CHAPTER II

THE TEUTONIC EPIC

I

THE TRAGIC CONCEPTION

Of the heroic poetry in the Teutonic alliterative verse, the history must be largely conjectural. The early stages of it are known merely through casual references like those of Tacitus. We know that to the mind of the Emperor Julian, the songs of the Germans resembled the croaking of noisy birds; but this criticism is not satisfactory, though it is interesting. The heroes of the old time before Ermanaric and Attila were not without their poets, but of what sort the poems were in which their praises were sung, we can only vaguely guess. Even of the poems that actually remain it is difficult to ascertain the history and the conditions of their production. The variety of styles discoverable in the extant documents is enough to prevent the easy conclusion that the German poetry of the first century was already a fixed type, repeated by successive generations of poets down to the extinction of alliterative verse as a living form.

After the sixth century things become a little clearer, and it is possible to speak with more certainty.

One thing at any rate of the highest importance may be regarded as beyond a doubt. The passages in which Jordanes tells of Suanihilda trampled to death by the horses of Ermanaric, and of the vengeance taken by her brothers Sarus and Ammius, are enough to prove that the subjects of heroic poetry had already, in the sixth century, if not earlier, formed themselves compactly in the imagination. If Jordanes knew a Gothic poem on Ermanaric and the brothers of Suanihilda, that was doubtless very different from the Northern poem of Sorli and Hamther, which is a later version of the same story. But even if the existence of a Gothic ballad of Swanhild were doubted,—and the balance of probabilities is against the doubter,—it follows indisputably from the evidence that in the time of Jordanes people were accustomed to select and dwell upon dramatic incidents in what was accepted as history; the appreciation of tragedy was there, the talent to understand a tragic situation, to shape a tragic plot, to bring out the essential matter in relief and get rid of irrelevant particulars.

In this respect at any rate, and it is one of the most important, there is continuity in the ancient poetry, onward from this early date. The stories of Alboin in the Lombard history of Paulus Diaconus, the meaning of which for the history of poetry is explained so admirably in the Introduction to *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, by Dr. Vigfusson and Mr. York Powell, are further and more vivid illustrations of the same thing. In the story of the youth of Alboin,

and the story of his death, there is matter of the same amount as would suffice for one of the short epics of the kind we know,—a poem of the same length as the Northern lay of the death of Ermanaric, of the same compass as *Waltharius*,—or, to take another standard of measurement, matter for a single tragedy with the unities preserved. Further, there is in both of them exactly that resolute comprehension and exposition of tragic meaning which is the virtue of the short epics. The tragic contradiction in them could not be outdone by Victor Hugo. It is no wonder that the story of Rosamond and Albovine, king of the Lombards, became a favourite with dramatists of different schools, from the first essays of the modern drama in the *Rosmunda* of Rucellai, passing by the common way of the novels of Bandello to the Elizabethan stage. The earlier story of Alboin's youth, if less valuable for emphatic tragedy, being without the baleful figure of a Rosamond or a Clytemnestra, is even more perfect as an example of tragic complication. Here again is the old sorrow of Priam; the slayer of the son face to face with the slain man's father, and not in enmity. In beauty of original conception the story is not finer than that of Priam and Achilles; and it is impossible to compare the stories in any other respect than that of the abstract plot. But in one quality of the plot the Lombard drama excels or exceeds the story of the last book of the *Iliad*. The contradiction is strained with a greater tension; the point of honour is more nearly absolute. This does not make it a better

story, but it proves that the man who told the story could understand the requirements of a tragic plot, could imagine clearly a strong dramatic situation, could refrain from wasting or obliterating the outline of a great story.

The Lombards and the Gepidae were at war. Alboin, son of the Lombard king Audoin, and Thurismund, son of the Gepid king Thurisvend, met in battle, and Alboin killed Thurismund. After the battle, the Lombards asked King Audoin to knight his son. But Audoin answered that he would not break the Lombard custom, according to which it was necessary for the young man to receive arms first from the king of some other people. Alboin when he heard this set out with forty of the Lombards, and went to Thurisvend, whose son he had killed, to ask this honour from him. Thurisvend welcomed him, and set him down at his right hand in the place where his son used to sit.

Then follows the critical point of the action. The contradiction is extreme; the reconciliation also, the solution of the case, is perfect. Things are stretched to the breaking-point before the release comes; nothing is spared that can possibly aggravate the hatred between the two sides, which is kept from breaking out purely by the honour of the king. The man from whom an infinite debt of vengeance is owing, comes of his own will to throw himself on the generosity of his adversary. This, to begin with, is hardly fair to simple-minded people like the Gepid warriors; they may fairly think that their

king is going too far in his reading of the law of honour:

> And it came to pass while the servants were serving at the tables, that Thurisvend, remembering how his son had been lately slain, and calling to mind his death, and beholding his slayer there beside him in his very seat, began to draw deep sighs, for he could not withhold himself any longer, and at last his grief burst forth in words. "Very pleasant to me," quoth he, "is the seat, but sad enough it is to see him that is sitting therein."[1]

By his confession of his thoughts the king gives an opening to those who are waiting for it, and it is taken at once. Insult and rejoinder break out, and it is within a hair's breadth of the irretrievable plunge that the king speaks his mind. He is lord in that house, and his voice allays the tumult; he takes the weapons of his son Thurismund, and gives them to Alboin and sends him back in peace and safety to his father's kingdom. It is a great story, even in a prose abstract, and the strength of its tragic problem is invincible. It is with strength like that, with a knowledge not too elaborate or minute, but sound and clear, of some of the possibilities of mental conflict and tragic contradiction, that heroic poetry first reveals itself among the Germans. It is this that gives strength to the story of the combat between Hildebrand and his son, of the flight of Walter and Hildegund, of the death of Brynhild, of Attila and Gudrun. Some of the heroic poems and plots are more simple than these. The battle of Maldon is a fair fight without

[1] *C.P.B.*, Introduction, p. lii.

any such distressful circumstances as in the case of Hildebrand or of Walter of Aquitaine. The adventures of Beowulf are simple, also; there is suspense when he waits the attack of the monster, but there is nothing of the deadly crossing of passions that there is in other stories. Even in *Maldon*, however, there is the tragic error; the fall and defeat of the English is brought about by the over-confidence and over-generosity of Byrhtnoth, in allowing the enemy to come to close quarters. In *Beowulf*, though the adventures of the hero are simple, other less simple stories are referred to by the way. One of these is a counterpart to the story of the youth of Alboin and the magnanimity of Thurisvend. One of the most famous of all the old subjects of heroic poetry was the vengeance of Ingeld for the death of his father, King Froda. The form of this story in *Beowulf* agrees with that of Saxo Grammaticus in preserving the same kind of opposition as in the story of Alboin, only in this case there is a different solution. Here a deadly feud has been put to rest by a marriage, and the daughter of Froda's slayer is married to Froda's son. But as in the Lombard history and in so many of the stories of Iceland, this reconciliation is felt to be intolerable and spurious; the need of vengeance is real, and it finds a spokesman in an old warrior, who cannot forget his dead lord, nor endure the sight of the new bride's kinsmen, going free and wearing the spoils of their victory. So Ingeld has to choose between his wife, wedded to him out of his enemy's house, and his father, whom that enemy has

killed. And so everywhere in the remains, not too voluminous, of the literature of the heroic age, one encounters this sort of tragic scheme. One of these ancient plots, abstracted and written out fair by Saxo, is the plot of *Hamlet*.

There is not one of the old Northern heroic poems, as distinct from the didactic and mythological pieces, that is without this tragic contradiction; sometimes expressed with the extreme of severity, as in the lay of the death of Ermanaric; sometimes with lyrical effusiveness, as in the lament of Gudrun; sometimes with a mystery upon it from the under-world and the kingdom of the dead, as in the poems of Helgi, and of the daughter of Angantyr.

The poem of the death of Ermanaric is a version of the story told by Jordanes, which since his time had come to be attached to the cycle of the Niblungs.

Swanhild, the daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun, was wedded to Ermanaric, king of the Goths. The king's counsellor wrought on his mind with calumnies against the queen, and he ordered her to be trampled to death under horses' feet, and so she died, though the horses were afraid of the brightness of her eyes and held back until her eyes were covered. Gudrun stirred up her sons, Sorli and Hamther, to go and avenge their sister. As they set out, they quarrelled with their base-born brother Erp, and killed him,—the tragic error in this history, for it was the want of a third man that ruined them, and Erp would have helped them if they had let him. In the hall of the

Goths they defy their enemy and hew down his men; no iron will bite in their armour; they cut off the hands and feet of Ermanaric. Then, as happens so often in old stories, they go too far, and a last insult alters the balance against them, as Odysseus alters it at the leave-taking with Polyphemus. The last gibe at Ermanaric stirs him as he lies, and he calls on the remnant of the Goths to stone the men that neither sword nor spear nor arrow will bring down. And that was the end of them.

"We have fought a good fight; we stand on slain Goths that have had their fill of war. We have gotten a good report, though we die to-day or to-morrow. No man can live over the evening, when the word of the Fates has gone forth."

There fell Sorli at the gable of the hall, and Hamther was brought low at the end of the house.

Among the Norse poems it is this one, the *Hamðismál*, that comes nearest to the severity of the English *Maldon* poem. It is wilder and more cruel, but the end attains to simplicity.

The gap in *Codex Regius*, the "Elder" or "Poetic Edda," has destroyed the poems midway between the beginning and end of the tragedy of Sigfred and Brynhild, and among them the poem of their last meeting. There is nothing but the prose paraphrase to tell what that was, but the poor substitute brings out all the more clearly the strength of the original conception, the tragic problem.

After the gap in the manuscript there are various poems of Brynhild and Gudrun, in which different views of the story are taken, and in all of them the

tragic contradiction is extreme: in Brynhild's vengeance on Sigurd, in Gudrun's lament for her husband slain by her brothers, and in the later fortunes of Gudrun. In some of these poems the tragedy becomes lyrical, and two kinds of imagination, epic and elegiac, are found in harmony.

The story of Helgi and Sigrun displays this rivalry of moods—a tragic story, carried beyond the tragic stress into the mournful quiet of the shadows.

Helgi is called upon by Sigrun to help her against Hodbrodd, and save her from a hateful marriage. Helgi kills Hodbrodd, and wins Sigrun; but he has also killed Sigrun's father Hogni and her elder brother. The younger brother Dag takes an oath to put away enmity, but breaks his oath and kills Helgi.

It is a story like all the others in which there is a conflict of duties, between friendship and the duty of vengeance, a plot of the same kind as that of Froda and Ingeld. Sigrun's brother is tried in the same way as Ingeld in the story told by Saxo and mentioned in *Beowulf*. But it does not end with the death of Helgi. Sigrun looks for Helgi to come back in the hour of the "Assembly of Dreams," and Helgi comes and calls her, and she follows him:—

> Thy hair is thick with rime, thou art wet with the dew of death, thy hands are cold and dank.
>
> It is thine own doing, Sigrun from Sevafell, that Helgi is drenched with deadly dew; thou weepest cruel tears, thou gold-dight, sunbright lady of the South, before thou goest to sleep; every one of them falls with blood, wet and chill, upon my breast. Yet precious are the draughts that are poured for us, though we have lost both love and land, and no man shall sing a song of

lamentation though he see the wounds on my breast, for kings' daughters have come among the dead.

I have made thee a bed, Helgi, a painless bed, thou son of the Wolfings. I shall sleep in thine arms, O king, as I should if thou wert alive.

This is something different from epic or tragedy, but it does not interfere with the tragedy of which it is the end.

The poem of the *Waking of Angantyr* is so filled with mystery and terror that it is hard to find in it anything else. After the *Volospá* it is the most wonderful of all the Northern poems.

Hervor, daughter of Angantyr, is left alone to avenge her father and her eleven brothers, killed by Arrow Odd before her birth. In her father's grave is the sword of the Dwarfs that never is drawn in vain, and she comes to his grave to find it. The island where he lies is full of death-fires, and the dead are astir, but Hervor goes on. She calls on her father and her brothers to help her:

Awake, Angantyr! It is Hervor that bids thee awake. Give me the sword of the Dwarfs! Hervard! Hiorvard! Rani! Angantyr! I bid you all awake!

Her father answers from the grave; he will not give up the sword, for the forgers of it when it was taken from them put a curse on those who wear it. But Hervor will not leave him until he has yielded to her prayers, and at last she receives the sword from her father's hands.[1]

[1] This poem has been followed by M. Leconte de Lisle in *L'Épée d'Angantyr* (*Poèmes Barbares*). It was among the first of the Northern poems to be translated into English, in Hickes's *Thesaurus* (1705), i. p. 193. It is also included in Percy's *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763).

Although the poem of Hervor lies in this way "between the worlds" of Life and Death,—the phrase is Hervor's own,—although the action is so strange and so strangely encompassed with unearthly fire and darkness, its root is not set in the dim borderland where the dialogue is carried on. The root is tragic, and not fantastic, nor is there any excess, nor anything strained beyond the limit of tragedy, in the passion of Hervor.

Definite imagination of a tragic plot, and sure comprehension of the value of dramatic problems, are not enough in themselves to make a perfect poem. They may go along with various degrees of imperfection in particular respects; faults of diction, either tenuity or extravagance of phrasing may accompany this central imaginative power. Strength of plot is partly independent of style; it bears translation, it can be explained, it is something that can be abstracted from the body of a poem and still make itself impressive. The dramatic value of the story of the death of Alboin is recognisable even when it is stated in the most general terms, as a mere formula; the story of *Waltharius* retains its life, even in the Latin hexameters; the plot of *Hamlet* is interesting, even in Saxo; the story of the Niblungs, even in the mechanical prose paraphrase. This gift of shaping a plot and letting it explain itself without encumbrances is not to be mistaken for the whole secret of the highest kind of poetry. But, if not the whole, it is the spring of the whole. All the other gifts may be there, but without this, though all but

the highest kind of epic or tragic art may be attainable, the very highest will not be attained.

Aristotle may be referred to again. As he found it convenient in his description of epic to insist on its dramatic nature, in his description of tragedy it pleased him to lay emphasis on that part of the work which is common to tragedy and epic—the story, the plot. It may be remarked how well the barbarous poetry conforms to the pattern laid down in Aristotle's description. The old German epic, in *Hildebrand*, *Waldere*, *Finnesburh*, *Byrhtnoth*, besides all the Northern lays of Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun, is dramatic in its method, letting the persons speak for themselves as much as may be. So far it complies with Aristotle's delineation of epic. And further, all this dramatic bent may be seen clearly to have its origin in the mere story,—in the dramatic situation, in fables that might be acted by puppets or in a dumb show, and yet be tragical. No analytic or psychological interest in varieties of character—in ἤθη—could have uttered the passion of Brynhild or of Gudrun. Aristotle knew that psychological analysis and moral rhetoric were not the authors of Clytemnestra or Oedipus. The barbarian poets are on a much lower and more archaic level than the poets with whom Aristotle is concerned, but here, where comparison is not meaningless nor valueless, their imaginations are seen to work in the same sound and productive way as the minds of Aeschylus or Sophocles, letting the seed—the story in its abstract form, the mere plot—develop itself and spring natur-

ally into the fuller presentation of the characters that are implied in it. It is another kind of art that studies characters in detail, one by one, and then sets them playing at chance medley, and trusts to luck that the result will be entertaining.

That Aristotle is confirmed by these barbarian auxiliaries is of no great importance to Aristotle, but it is worth arguing that the barbarous German imagination at an earlier stage, relatively, than the Homeric, is found already possessed of something like the sanity of judgment, the discrimination of essentials from accidents, which is commonly indicated by the term classical. Compared with Homer these German songs are prentice work; but they are begun in the right way, and therefore to compare them with a masterpiece in which the same way is carried out to its end is not unjustifiable.

II

SCALE OF THE POEMS

THE following are the extant poems on native heroic themes, written in one or other of the dialects of the Teutonic group, and in unrhymed alliterative measures.

(1) *Continental.*—The *Lay of Hildebrand* (*c.* A.D. 800), a Low German poem, copied by High German clerks, is the only remnant of the heroic poetry of the continental Germans in which, together with the national metre, there is a national theme.

(2) *English.*—The poems of this order in old English are *Beowulf*, *Finnesburh*, *Waldere*, and *Byrhtnoth*, or the *Lay of Maldon*. Besides these there are poems on historical themes preserved in the Chronicle, of which *Brunanburh* is the most important, and two dramatic lyrics, *Widsith* and *Deor*, in which there are many allusions to the mythical and heroic cycles.

(3) *Scandinavian and Icelandic.*—The largest number of heroic poems in alliterative verse is found in the old Northern language, and in manuscripts written in Iceland. The poems themselves may have

come from other places in which the old language of Norway was spoken, some of them perhaps from Norway itself, many of them probably from those islands round Britain to which a multitude of Norwegian settlers were attracted,—Shetland, the Orkneys, the Western Islands of Scotland.[1]

The principal collection is that of the manuscript in the King's Library at Copenhagen (2365, 4°) generally referred to as *Codex Regius* (R); it is this book, discovered in the seventeenth century, that has received the inaccurate but convenient names of *Elder Edda*, or *Poetic Edda*, or *Edda of Sæmund the Wise*, by a series of miscalculations fully described in the preface to the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*. Properly, the name *Edda* belongs only to the prose treatise by Snorri Sturluson.

The chief contents of *Codex Regius* are a series of independent poems on the Volsung story, beginning with the tragedies of *Helgi and Swava* and *Helgi and Sigrun* (originally unconnected with the Volsung legend), and going on in the order of events.

The series is broken by a gap in which the poems dealing with some of the most important parts of the story have been lost. The matter of their contents is known from the prose paraphrase called *Volsunga Saga*. Before the Volsung series come a number of poems chiefly mythological: the *Sibyl's Prophecy*, (Volospá); the *Wooing of Frey*, or the *Errand of Skirnir*; the *Flyting of Thor and Woden* (Harbarz-

[1] Cf. G. Vigfusson, Prolegomena to *Sturlunga* (Oxford, 1878); *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (*ibid.* 1883); *Grimm Centenary Papers* (1886); Sophus Bugge, *Helgedigtene* (1896).

lióð); *Thor's Fishing for the Midgarth Serpent*, (Hymiskviða); the *Railing of Loki* (Lokasenna); the *Winning of Thor's Hammer* (Þrymskviða); the *Lay of Weland*. There are also some didactic poems, chief among them being the gnomic miscellany under the title *Hávamál;* while besides this there are others, like *Vafþrúðnismál*, treating of mythical subjects in a more or less didactic and mechanical way. There are a number of prose passages introducing or linking the poems. The confusion in some parts of the book is great.

Codex Regius is not the only source; other mythic and heroic poems are found in other manuscripts. The famous poem of the *Doom of Balder* (Gray's "Descent of Odin"); the poem of the *Rescue of Menglad*, the enchanted princess; the verses preserved in the *Heiðreks Saga*, belonging to the story of Angantyr; besides the poem of the *Magic Mill* (Grottasöngr) and the *Song of the Dart* (Gray's "Fatal Sisters"). There are many fragmentary verses, among them some from the *Biarkamál*, a poem with some curious points of likeness to the English *Lay of Finnesburh*. A Swedish inscription has preserved four verses of an old poem on Theodoric.

