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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 common-places, 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 dular 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 Roncevalles. 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 Pastoralis*, 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.

