical, and theological pieces; extracts from St. Augustine; the *History of the Cross;* the *Description of Jerusalem;* the *Debate of Body and Soul; Algorismus* (by Hauk himself, who was an arithmetician); a version of the *Brut* and of *Merlin's Prophecy; Lucidarium*, the most popular medieval handbook of popular science. This is the collection, to which all the ends of the earth have contributed, and it is in strange and far-fetched company like this that the Northern documents are found. In Greece, whatever early transactions there may have been with the wisdom of Egypt or Phoenicia, there is no such medley as this.

Another illustration of the literary chaos is presented, even more vividly than in the contents of Hauk's book, by the whalebone casket in the British Museum. Weland the smith (whom Alfred introduced into his *Boethius*) is here put side by side with the Adoration of the Magi; on another side are Romulus and Remus; on another, Titus at Jerusalem; on the lid of the casket is the defence of a house by one who is shooting arrows at his assailants; his name is written over him, and his name is *Ægili*,—

Egil the master-bowman, as Weland is the master-smith, of the Northern mythology. Round the two companion pictures, Weland on the left and the Three Kings on the right, side by side, there go wandering runes, with some old English verses about the "whale," or walrus, from which the ivory for these engravings was obtained. The artist plainly had no more suspicion than the author of *Lycidas* that there was anything incorrect or unnatural in his combinations. It is under these conditions that the heroic poetry of Germania has been preserved; never as anything more than an accident among an infinity of miscellaneous notions, the ruins of ancient empires, out of which the commonplaces of European literature and popular philosophy have been gradually collected.

The fate of epic poetry was the same as that of the primitive German forms of society. In both there was a progress towards independent perfection, an evolution of the possibilities inherent in them, independent of foreign influences. But both in Teutonic society, and in the poetry belonging to it and reflecting it, this independent course of life is thwarted and interfered with. Instead of independent strong Teutonic national powers, there are the more or less Romanised and blended nationalities possessing the lands that had been conquered by Goths and Burgundians, Lombards and Franks; instead of Germania, the Holy Roman Empire; instead of Epic, Romance; not the old-fashioned romance of native mythology, not the natural spon-

taneous romance of the Irish legends or the Icelandic stories of gods and giants, but the composite far-fetched romance of the age of chivalry, imported from all countries and literatures to satisfy the medieval appetite for novel and wonderful things.

Nevertheless, the stronger kind of poetry had still something to show, before all things were overgrown with imported legend, and before the strong enunciation of the older manner was put out of fashion by the medieval clerks and rhetoricians.

IV

THE THREE SCHOOLS—TEUTONIC EPIC—FRENCH EPIC—THE ICELANDIC HISTORIES

THE Teutonic heroic poetry was menaced on all hands from the earliest times; it was turned aside from the national heroes by saints and missionaries, and charmed out of its sterner moods by the spell of wistful and regretful meditation. In continental Germany it appears to have been early vanquished. In England, where the epic poetry was further developed than on the Continent, it was not less exposed to the rivalry of the ideas and subjects that belonged to the Church.

The Anglo-Saxon histories of St. Andrew and St. Helen are as full of romantic passages as those poems of the fourteenth century in which the old alliterative verse is revived to tell the tale of Troy or of the *Mort Arthur*. The national subjects themselves are not proof against the ideas of the Church; even in the fragments of *Waldere* they are to be found; and the poem of *Beowulf* has been filled, like so much of the old English poetry, with the melancholy of the preacher, and the sense of the vanity of earthly

things. But the influence of fantasy and pathos could not dissolve the strength of epic beyond recovery, or not until it had done something to show what it was worth. Not all the subjects are treated in the romantic manner of Cynewulf and his imitators. The poem of *Maldon*, written at the very end of the tenth century, is firm and unaffected in its style, and of its style there can be no question that it is heroic.

The old Norse poetry was beyond the influence of most of the tendencies and examples that corrupted the heroic poetry of the Germans, and changed the course of poetry in England. It was not till the day of its glory was past that it took to subjects like those of Cynewulf and his imitators. But it was hindered in other ways from representing the lives of heroes in a consistent epic form. If it knew less of the miracles of saints, it knew more of the old mythology; and though it was not, like English and German poetry, taken captive by the preachers, it was stirred and thrilled by the beauty of its own stories in a way that inclined to the lyrical rather than the epic tone. Yet here also there are passages of graver epic, where the tone is more assured and the composition more stately.

The relation of the French epics to French romance is on the one side a relation of antagonism, in which the older form gives way to the newer, because "the newer song is sweeter in the ears of men." The *Chanson de Geste* is driven out by poems that differ from it in almost every possible respect; in the character of their original subject-matter, in their

verse, their rhetoric, and all their gear of commonplaces, and all the devices of their art. But from another point of view there may be detected in the *Chansons de Geste* no small amount of the very qualities that were fatal to them, when the elements were compounded anew in the poems of *Erec* and *Lancelot*.