Thus there is some variety in the original documents now extant out of the host of poems that have been lost. One conclusion at least is irresistible—that, in guessing at the amount of epic poetry of this order which has been lost, one is justified in making a liberal estimate. Fragments are all that we possess. The extant poems have escaped the deadliest risks; the

fire at Copenhagen in 1728, the bombardment in 1807, the fire in the Cotton Library in 1731, in which *Beowulf* was scorched but not burned. The manuscripts of *Finnesburh* and *Maldon* have been mislaid; but for the transcripts taken in time by Hickes and Hearne they would have been as little known as the songs that the Sirens sang. The poor remnants of *Waldere* were found by Stephens in two scraps of bookbinders' parchment.

When it is seen what hazards have been escaped by those bits of wreckage, and at the same time how distinct in character the several poems are, it is plain that one may use some freedom in thinking of the amount of this old poetry that has perished.

The loss is partly made good in different ways: in the Latin of the historians Jordanes, Paulus Diaconus, and most of all in the paraphrases, prose and verse, by Saxo Grammaticus; in Ekkehard's Latin poem of *Waltharius* (*c.* A.D. 930); in the *Volsunga Saga*, which has kept the matter of the lost poems of *Codex Regius* and something of their spirit; in the *Thidreks Saga*, a prose story made up by a Norwegian in the thirteenth century from current North German ballads of the Niblungs; in the German poems of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which, in a later form of the language and in rhyming verse, have preserved at any rate some matters of tradition, some plots of stories, if little of the peculiar manner and imagination of the older poetry.

The casual references to Teutonic heroic subjects in a vast number of authors have been brought

together in a monumental work, *die deutsche Heldensage*, by Wilhelm Grimm (1829).

The Western Group

Hildebrand, Finnesburh, Waldere, Beowulf, Byrhtnoth

The Western group of poems includes all those that are not Scandinavian; there is only one among them which is not English, the poem of *Hildebrand*. They do not afford any very copious material for inferences as to the whole course and progress of poetry in the regions to which they belong. A comparison of the fragmentary *Hildebrand* with the fragments of *Waldere* shows a remarkable difference in compass and fulness; but, at the same time, the vocabulary and phrases of *Hildebrand* declare that poem unmistakably to belong to the same family as the more elaborate *Waldere*. *Finnesburh*, the fragmentary poem of the lost Lambeth MS., seems almost as far removed as *Hildebrand* from the more expansive and leisurely method of *Waldere;* while *Waldere*, *Beowulf*, and the poem of *Maldon* resemble one another in their greater ease and fluency, as compared with the brevity and abruptness of *Hildebrand* or *Finnesburh*. The documents, as far as they go, bear out the view that in the Western German tongues, or at any rate in England, there was a development of heroic poetry tending to a greater amplitude of narration. This progress falls a long way short of the fulness of Homer, not to speak of the extreme diffuseness of some of the French

chansons de geste. It is such, however, as to distinguish the English poems, *Waldere*, *Beowulf*, and *Byrthnoth*, very obviously from the poem of *Hildebrand.* While, at the same time, the brevity of *Hildebrand* is not like the brevity of the Northern poems. *Hildebrand* is a poem capable of expansion. It is easy enough to see in what manner its outlines might be filled up and brought into the proportions of *Waldere* or *Beowulf.* In the Northern poems, on the other hand, there is a lyrical conciseness, and a broken emphatic manner of exposition, which from first to last prevented any such increase of volume as seems to have taken place in the old English poetry; though there are some poems, the *Atlamál* particularly, which indicate that some of the Northern poets wished to go to work on a larger scale than was generally allowed them by their traditions.

In the Northern group there is a great variety in respect of the amount of incident that goes to a single poem; some poems deal with a single adventure, while others give an abstract of a whole heroic history. In the Western poems this variety is not to be found. There is a difference in this respect between *Hildebrand* and *Waldere*, and still more, at least on the surface, between *Hildebrand* and *Beowulf;* but nothing like the difference between the *Lay of the Hammer* (Þrymskviða), which is an episode of Thor, and the *Lay of Weland* or the *Lay of Brynhild*, which give in a summary way a whole history from beginning to end.

Hildebrand tells of the encounter of father and

son, Hildebrand and Hadubrand, with a few references to the past of Hildebrand and his relations to Odoacer and Theodoric. It is one adventure, a tragedy in one scene.

Finnesburh, being incomplete at the beginning and end, is not good evidence. What remains of it presents a single adventure, the fight in the hall between Danes and Frisians. There is another version of the story of *Finnesburh*, which, as reported in *Beowulf* (ll. 1068-1154) gives a good deal more of the story than is given in the separate *Finnesburh Lay*. This episode in *Beowulf*, where a poem of *Finnesburh* is chanted by the Danish minstrel, is not to be taken as contributing another independent poem to the scanty stock; the minstrel's story is reported, not quoted at full length. It has been reduced by the poet of *Beowulf*, so as not to take up too large a place of its own in the composition. Such as it is, it may very well count as direct evidence of the way in which epic poems were produced and set before an audience; and it may prove that it was possible for an old English epic to deal with almost the whole of a tragic history in one sitting. In this case the tragedy is far less complex than the tale of the Niblungs, whatever interpretation may be given to the obscure allusions in which it is preserved.

Finn, son of Folcwalda, king of the Frisians, entertained Hnæf the Dane, along with the Danish warriors, in the castle of Finnesburh. There, for reasons of his own, he attacked the Danes; who kept

the hall against him, losing their own leader Hnæf, but making a great slaughter of the Frisians.

The *Beowulf* episode takes up the story at this point.

Hnæf was slain in the place of blood. His sister Hildeburg, Finn's wife, had to mourn for brother and son.

Hengest succeeded Hnæf in command of the Danes and still kept the hall against the Frisians. Finn was compelled to make terms with the Danes. Hengest and his men were to live among the Frisians with a place of their own, and share alike with Finn's household in all the gifts of the king. Finn bound himself by an oath that Hengest and his men should be free of blame and reproach, and that he would hold any Frisian guilty who should cast it up against the Danes that they had followed their lord's slayer.[1] Then, after the oaths, was held the funeral of the Danish and the Frisian prince, brother and son of Hildeburg the queen.

Then they went home to Friesland, where Hengest stayed with Finn through the winter. With the spring he set out, meaning vengeance; but he dissembled and rendered homage, and accepted the sword the lord gives his liegeman. Death came upon Finn in his house; for the Danes came back and slew him, and the hall was made red with the Frisian blood. The Danes took Hildeburg and the

[1] Compare *Cynewulf and Cyneheard* in the Chronicle (A.D. 755); also the outbreak of enmity, through recollection of old wrongs, in the stories of Alboin, and of the vengeance for Froda (*supra*, pp. 76-81).

treasure of Finn and carried the queen and the treasure to Denmark.

The whole story, with the exception of the original grievance or grudge of the Frisian king, which is not explained, and the first battle, which is taken as understood, is given in *Beowulf* as the contents of one poem, delivered in one evening by a harper. It is more complicated than the story of *Hildebrand*, more even than *Waldere;* and more than either of the two chief sections of *Beowulf* taken singly—"Beowulf in Denmark" and the "Fight with the Dragon." It is far less than the plot of the long *Lay of Brynhild*, in which the whole Niblung history is contained. In its distribution of the action, it corresponds very closely to the story of the death of the Niblungs as given by the *Atlakviða* and the *Atlamál*. The discrepancies between these latter poems need not be taken into account here. In each of them and in the *Finnesburh* story there is a double climax; first the wrong, then the vengeance. *Finnesburh* might also be compared, as far as the arrangement goes, with the *Song of Roland;* the first part gives the treacherous attack and the death of the hero; then comes a pause between the two centres of interest, followed in the second part by expiation of the wrong.

The story of *Finnesburh* is obscure in many respects; the tradition of it has failed to preserve the motive for Finn's attack on his wife's brother, without which the story loses half its value. Something remains, nevertheless, and it is possible to recognise in this episode a greater regard for unity

and symmetry of narrative than is to be found in *Beowulf* taken as a whole.

The Lambeth poem of *Finnesburh* most probably confined itself to the battle in the hall. There is no absolute proof of this, apart from the intensity of its tone, in the extant fragment, which would agree best with a short story limited, like *Hildebrand*, to one adventure. It has all the appearance of a short lay, a single episode. Such a poem might end with the truce of Finn and Hengest, and an anticipation of the Danes' vengeance:

> It is marvel an the red blood run not, as the rain does in the street.

Yet the stress of this adventure is not greater than that of Roland, which does not end at Roncesvalles; it may be that the *Finnesburh* poem went on to some of the later events, as told in the *Finnesburh* abridgment in *Beowulf*.

The story of Walter of Aquitaine as represented by the two fragments of old English verse is not greatly inconsistent with the same story in its Latin form of *Waltharius*. The Latin verses of *Waltharius* tell the story of the flight of Walter and Hildegund from the house of Attila, and of the treacherous attack on Walter by Gunther, king of the Franks, against the advice, but with the unwilling consent, of Hagen, his liegeman and Walter's friend. Hagen, Hildegund, and Walter were hostages with Attila from the Franks, Burgundians, and Aquitanians. They grew up together at the Court of Attila till

Gunther, son of Gibicho, became king of the Franks and refused tribute to the Huns. Then Hagen escaped and went home. Walter and Hildegund were lovers, and they, too, thought of flight, and escaped into the forests, westward, with a great load of treasure, and some fowling and fishing gear for the journey.

After they had crossed the Rhine, they were discovered by Hagen; and Gunther, with twelve of the Franks, went after them to take the Hunnish treasure: Hagen followed reluctantly. The pursuers came up with Walter as he was asleep in a hold among the hills, a narrow green place with overhanging cliffs all round, and a narrow path leading up to it. Hildegund awakened Walter, and he went and looked down at his adversaries. Walter offered terms, through the mediation of Hagen, but Gunther would have none of them, and the fight began. The Latin poem describes with great spirit how one after another the Franks went up against Walter: Camelo (ll. 664-685), Scaramundus (686-724), Werinhardus the bowman (725-755), Ekevrid the Saxon (756-780), who went out jeering at Walter; Hadavartus (781-845), Patavrid (846-913), Hagen's sister's son, whose story is embellished with a diatribe on avarice; Gerwicus (914-940), fighting to avenge his companions and restore their honour—

> Is furit ut caesos mundet vindicta sodales;

but he, too, fell—

> Exitiumque dolens, pulsabat calcibus arvum.

Then there was a breathing-space, before Randolf,

the eighth of them, made trial of Walter's defence (962-981). After him came Eleuther, whose other name was Helmnod, with a harpoon and a line, and the line was held by Trogus, Tanastus, and the king; Hagen still keeping aloof, though he had seen his nephew killed. The harpoon failed; three Frankish warriors were added to the slain; the king and Hagen were left (l. 1060).

Gunther tried to draw Hagen into the fight. Hagen refused at first, but gave way at last, on account of the slaying of his nephew. He advised a retreat for the night, and an attack on Walter when he should have left the fastness. And so the day ended.

Walter and Hildegund took turns to watch, Hildegund singing to awaken Walter when his turn came. They left their hold in the morning; but they had not gone a mile when Hildegund looking behind saw two men coming down a hill after them. These were Gunther and Hagen, and they had come for Walter's life. Walter sent Hildegund with the horse and its burden into the wood for safety, while he took his stand on rising ground. Gunther jeered at him as he came up; Walter made no answer to him, but reproached Hagen, his old friend. Hagen defended himself by reason of the vengeance due for his nephew; and so they fought, with more words of scorn. Hagen lost his eye, and Gunther his leg, and Walter's right hand was cut off by Hagen; and "this was their sharing of the rings of Attila!"—

Sic, sic, armillas partiti sunt Avarenses (l. 1404).

Walter and Hildegund were king and queen of Aquitaine, but of his later wars and victories the tale has no more to tell.

Of the two old English fragments of this story, the first contains part of a speech of Hildegund[1] encouraging Walter.

Its place appears to be in the pause of the fight, when the Frankish champions have been killed, and Gunther and Hagen are alone. The speech is rhetorical: "Thou hast the sword Mimming, the work of Weland, that fails not them that wield it. Be of good courage, captain of Attila; never didst thou draw back to thy hold for all the strokes of the foeman; nay, my heart was afraid because of thy rashness. Thou shalt break the boast of Gunther; he came on without a cause, he refused the offered gifts; he shall return home empty-handed, if he return at all." That is the purport of it.

The second fragment is a debate between Gunther and Walter. It begins with the close of a speech of Gunther (Guðhere), in which there are allusions to other parts of the heroic cycle, such as are common in *Beowulf*.

The allusion here is to one of the adventures of Widia, Weland's son; how he delivered Theodoric from captivity, and of Theodoric's gratitude. The connexion is obscure, but the reference is of great value as proving the resemblance of narrative method

[1] Hildegyth, her English name, is unfortunately not preserved in either of the fragmentary leaves. It is found (Hildigið) in the *Liber Vitae* (Sweet, *Oldest English Texts*, p. 155).

in *Waldere* and *Beowulf*, not to speak of the likeness to the Homeric way of quoting old stories. Waldere answers, and this is the substance of his argument: "Lo, now, Lord of the Burgundians, it was thy thought that Hagena's hand should end my fighting. Come then and win my corselet, my father's heirloom, from the shoulders weary of war."[1]

The fragment closes with a pious utterance of submission to heaven, by which the poem is shown to be of the same order as *Beowulf* in this respect also, as well as others, that it is affected by a turn for edification, and cannot stand as anything like a pure example of the older kind of heroic poetry. The phrasing here is that of the Anglo-Saxon secondary poems; the common religious phrasing that came into vogue and supplemented the old heathen poetical catch-words.

The style of *Waldere* makes it probable that the action of the story was not hurried unduly. If the author kept the same proportion throughout, his poem may have been almost as long as *Waltharius*. It is probable that the fight among the rocks was described in detail; the *Maldon* poem may show how such a subject could be managed in old English verse,

[1] The resemblance to Hildebrand, l. 58, is pointed out by Sophus Bugge: "Doh maht du nu aodlihho, ibu dir din ellen taoc, In sus heremo man hrusti giwinnan." (Hildebrand speaks): "Easily now mayest thou win the spoils of so old a man, if thy strength avail thee." It is remarkable as evidence of the strong conventional character of the Teutonic poetry, and of the community of the different nations in the poetical convention, that two short passages like *Hildebrand* and *Waldere* should present so many points of likeness to other poems, in details of style. Thus the two lines quoted from *Hildebrand* as a parallel to *Waldere* contain also the equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon phrase, *Þonne his ellen deah*, a familiar part of the Teutonic *Gradus*.

and how the matter of *Waltharius* may have been expressed in *Waldere*. Roughly speaking, there is about as much fighting in the three hundred and twenty-five lines of *Maldon* as in double the number of hexameters in *Waltharius;* but the *Maldon* poem is more concise than the extant fragments of *Waldere*. *Waldere* may easily have taken up more than a thousand lines.

The Latin and the English poems are not in absolute agreement. The English poet knew that Guðhere, Guntharius, was Burgundian, not Frank; and an expression in the speech of Hildegyth suggests that the fight in the narrow pass was not so exact a succession of single combats as in *Waltharius*.

The poem of *Maldon* is more nearly related in its style to *Waldere* and *Beowulf* than to the *Finnesburh* fragment. The story of the battle has considerable likeness to the story of the fight at Finnesburh. The details, however, are given in a fuller and more capable way, at greater length.

Beowulf has been commonly regarded as exceptional, on account of its length and complexity, among the remains of the old Teutonic poetry. This view is hardly consistent with a right reading of *Waldere*, or of *Maldon* either, for that matter. It is not easy to make any great distinction between *Beowulf* and *Waldere* in respect of the proportions of the story. The main action of *Beowulf* is comparable in extent with the action of *Waltharius*. The later adventure of *Beowulf* has the character of a sequel, which extends the poem, to the detriment

of its proportions, but without adding any new element of complexity to the epic form. Almost all the points in which the manner of *Beowulf* differs from that of *Finnesburh* may be found in *Waldere* also, and are common to *Waldere* and *Beowulf* in distinction from *Hildebrand* and *Finnesburh*. The two poems, the poem of *Beowulf* and the fragments of *Waldere*, seem to be alike in the proportion they allow to dramatic argument, and in their manner of alluding to heroic matters outside of their own proper stories, not to speak of their affinities of ethical tone and sentiment.

The time of the whole action of *Beowulf* is long. The poem, however, falls naturally into two main divisions—*Beowulf in Denmark*, and the *Death of Beowulf*. If it is permissible to consider these for the present as two separate stories, then it may be affirmed that in none of the stories preserved in the old poetic form of England and the German Continent is there any great length or complexity. *Hildebrand*, a combat; *Finnesburh*, a defence of a house; *Waldere*, a champion beset by his enemies; *Beowulf in Denmark*, the hero as a deliverer from pests; *Beowulf's Death* in one action; *Maldon* the last battle of an English captain; these are the themes, and they are all simple. There is more complexity in the story of *Finnesburh*, as reported in *Beowulf*, than in all the rest; but even that story appears to have observed as much as possible the unity of action. The epic singer at the court of the Dane appears to have begun, not with the narrative of the

first contest, but immediately after that, assuming that part of the story as known, in order to concentrate attention on the vengeance, on the penalty exacted from Finn the Frisian for his treachery to his guests.

Some of the themes may have less in them than others, but there is no such variety of scale among them as will be found in the Northern poems. There seems to be a general agreement of taste among the Western German poets and audiences, English and Saxon, as to the right compass of an heroic lay. When the subject was a foreign one, as in the *Hêliand*, in the poems of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, in *Andreas*, or *Elene*, there might be room for the complexity and variety of the foreign model. The poem of *Judith* may be considered as a happy instance in which the foreign document has of itself, by a pre-established harmony, conformed to an old German fashion. In the original story of *Judith* the unities are observed in the very degree that was suited to the ways of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. It is hazardous to speak generally of a body of poetry so imperfectly represented in extant literature, but it is at any rate permissible to say that the extant heroic poems, saved out of the wreck of the Western Teutonic poetry, show a strong regard for unity of action, in every case except that of *Beowulf;* while in that case there are two stories—a story and a sequel—each observing a unity within its own limit.

Considered apart from the Northern poems, the poems of England and Germany give indication of a

progress in style from a more archaic and repressed, to a more developed and more prolix kind of narrative. The difference is considerable between *Hildebrand* and *Waldere*, between *Finnesburh* and *Beowulf*.

It is the change and development in style, rather than any increase in the complexity of the themes, that accounts for the difference in scale between the shorter and the longer poems.

