

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 γόβωσαν ἔην ἐλέαιρε γυναῖκα,
ὀφθαλμοὶ δ' ὡς εἰ κέρα ἔστασαν ἠὲ σίδηρος
ἀτρέμας ἐν βλεφάροισι· δόλω δ' ὄ γε δάκρυα κεῖθεν.

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 οὐν δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀγαθοῖς ἀφανίζει ἡδύτων 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, Diomedes, 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 Aeneas³ 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 sophisticated 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 Poète, 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.