The French epics have many points of likeness with the Teutonic poetry of *Beowulf* or *Finnesburh*, or of the Norse heroic songs. They are epic in substance, having historical traditions at the back of them, and owing the materials of their picture to no deliberate study of authorities. They differ from *Beowulf* in this respect, among others, that they are the poems of feudal society, not of the simpler and earlier communities. The difference ought not to be exaggerated. As far as heroic poetry is concerned, the difference lies chiefly in the larger frame of the story. The kingdom of France in the French epics is wider than the kingdom of Hrothgar or Hygelac. The scale is nearer that of the *Iliad* than of the *Odyssey*. The "Catalogue of the Armies sent into the Field" is longer, the mass of fighting-men is more considerable, than in the epic of the older school. There is also, frequently, a much fuller sense of the national greatness and the importance of the defence of the land against its enemies, a consciousness of the dignity of the general history, unlike the carelessness with which the Teutonic poets fling themselves into the story of individual lives, and disregard the historical background. Generally,

however, the Teutonic freedom and rebellious spirit is found as unmistakably in the *Chansons de Geste* as in the alliterative poems. Feudalism appears in heroic poetry, and indeed in prosaic history, as a more elaborate form of that anarchy which is the necessary condition of an heroic age. It does not deprive the poet of his old subjects, his family enmities, and his adventures of private war. Feudalism did not invent, neither did it take away, the virtue of loyalty that has so large a place in all true epic, along with its counterpart of defiance and rebellion, no less essential to the story. It intensified the poetical value of both motives, but they are older than the *Iliad*. It provided new examples of the "wrath" of injured or insulted barons; it glorified to the utmost, it honoured as martyrs, those who died fighting for their lord.[1]

In all this it did nothing to change the essence of heroic poetry. The details were changed, the scene was enlarged, and so was the number of the combatants. But the details of feudalism that make a difference between Beowulf, or the men of Attila, and the epic paladins of Charlemagne in the French poems of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, need not obscure the essential resemblance between one heroic period and another.

On the other hand, it is plain from the beginning that French epic had to keep its ground with

[1] Lor autres mors ont toz en terre mis :
Crois font sor aus, qu'il erent droit martir ;
Por lor seignor orent esté ocis.
Garin le Loherain, tom. ii. p. 88.

some difficulty against the challenge of romantic skirmishers. In one of the earliest of the poems about Charlemagne, the Emperor and his paladins are taken to the East by a poet whom Bossu would hardly have counted "honest." In the poem of *Huon of Bordeaux*, much later, the story of Oberon and the magic horn has been added to the plot of a feudal tragedy, which in itself is compact and free from extravagance. Between those extreme cases there are countless examples of the mingling of the graver epic with more or less incongruous strains. Sometimes there is magic, sometimes the appearance of a Paynim giant, often the repetition of long prayers with allusions to the lives of saints and martyrs, and throughout there is the constant presence of ideas derived from homilies and the common teaching of the Church. In some of these respects the French epics are in the same case as the old English poems which, like *Beowulf*, show the mingling of a softer mood with the stronger; of new conventions with old. In some respects they show a further encroachment of the alien spirit.

The English poem of *Maldon* has some considerable likeness in the matter of its story, and not a little in its ideal of courage, with the *Song of Roland*. A comparison of the two poems, in those respects in which they are commensurable, will show the English poem to be wanting in certain elements of mystery that are potent in the other.

The *Song of Maldon* and the *Song of Roncesvalles* both narrate the history of a lost battle, of a realm

defended against its enemies by a captain whose pride and self-reliance lead to disaster, by refusing to take fair advantage of the enemy and put forth all his available strength. Byrhtnoth, fighting the Northmen on the shore of the Essex river, allows them of his own free will to cross the ford and come to close quarters. "He gave ground too much to the adversary; he called across the cold river and the warriors listened: 'Now is space granted to you; come speedily hither and fight; God alone can tell who will hold the place of battle.' Then the wolves of blood, the rovers, waded west over Panta."

This unnecessary magnanimity has for the battle of Maldon the effect of Roland's refusal to sound the horn at the battle of Roncesvalles; it is the tragic error or transgression of limit that brings down the crash and ruin at the end of the day.

In both poems there is a like spirit of indomitable resistance. The close of the battle of Maldon finds the loyal companions of Byrhtnoth fighting round his body, abandoned by the cowards who have run away, but themselves convinced of their absolute strength to resist to the end.