For the natural history of poetical forms this point is of the highest importance. The Teutonic poetry shows that epic may be developed out of short lays through a gradual increase of ambition and of eloquence in the poets who deal with common themes. There is no question here of the process of agglutination and contamination whereby a number of short lays are supposed to be compounded into an epic poem. Of that process it may be possible to find traces in *Beowulf* and elsewhere. But quite apart from that, there is the process by which an archaic stiff manner is replaced by greater freedom, without any loss of unity in the plot. The story of Walter of Aquitaine is as simple as the story of Hildebrand. The difference between *Hildebrand* and *Waldere* is the difference between an archaic and an accomplished mode of narrative, and this difference is made by a change in spirit and imagination, not by a process of agglutination. To make the epic of *Waldere* it was not necessary to cobble together a number of older lays on separate episodes. It was possible to keep the original plan of the old story in

its simplest irreducible form, and still give it the force and magnificence of a lofty and eloquent style. It was for the attainment of this pitch of style that the heroic poetry laboured in *Waldere* and *Beowulf*, with at least enough success to make these poems distinct from the rest in this group.

With all the differences among them, the continental and English poems, *Hildebrand*, *Waldere*, and the rest, form a group by themselves, with certain specific qualities of style distinguishing them from the Scandinavian heroic poetry. The history of the Scandinavian poetry is the converse of the English development. Epic poetry in the North becomes more and more hopeless as time goes on, and with some exceptions tends further and further away from the original type which was common to all the Germans, and from which those common forms and phrases have been derived that are found in the "Poetic Edda" as well as in *Beowulf* or the *Hêliand*.

In England before the old poetry died out altogether there was attained a certain magnitude and fulness of narrative by which the English poems are distinguished, and in virtue of which they may claim the title *epic* in no transferred or distorted sense of the term. In the North a different course is taken. There seems indeed, in the *Atlamál* especially, a poem of exceptional compass and weight among those of the North, to have been something like the Western desire for a larger scale of narrative poem. But the rhetorical expansion of the older forms into an equable and deliberate narrative was counteracted by the still stronger affection for

lyrical modes of speech, for impassioned, abrupt, and heightened utterance. No epic solidity or composure could be obtained in the fiery Northern verse; the poets could not bring themselves into the frame of mind required for long recitals; they had no patience for the intervals necessary, in epic as in dramatic poetry, between the critical moments. They would have everything equally full of energy, everything must be emphatic and telling. But with all this, the Northern heroic poems are in some of their elements strongly allied to the more equable and duller poems of the West; there is a strong element of epic in their lyrical dialogues and monologues, and in their composition and arrangement of plots.

The Northern Group

In comparing the English and the Northern poems, it should be borne in mind that the documents of the Northern poetry are hardly sufficient evidence of the condition of Northern epic at its best. The English documents are fragmentary, indeed, but at least they belong to a time in which the heroic poetry was attractive and well appreciated; as is proved by the wonderful freshness of the *Maldon* poem, late though it is. The Northern poems seem to have lost their vogue and freshness before they came to be collected and written down. They were imperfectly remembered and reported; the text of them is broken and confused, and the gaps are made up with prose explanations. The fortunate preservation of a second copy of *Volospá*,

in Hauk's book, has further multiplied labours and perplexities by a palpable demonstration of the vanity of copiers, and of the casual way in which the strophes of a poem might be shuffled at random in different texts; while the chief manuscript of the poems itself has in some cases double and incongruous versions of the same passage.[1]

The *Codex Regius* contains a number of poems that can only be called *epic* in the widest and loosest sense of the term, and some that are not *epic* in any sense at all. The gnomic verses, the mythological summaries, may be passed over for the present; whatever illustrations they may afford of early beliefs and ideas, they have no evidence to give concerning the proportions of stories. Other poems in the collection come under the denomination of epic only by a rather liberal extension of the term to include poems which are no more epic than dramatic, and just as much the one as the other, like the poems of *Frey's Wooing* and of the earlier exploits of Sigurd, which tell their story altogether by means of dialogue, without any narrative passages at all. The links and explanations are supplied, in prose, in the manuscript. Further, among the poems which come nearer to the English form of narrative poetry there is the very greatest variety of scale. The amount of story told in the Northern poems may vary indefinitely within the widest limits. Some poems contain little

[1] Cf. *C.P.B.*, i. p. 375, for double versions of part of *Hamðismál*, and of the *Lay of Helgi*. On pp. 377-379, parts of the two texts of *Volospá*—R and H—are printed side by side for comparison.

more than an idyll of a single scene; others may give an abstract of a whole history, as the whole Volsung story is summarised, for instance, in the *Prophecy of Gripir*.

Some of the poems are found in such a confused and fragmentary form, with interruptions and interpolations, that, although it is possible to make out the story, it is hardly possible to give any confident judgment about the original proportions of the poems. This is particularly the case with the poems of which the hero bears the name of Helgi. The difficulties of these were partly appreciated, but not solved, by the original editor.

The differences of scale may be illustrated by the following summary description, which aims at little more than a rough measurement of the stories, for purposes of comparison with *Beowulf* and *Waldere*.

The *Lay of Weland* gives a whole mythical history. How Weland and his brother met with the swan-maidens, how the swan-brides left them in the ninth year, how Weland Smith was taken prisoner by King Nidad, and hamstrung, and set to work for the king; and of the vengeance of Weland. There are one hundred and fifty-nine lines, but in the text there are many defective places. The *Lay* is a ballad history, beginning at the beginning, and ending, not with the end of the life of Weland, nor with the adventures of his son Widia, but with the escape of Weland from the king, his enemy, after he had killed the king's sons and put shame on the king's daughter Bodvild.

In plan, the *Lay of Weland* is quite different from the lays of the adventures of Thor, the *Þrymskviða* and the *Hymiskviða*, the songs of the Hammer and the Cauldron. These are chapters, episodes, in the history of Thor, not summaries of the whole matter, such as is the poem of *Weland*.

The stories of Helgi Hundingsbane, and of his namesakes, as has been already remarked, are given in a more than usually complicated and tangled form.

At first everything is simple enough. A poem of the life of Helgi begins in a way that promises a mode of narrative fuller and less abrupt than the *Lay of Weland*. It tells of the birth of Helgi, son of Sigmund; of the coming of the Norns to make fast the threads of his destiny; of the gladness and the good hopes with which his birth was welcomed. Then the *Lay of Helgi* tells, very briefly, how he slew King Hunding, how the sons of Hunding made claims for recompense. "But the prince would make no payment of amends; he bade them look for no payment, but for the strong storm, for the grey spears, and for the rage of Odin."[1] And the sons of Hunding were slain as their father had been.

Then the main interest begins, the story of Helgi and Sigrun.

"A light shone forth from the Mountains of Flame, and lightnings followed." There appeared to Helgi,

[1] Cf. *Maldon*, l. 45 *sq.*, "Hearest thou what this people answer? They will pay you, for tribute, spears, the deadly point, the old swords, the weapons of war that profit you not," etc.

in the air, a company of armed maidens riding across the field of heaven; "their armour was stained with blood, and light went forth from their spears." Sigrun from among the other "ladies of the South" answered Helgi, and called on him for help; her father Hogni had betrothed her, against her will, to Hodbrodd, son of Granmar. Helgi summoned his men to save her from this loathed wedding. The battle in which Helgi slew his enemies and won the lady of the air is told very shortly, while disproportionate length is given to an interlude of vituperative dialogue between two heroes, Sinfiotli, Helgi's brother, and Gudmund, son of Granmar, the warden of the enemy's coast; this passage of *Vetus Comoedia* takes up fifty lines, while only six are given to the battle, and thirteen to the meeting of Helgi and Sigrun afterwards. Here ends the poem which is described in *Codex Regius* as the *Lay of Helgi* (*Helgakviða*). The story is continued in the next section in a disorderly way, by means of ill-connected quotations. The original editor, whether rightly or wrongly, is quite certain that the *Lay of Helgi*, which ends with the victory of Helgi over the unamiable bridegroom, is a different poem from that which he proceeds to quote as the *Old Lay of the Volsungs*, in which the same story is told. In this second version there is at least one interpolation from a third; a stanza from a poem in the "dialogue measure," which is not the measure in which the rest of the story is told. It is uncertain what application was meant to be given to the title *Old Lay of the Volsungs*, and whether

the editor included under that title the whole of his second version of Helgi and Sigrun. For instance, he gives another version of the railing verses of Sinfiotli, which he may or may not have regarded as forming an essential part of his *Old Volsung Lay*. He distinguishes it at any rate from the other "Flyting," which he definitely and by name ascribes to *Helgakviða*.

It is in this second version of the story of Helgi that the tragedy is worked out. Helgi slays the father of Sigrun in his battle against the bridegroom's kindred: Sigrun's brother takes vengeance. The space is scant enough for all that is told in it; scant, that is to say, in comparison with the space of the story of Beowulf; though whether the poem loses, as poetry, by this compression is another matter.

It is here, in connexion with the second version, that the tragedy is followed by the verses of the grief of Sigrun, and the return of Helgi from the dead; the passage of mystery, the musical close, in which the tragic idea is changed into something less distinct than tragedy, yet without detriment to the main action.

Whatever may be the critical solution of the textual problems of these *Lays*, it is impossible to get out of the text any form of narrative that shall resemble the English mode. Even where the story of Helgi is slowest, it is quicker, more abrupt, and more lyrical even than the *Lay of Finnesburh*, which is the quickest in movement of the English poems.

The story of Helgi and Sigrun is intelligible, and though incomplete, not yet so maimed as to have lost its proportions altogether. Along with it, however, in the manuscript there are other, even more difficult fragments of poems about another Helgi, son of Hiorvard, and his love for another Valkyria, Swava. And yet again there are traces of a third Helgi, with a history of his own. The editors of *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* have accepted the view of the three Helgis that is indicated by the prose passages of the manuscript here; namely, that the different stories are really of the same persons born anew, "to go through the same life-story, though with varying incidents."[1] "Helgi and Swava, it is said, were born again," is the note in the manuscript. "There was a king named Hogni, and his daughter was Sigrun. She was a Valkyria and rode over air and sea; *she was Swava born again.*" And, after the close of the story of Sigrun, "it was a belief in the old days that men were born again, but that is now reckoned old wives' fables. Helgi and Sigrun, it is reported, were born anew, and then he was Helgi Haddingjaskati, and she Kara, Halfdan's daughter, as is told in the songs of Kara, and she was a Valkyria."

It is still possible to regard the "old wives' fable" (which is a common element in Celtic legend and elsewhere) as something unessential in the poems of Helgi; as a popular explanation intended to reconcile different myths attaching to the name. However that may be, the poems of *Helgi and Swava* are so

[1] *C.P.B.*, i. p. 130.

fragmentary and confused, and so much has to be eked out with prose, that it is impossible to say what the complete form and scale of the poetical story may have been, and even difficult to be certain that it was ever anything else than fragments. As they stand, the remains are like those of the story of Angantyr; prominent passages quoted by a chronicler, who gives the less important part of the story in prose, either because he has forgotten the rest of the poem, or because the poem was made in that way to begin with.

Of the poem of *Kara*, mentioned in the manuscript, there is nothing left except what can be restored by a conjectural transference of some verses, given under the name of Helgi and Sigrun, to this third mysterious plot. The conjectures are supported by the reference to the third story in the manuscript, and by the fact that certain passages which do not fit in well to the story of Helgi and Sigrun, where they are placed by the collector, correspond with prose passages in the late Icelandic romance of *Hromund Greipsson*,[1] in which Kara is introduced.

The story of Helgi and Swava is one that covers a large period of time, though the actual remnants of the story are small. It is a tragedy of the early Elizabethan type described by Sir Philip Sidney, which begins with the wooing of the hero's father and mother. The hero is dumb and nameless from his birth, until the Valkyria, Swava, meets him and gives him his name, Helgi; and tells him of a magic sword in an island, that will bring him victory.

[1] *C.P.B.*, Introduction, p. lxxviii.

The tragedy is brought about by a witch who drives Hedin, the brother of Helgi, to make a foolish boast, an oath on the Boar's head (like the vows of the Heron or the Peacock, and the *gabs* of the Paladins of France) that he will wed his brother's bride. Hedin confesses his vanity to Helgi, and is forgiven, Helgi saying, "Who knows but the oath may be fulfilled? I am on my way to meet a challenge."

Helgi is wounded mortally, and sends a message to Swava to come to him, and prays her after his death to take Hedin for her lord. The poem ends with two short energetic speeches: of Swava refusing to have any love but Helgi's; and of Hedin bidding farewell to Swava as he goes to make amends, and avenge his brother.

These fragments, though their evidence tells little regarding epic scale or proportions, are, at least, illustrations of the nature of the stories chosen for epic narrative. The character of Hedin, his folly and magnanimity, is in strong contrast to that of Dag, the brother of Sigrun, who makes mischief in the other poem. The character of Swava is a fainter repetition of Sigrun.

Nothing very definite can be made out of any of the Helgi poems with regard to the conventions of scale in narrative; except that the collector of the poems was himself in difficulties in this part of his work, and that he knew he had no complete poem to offer his readers, except perhaps the *Helgakviða*.

The poem named by the Oxford editors "The Long Lay of Brunhild" (i. p. 293) is headed in the

manuscript "Qviða Sigurþar," *Lay of Sigurd*, and referred to, in the prose gloss of *Codex Regius*, as "The Short Lay of Sigurd." "Short" in this place appears to denote the summary character of the poem; there is no other evident reason for it. This is one of the most important of the Northern heroic lays, in every respect; and, among other reasons, as an example of definite artistic calculation and study, a finished piece of work. It shows the difference between the Northern and the Western standards of epic measurement. The poem is one that gives the whole of the tragedy in no longer space than is used in the poem of *Maldon* for the adventures of a few hours of battle. There are 288 lines, not all complete.

There are many various modes of representation in the poem. The beginning tells the earlier story of Sigurd and Brynhild in twenty lines:—

It was in the days of old that Sigurd, the young Volsung, the slayer of Fafni, came to the house of Giuki. He took the troth-plight of two brothers; the doughty heroes gave oaths one to another. They offered him the maid Gudrun, Giuki's daughter, and store of treasure; they drank and took counsel together many a day, Child Sigurd and the sons of Giuki; until they went to woo Brynhild, and Sigurd the Volsung rode in their company; he was to win her if he could get her. The Southern hero laid a naked sword, a falchion graven, between them twain; nor did the Hunnish king ever kiss her, neither take her into his arms; he handed the young maiden over to Giuki's son.

She knew no guilt in her life, nor was any evil found in her when she died, no blame in deed or thought. The grim Fates came between.[1]

"It was the Fates that worked them ill." This

[1] From *C.P.B.*, i. pp. 293, 294, with some modifications.

sententious close of the prologue introduces the main story, chiefly dramatic in form, in which Brynhild persuades Gunnar to plan the death of Sigurd, and Gunnar persuades Hogni. It is love for Sigurd, and jealousy of Gudrun, that form the motive of Brynhild. Gunnar's conduct is barely intelligible; there is no explanation of his compliance with Brynhild, except the mere strength of her importunity. Hogni is reluctant, and remembers the oaths sworn to Sigurd. Gothorm, their younger brother, is made their instrument,—he was "outside the oaths." The slaying of Sigurd by Gothorm, and Sigurd's dying stroke that cuts his slayer in two, are told in the brief manner of the prologue to the poem; likewise the grief of Gudrun. Then comes Sigurd's speech to Gudrun before his death.

The principal part of the poem, from line 118 to the end, is filled by the storm in the mind of Brynhild: her laughter at the grief of Gudrun, her confession of her own sorrows, and her preparation for death; the expostulations of Gunnar, the bitter speech of Hogni,—"Let no man stay her from her long journey"; the stroke of the sword with which Brynhild gives herself the death-wound; her dying prophecy. In this last speech of Brynhild, with all its vehemence, there is manifest care on the part of the author to bring out clearly his knowledge of the later fortunes of Gudrun and Gunnar. The prophecy includes the birth of Swanhild, the marriage of Attila and Gudrun, the death of Gunnar at the hands of Attila, by reason of the love between Gudrun and

Oddrun; the vengeance of Gudrun on Attila, the third marriage of Gudrun, the death of Swanhild among the Goths. With all this, and carrying all this burden of history, there is the passion of Brynhild, not wholly obscured or quenched by the rhetorical ingenuity of the poet. For it is plain that the poet was an artist capable of more than one thing at a time. He was stirred by the tragic personage of Brynhild; he was also pleased, intellectually and dispassionately, with his design of grouping together in one composition all the events of the tragic history.

The poem is followed by the short separate Lay (forty-four lines) of the *Hell-ride of Brynhild*, which looks as if it might have been composed by the same or another poet, to supply some of the history wanting at the beginning of the *Lay of Brynhild*. Brynhild, riding Hell-ward with Sigurd, from the funeral pile where she and Sigurd had been laid by the Giuking lords, is encountered by a giantess who forbids her to pass through her "rock-built courts," and cries shame upon her for her guilt. Brynhild answers with the story of her evil fate, how she was a Valkyria, punished by Odin for disobedience, set in the ring of flame, to be released by none but the slayer of Fafni; how she had been beguiled in Gunnar's wooing, and how Gudrun cast it in her teeth. This supplies the motive for the anger of Brynhild against Sigurd, not clearly expressed in the *Lay*, and also for Gunnar's compliance with her jealous appeal, and Hogni's consent to the death of Sigurd. While, in the same manner as in the *Lay*, the formalism and pedantry of

the historical poet are burnt up in the passion of the heroine. "Sorrow is the portion of the life of all men and women born: we two, I and Sigurd, shall be parted no more for ever." The latter part of the *Lay*, the long monologue of Brynhild, is in form like the *Lamentation of Oddrun* and the idyll of Gudrun and Theodoric; though, unlike those poems, it has a fuller narrative introduction: the monologue does not begin until the situation has been explained.

On the same subject, but in strong contrast with the *Lay of Brynhild*, is the poem that has lost its beginning in the great gap in *Codex Regius*. It is commonly referred to in the editions as the *Fragmentary Lay of Sigurd* ("Brot af Sigurðarkviðu"); in the Oxford edition it is styled the "Fragment of a short Brunhild Lay." There are seventy-six lines (incomplete) beginning with the colloquy of Gunnar and Hogni. Here also the character of Brynhild is the inspiration of the poet. But there does not seem to have been in his mind anything like the historical anxiety of the other poet to account for every incident, or at least to show that, if he wished, he could account for every incident, in the whole story. It is much stronger in expression, and the conception of Brynhild is more dramatic and more imaginative, though less eloquent, than in the longer poem. The phrasing is short and emphatic:—

> Gudrun, Giuki's daughter, stood without, and this was the first word she spoke: "Where is Sigurd, the king of men, that my brothers are riding in the van?" Hogni made answer to her words: "We have hewn Sigurd asunder with

the sword; ever the grey horse droops his head over the dead king."

Then spake Brynhild, Budli's daughter: "Have great joy of your weapons and hands. Sigurd would have ruled everything as he chose, if he had kept his life a little longer. It was not meet that he should so rule over the host of the Goths and the heritage of Giuki, who begat five sons that delighted in war and in the havoc of battle."

Brynhild laughed, the whole house rang: "Have long joy of your hands and weapons, since ye have slain the valiant king."[1]

The mood of Brynhild is altered later, and she "weeps at that she had laughed at." She wakens before the day, chilled by evil dreams. "It was cold in the hall, and cold in the bed," and she had seen in her sleep the end of the Niblungs, and woke, and reproached Gunnar with the treason to his friend.

It is difficult to estimate the original full compass of this fragmentary poem, but the scale of its narrative and its drama can be pretty clearly understood from what remains. It is a poem with nothing superfluous in it. The death of Sigurd does not seem to have been given in any detail, except for the commentary spoken by the eagle and the raven, prophetic of the doom of the Niblungs. The mystery of Brynhild's character is curiously recognised by a sort of informal chorus. It is said that "they were stricken silent as she spoke, and none could understand her bearing, that she should weep to speak of that for which she had besought them laughing." It is one of the simplest forms in narrative; but in this case the simplicity of the rhetoric goes along with some variety

[1] From *C.P.B.*, i. p. 307, with some changes.

and subtlety of dramatic imagination. The character of the heroine is rightly imagined and strongly rendered, and her change of mind is impressive, as the author plainly meant it to be.

The *Lay of Attila* (*Atlakviða*) and the Greenland poem of *Attila* (*Atlamál*) are two poems which have a common subject and the same amount of story: how Attila sent for Gunnar and Hogni, the brothers of Gudrun, and had them put to death, and how Gudrun took vengeance on Attila.

In the *Atlakviða* there are 174 lines, and some broken places; in *Atlamál* there are 384 lines; its narrative is more copious than in most of the Norse Lays. There are some curious discrepancies in the matter of the two poems, but these hardly affect the scale of the story. The difference between them in this respect is fairly represented by the difference in the number of their lines. The scenes of the history are kept in similar proportions in both poems.

The story of Gudrun's vengeance has been seen (p. 96) to correspond, as far as the amount of action is concerned, pretty closely with the story of Hengest and Finn. The epic unity is preserved; and, as in the *Finnesburh* story, there is a distribution of interest between the *wrong* and the *vengeance*,—(1) the death of Hnæf, the death of Gunnar and Hogni; (2) the vengeance of Hengest, the vengeance of Gudrun, with an interval of dissimulation in each case.

The plot of the death of Attila, under all its manifold variations, is never without a certain natural fitness for consistent and well-proportioned narrative.

None of the Northern poems take any account of the theory that the murder of Sigfred was avenged by his wife upon her brothers. That theory belongs to the *Nibelungenlied;* in some form or other it was known to Saxo; it is found in the Danish ballad of *Grimild's Revenge*, a translation or adaptation from the German. That other conception of the story may be more full of tragic meaning; the Northern versions, which agree in making Attila the slayer of the Niblung kings, have the advantage of greater concentration. The motive of Attila, which is different in each of the poems on this subject, is in no case equal to the tragic motive of Kriemhild in the *Nibelungen.* On the other hand, the present interest of the story is not distracted by reference to the long previous history of Sigfred; a new start is made when the Niblungs are invited to Attila's Court. The situation is intelligible at once, without any long preliminary explanation.

In the *Lay of Attila* the hoard of the Niblungs comes into the story; its fatal significance is recognised; it is the "metal of discord" that is left in the Rhine for ever. But the situation can be understood without any long preliminary history of the Niblung treasure and its fate. Just as the story of *Waldere* explains itself at once,—a man defending his bride and his worldly wealth against a number of enemies, in a place where he is able to take them one by one, as they come on,—so the story of *Attila* can begin without long preliminaries; though the previous history is to be found, in tradition, in common

stories, if any one cares to ask for it. The plot is intelligible in a moment: the brothers inveigled away and killed by their sister's husband (for reasons of his own, as to which the versions do not agree); their sister's vengeance by the sacrifice of her own children and the death of her husband.

In the *Atlamál* there is very much less recognition of the previous history than in *Atlakviða*. The story begins at once with the invitation to the Niblung brothers and with their sister's warning. Attila's motive is not emphasised; he has a grudge against them on account of the death of Brynhild his sister, but his motive is not very necessary for the story, as the story is managed here. The present scene and the present passion are not complicated with too much reference to the former history of the personages. This mode of procedure will be found to have given some trouble to the author, but the result at any rate is a complete and rounded work.

There is great difference of treatment between *Atlakviða* and the Greenland poem *Atlamál*, a difference which is worth some further consideration.[1] There is, however, no very great difference of scale; at any rate, the difference between them becomes unimportant when they are compared with *Beowulf*. Even the more prolix of the two, which in some respects is the fullest and most elaborate of the Northern heroic poems, yet comes short of the English scale. *Atlamál* takes up very little more than the space of the English poem of *Maldon*, which is a simple narrative of a

[1] See pp. 168-180 below.

battle, with nothing like the tragic complexity and variety of the story of the vengeance of Gudrun.

There is yet another version of the death of Gunnar the Giuking to compare with the two poems of *Attila*—the *Lament of Oddrun* (*Oddrúnargrátr*), which precedes the *Atlakviða* in the manuscript. The form of this, as well as the plot of it, is wonderfully different from either of the other two poems. This is one of the epic or tragic idylls in which a passage of heroic legend is told dramatically by one who had a share in it. Here the death of Gunnar is told by Oddrun his mistress, the sister of Attila.

This form of indirect narration, by giving so great a dramatic value to the person of the narrator, before the beginning of her story, of course tends to depreciate or to exclude the vivid dramatic scenes that are common everywhere else in the Northern poems. The character of the speaker leaves too little independence to the other characters. But in none of the poems is the tragic plot more strongly drawn out than in the seventy lines of Oddrun's story to Borgny.

The father of Oddrun, Brynhild, and Attila had destined Oddrun to be the bride of Gunnar, but it was Brynhild that he married. Then came the anger of Brynhild against Sigurd, the death of Sigurd, the death of Brynhild that is renowned over all the world. Gunnar sought the hand of Oddrun from her brother Attila, but Attila would not accept the price of the bride from the son of Giuki. The love of Oddrun was given to Gunnar. "I gave my love to Gunnar as Brynhild should have loved him. We could not

withstand our love: I kept troth with Gunnar." The lovers were betrayed to Attila, who would not believe the accusation against his sister; "yet no man should pledge his honour for the innocence of another, when it is a matter of love." At last he was persuaded, and laid a plot to take vengeance on the Niblungs; Gudrun knew nothing of what was intended.

The death of Gunnar and Hogni is told in five-and-twenty lines:—

There was din of the hoofs of gold when the sons of Giuki rode into the Court. The heart was cut out of the body of Hogni; his brother they set in the pit of snakes. The wise king smote on his harp, for he thought that I should come to his help. Howbeit I was gone to the banquet at the house of Geirmund. From Hlessey I heard how the strings rang loud. I called to my handmaidens to rise and go; I sought to save the life of the prince; we sailed across the sound, till we saw the halls of Attila. But the accursed serpent crept to the heart of Gunnar, so that I might not save the life of the king.

Full oft I wonder how I keep my life after him, for I thought I loved him like myself.

Thou hast sat and listened while I have told thee many evils of my lot and theirs. The life of a man is as his thoughts are.

The Lamentation of Oddrun is finished.

The *Hamðismál*, the poem of the death of Ermanaric, is one that, in its proportions, is not unlike the *Atlakviða*: the plot has been already described (pp. 81-82). The poem of 130 lines as it stands has suffered a good deal. This also is like the story of Hengest and the story of Gudrun in the way the action is proportioned. It began with the slaying of Swanhild, the wrong to Gudrun—this part is lost. It goes on to

the speech of Gudrun to her sons, Sorli and Hamther, and their expedition to the hall of the Goth; it ends with their death. In this case, also, the action must have begun at once and intelligibly, as soon as the motive of the Gothic treachery and cruelty was explained, or even without that explanation, in the more immediate sense of the treachery and cruelty, in the story of Swanhild trampled to death, and of the news brought to Gudrun. Here, also, there is much less expansion of the story than in the English poems; everything is surcharged with meaning.

The *Old Lay of Gudrun* (*Guðrúnarkviða in forna*), or the tale of Gudrun to Theodoric, an idyll like the story of Oddrun, goes quickly over the event of the killing of Sigurd, and the return of Grani, masterless. Unlike the *Lament of Oddrun*, this monologue of Gudrun introduces dramatic passages. The meeting of Gudrun and her brother is not merely told by Gudrun in indirect narration; the speeches of Hogni and Gudrun are reported directly, as they might have been in a poem of the form of *Atlakviða*, or the *Lay of Sigurd*, or any other in which the poet tells the story himself, without the introduction of an imaginary narrator. The main part of the poem is an account of the way in which Gudrun's mother, Grimhild, compelled her, by a potion of forgetfulness, to lose the thought of Sigurd and of all her woes, and consent to become the wife of Attila. This part is well prefaced by the quiet account of the life of Gudrun in her widowhood, before Grimhild began her schemes; how Gudrun

lived in the house of Half, with Thora, daughter of Hakon, in Denmark, and how the ladies spent their time at the tapestry frame, working pictures of the heroes, the ships of Sigmund, the ranks of Hunnish warriors.

In the manuscript there are found at the end of the *Old Lay of Gudrun*, as if they were part of it, some verses which have been separated from it by the editors (*C.P.B.*, i. 347) as a "Fragment of an Atli Lay." They came from a poem of which the design, at any rate, was the same as that of the *Old Lay*, and Gudrun is the speaker. She tells how, after the death of Gunnar and Hogni, she was wakened by Atli, to listen to his evil dreams, foreboding his doom, and how she interpreted them in a way to comfort him and put him off his guard.

In English poetry there are instances of stories introduced dramatically, long before the pilgrimage to Canterbury. In *Beowulf* there are various episodes where a story is told by one of the persons engaged. Besides the poem of Hengest chanted in Heorot, there is Beowulf's own narrative of his adventures, after his return to his own people in the kingdom of the Gauts, and passages still nearer in form to the *Lament of Oddrun* and the *Confession of Gudrun* are the last speech of Beowulf before his death (2426-2537), and the long speech of Wiglaf (2900-3027) telling of the enmity of the Gauts and the Swedes. But those are not filled with dramatic pathos to the same degree as these Northern *Heroides*, the monologues of Oddrun and Gudrun.

The *Lay of Gudrun* (*Gudrúnarkviða*) which

comes in the manuscript immediately before the *Lay of Sigurd*, is a pure heroic idyll. Unlike most of its companions, it leaves the details of the Volsung story very much in neglect, and brings all its force to bear on the representation of the grief of the queen, contrasted with the stormy passion of Brynhild. It is rightly honoured for its pathetic imagination of the dumb grief of Gudrun, broken up and dissolved when her sister draws away the covering from the face of Sigurd. "But fire was kindled in the eyes of Brynhild, daughter of Budli, when she looked upon his wounds."

The refrain of the poem increases its resemblance to the form of a Greek idyll. The verse is that of narrative poetry; the refrain is not purely lyrical and does not come in at regular intervals.

The *Tregrof Guðrúnar*, or *Chain of Woe*, restored by the Oxford editors out of the most confused part of the original text, is pure lamentation, spoken by Gudrun before her death, recounting all her sorrows: the bright hair of Swanhild trampled in the mire; Sigurd slain in his bed, despoiled of victory; Gunnar in the court of the serpents; the heart of Hogni cut out of his living body—"Saddle thy white steed and come to me, Sigurd; remember what we promised to one another, that thou wouldst come from Hell to seek me, and I would come to thee from the living world."

The short poem entitled *Qviða Guðrúnar* in the manuscript, the *Ordeal of Gudrun* in the English edition, is distinctly episodic. The subject is the calumny which was brought against Gudrun by

Herkja, the cast-off mistress of Attila, that "she had seen Gudrun and Theodoric together"; and the ordeal of water by which Gudrun proved her innocence, while the falsehood was brought home to Herkja, the bondwoman. The theme is slighter and simpler than all the rest, and this poem, at least, might be reckoned not unfit to be taken up as a single scene in a long epic.

Some of the Northern poems in the epic measure are almost wholly made up of dialogue. The story of *Balder's Doom* is a dialogue between Odin and the witch whom he raises from the dead. The earlier part of the story of Sigurd in the "Elder Edda" is almost all dialogue, even where the narrative measure is employed.

There is hardly any mere narrative in the poems remaining of the cycle of Angantyr. In several other cases, the writer has only given, perhaps has only remembered clearly, the dramatic part of the poems in which he was interested; the intervals of the story he fills up with prose. It is difficult to tell where this want of narrative connexion in the poetry is original, and where it is due to forgetfulness or ignorance; where the prose of the manuscripts is to be taken as standing in the place of lost narrative verses, and where it fills a gap that was never intended to be filled with verse, but was always left to the reciter, to be supplied in his own way by passages of story-telling, between his chantings of the poetic dialogue of Hervor and the Shepherd, for instance, or of Hervor and Angantyr.

The poems just mentioned are composed in narrative measure. There are also other dialogue poems in a measure different from this, and peculiarly adapted to dialogues, the measure of the gnomic *Hávamál* and of the didactic mythological poems, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, *Grímnismál*. These pieces are some distance removed from epic or ballad poetry. But there are others in this gnomic measure which it is not easy to keep far apart from such dialogue poems as *Balder's Doom*, though their verse is different. By their peculiar verse they are distinguished from the English and Saxon heroic poetry; but they retain, for all their peculiar metre and their want of direct narrative, some of the characteristics of Teutonic epic.

The *Lokasenna* has a plot, and represents dramatically an incident in the history of the gods. The chief business is Loki's shameless rehearsal of accusations against the gods, and their helpless rejoinders. It is a masque of the gods, and not a ballad like the *Winning of Thor's Hammer*. It is not, however, a mere string of "flytings" without a plot; there is some plot and action. It is the absence of Thor that gives Loki courage to browbeat the gods; the return of Thor at the end of the poem avenges the gods on their accuser.

In the strange poem of the *Railing of Thor and Harbard*, and in a very rough and irregular kind of verse, there is a similar kind of plot.

The *Contention of Atli and Rimgerd the Giantess* is a short comic dialogue, interposed among the frag-

ments of the poem of Helgi Hiorvard's son, and marked off from them by its use of the dialogue verse, as well as by its episodic plot.

Helgi Hiorvard's son had killed the giant Hati, and the giant's daughter comes at night where Helgi's ships are moored in the firth, and stands on a rock over them, challenging Helgi and his men. Atli, keeping watch on deck, answers the giantess, and there is an exchange of gibes in the old style between them. Helgi is awakened and joins in the argument. It is good comedy of its kind, and there is poetry in the giantess's description of the company of armed maidens of the air whom she has seen keeping guard over Helgi's ships—"three nines of maids, but one rode foremost, a white maid, enhelmed. Their rearing horses shook dew from their manes into the deep dales, and hail upon the lofty woods; thence come fair seasons among men. But the whole sight was hateful to me" (*C.P.B.*, i. p. 154).

The giantess is kept there by the gibes of Atli till the daybreak. "Look eastward, now, Rimgerd!" And the giantess is turned into stone, a great harbour mark, to be laughed at.

In some other poems there is much more action, and much more need for an interpreter to act as chorus in the intervals between the dialogues. The story of the wooing of Gerd is in this form: how Frey sat in the seat of Odin and saw a fair maid in Jotunheim, and got great sickness of thought, till his swain Skirnir found the cause of his languishing, and went to woo Gerd for him in Gymi's Garth. Another

love-story, and a story not unlike that of Frey and Gerd, is contained in the two poems *Grógaldr* and *Fiölsvinnsmál*, that tell of the winning of Menglad by her destined lover.

These two latter poems are not in *Codex Regius*, and it was only gradually that their relation to one another was worked out, chiefly by means of the Danish ballad which contains the story of both together in the right order.

In the first, Svipdag the hero comes to his mother's grave to call on her for counsel. He has been laid under a mysterious charge, to go on a quest which he cannot understand, "to find out Menglad," and Menglad he has never heard of, and does not know where she is to be found.

The second poem, also in dialogue, and in the dialogue measure, gives the coming of Svipdag to the mysterious castle, and his debate with the giant who keeps the gate. For Menglad is the princess whose story is told everywhere, and under a thousand names,—the lady of a strange country, kept under a spell in a witch's castle till the deliverer comes. The wooing of Gerd out of Jotunheim is another version of the same story, which in different forms is one of the oldest and most universal everywhere,—the fairy story of the princess beyond the sea.

The second dialogue is very much encumbered by the pedantries of the giant who keeps the gate; it ends, however, in the recognition of Svipdag and Menglad. Menglad says: "Long have I sat waiting for thee, many-a-day; but now is that befallen that

I have sought for, and thou art come to my bower. Great was the sorrow of my waiting ; great was thine, waiting for the gladness of love. Now it is very truth for us : the days of our life shall not be sundered."

The same form is used in the older poems of Sigurd, those that come before the hiatus of the great manuscript, and have been gathered together in the Oxford edition under the title of the *Old Play of the Wolsungs*. They touch briefly on all the chief points of the story of the Niblung hoard, from the capture and ransom of Andvari to the winning of the warrior maiden Sigrdrifa by Sigurd.

All these last-mentioned dialogue poems, in spite of their lyric or elegiac measure, are like the narrative poems in their dependence upon traditional, mythic, or heroic stories, from which they choose their themes. They are not like the lyrical heroic poems of *Widsith* and *Deor* in Anglo-Saxon literature, which survey a large tract of heroic legend from a point of vantage. Something of this sort is done by some of the Norse dialogue poems, *Vafþrúðnismál*, etc., but in the poems of Frey and Gerd, of Svipdag and Menglad, and of the Niblung treasure, though this reflective and comparative method occasionally makes itself evident, the interest is that of the story. They have a story to represent, just as much as the narrative poems, though they are debarred from the use of narrative.

It must be confessed that there is an easily detected ambiguity in the use of the term epic in

application to the poems, whether German, English, or Northern, here reviewed. That they are heroic poems cannot be questioned, but that they are epic in any save the most general sense of the term is not quite clear. They may be epic in character, in a general way, but how many of them have a claim to the title in its eminent and special sense? Most of them are short poems; most of them seem to be wanting in the breadth of treatment, in the amplitude of substance, that are proper to epic poetry.

Beowulf, it may be admitted, is epic in the sense that distinguishes between the longer narrative poem and the shorter ballad. The fragments of *Waldere* are the fragments of a poem that is not cramped for room, and that moves easily and with sufficient eloquence in the representation of action. The narrative of the *Maldon* poem is not pinched nor meagre in its proportions. Hardly any of the other poems, however, can be compared with these in this respect. These are the most liberal in scale of all the old Teutonic poems; the largest epic works of which we know anything directly. These are the fullest in composition, the least abstract or elliptical; and they still want something of the scale of the *Iliad*. The poem of *Maldon* for instance corresponds not to the *Iliad*, but to the action of a single book, such as the twelfth, with which it has been already compared. If the story of the English *Waldere*, when complete, was not more elaborate than the extant Latin *Waltharius*, it must have come far short of the proportions of Homer. It is a story for a single recitation,

like the story of Finnesburh in *Beowulf*. The poem of *Beowulf* may have more in it than the story of Walter and Hildegund, but this advantage would seem to be gained at the expense of the unity of the poem. It is lengthened out by a sequel, by the addition of a new adventure which requires the poet to make a new start. In the poem of *Hildebrand* there is a single tragedy contained in a single scene. It is briefly rendered, in a style evidently more primitive, less expansive and eloquent, than the style of *Beowulf* or *Waldere*. Even if it had been given in a fuller form, the story would still have been essentially a short one; it could not well have been longer than the poem of *Sohrab and Rustum*, where the theme is almost the same, while the scale is that of the classical epic.