Byrhtwold spoke and grasped his shield—he was an old companion—he shook his ashen spear, and taught courage to them that fought:—

"Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener, mood shall be the more, as our might lessens. Here our prince lies low, they have hewn him to death! Grief and sorrow for ever on the man that leaves this war-play! I am old of years, but hence I will not go; I think to lay me down by the side of my lord, by the side of the man I cherished."

The story of Roncesvalles tells of an agony equally hopeless and equally secure from every touch of fear.

The *Song of Maldon* is a strange poem to have been written in the reign of Ethelred the Unready. But for a few phrases it might, as far as the matter is concerned, have been written before the conversion of England, and although it is a battle in defence of the country, and not a mere incident of private war, the motive chiefly used is not patriotism, but private loyalty to the captain. Roland is full of the spirit of militant Christendom, and there is no more constant thought in the poem than that of the glory of France. The virtue of the English heroes is the old Teutonic virtue. The events of the battle are told plainly and clearly; nothing adventitious is brought in to disturb the effect of the plain story; the poetical value lies in the contrast between the grey landscape (which is barely indicated), the severe and restrained description of the fighters, on the one hand, and on the other the sublimity of the spirit expressed in the last words of the "old companion." In the narrative of events there are no extraneous beauties to break the overwhelming strength of the eloquence in which the meaning of the whole thing is concentrated. With Roland at Roncesvalles the case is different. He is not shown in the grey light of the Essex battlefield. The background is more majestic. There is a mysterious half-lyrical refrain throughout the tale of the battle: "high are the mountains and dark the valleys" about the combatants in the pass; they are not left to themselves

like the warriors of the poem of *Maldon*. It is romance, rather than epic or tragedy, which in this way recognises the impersonal power of the scene; the strength of the hills under which the fight goes on. In the first part of the *Odyssey* the spell of the mystery of the sea is all about the story of Odysseus; in the later and more dramatic part the hero loses this, and all the strength is concentrated in his own character. In the story of Roland there is a vastness and vagueness throughout, coming partly from the numbers of the hosts engaged, partly from the author's sense of the mystery of the Pyrenean valleys, and, in a very large measure, from the heavenly aid accorded to the champion of Christendom. The earth trembles, there is darkness over all the realm of France even to the Mount St. Michael.

C'est la dulur pur la mort de Rollant.

St. Gabriel descends to take from the hand of Roland the glove that he offers with his last confession; and the three great angels of the Lord are there to carry his soul to Paradise.

There is nothing like this in the English poem. The battle is fought in the light of an ordinary day; there is nothing to greet the eyes of Byrhtnoth and his men except the faces of their enemies.

It is not hard to find in old English poetry descriptions less austere than that of *Maldon;* there may be found in the French *Chansons de Geste* great spaces in which there is little of the majestic light and darkness of Roncesvalles. But it is hard to

escape the conviction that the poem of *Maldon*, late as it is, has expressed the spirit and essence of the Northern heroic literature in its reserved and simple story, and its invincible profession of heroic faith; while the poem of Roncesvalles is equally representative of the French epic spirit, and of the French poems in which the ideas common to every heroic age are expressed with all the circumstances of the feudal society of Christendom, immediately before the intellectual and literary revolutions of the twelfth century. The French epics are full of omens of the coming victory of romance, though they have not yet given way. They still retain, in spite of their anticipations of the Kingdom of the Grail, an alliance in spirit with the older Teutonic poetry, and with those Icelandic histories that are the highest literary expression of the Northern spirit in its independence of feudalism.

The heroic age of the ancient Germans may be said to culminate, and end, in Iceland in the thirteenth century. The Icelandic *Sagas*—the prose histories of the fortunes of the great Icelandic houses—are the last and also the finest expression and record of the spirit and the ideas belonging properly to the Germanic race in its own right, and not derived from Rome or Christendom. Those of the German nations who stayed longest at home had by several centuries the advantage of the Goths and Franks, and had time to complete their native education before going into foreign subjects. The English were less exposed to Southern influences than the continental Germans; the

Scandinavian nations less than the Angles and Saxons. In Norway particularly, the common German ideas were developed in a way that produced a code of honour, a consciousness of duty, and a strength of will, such as had been unknown in the German nations who were earlier called upon to match themselves against Rome. Iceland was colonised by a picked lot of Norwegians; by precisely those Norwegians who had this strength of will in its highest degree.

Political progress in the Middle Ages was by way of monarchy; but strong monarchy was contrary to the traditions of Germania, and in Norway, a country of great extent and great difficulties of communication, the ambition of Harold Fairhair was resisted by numbers of chieftains who had their own local following and their own family dignity to maintain, in their firths and dales. Those men found Norway intolerable through the tyranny of King Harold, and it was by them that Iceland was colonised through the earlier colonies in the west—in Scotland, in Ireland, in Shetland and the other islands.