If the old English epic poetry falls short of the Homeric magnitude, it almost equally exceeds the scale of the Northern heroic poems. If *Beowulf* and *Waldere* seem inadequate in size, the defect will not be made good out of the Northern lays of *Helgi* or *Sigfred*.

The Northern poems are exceedingly varied in their plan and disposition, but none of them is long, and many of them are in the form of *dramatic lyric*, with no place for pure narrative at all; such are the poems of *Frey's Wooing*, of *Svipdag and Menglad*, and others, in which there is a definite plot worked out by means of lyric dialogue. None of them is of anything like the same scale as *Beowulf*, which is a complex epic poem, or *Byrhtnoth*, which is an

episodic poem liberally dealt with and of considerable length.

The Teutonic poetry presents itself, at a first view, as the complement of Homer. Here are to be found many of the things that are wanting at the beginning of Greek literary history. Here are single epic lays, or clusters of them, in every form. Here, in place of the two great poems, rounded and complete, there is the nebulous expanse of heroic tradition, the outline of an heroic cycle, together with a number of episodic poems taking their origin from one point or another of the cycle, according as the different parts of the story happen to catch the imagination of a poet. Instead of the Homeric scale of epic there are a number of brief epic tragedies, the plots of which are chosen from the multitude of stories current in tradition.

Among these shorter epic poems, if such they may be called, there are to be distinguished great varieties of procedure in regard to the amount of action represented in the poem.

There is one class of poem that represents a single action with some detail; there is another that represents a long and complex story in a summary and allusive way. The first kind may be called *episodic* in the sense that it takes up about the same quantity of story as might make an act in a play; or perhaps, with a little straining of the term, as much as might serve for one play in a trilogy.

The second kind is not episodic; it does not seem fitted for a place in a larger composition. It is a

kind of short and summary epic, taking as large a province of history as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.

Hildebrand, the *Fight at Finnesburh*, *Waldere*, *Byrhtnoth*, the *Winning of the Hammer*, *Thor's Fishing*, the *Death of the Niblungs* (in any of the Northern versions), the *Death of Ermanaric*, might all be fairly regarded as belonging to the first kind of story; while the *Lay of Weland* and the *Lay of Brynhild* cover a much larger extent of story, though not of actual space, than any of those.

It is not quite easy to find a common measure for these and for the Homeric poems. One can tell perhaps from Mr. Arnold's poem of *Sohrab and Rustum* how much is wanting to the *Lay of Hildebrand*, and on what scale the story of Hildebrand might have been told if it had been told in the Homeric instead of the archaic German manner. The story of Walter of Aquitaine in the Latin hexameters of *Waltharius* takes up 1456 lines. Although the author of this Latin poem is something short of Homer, "a little overparted" by the comparison, still his work is designed on the scale of classical epic, and gives approximately the right extent of the story in classical form. But while those stories are comparatively short, even in their most expanded forms, the story of Weland and the story of Helgi each contains as much as would suffice for the plot of an *Odyssey*, or more. The *Lay of Brynhild* is not an episodic poem of the vengeance and the passion of Brynhild, though that is the principal theme. It begins in a summary manner with Sigurd's coming to

the house of the Niblungs, the wedding of Sigurd and Gudrun, the wooing of Brynhild for Gunnar; all these earlier matters are taken up and touched on before the story comes to the searchings of heart when the kings are persuaded to kill Sigurd. Then the death of Sigurd is told of, and the rest of the poem is filled with the tragedy of Brynhild and Gudrun; the future history of Gudrun is spoken of prophetically by Brynhild before she throws herself on the funeral pile. Plainly this cannot be considered in the same sense "episodic" as the poem of Thor's fishing for the Midgarth snake. The poems of Thor's fishing and the recovery of the hammer are distinctly fragments of a legendary cycle. The *Lay of Brynhild* makes an attempt to complete the whole Volsung story from beginning to end, while giving special importance to one particular incident of it,—the passion of Brynhild after the death of Sigurd. The poems of *Attila* and the *Lay of the Death of Ermanaric* are more restricted.

It remains true that the great story of the Niblung tragedy was never told at length in the poetical measure used for episodes of it, and for the summary form of the *Lay of Brynhild.* It should be remembered, however, that a poem of the scale of the *Nibelungenlied,* taking up the whole matter, must go as far beyond the Homeric limit as the *Lay of Brynhild* falls short of it. From one point of view the shorter episodic poems are more Homeric in their plots than either the summary epics which cover the whole ground, as the *Lay of Brynhild* attempts to cover it,

or the longer works in prose that begin at the beginning and go on to the end, like the *Volsunga Saga*. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are themselves episodic poems; neither of them has the reach of the *Nibelungenlied*. It should not be forgotten, either, that Aristotle found the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* rather long. The Teutonic poems are not to be despised because they have a narrower orbit than the *Iliad*. Those among them that contain matter enough for a single tragedy, and there are few that have not as much as this in them, may be considered not to fall far short of the standard fixed by Aristotle for the right amount of action to be contained in an heroic poem. They are too hurried, they are wanting in the classical breadth and ease of narrative; but at any rate they are comprehensible, they observe an epic unity. They do not, like certain of the endless French poetical histories, remind one of the picture of incomprehensible bulk in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the animal 10,000 stadia long.

Thus, though it is natural at first to imagine that in the old Teutonic poetry one is possessed of such separate lays or ballads as might be the original materials of a larger epic, an epic of the Homeric scale, this impression will hardly remain long after a closer criticism of the workmanship of the poems. Very few of them correspond in the amount of their story to the episodes of the Homeric poems. Many of them contain in a short space the matter of stories more complicated, more tragical, than the story of Achilles. Most of them by their unity and self-

consistency make it difficult to think of them as absorbed in a longer epic. This is the case not only with those that take in a whole history, like the *Lay of Brynhild*, but also with those whose plot is comparatively simple, like *Hildebrand* or *Waldere*. It is possible to think of the story of Walter and Hildegund as forming part of a larger story of the fortunes of the Huns. It has this subordinate place in the *Thidreks Saga*. But it is not easy to believe that in such a case it preserves its value. *Thidreks Saga* is not an epic, though it is made by an agglutination of ballads. In like manner the tragedy of *Hildebrand* gains by its isolation from the stories of the other chiefs, Theodoric and Odoacer. The stories of Walter and of Hildebrand, like the story of Hamlet the Dane, are too strong in themselves to form part of a larger composition, without detriment to its unity and harmony. They might be brought in allusively and in a subordinate way, like the story of Thebes and other stories in the *Iliad;* but that is not the same thing as making an epic poem out of separate lays. So that on all grounds the first impression of the Teutonic epic poetry has to be modified. If ever epic poetry was made by a conglomeration of ballads, it must have had other kinds of material than this. Some of the poems are episodic; others are rather to be described as abridgments of epic than as separate epic scenes. But neither in the one case nor in the other is there to be found the kind of poetry that is required by the hypothesis of composite epic. There are short epics that might conceivably have served as the framework,

or the ground-plan, of a more elaborate work, containing, like the *Lay of Helgi* or the *Lay of Brynhild*, incidents enough and hints of character enough for a history fully worked out, as large as the Homeric poems. If it should be asked why there is so little evidence of any Teutonic attempt to weave together separate lays into an epic work, the answer might be, first, that the separate lays we know are too much separate and individual, too strong in themselves, to be satisfactorily cobbled into a more expansive fabric; and, secondly, that it has not yet been proved that epic poems can be made by process of cobbling. The need of a comprehensive epic of the Niblungs was not imperative. Neither was there any demand in Athens, in the time of Sophocles and Euripides, for a comprehensive work—a *Thebaid*, a *Roman de Thèbes*—to include the plots of all the tragedies of the house of Cadmus. It was not a poet, but a prose journeyman, who did this sort of work in the North, and it was not till the old school of poetry had passed away that the composite prose history of the Volsungs and Niblungs, of Sigmund and Sinfiotli, Sigurd, Brynhild, Gudrun, and Atli, was put together out of the old poems. The old lays, Northern and Western, whatever their value, have all strong individual characters of their own, and do not easily submit to be regarded as merely the unused materials, waiting for an epic composer who never was born.

III

EPIC AND BALLAD POETRY

THE ballads of a later age have many points of likeness to such poems as *Hildebrand*, *Finnesburh*, *Maldon*, and the poems of the Northern collection. The two orders of poetry are, however, not to be confounded. Their affinity indeed is clear. But the older poems in alliterative verse have a character not possessed by the ballads which followed them, and which often repeated the same stories in the later Middle Ages. Even the simplest of the older poems, which is the *Lay of Hildebrand*, is distinguished by evident signs of dignity from even the most ambitious of the rhyming ballads in any of the tongues. Its rhetoric is of a different order.

This is not a question of preferences, but of distinction of kinds. The claim of an epic or heroic rank for the older poems need not be forced into a denial of all the other excellences of the rhyming ballads.

Ballad, as the term is commonly used, implies a certain degree of simplicity, and an absence of high poetical ambition. Ballads are for the market-place

and the "blind crowder," or for the rustic chorus that sings the ballad burden. The wonderful poetical beauty of some of the popular ballads of Scotland and Denmark, not to speak of other lands, is a kind of beauty that is never attained by the great poetical artists; an unconscious grace. The ballads of the Scottish Border, from their first invention to the publication of the *Border Minstrelsy*, lie far away from the great streams of poetical inspiration. They have little or nothing to do with the triumphs of the poets; the "progress of poesy" leaves them untouched; they learn neither from Milton nor from Pope, but keep a life of their own that has its sources far remote in the past, in quite another tradition of art than that to which the great authors and their works belong.

The Teutonic epic poems, the Northern poems at any rate, are ballads in respect of their management of the plots. The scale of them is not to be distinguished from the scale of a ballad; the ballads have the same way of indicating and alluding to things and events without direct narrative, without continuity, going rapidly from critical point to point, in their survey of the fable.

But there is this great difference, that the style of the earlier epics is ambitious and self-conscious, an aristocratic and accomplished style. The ballads of *Clerk Saunders* or *Sir Patrick Spens* tell about things that have been generally forgotten, in the great houses of the country, by the great people who have other things to think about, and, if they take

to literature, other models of style. The lay of the fight at Finnesburh, the lays of the death of Attila, were in their time the poems of the king's or the earl's hall; they were at the height of literary accomplishment in their generation, and their style displays the consciousness of rank. The ballads never had anything like the honour that was given to the older lays.

The difference between epic and ballad style comes out most obviously when, as frequently has happened, in Denmark, Iceland, and the Faroes, the poems of the old school have been translated from their epic verse into the "eights and sixes" or some other favourite measure of the common ballads. This has been the case, for instance, with the poem of Thor's Hammer, and the poem of the journey of Svipdag in search of Menglad. In other cases, as in that of the return of Helgi from the dead, it is less certain, though it is probable, that there is a direct relation between the two kinds of poetry, between the old Northern poem of Helgi and the Danish ballad of Sir Aage which has the same story to tell; but a comparison of the two styles, in a case like this, is none the less possible and justifiable.

The poems in the older form and diction, however remote they may be from modern fashions, assert themselves unmistakably to be of an aristocratic and not a popular tradition. The ballads have many things in common with the other poems, but they have lost the grand style, and the pride and solemnity of language. One thing they have retained almost

invariably. Ballad poetry may be trusted to preserve the sense of the tragic situation. If some ballads are less strong than others in their rendering of a traditional story, their failure is not peculiar to that kind of composition. Not every ballad-singer, and not every tragic poet, has the same success in the development of his fable. As a rule, however, it holds good that the ballads are sound in their conception of a story; if some are constitutionally weak or unshapely, and others have suffered from the infirmity of reciters and transcribers, these accidents are not to be counted against the class of poetry to which they belong. Yet, however well the ballads may give the story, they cannot give it with the power of epic; and that this power belongs to the older kind of verse, the verse of the *Lay of Brynhild*, may be proved with all the demonstration that this kind of argument allows. It is open to any one to say that the grand style is less attractive than the charm of the ballad burdens, that the airy music of the ballads is more appealing and more mysterious than all the eloquence of heroic poetry; but that does not touch the question. The rhetoric of the older poems merely claims to be acknowledged for what it is worth.

The Danish ballad of *Ungen Sveidal* "Child Sveidal,"[1] does not spoil the ancient story which had been given in the older language and older verse of *Svipdag and Menglad*. But there are different ways of describing how the adventurer comes to the dark

[1] Grundtvig, *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, No. 70. See above, p. 132.

tower to rescue the unknown maiden. The ballad uses the common ballad forms, the common easy rhymes and assonances :—

Out they cast their anchor
All on the white sea sand,
And who was that but the Child Sveidal
Was first upon the land?

His heart is sore with deadly pain
For her that he never saw,
His name is the Child Sveidal;
So the story goes.

This sort of story need not be despised, and it is peculiarly valuable when it appears in the middle of one of the least refreshing seasons of literature, like this ballad in the age of the Lutheran Reformation in Denmark. In such an age and among theological tracts and controversies, the simple ballad measures may bring relief from oppression and desolation; and call for thanks to the Danish ladies by whose care this ballad and so many others were written down. But gratitude need not conceal the truth, that the style of the ballad is unlike the style of an heroic poem. The older poem from which *Child Sveidal* is derived may have left many poetical opportunities unemployed; it comes short in many things, and makes up for them by mythological irrelevances. But it is composed in a style of which it is impossible to mistake the gravity; it has all the advantage of established forms that have been tested and are able to bear the weight of the poetical matter. There is a vast difference between the simplicity of the ballad

and the stately measure and rhetorical pomp of the original :—

> Svipdag is my name ; Sunbright was my Father's name :
> The winds have driven me far, along cold ways ;
> No one can gainsay the word of Fate,
> Though it be spoken to his own destruction.

The difference is as great as the difference between the ballad of the *Marriage of Gawayne* and the same story as told in the *Canterbury Tales ;* or the difference between Homer's way of describing the recovery of lifted cattle and the ballad of *Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodheid.*

It happens fortunately that one of the Danish ballads, *Sivard og Brynild*, which tells of the death of Sigurd (*Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, No. 3), is one of the best of the ballads, in all the virtues of that style, so that a comparison with the *Lay of Brynhild*, one of the best poems of the old collection, is not unfair to either of them.

The ballad of *Sivard*, like the *Lay of Brynhild*, includes much more than an episode ; it is a complete tragic poem, indicating all the chief points of the story. The tragic idea is different from that of any of the other versions of the Volsung story, but quite as distinct and strong as any.

SIVARD

(*O the King's Sons of Denmark !*)

Sivard has a horse that is fleet, and he has stolen Brynild from the Mountain of Glass, all by the light of day. From the Mountain of Glass he has stolen proud Brynild, and given

her to Hagen, his brother-in-arms. Brynild and Signild went to the river shore to wash their silken gowns. "Signild, my sister, where got you the golden rings on your hand?"—"The gold rings on my hand I got from Sivard, my own true love; they are his pledge of troth: and you are given to Hagen." When Brynild heard this she went into the upper room and lay there sick: there she lay sick and Hagen came to her. "Tell me, maiden Brynild, my own true love, what is there in the world to heal you; tell me, and I will bring it, though it cost all the world's red gold."—"Nothing in the world you can bring me, unless you bring me, into my hands, the head of Sivard."—"And how shall I bring to your hands the head of Sivard? There is not the sword in all the world that will bite upon him: no sword but his own, and that I cannot get."—"Go to his room, and bid him lend you his sword, for his honour, and say, 'I have vowed an adventure for the sake of my true love.' When first he hands you over his sword, I pray you remember me, in the Lord God's name." It is Hagen that has swept his mantle round him, and goes into the upper room to Sivard. "Here you sit, Sivard, my foster-brother; will you lend me your good sword for your honour? for I have vowed a vow for the sake of my love."—"And if I lend you my good sword Adelbring, you will never come in battle where it will fail you. My good sword Adelbring you may have, indeed, but keep you well from the tears of blood that are under the hilt, keep you from the tears of blood that are so red.[1] If they run down upon your fingers, it will be your death."