The ideas that took the Northern colonists to Iceland were the ideas of Germania,—the love of an independent life, the ideal of the old-fashioned Northern gentleman, who was accustomed to consideration and respect from the freemen, his neighbours, who had authority by his birth and fortune to look after the affairs of his countryside, who would not make himself the tenant, vassal, or steward of any king. In the new country these ideas were intensified and defined. The ideal of the Icelandic Commonwealth was

something more than a vague motive, it was present to the minds of the first settlers in a clear and definite form. The most singular thing in the heroic age of Iceland is that the heroes knew what they were about. The heroic age of Iceland begins in a commonwealth founded by a social contract. The society that is established there is an association of individuals coming to an agreement with one another to invent a set of laws and observe them. Thus while Iceland on the one hand is a reactionary state, founded by men who were turning their backs on the only possible means of political progress, cutting themselves off from the world, and adhering obstinately to forms of life with no future before them, on the other hand this reactionary commonwealth, this fanatical representative of early Germanic use and wont, is possessed of a clearness of self-consciousness, a hard and positive clearness of understanding, such as is to be found nowhere else in the Middle Ages and very rarely at all in any polity.

The prose literature of Iceland displays the same two contradictory characters throughout. The actions described, and the customs, are those of an early heroic age, with rather more than the common amount of enmity and vengeance, and an unequalled power of resistance and rebellion in the individual wills of the personages. The record of all this anarchy is a prose history, rational and unaffected, seeing all things in a dry light; a kind of literature that has not much to learn from any humanism or rationalism, in regard to its own proper subjects at any rate.

The people of Iceland were not cut off from the ordinary European learning and its commonplaces. They read the same books as were read in England or Germany. They read St. Gregory *de Cura Pastorali*, they read *Ovidius Epistolarum*, and all the other popular books of the Middle Ages. In time those books and the world to which they belonged were able to obtain a victory over the purity of the Northern tradition and manners, but not until the Northern tradition had exhausted itself, and the Icelandic polity began to break up. The literature of the maturity of Iceland just before the fall of the Commonwealth is a literature belonging wholly and purely to Iceland, in a style unmodified by Latin syntax and derived from the colloquial idiom. The matter is the same in kind as the common matter of heroic poetry. The history represents the lives of adventurers, the rivalries and private wars of men who are not ignorant of right and honour, but who acknowledge little authority over them, and are given to choose their right and wrong for themselves, and abide the consequences. This common matter is presented in a form which may be judged on its own merits, and there is no need to ask concessions from any one in respect of the hard or unfavourable conditions under which this literature was produced. One at least of the Icelandic Sagas is one of the great prose works of the world—the story of Njal and his sons.

The most perfect heroic literature of the Northern nations is to be found in the country where the heroic polity and society had most room and leisure; and in

Iceland the heroic ideals of life had conditions more favourable than are to be discovered anywhere else in history. Iceland was a world divided from the rest, outside the orbit of all the states of Europe; what went on there had little more than an ideal relation to the course of the great world; it had no influence on Europe, it was kept separate as much as might be from the European storms and revolutions. What went on in Iceland was the progress in seclusion of the old Germanic life—a life that in the rest of the world had been blended and immersed in other floods and currents. Iceland had no need of the great movements of European history.

They had a humanism of their own, a rationalism of their own, gained quite apart from the great European tumults, and gained prematurely, in comparison with the rest of Europe. Without the labour of the Middle Ages, without the storm and stress of the reform of learning, they had the faculty of seeing things clearly and judging their values reasonably, without superstition. They had to pay the penalty of their opposition to the forces of the world; there was no cohesion in their society, and when once the balance of power in the island was disturbed, the Commonwealth broke up. But before that, they accomplished what had been ineffectually tried by the poet of *Beowulf*, the poet of *Roland;* they found an adequate form of heroic narrative. Also in their use of this instrument they were led at last to a kind of work that has been made nowhere else in the world, for nowhere else does the form of heroic narrative

come to be adapted to contemporary events, as it was in Iceland, by historians who were themselves partakers in the actions they described. Epic, if the Sagas are epic, here coincides with autobiography. In the *Sturlunga Saga*, written by Sturla, Snorri's nephew, the methods of heroic literature are applied by an eye-witness to the events of his own time, and there is no discrepancy or incongruity between form and matter. The age itself takes voice and speaks in it; there is no interval between actors and author. This work is the end of the heroic age, both in politics and in literature. After the loss of Icelandic freedom there is no more left of Germania, and the *Sturlunga Saga* which tells the story of the last days of freedom is the last word of the Teutonic heroic age. It is not a decrepit or imitative or secondary thing; it is a masterpiece; and with this true history, this adaptation of an heroic style to contemporary realities, the sequence of German heroic tradition comes to an end.