Hagen got the sword, and it was his own sworn brother he slew there in the room. He took up the bloody head under his cloak of furs and brought it to proud Brynild. "Here you have the head for which you sought; for the sake of you I have slain my brother, to my undoing."—"Take away the head and let me not see it; nor will I pledge you my troth to make you glad." "Never will I pledge troth to you, and nought is the gladness; for the sake of you I have slain my brother; sorrow is on

[1] Compare the warning of Angantyr to Hervor when he gives her the sword Tyrfing—"Keep the sword sheathed, the slayer of Hialmar; touch not the edges, there is venom upon them"—and the magic sword Skofnung in *Kormaks Saga*.

me, sore and great." It was Hagen drew his sword and took the proud Brynild and hewed her asunder. He set the sword against a stone, and the point was deadly in the King's son's heart. He set the sword in the black earth, and the point was death in the King's son's heart. Ill was the day that maiden was born. For her were spilt the lives of two King's sons. (*O the King's Sons of Denmark!*)

This is a consistent tragic story, and it is well told. It has the peculiar virtue of the ballad, to make things impressive by the sudden manner in which they are spoken of and passed by; in this abrupt mode of narrative the ballads, as has been noted already, are not much different from the earlier poems. The *Lay of Brynhild* is not much more diffuse than the ballad of *Sivard* in what relates to the slaying of the hero. Both are alike distinct from the method of Homer; compared with Homer both the lays and the ballads are hurried in their action, over-emphatic, cramped in a narrow space. But when the style and temper are considered, apart from the incidents of the story, then it will appear that the lay belongs to a totally different order of literature from the ballad. The ballad tells of things dimly discerned by the poet; king's sons and daughters are no more to him than they are to the story-tellers of the market-place—forms of a shadowy grandeur, different from ordinary people, swayed by strange motives, not irrationally, nor altogether in a way beyond the calculation of simple audiences, yet in ways for which there is no adequate mode of explanation known to the reciter. The ballad keeps instinctively a right outline for its tragic story, but

to develop the characters is beyond its power. In the epic *Lay of Brynhild*, on the other hand, the poet is concerned with passions which he feels himself able to comprehend and to set forth dramatically; so that, while the story of the poem is not very much larger in scale than that of the ballad, the dramatic speeches are greatly elaborated. Brynhild in the lay is not a mere tragic symbol, as in the ballad, but a tragic character. The ballad has the seed of tragedy in it, but in the lay the seed has sprung up in the dramatic eloquence of Brynhild's utterances before her death. The ballad is tragical, but in an abstract manner. The plot of the slighted woman and her vengeance, with the remorse of Hagen, is all true, and not exaggerated in motive. But while the motives are appreciated, it is not in the power of the poet to develop the exposition of them, to make them dramatically characteristic, as well as right in their general nature. It is just this dramatic ideal which is the ambition and inspiration of the other poet; the character of Brynhild has taken possession of his imagination, and requires to be expressed in characteristic speech. A whole poetical world is open to the poet of Brynhild, and to the other poets of the Northern heroic cycle. They have taken the first day's journey into the empire of Homer and Shakespeare; the forms of poetry that they employ are varied and developed by them so as to express as fully as possible the poetical conception of different individual characters. It is not easy to leave them without the impression that their poetry was capable

of infinitely greater progress in this direction; that some at least of the poets of the North were "bearers of the torch" in their generation, not less than the poets of Provence or France who came after them and led the imagination of Christendom into another way. That is, it is possible to think of the poets of Sigurd and Brynhild as holding among the Northern nations of the tenth or eleventh century the place that is held in every generation by some set of authors who, for the time, are at the head of intellectual and literary adventure, who hold authority, from Odin or the Muses, to teach their contemporaries one particular kind of song, till the time comes when their vogue is exhausted, and they are succeeded by other masters and other schools. This commission has been held by various kinds of author since the beginning of history, and manifold are the lessons that have been recommended to the world by their authority; now epic, now courtly and idealist lyric, romantic drama, pedantic tragedy, funeral orations, analytical novels. They are not all amusing, and not all their prices are more than the rate of an old song. But they all have a value as trophies, as monuments of what was most important in their time, of the things in which the generations, wise and foolish, have put their trust and their whole soul. The ballads have not this kind of importance; the ballad poets are remote from the lists where the great champions overthrow one another, where poet takes the crown from poet. The ballads, by their very nature, are secluded and apart from the great literary enterprises; it is the beauty

of them that they are exempt from the proclamations and the arguments, the shouting and the tumult, the dust and heat, that accompany the great literary triumphs, and make epochs for the historians, as in the day of *Cléopatre*, or the day of *Hernani*. The ballad has no weight of responsibility upon it; it does not carry the intellectual light of its century; its authors are easily satisfied. In the various examples of the Teutonic alliterative poetry there is recognisable the effort and anxiety of poets who are not content with old forms, who have a poetical vocation to go on and find out new forms, who are on the search for the "one grace above the rest," by which all the chief poets are led. The remains of this poetry are so many experiments, which, in whatever respects they may have failed, yet show the work and energy of authors who are proud of their art, as well as the dignity of men who are familiar with greatness and great actions: in both which respects they differ from the ballad poets. The spell of the popular story, the popular ballad, is not quite the same as theirs. Theirs is more commanding; they are nearer to the strenuous life of the world than are the simple people who remember, over their fires of peat, the ancient stories of the wanderings of kings' sons. They have outgrown the stage of life for which the fables and old wives' tales are all-sufficient; they have begun to make a difference between fable and characters; they have entered on a way by which the highest poetical victories are attainable. The poetry of the old lays of the

Volsungs, as compared with popular ballads and tales, is "weighty and philosophical"—full of the results of reflection on character. Nor have they with all this lost the inexplicable magic of popular poetry, as the poems of Helgi and Sigrun, and of the daughter of Angantyr, and others, may easily prove.

IV

THE STYLE OF THE POEMS

THE style of the poems, in what concerns their verse and diction, is not less distinctly noble than their spirit and temper. The alliterative verse, wherever it is found, declares itself as belonging to an elaborate poetical tradition. The alliterative line is rhetorically capable of a great amount of emphasis; it lends itself as readily as the "drumming decasyllabon" of the Elizabethan style to pompous declamation. Parallelism of phrases, the favourite rhetorical device, especially with the old English poets, is incompatible with tenuity of style; while the weight of the verse, as a rule, prevents the richness of phrasing from becoming too extravagant and frivolous.[1]

The style of alliterative verse is not monotonous. Without reckoning the forms that deviate from the common epic measure, such as the Northern lyrical staves, there may be found in it as many varieties of style as in English blank verse from the days of *Gorboduc* onward.

In its oldest common form it may be supposed

[1] Examples in Appendix, Note A.

that the verse was not distinctly epic or lyric; lyric rather than epic, lyric with such amount of epic as is proper for psalms of triumph, or for the praise of a king, the kind of verse that might be used for any sort of *carmina*, such as for marking authorship and ownership on a sword or a horn, for epitaphs or spells, or for vituperative epigrams.

In England and the Continent the verse was early adapted for continuous history. The lyrical and gnomic usages were not abandoned. The poems of *Widsith* and *Deor's Lament* show how the allusive and lyrical manner of referring to heroic legend was kept up in England. The general tendency, however, seems to have favoured a different kind of poetry. The common form of old English verse is fitted for narrative. The ideal of the poets is one that would have the sense "variously drawn out from one verse to another." When the verse is lyrical in tone, as in the *Dream of the Rood*, or the *Wanderer*, the lyrical passion is commonly that of mourning or regret, and the expression is elegiac and diffuse, not abrupt or varied. The verse, whether narrative or elegiac, runs in rhythmical periods; the sense is not "concluded in the couplet." The lines are mortised into one another; by preference, the sentences begin in the middle of a line. The parallelism of the old poetry, and its wealth of paraphrase, encourage deliberation in the sentences, though they are often interrupted by a short sentence, generally introduced to point a moral.

The old Norse poetry, with many likenesses to

the old English, had a different taste in rhetorical syntax. Instead of the long-drawn phrases of the English poetry, and an arrangement of sentences by which the metrical limits of the line were generally disguised, the Norse alliterative poetry adopted a mode of speech that allowed the line to ring out clearly, and gave full force to the natural emphasis of the rhythm.

These two opposite rhetorical tendencies are illustrated also by the several variations upon the common rhythm that found favour in one region and the other. Where an English or a German alliterative poet wishes to vary from the common metre, he uses the lengthened line, an expansion of the simple line, which, from its volume, is less suitable for pointed expression, and more capable of pathos or solemnity, than the ordinary form of verse. The long line of the Saxon and English poets is not used in the Norse poetry; there the favourite verse, where the ordinary narrative line is discarded, is in the form of gnomic couplets, in which, as in the classical elegiac measure, a full line is succeeded by a truncated or broken rhythm, and with the same effect of clinching the meaning of the first line as is commonly given by the Greek or Latin pentameter. Of this favourite Northern measure there are only one or two casual and sporadic instances in English poetry; in the short dramatic lyric of the *Exeter Book*, interpreted so ingeniously by Mr. Gollancz, and in the gnomic verses of the same collection.

This difference of taste goes very far to explain

the difference between English and Norse epic; to appreciate the difference of style is to understand the history of the early poetry. It was natural that the more equable form of the English and the Continental German narrative poetry should prove itself fit for extended and continuous epic narrative; it was inevitable that the Norse intolerance of tame expression, and of everything unimpassioned or unemphatic, should prevent the growth of any of the larger and slower kinds of poetry.

The triumphs of alliterative poetry in the first or English kind are the long swelling passages of tragic monologue, of which the greatest is in the Saxon *Genesis*,—the speech of Satan after the fall from heaven. The best of the Northern poetry is all but lyrical; the poem of the Sibyl, the poems of Sigrun, Gudrun, Hervor.

The nature of the two forms of poetry is revealed in their respective manners of going wrong. The decline of the old English poetry is shown by an increase of diffuseness and insipidity. The old Norse poetry was attacked by an evil of a different sort, the malady of false wit and over-decoration. The English poetry, when it loses strength and self-control, is prone to monotonous lamentation; the Norse poetry is tempted to overload itself with conceits.

In the one there is excess of sentiment, in the other the contrary vice of frigidity, and a premeditated and ostentatious use of figurative expressions.

The poem of *Beowulf* has known the insidious approach and temptation of diffuse poetic melancholy.

The Northern poems are corrupted by the vanity of metaphor. To evade the right term for everything has been the aim of many poetic schools; it has seldom been attained more effectually than in the poetry of the Norwegian tongue.

Periphrastic epithets are part of the original and common stock of the Teutonic poetry. They form a large part of the vocabulary of common phrases which bear witness to the affinity existing among the remains of this poetry in all the dialects.[1]

But this common device was differently applied, in the end, by the two literatures, English and Icelandic, in which the old forms of verse held their ground longest against the rhyming forms. The tendency in England was to make use of the well-worn epithets, to ply the *Gradus:* the duller kind of Anglo-Saxon poetry is put together as Latin verses are made in school,—an old-fashioned metaphor is all the more esteemed for its age. The poets, and presumably their hearers, are best content with familiar phrases. In Iceland, on the other hand, there was an impatience of the old vocabulary, and a curiosity and search for new figures, that in the complexity and absurdity of its results is not approached by any school of "false wit" in the whole range of literature.

Already in the older forms of Northern poetry it is plain that there is a tendency to lyrical emphasis which is unfavourable to the chances of long narrative in verse. Very early, also, there are symptoms of the

[1] Compare the index to Sievers's edition of the *Hêliand* for illustrations of this community of poetical diction in old Saxon, English, Norse, and High German; and J. Grimm, *Andreas und Elene* (1840), pp. xxv.-xliv.

familiar literary plague, the corruption of metaphor. Both these tendencies have for their result the new school of poetry peculiar to the North and the courts of the Northern kings and earls,—the Court poetry, or poetry of the Scalds, which in its rise and progress involved the failure of true epic. The German and English epic failed by exhaustion in the competition with Latin and Romance literature, though not without something to boast of before it went under. The Northern epic failed, because of the premature development of lyrical forms, first of all within itself, and then in the independent and rival modes of the Scaldic poetry.

The Scaldic poetry, though later in kind than the poems of *Codex Regius*, is at least as old as the tenth century;[1] the latest of the epic poems, *Atlamál* (the Greenland poem of Attila), and others, show marks of the influence of Court poetry, and are considerably later in date than the earliest of the Scalds.

The Court poetry is lyric, not epic. The aim of the Court poets was not the narrative or the dramatic presentation of the greater heroic legends; it was the elaborate decoration of commonplace themes, such as the praise of a king, by every possible artifice of rhyme and alliteration, of hard and exact construction of verse, and, above all, of far-sought metaphorical allusions. In this kind of work, in the praise of kings alive or dead, the poet was compelled to betake himself to mythology and mythical history, like the

[1] See *Bidrag til den ældste Skaldedigtnings Historie*, by Dr. Sophus Bugge (1894).

learned poets of other nations with their mythology of Olympus. In the mythology of Asgard were contained the stories of precious names and epithets by means of which the poems might be made to glitter and blaze.[1] It was for the sake of poets like these that Snorri wrote his *Edda*, and explained the mythical references available for the modern poetry of his time, though fortunately his spirit and talent were not limited to this didactic end, nor to the pedantries and deadly brilliance of fashionable verse. By the time of Snorri the older kind of poetry had become very much what Chaucer was to the Elizabethan sonneteers, or Spenser to the contemporaries of Pope. It was regarded with some amount of honour, and some condescension, but it had ceased to be the right kind of poetry for a "courtly maker."

The Northern poetry appears to have run through some of the same stages as the poetry of Greece, though with insufficient results in most of them. The epic poetry is incomplete, with all its nobility. The best things of the old poetry are dramatic—lyrical monologues, like the song of the Sibyl, and Gudrun's story to Theodoric, or dialogues like those of Helgi and Sigrun, Hervor and Angantyr. Before any adequate large rendering had been accorded to those tragic histories, the Northern poetry, in its impatience of length, had discovered the idyllic mode of expression and the dramatic monologue, in which there was no excuse for weakness and tameness, and, on the contrary,

[1] Compare *C.P.B.*, ii. 447, Excursus on the Figures and Metaphors of old Northern Poetry.

great temptation to excess in emphatic and figurative language. Instead of taking a larger scene and a more complex and longer story, the poets seem to have been drawn more and more to cut short the story and to intensify the lyrical passion of their dialogue or monologue. Almost as if they had known the horror of infinite flatness that is all about the literature of the Middle Ages, as if there had fallen upon them, in that Aleïan plain, the shadow of the enormous beast out of Aristotle's *Poetics*, they chose to renounce all superfluity, and throw away the make-shift wedges and supports by which an epic is held up. In this way they did great things, and *Volospá* (the *Sibyl's Prophecy*) is their reward. To write out in full the story of the Volsungs and Niblungs was left to the prose compilers of the *Volsunga Saga*, and to the Austrian poet of the *Nibelungenlied*.

The *Volospá* is as far removed from the courtly odes and their manner and ingenuity as the *Marriage Hymn* of Catullus from the *Coma Berenices*. The *Volospá*, however, has this in common with the mechanical odes, that equally with these it stands apart from epic, that equally with these it fuses epic material into an alien form. The sublimity of this great poem of the *Doom* is not like the majesty or strength of epic. The voice is not the voice of a teller of stories. And it is here, not in true epic verse, that the Northern poetry attains its height.

It is no ignoble form of poetry that is represented by the *Sibyl's Song* and the *Lament of Gudrun*.

But it was not enough for the ambition of the poets. They preferred the composition of correct and elaborate poems in honour of great men, with much expenditure of mythology and without passion;[1] one of the forms of poetry which may be truly said to leave nothing to be desired, the most artificial and mechanical poetry in the world, except possibly the closely-related kinds in the traditional elaborate verse of Ireland or of Wales.

It was still possible to use this modern and difficult rhetoric, occasionally, for subjects like those of the freer epic; to choose a subject from heroic tradition and render it in the fashionable style. The *Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok*[2] is the chief of those secondary dramatic idylls. It is marked off by difference of verse, for one thing, from the *Hamðismál* and the *Atlakviða;* and, besides this, it has the characteristic of imitative and conventional heroic literature—the unpersuasive and unconvincing force of the heroic romance, the rhetoric of Almanzor. The end of the poem is fine, but it does not ring quite true :—

> The gods will welcome me; there is nothing to bewail in death. I am ready to go; they are calling me home, the maidens whom Odin has sent to call me. With gladness will I drink the ale, set high among the gods. The hours of life are gone over; laughing will I die.

It is not like the end of the sons of Gudrun; it is not of the same kind as the last words of Sorli,

[1] These may be found in the second volume of the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale.*

[2] *C.P.B.*, ii. 339.

which are simpler, and infinitely more imaginative and true:—

> We have fought; if we die to-day, if we die to-morrow, there is little to choose. No man may speak when once the Fates have spoken (*Hamðismál*, s.f.).

It is natural that the *Song of Ragnar Lodbrok* should be appreciated by modern authors. It is one of the documents responsible for the conventional Valkyria and Valhalla of the Romantic School, and for other stage properties, no longer new. The poem itself is in spirit rather more nearly related to the work of Tegnér or Oehlenschläger than to the *Volospá*. It is a secondary and literary version, a "romantic" version of ideas and images belonging to a past time, and studied by an antiquarian poet with an eye for historical subjects.[1]

The progress of epic was not at an end in the rise of the new Court poetry that sounded sweeter in the ears of mortals than the old poems of *Sigurd* and *Brynhild*. The conceits and the hard correctness of the Scalds did not satisfy all the curiosity or the imaginative appetite of their patrons. There still remained a desire for epic, or at least for a larger and freer kind of historical discourse. This was satisfied by the prose histories of the great men of Iceland, of the kings of Norway, and the lords of the Isles; histories the nearest to true epic of all that have ever been spoken without verse. That the chief of all the masters of this art should have been

[1] Translated in Percy's *Runic Poetry* (1763), p. 27, and often since.

Snorri Sturluson, the exponent and practitioner of the mystery of the Court poets, is among the pleasantest of historical paradoxes.

The development of the Court poetry to all extremes of "false wit," and of glaring pretence and artificiality of style, makes the contrast all the more vivid between its brocaded stiffness and the ease and freedom of the Sagas. But even apart from the Court poetry, it is clear that there was little chance for any development of the Northern heroic poetry into an Homeric fulness of detail. In the Norse poetry, as in Greek, the primitive forms of heroic dirges or hymns give place to narrative poetry; and that again is succeeded by a new kind of lyric, in which the ancient themes of the *Lament* and the *Song of Praise* are adorned with the new ideas and the new diction of poets who have come to study novelty, and have entered, though with far other arms and accoutrements, on the same course as the Greek lyric authors of dithyrambs and panegyrical odes. In this progress of poetry from the unknown older songs, like those of which Tacitus speaks, to the epic form as it is preserved in the "Elder Edda," and from the epic form to the lyrical form of the Scalds, the second stage is incomplete; the epic form is uncertain and half-developed. The rise of the Court poetry is the most obvious explanation of this failure. The Court poetry, with all its faults, is a completed form which had its day of glory, and even rather more than its share of good fortune. It is the characteristic and successful kind of poetry in

Iceland and Norway, just as other kinds of elaborate lyric were cultivated, to the depreciation of epic, in Provence and in Italy. It was to the Court poet that the prizes were given; the epic form was put out of favour generations before the fragments of it were gathered together and preserved by the collector from whose books they have descended to the extant manuscripts and the editions of the "Elder Edda."

But at the same time it may be represented that the Court poetry was as much effect as cause of the depreciation of epic. The lyrical strain declared itself in the Northern epic poetry too strongly for any such epic work as either *Beowulf* or the *Hêliand*. The bent was given too early, and there was no recovery possible. The Court poetry, in its rhetorical brilliance and its allusive phrases, as well as in the hardness and correctness of its verse, is carrying out to completion certain tastes and principles whose influence is manifest throughout the other orders of old Northern poetry; and there is no need to go to the Court poetry to explain the difference between the history of Northern and of English alliterative verse, though it is by means of the Court poetry that this difference may be brought into the strongest light. The contrast between the English liking for continuous discourse and the Norse liking for abrupt emphasis is already to be discerned in the oldest literary documents of the two nations.

V

THE PROGRESS OF EPIC

VARIOUS RENDERINGS OF THE SAME STORY

Due (1) to accidents of tradition and impersonal causes:
(2) to calculation and selection of motives by the poets, and intentional modification of traditional matter.

Beowulf, as the poem stands, is quite a different sort of thing from the poems in the Copenhagen manuscript. It is given out by its scribes in all the glory of a large poem, handsomely furnished with a prelude, a conclusion, and divisions into several books. It has the look of a substantial epic poem. It was evidently regarded as something considerable, as a work of eminent virtue and respectability. The Northern poems, treasured and highly valued as they evidently were, belong to a different fashion. In the *Beowulf* of the existing manuscript the fluctuation and variation of the older epic tradition has been controlled by editors who have done their best to establish a text of the poem. The book has an appearance of authority. There is little of this in the Icelandic manuscript. The Northern poems have

evidently been taken as they were found. Imperfections of tradition, which in *Beowulf* would have been glossed over by an editorial process, are here left staring at the reader. The English poem pretends to be a literary work of importance—a book, in short; while the Icelandic verses are plainly gathered from all quarters, and in such a condition as to defy the best intentions of the editor, who did his best to understand what he heard, but had no consistent policy of improvement or alteration, to correct the accidental errors and discrepancies of the oral communications.

Further, and apart from the accidents of this particular book, there is in the poems, even when they are best preserved, a character of fluctuation and uncertainty, belonging to an older and less literary fashion of poetry than that of *Beowulf*.

Beowulf has been regarded by some as a composite epic poem made out of older and shorter poems. *Codex Regius* shows that this hypothesis is dealing with an undoubted *vera causa* when it talks of short lays on heroic subjects, and of the variations of treatment to be found in different lays on one and the same theme, and of the possibilities of contamination.

Thus, in considering the story of Beowulf's descent under water, and the difficulties and contradictions of that story as it stands, Ten Brink has been led to suppose that the present text is made up of two independent versions, run together by an editor in a hazardous way without regard to the differences in

points of detail, which still remain to the annoyance of the careful reader.

There is no great risk in the assumption that there were different versions of the fight with Grendel's mother, which may have been carelessly put together into one version in spite of their contradictions. In the *Codex Regius* there are three different versions of the death of the Niblungs, the *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, and the *Lament of Oddrun*. The *Lament of Oddrun* is vitally different from the other two poems, and these differ from one another, with regard to the motive of Atli's feud with Gunnar. It is possible for the human mind to imagine an editor, a literary man, capable of blending the poems in order to make a larger book. This would be something like the process which Ten Brink has suspected in the composition of this part of *Beowulf*. It is one thing, however, to detect the possibility of such misdemeanours; and quite another thing to suppose that it is by methods such as these that the bulk of the larger epic is swollen beyond the size of common lays or ballads. It is impossible, at any rate, by any reduction or analysis of *Beowulf*, to get rid of its stateliness of narrative; it would be impossible by any fusion or aggregation of the Eddic lays to get rid of their essential brevity. No accumulation of lays can alter the style from its trick of detached and abrupt suggestions to the slower and more equable mode.

That there was a growth of epic among the Teutonic nations is what is proved by all the documents. This growth was of the same general kind as the

progress of any of the great forms of literature—the Drama, the Novel. Successive generations of men, speaking the same or similar forms of language, made poetical experiments in a common subject-manner, trying different ways of putting things, and changing their forms of poetry according to local and personal variations of taste; so that the same story might be told over and over again, in different times, with different circumstances.

In one region the taste might be all for compression, for increase of the tension, for suppression of the tamer intervals in the story. In another it might run to greater length and ease, and favour a gradual explication of the plot.

The "Elder Edda" shows that contamination was possible. It shows that there might be frequent independent variations on the same theme, and that, apart from any editorial work, these versions might occasionally be shuffled and jumbled by mere accidents of recollection.

Thus there is nothing contrary to the evidence in the theory that a redactor of *Beowulf* may have had before him different versions of different parts of the poem, corresponding to one another, more or less, as *Atlamál* corresponds to the *Atlakviða*. This hypothesis, however, does not account for the difference in form between the English and the Northern poems. No handling of the *Atlamál* or the *Atlakviða* could produce anything like the appearance of *Beowulf*. The contaminating editor may be useful as an hypothesis in certain particular cases. But the heroic poetry

got on very well without him, generally speaking. It grew by a free and natural growth into a variety of forms, through the ambitions and experiments of poets.

Variety is evident in the poems that lie outside the Northern group; *Finnesburh* is of a different order from *Waldere*. It is in the Northern collection, however, that the variety is most evident. There the independent versions of the same story are brought together, side by side. The experiments of the old school are ranged there; and the fact that experiments were made, that the old school was not satisfied with its conventions, is perhaps the most legitimate inference, and one of the most significant, to be made by a reader of the poems.

Variations on similar themes are found in all popular poetry; here, again, the poems of the *Edda* present themselves as akin to ballads. Here again they are distinguished from ballads by their greater degree of ambition and self-consciousness. For it will not do to dismiss the Northern poems on the Volsung story as a mere set of popular variations on common themes. The more carefully they are examined, the less will be the part assigned to chance and imperfect recollection in producing the variety of the poems. The variation, where there are different presentations of the same subject, is not produced by accident or the casual and faulty repetition of a conventional type of poem, but by a poetical ambition for new forms. *Codex Regius* is an imperfect monument of a time of poetical energy in which old forms were displaced by new, and old

subjects refashioned by successive poets. As in the Athenian or the English drama the story of Oedipus or of Lear might be taken up by one playwright after another, so in the North the Northern stories were made to pass through changes in the minds of different poets.

The analogy to the Greek and the English drama need not be forced. Without any straining of comparisons, it may be argued that the relation of the *Atlamál* and *Atlakviða* is like the relation of Euripides to Aeschylus, and not so much like the variations of ballad tradition, in this respect, that the *Atlamál* is a careful, deliberate, and somewhat conceited attempt to do better in a new way what has been done before by an older poet. The idylls of the heroines, Brynhild, Gudrun, Oddrun, are not random and unskilled variations; they are considerate and studied poems, expressing new conceptions and imaginations.

It is true that this poetry is still, in many respects, in the condition of popular poetry and popular traditional stories. The difference of plot in some versions of the same subject appears to be due to the ordinary causes that produce the variants of popular tales,—defective memory, accidental loss of one point in the story, and change of emphasis in another. To causes such as these, to the common impersonal accidents of tradition, may perhaps be referred one of the strangest of all the alterations in the bearing of a story—the variation of plot in the tradition of the Niblungs.

In the "Elder Edda" the death of the Niblungs is laid to the charge of Attila; their sister Gudrun does her best to save them; when she fails in this, she takes vengeance for them on her husband.

In the German tradition, as in the version known to Saxo, in the *Nibelungenlied*, in the Danish ballad of *Grimild's Revenge* (which is borrowed from the German), the lines are laid quite differently. There it is their sister who brings about the death of the kings; it is the wife of Sigfred, of Sigfred whom they have killed, that exacts vengeance from her brothers Gunther and Hagene. Attila is here put aside. Gudrun's slaughter of her children is unrecorded; there is no motive for it when all her anger is turned against her brothers. This shifting of the centre of a story is not easy to explain. But, whatever the explanation may be, it seems probable that it lies somewhere within the range of popular tradition, that the change is due to some of the common causes of the transformation of stories, and not to a definite and calculated poetical modification. The tragical complications are so many in the story of the Niblungs that there could not fail to be variations in the traditional interpretation of motives, even without the assistance of the poets and their new readings of character.

In some of the literary documents there may be found two kinds of variation from an original form of story,—variation due to those popular and indefinite causes, the variation of failing memory, on the one hand; and on the other, variation due to the ambition or conceit of an author with ideas of his own.

A comparison of the *Atlakviða*, the *Atlamál*, and the *Lamentation of Oddrun* may at first suggest that we have here to deal with just such variants as are common wherever stories are handed on by oral tradition. Further consideration will more and more reduce the part allotted to oral maltreatment, and increase the part of intentional and artistic modification, in the variations of story to be found in these poems.

All three poems are agreed in their ignorance of the variation which makes the wife of Sigfred into the avenger of his death. In all three it is Attila who brings about the death of the brothers of Gudrun.

It seems to have been a constant part of the traditional story, as known to the authors of these three poems, that Attila, when he had the brothers of Gudrun in his power, gave order to cut out the heart of Hogni, and thereafter to throw Gunnar into the serpents' den.

The *Atlakviða* presents an intelligible explanation of this; the other two poems leave this part of the action rather vague.

In the *Atlakviða* the motive of Attila's original hatred is left at first unexplained, but comes out in the circumstances of the death of the Niblungs. When the Burgundian kings are seized and bound, they are called upon to buy themselves off with gold. It is understood, in Gunnar's reply, that the gold of the Niblung treasure is what is sought for. He asks that the heart of Hogni may be

brought to him. They bring him, instead, the heart of Hialli, which Gunnar detects at once as the heart of a coward. Then at last the heart of Hogni is cut out and brought to Gunnar; and then he defies the Huns, and keeps his secret.

> Now is the hoard of the Niblungs all in my keeping alone, for Hogni is dead: there was doubt while we two lived, but now there is doubt no more. Rhine shall bear rule over the gold of jealousy, the eager river over the Niblungs' heritage; the goodly rings shall gleam in the whirling water, they shall not pass to the children of the Huns.

Gunnar was thrown among the snakes, and there he harped upon his harp before his death came on him. The end of Gunnar is not told explicitly; the story goes on to the vengeance of Gudrun.

In the *Oddrúnargrátr* there is another motive for Attila's enmity to Gunnar: not the gold of the Niblungs, but the love that was between Gunnar and Oddrun (Oddrun was the sister of Attila and Brynhild). The death of Brynhild is alluded to, but that is not the chief motive. The gold of the Niblungs is not mentioned. Still, however, the death of Hogni precedes the death of Gunnar,—"They cut out the heart of Hogni, and his brother they set in the serpents' close." Gunnar played upon his harp among the serpents, and for a long time escaped them; but the old serpent came out at last and crawled to his heart. It is implied that the sound of his music is a charm for the serpents; but another motive is given by Oddrun, as she tells the story: Gunnar played on his harp for Oddrun,

to be heard by her, so that she should come to help him. But she came too late.

It might be inferred from this poem that the original story of the death of Hogni has been imperfectly recollected by the poet who touches lightly on it and gives no explanation here. It is fairer to suppose that it was passed over because it was irrelevant. The poet had chosen for his idyll the love of Gunnar and Oddrun, a part of the story which is elsewhere referred to among these poems, namely in the *Long Lay of Brynhild* (l. 58). By his choice of this, and his rendering of it in dramatic monologue, he debarred himself from any emphatic use of the motive for Hogni's death. It cannot be inferred from his explanation of Gunnar's harp-playing that the common explanation was unknown to him. On the contrary, it is implied here, just as much as in *Atlakviða*, that the serpents are kept from him by the music, until the old sleepless one gives him his death. But the poet, while he keeps this incident of the traditional version, is not particularly interested in it, except as it affords him a new occasion to return to his main theme of the love story. Gunnar's music is a message to Oddrun. This is an imaginative and dramatic adaptation of old material, not a mere lapse of memory, not a mere loss of the traditional bearings of the story.

The third of these poems, the *Atlamál*, is in some respects the most remarkable of them all. In its plot it has more than the others, at the first reading, the appearance of a faulty recollection; for, while it

makes a good deal of play with the circumstances of the death of Hogni, it misses, or appears to miss, the point of the story; the motive of Gunnar, which is evident and satisfactory in the *Atlakviða*, is here suppressed or dropped. The gold of the Niblungs is not in the story at all; the motive of Attila appears to be anger at the death of his sister Brynhild, Gunnar's wife, but his motive is not much dwelt on. It is as if the author had forgotten the run of events like a blundering minstrel.

On the other hand, the poem in its style is further from all the manners of popular poetry, more affected and rhetorical, than any of the other pieces in the book. It is written in the *málaháttr*, a variety of the common epic measure, with a monotonous cadence; the sort of measure that commends itself to an ambitious and rhetorical poet with a fancy for correctness and regularity. The poem has its origin in an admiration for the character of Gudrun, and a desire to bring out more fully than in the older poems the tragic thoughts and passion of the heroine. Gudrun's anxiety for her brothers' safety, and her warning message to them not to come to the Court of the Huns, had been part of the old story. In the *Atlakviða* she sends them a token, a ring with a wolf's hair twisted round it, which is noticed by Hogni but not accepted by Gunnar. In the *Atlamál* something more is made of this; her message here is written in runes, and these are falsified on the way by Attila's messenger, so that the warning is at first unread. But the confusion of the runes is detected

by the wife of Hogni, and so the story opens with suspense and forebodings of the doom. The death of Hogni and Gunnar is explained in a new way, and always with the passion of Gudrun as the chief theme. In this story the fight of the Niblungs and the Huns is begun outside the doors of the hall. Gudrun hears the alarm and rushes out with a welcome to her brothers,—"that was their last greeting,"—and a cry of lamentation over their neglect of her runes. Then she tries to make peace, and when she fails in that, takes up a sword and fights for her brothers. It is out of rage and spite against Gudrun, and in order to tame her spirit, that Attila has the heart of Hogni cut out of him, and sends Gunnar to the serpents.

All this change in the story is the result of meditation and not of forgetfulness. Right or wrong, the poet has devised his story in his own way, and his motives are easily discovered. He felt that the vengeance of Gudrun required to be more carefully and fully explained. Her traditional character was not quite consistent with the horrors of her revenge. In the *Atlamál* the character of Gudrun is so conceived as to explain her revenge,—the killing of her children follows close upon her fury in the battle, and the cruelty of Attila is here a direct challenge to Gudrun, not, as in the *Atlakviða*, a mere incident in Attila's search for the Niblung treasure. The cruelty of the death of Hogni in the *Atlakviða* is purely a matter of business; it is not of Attila's choosing, and apparently he favours the attempt to save Hogni by the sacrifice of Hialli the feeble man. In

the *Atlamál* it is to save Hogni from Attila that Hialli the cook is chased into a corner and held under the knife. This comic interlude is one of the liveliest passages of the poem. It serves to increase the strength of Hogni. Hogni begs them to let the creature go,—"Why should we have to put up with his squalling?" It may be observed that in this way the poet gets out of a difficulty. It is not in his design to have the coward's heart offered to Gunnar; he has dropped that part of the story entirely. Gunnar is not asked to give up the treasure, and has no reason to protect his secret by asking for the death of his brother; and there would be no point in keeping the incident for the benefit of Attila. That Gunnar should first detect the imposture, and should then recognise the heart of his brother, is a fine piece of heroic imagination of a primitive kind. It would have been wholly inept and spiritless to transfer this from Gunnar to Attila. The poet of *Atlamál* shows that he understands what he is about. The more his work is scrutinised, the more evident becomes the sobriety of his judgment. His dexterity in the disposing of his incidents is proved in every particular. While a first reading of the poem and a first comparison with the story of *Atlakviða* may suggest the blundering and irresponsible ways of popular reciters, a very little attention will serve to bring out the difference and to justify this poet. He is not an improviser; his temptations are of another sort. He is the poet of a second generation, one of those who make up by energy of intelligence for their

want of original and spontaneous imagination. It is not that he is cold or dull; but there is something wanting in the translation of his thoughts into speech. His metres are hammered out; the precision of his verse is out of keeping with the fury of his tragic purport. The faults are the faults of overstudy, the faults of correctness and maturity.

The significance of the *Atlamál* is considerable in the history of the Northern poetry. It may stand for the furthest mark in one particular direction; the epic poetry of the North never got further than this. If *Beowulf* or *Waldere* may perhaps represent the highest accomplishment of epic in old English verse, the *Atlamál* has, at least, as good a claim in the other language. The *Atlamál* is not the finest of the old poems. That place belongs, without any question, to the *Volospá*, the Sibyl's Song of the judgment; and among the others there are many that surpass the *Atlamál* in beauty. But the *Atlamál* is complete; it is a work of some compass, diligently planned and elaborated. Further, although it has many of the marks of the new rhetoric, these do not change its character as a narrative poem. It is a narrative poem, not a poem of lyrical allusions, not an heroic ode. It is at once the largest and the most harmonious in construction of all the poems. It proves that the change of the Northern poetry, from narrative to the courtly lyric, was a change not made without fair opportunity to the older school to show what it was worth. The variety of the three poems of Attila, ending in the careful rhetoric of the

Atlamál, is proof sufficient of the labour bestowed by different poets in their use of the epic inheritance. Great part of the history of the North is misread, unless account is taken of the artistic study, the invention, the ingenuity, that went to the making of those poems. This variety is not the confusion of barbarous tradition, or the shifts and experiments of improvisers. The prosody and the rhetorical furniture of the poems might prevent that misinterpretation. It might be prevented also by an observation of the way the matter is dealt with, even apart from the details of the language and the style. The proof from these two quarters, from the matter and from the style, is not easily impugned.

So the first impression is discredited, and so it appears that the "Elder Edda," for all its appearance of disorder, haste, and hazard, really contains a number of specimens of art, not merely a heap of casual and rudimentary variants. The poems of the Icelandic manuscript assert themselves as individual and separate works. They are not the mere makings of an epic, the mere materials ready to the hand of an editor. It still remains true that they are defective, but it is true also that they are the work of artists, and of a number of artists with different aims and ideals. The earliest of them is long past the stage of popular improvisation, and the latest has the qualities of a school that has learned more art than is good for it.

The defect of the Northern epic is that it allowed itself to be too soon restricted in its scope. It

became too minute, too emphatic, too intolerant of the comfortable dilutions, the level intervals, between the critical moments.[1] It was too much affected by the vanities of the rival Scaldic poetry; it was overcome by rhetoric. But it cannot be said that it went out tamely.

[1] There is a natural affinity to Gray's poetry in the Icelandic poetry that he translated—compressed, emphatic, incapable of laxity.

VI

BEOWULF

THE poem of *Beowulf* has been sorely tried; critics have long been at work on the body of it, to discover how it is made. It gives many openings for theories of agglutination and adulteration. Many things in it are plainly incongruous. The pedigree of Grendel is not authentic; the Christian sentiments and morals are not in keeping with the heroic or the mythical substance of the poem; the conduct of the narrative is not always clear or easy to follow. These difficulties and contradictions have to be explained; the composition of the poem has to be analysed; what is old has to be separated from what is new and adventitious; and the various senses and degrees of "old" and "new" have to be determined, in the criticism of the poem. With all this, however, the poem continues to possess at least an apparent and external unity. It is an extant book, whatever the history of its composition may have been; the book of the adventures of Beowulf, written out fair by two scribes in the tenth century; an epic poem, with a prologue at the beginning, and a judgment pronounced on the life of the

hero at the end; a single book, considered as such by its transcribers, and making a claim to be so considered.

Before any process of disintegration is begun, this claim should be taken into account; the poem deserves to be appreciated as it stands. Whatever may be the secrets of its authorship, it exists as a single continuous narrative poem; and whatever its faults may be, it holds a position by itself, and a place of some honour, as the one extant poem of considerable length in the group to which it belongs. It has a meaning and value apart from the questions of its origin and its mode of production. Its present value as a poem is not affected by proofs or arguments regarding the way in which it may have been patched or edited. The patchwork theory has no power to make new faults in the poem; it can only point out what faults exist, and draw inferences from them. It does not take away from any dignity the book may possess in its present form, that it has been subjected to the same kind of examination as the *Iliad*. The poem may be reviewed as it stands, in order to find out what sort of thing passed for heroic poetry with the English at the time the present copy of the poem was written. However the result was obtained, *Beowulf* is, at any rate, the specimen by which the Teutonic epic poetry must be judged. It is the largest monument extant. There is nothing beyond it, in that kind, in respect of size and completeness. If the old Teutonic epic is judged to have failed, it must be because *Beowulf* is a failure.

Taking the most cursory view of the story of *Beowulf*, it is easy to recognise that the unity of the plot is not like the unity of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. One is inclined at first to reckon *Beowulf* along with those epics of which Aristotle speaks, the *Heracleids* and *Theseids*, the authors of which "imagined that because Heracles was one person the story of his life could not fail to have unity."[1]

It is impossible to reduce the poem of *Beowulf* to the scale of Aristotle's *Odyssey* without revealing the faults of structure in the English poem :—

> A man in want of work goes abroad to the house of a certain king troubled by Harpies, and having accomplished the purification of the house returns home with honour. Long afterwards, having become king in his own country, he kills a dragon, but is at the same time choked by the venom of it. His people lament for him and build his tomb.

Aristotle made a summary of the Homeric poem, because he wished to show how simple its construction really was, apart from the episodes. It is impossible, by any process of reduction and simplification, to get rid of the duality in *Beowulf*. It has many episodes, quite consistent with a general unity of action, but there is something more than episodes, there is a sequel. It is as if to the *Odyssey* there had been added some later books telling in full of the old age of Odysseus, far from the sea, at the hands of his son Telegonus. The adventure with the dragon is separate from the earlier adventures. It is only connected with them because the same person is involved in both.

[1] *Poet.* 1451 a.

It is plain from Aristotle's words that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were in this, as in all respects, above and beyond the other Greek epics known to Aristotle. Homer had not to wait for *Beowulf* to serve as a foil to his excellence. That was provided in the other epic poems of Greece, in the cycle of Troy, in the epic stories of Theseus and Heracles. It seems probable that the poem of *Beowulf* may be at least as well knit as the *Little Iliad*, the Greek cyclic poem of which Aristotle names the principal incidents, contrasting its variety with the simplicity of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[1]

Indeed it is clear that the plan of *Beowulf* might easily have been much worse, that is, more lax and diffuse, than it is. This meagre amount of praise will be allowed by the most grudging critics, if they will only think of the masses of French epic, and imagine the extent to which a French company of poets might have prolonged the narrative of the hero's life—the *Enfances*, the *Chevalerie*—before reaching the *Death of Beowulf*.

At line 2200 in *Beowulf* comes the long interval of time, the fifty years between the adventure at Heorot and the fight between Beowulf and the dragon. Two thousand lines are given to the first story, a thousand to the *Death of Beowulf*. Two thousand lines are occupied with the narrative of Beowulf's expedition, his voyage to Denmark, his fight with Grendel and

[1] τοιγαροῦν ἐκ μὲν Ἰλιάδος καὶ Ὀδυσσείας μία τραγῳδία ποιεῖται ἑκατέρας ἢ δύο μόναι· ἐκ δὲ Κυπρίων πολλαὶ καὶ τῆς μικρᾶς Ἰλιάδος πλέον ὀκτώ, οἷον ὅπλων κρίσις, Φιλοκτήτης, Νεοπτόλεμος, Εὐρύπυλος, πτωχεία, Λάκαιναι, Ἰλίου πέρσις, καὶ ἀπόπλους καὶ Σίνων καὶ Τρῳάδες (1459 b).

Grendel's mother, his return to the land of the Gauts and his report of the whole matter to King Hygelac. In this part of the poem, taken by itself, there is no defect of unity. The action is one, with different parts all easily and naturally included between the first voyage and the return. It is amplified and complicated with details, but none of these introduce any new main interests. *Beowulf* is not like the *Heracleids* and *Theseids*. It transgresses the limits of the Homeric unity, by adding a sequel; but for all that it is not a mere string of adventures, like the bad epic in Horace's *Art of Poetry*, or the innocent plays described by Sir Philip Sidney and Cervantes. A third of the whole poem is detached, a separate adventure. The first two-thirds taken by themselves form a complete poem, with a single action; while, in the orthodox epic manner, various allusions and explanations are introduced regarding the past history of the personages involved, and the history of other people famous in tradition. The adventure at Heorot, taken by itself, would pass the scrutiny of Aristotle or Horace, as far as concerns the lines of its composition.

There is variety in it, but the variety is kept in order and not allowed to interfere or compete with the main story. The past history is disclosed, and the subordinate novels are interpolated, as in the *Odyssey*, in the course of an evening's conversation in hall, or in some other interval in the action. In the introduction of accessory matter, standing in different degrees of relevance to the main plot, the practice

of *Beowulf* is not essentially different from that of classical epic.

In the *Iliad* we are allowed to catch something of the story of the old time before Agamemnon,—the war of Thebes, Lycurgus, Jason, Heracles,—and even of things less widely notable, less of a concern to the world than the voyage of Argo, such as, for instance, the business of Nestor in his youth. In *Beowulf*, in a similar way, the inexhaustible world outside the story is partly represented by means of allusions and digressions. The tragedy of Finnesburh is sung by the harper, and his song is reported at some length, not merely referred to in passing. The stories of Thrytho, of Heremod, of Sigemund the Wælsing, and Fitela his son (Sigmund and Sinfiotli), are introduced like the stories of Lycurgus or of Jason in Homer. They are illustrations of the action, taken from other cycles. The fortunes of the Danish and Gautish kings, the fall of Hygelac, the feuds with Sweden, these matters come into closer relation with the story. They are not so much illustrations taken in from without, as points of attachment between the history of *Beowulf* and the untold history all round it, the history of the persons concerned, along with Beowulf himself, in the vicissitudes of the Danish and Gautish kingdoms.

In the fragments of *Waldere*, also, there are allusions to other stories. In *Waldere* there has been lost a poem much longer and fuller than the *Lay of Hildebrand*, or any of the poems of the "Elder Edda"—a poem more like *Beowulf* than any of those

now extant. The references to Weland, to Widia Weland's son, to Hama and Theodoric, are of the same sort as the references in *Beowulf* to the story of Froda and Ingeld, or the references in the *Iliad* to the adventures of Tydeus.

In the episodic passages of *Beowulf* there are, curiously, the same degrees of relevance as in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Some of them are necessary to the proper fulness of the story, though not essential parts of the plot. Such are the references to Beowulf's swimming-match; and such, in the *Odyssey*, is the tale told to Alcinous.

The allusions to the wars of Hygelac have the same value as the references in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to such portions of the tale of Troy, and of the return of the Greek lords, as are not immediately connected with the anger of Achilles, or the return of Odysseus. The tale of *Finnesburh* in *Beowulf* is purely an interlude, as much as the ballad of *Ares and Aphrodite* in the *Odyssey*.

Many of the references to other legends in the *Iliad* are illustrative and comparative, like the passages about Heremod or Thrytho in *Beowulf*. "Ares suffered when Otus and Ephialtes kept him in a brazen vat, Hera suffered and Hades suffered, and were shot with the arrows of the son of Amphitryon" (*Il.* v. 385). The long parenthetical story of Heracles in a speech of Agamemnon (*Il.* xx. 98) has the same irrelevance of association, and has incurred the same critical suspicions, as the contrast of Hygd and

Thrytho, a fairly long passage out of a wholly different story, introduced in *Beowulf* on the very slightest of suggestions.

Thus in *Beowulf* and in the Homeric poems there are episodes that are strictly relevant and consistent, filling up the epic plan, opening out the perspective of the story; also episodes that without being strictly relevant are rightly proportioned and subordinated, like the interlude of Finnesburh, decoration added to the structure, but not overloading it, nor interfering with the design; and, thirdly, episodes that seem to be irrelevant, and may possibly be interpolations. All these kinds have the effect of increasing the mass as well as the variety of the work, and they give to *Beowulf* the character of a poem which, in dealing with one action out of an heroic cycle, is able, by the way, to hint at and partially represent a great number of other stories.

It is not in the episodes alone that *Beowulf* has an advantage over the shorter and more summary poems. The frequent episodes are only part of the general liberality of the narrative.

The narrative is far more cramped than in *Homer;* but when compared with the short method of the Northern poems, not to speak of the ballads, it comes out as itself Homeric by contrast. It succeeds in representing pretty fully and continuously, not by mere allusions and implications, certain portions of heroic life and action.

The principal actions in *Beowulf* are curiously trivial, taken by themselves. All around them are

the rumours of great heroic and tragic events, and the scene and the personages are heroic and magnificent. But the plot in itself has no very great poetical value; as compared with the tragic themes of the Niblung legend, with the tale of Finnesburh, or even with the historical seriousness of the *Maldon* poem, it lacks weight. The largest of the extant poems of this school has the least important subject-matter; while things essentially and in the abstract more important, like the tragedy of Froda and Ingeld, are thrust away into the corners of the poem.

In the killing of a monster like Grendel, or in the killing of a dragon, there is nothing particularly interesting; no complication to make a fit subject for epic. *Beowulf* is defective from the first in respect of plot.

The story of Grendel and his mother is one that has been told in myriads of ways; there is nothing commoner, except dragons. The killing of dragons and other monsters is the regular occupation of the heroes of old wives' tales; and it is difficult to give individuality or epic dignity to commonplaces of this sort. This, however, is accomplished in the poem of *Beowulf*. Nothing can make the story of Grendel dramatic like the story of Waldere or of Finnesburh. But the poet has, at any rate, in connexion with this simple theme, given a rendering, consistent, adequate, and well-proportioned, of certain aspects of life and certain representative characters in an heroic age.

The characters in *Beowulf* are not much more than types; not much more clearly individual than the persons of a comedy of Terence. In the shorter Northern poems there are the characters of Brynhild and Gudrun; there is nothing in *Beowulf* to compare with them, although in *Beowulf* the personages are consistent with themselves, and intelligible.

Hrothgar is the generous king whose qualities were in Northern history transferred to his nephew Hrothulf (Hrolf Kraki), the type of peaceful strength, a man of war living quietly in the intervals of war.

Beowulf is like him in magnanimity, but his character is less uniform. He is not one of the more cruel adventurers, like Starkad in the myth, or some of the men of the Icelandic Sagas. But he is an adventurer with something strange and not altogether safe in his disposition. His youth was like that of the lubberly younger sons in the fairy stories. "They said that he was slack." Though he does not swagger like a Berserk, nor "gab" like the Paladins of Charlemagne, he is ready on provocation to boast of what he has done. The pathetic sentiment of his farewell to Hrothgar is possibly to be ascribed, in the details of its rhetoric, to the common affection of Anglo-Saxon poetry for the elegiac mood; but the softer passages are not out of keeping with the wilder moments of *Beowulf*, and they add greatly to the interest of his character. He is more variable, more dramatic, than the king and queen of the Danes, or any of the secondary personages.

Wealhtheo, the queen, represents the poetical idea

of a noble lady. There is nothing complex or strongly dramatic in her character.

Hunferth, the envious man, brought in as a foil to Beowulf, is not caricatured or exaggerated. His sourness is that of a critic and a politician, disinclined to accept newcomers on their own valuation. He is not a figure of envy in a moral allegory.

In the latter part of the poem it is impossible to find in the character of Wiglaf more than the general and abstract qualities of the "loyal servitor."

Yet all those abstract and typical characters are introduced in such a way as to complete and fill up the picture. The general impression is one of variety and complexity, though the elements of it are simple enough.

With a plot like that of *Beowulf* it might seem that there was danger of a lapse from the more serious kind of heroic composition into a more trivial kind. Certainly there is nothing in the plain story to give much help to the author; nothing in Grendel to fascinate or tempt a poet with a story made to his hand.

The plot of *Beowulf* is not more serious than that of a thousand easy-going romances of chivalry, and of fairy tales beyond all number.

The strength of what may be called an epic tradition is shown in the superiority of *Beowulf* to the temptations of cheap romantic commonplace. Beowulf, the hero, is, after all, something different from the giant-killer of popular stories, the dragon-slayer of the romantic schools. It is the virtue and

the triumph of the poet of *Beowulf* that when all is done the characters of the poem remain distinct in the memory, that the thoughts and sentiments of the poem are remembered as significant, in a way that is not the way of the common romance. Although the incidents that take up the principal part of the scene of *Beowulf* are among the commonest in popular stories, it is impossible to mistake the poem for one of the ordinary tales of terror and wonder. The essential part of the poem is the drama of characters; though the plot happens to be such that the characters are never made to undergo a tragic ordeal like that of so many of the other Teutonic stories. It is not incorrect to say of the poem of *Beowulf* that the main story is really less important to the imagination than the accessories by which the characters are defined and distinguished. It is the defect of the poem this should be so. There is a constitutional weakness in it.

Although the two stories of *Beowulf* are both commonplace, there is a difference between the story of Grendel and the story of the dragon.

The story of the dragon is more of a commonplace than the other. Almost every one of any distinction, and many quite ordinary people in certain periods of history have killed dragons; from Hercules and Bellerophon to Gawain, who, on different occasions, narrowly escaped the fate of Beowulf; from Harald Hardrada (who killed two at least) to More of More Hall who killed the dragon of Wantley.

The latter part of *Beowulf* is a tissue of common-

places of every kind: the dragon and its treasure; the devastation of the land; the hero against the dragon; the defection of his companions; the loyalty of one of them; the fight with the dragon; the dragon killed, and the hero dying from the flame and the venom of it; these are commonplaces of the story, and in addition to these there are commonplaces of sentiment, the old theme of this transitory life that "fareth as a fantasy," the lament for the glory passed away; and the equally common theme of loyalty and treason in contrast. Everything is commonplace, while everything is also magnificent in its way, and set forth in the right epic style, with elegiac passages here and there. Everything is commonplace except the allusions to matters of historical tradition, such as the death of Ongentheow, the death of Hygelac. With these exceptions, there is nothing in the latter part of *Beowulf* that might not have been taken at almost any time from the common stock of fables and appropriate sentiments, familiar to every maker or hearer of poetry from the days of the English conquest of Britain, and long before that. It is not to be denied that the commonplaces here are handled with some discretion; though commonplace, they are not mean or dull.[1]

The story of Grendel and his mother is also common, but not as common as the dragon. The

[1] It has been shown recently by Dr. Edward Sievers that Beowulf's dragon corresponds in many points to the dragon killed by Frotho, father of Haldanus, in Saxo, Book II. The dragon is not wholly commonplace, but has some particular distinctive traits. See *Berichte der Königl. Sächs. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften*, 6 Juli 1895.

function of this story is considerably different from the other, and the class to which it belongs is differently distributed in literature. Both are stories of the killing of monsters, both belong naturally to legends of heroes like Theseus or Hercules. But for literature there is this difference between them, that dragons belong more appropriately to the more fantastic kinds of narrative, while stories of the deliverance of a house from a pestilent goblin are much more capable of sober treatment and verisimilitude. Dragons are more easily distinguished and set aside as fabulous monsters than is the family of Grendel. Thus the story of Grendel is much better fitted than the dragon story for a composition like *Beowulf*, which includes a considerable amount of the detail of common experience and ordinary life. Dragons are easily scared from the neighbourhood of sober experience; they have to be looked for in the mountains and caverns of romance or fable. Whereas Grendel remains a possibility in the middle of common life, long after the last dragon has been disposed of.

The people who tell fairy stories like the *Well of the World's End*, the *Knight of the Red Shield*, the *Castle East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon*, have no belief, have neither belief nor disbelief, in the adventures of them. But the same people have other stories of which they take a different view, stories of wonderful things more near to their own experience. Many a man to whom the *Well of the World's End* is an idea, a fancy, has in his mind a story like that of Grendel which he believes, which makes him afraid.

The bogle that comes to a house at night and throttles the goodman is a creature more hardy than the dragon and more persevering. Stories like that of Beowulf and Grendel are to be found along with other popular stories in collections; but they are to be distinguished from them. There are popular heroes of tradition to this day who are called to do for lonely houses the service done by Beowulf for the house of Hrothgar.

Peer Gynt (not Ibsen's Peer Gynt, who is sophisticated, but the original Peter) is a lonely deer-stalker on the fells, who is asked by his neighbour to come and keep his house for him, which is infested with trolls. Peer Gynt clears them out,[1] and goes back to his deer-stalking. The story is plainly one that touches the facts of life more nearly than stories of *Shortshanks* or the *Blue Belt*. The trolls are a possibility.

The story of Uistean Mor mac Ghille Phadrig is another of the same sort.[2] It is not, like the *Battle of the Birds* or *Conal Gulban*, a thing of pure fantasy. It is a story that may pass for true when the others have lost everything but their pure imaginative value as stories. Here, again, in the West Highlands, the champion is called upon like Beowulf and Peer Gynt to save his neighbours from a warlock. And it is matter of history that Bishop Gudmund Arason of Holar in Iceland had to suppress a creature with a seal's head, Selkolla, that played the game of Grendel.[3]

[1] Asbjörnsen, *Norske Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn*. *At renske Huset* is the phrase—"to cleanse the house." Cf. *Heorot is gefælsod*, "Heorot is cleansed," in *Beowulf*.

[2] J. F. Campbell, *Tales of the West Highlands*, ii. p. 99. The reference to this story in *Catriona* (p. 174) will be remembered.

[3] *Biskupa Sögur*, i. p. 604.

There are people, no doubt, for whom Peer Gynt and the trolls, Uistean Mor and the warlock, even Selkolla that Bishop Gudmund killed, are as impossible as the dragon in the end of the poem of *Beowulf*. But it is certain that stories like those of Grendel are commonly believed in many places where dragons are extinct. The story of Beowulf and Grendel is not wildly fantastic or improbable; it agrees with the conditions of real life, as they have been commonly understood at all times except those of peculiar enlightenment and rationalism. It is not to be compared with the Phaeacian stories of the adventures of Odysseus. Those stories in the *Odyssey* are plainly and intentionally in a different order of imagination from the story of the killing of the suitors. They are pure romance, and if any hearer of the *Odyssey* in ancient times was led to go in search of the island of Calypso, he might come back with the same confession as the seeker for the wonders of Broceliande,—*fol i alai*. But there are other wonderful things in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* which are equally improbable to the modern rationalist and sceptic; yet by no means of the same kind of wonder as Calypso or the Sirens. Probably few of the earliest hearers of the *Odyssey* thought of the Sirens or of Calypso as anywhere near them, while many of them must have had their grandmothers' testimony for things like the portents before the death of the suitors. Grendel in the poem of *Beowulf* is in the same order of existence as these portents. If they are superstitions, they are among the most persistent; and they

are superstitions, rather than creatures of romance. The fight with Grendel is not of the same kind of adventure as Sigurd at the hedge of flame, or Svipdag at the enchanted castle. And the episode of Grendel's mother is further from matter of fact than the story of Grendel himself. The description of the desolate water is justly recognised as one of the masterpieces of the old English poetry; it deserves all that has been said of it as a passage of romance in the middle of epic. Beowulf's descent under the water, his fight with the warlock's mother, the darkness of that "sea dingle," the light of the mysterious sword, all this, if less admirably worked out than the first description of the dolorous mere, is quite as far from Heorot and the report of the table-talk of Hrothgar, Beowulf, and Hunferth. It is also a different sort of thing from the fight with Grendel. There is more of supernatural incident, more romantic ornament, less of that concentration in the struggle which makes the fight with Grendel almost as good in its way as its Icelandic counterpart, the wrestling of Grettir and Glam.

The story of *Beowulf*, which in the fight with Grendel has analogies with the plainer kind of goblin story, rather alters its tone in the fight with Grendel's mother. There are parallels in *Grettis Saga*, and elsewhere, to encounters like this, with a hag or ogress under water; stories of this sort have been found no less credible than stories of haunting warlocks like Grendel. But this second story is not told in the same way as the first. It has more of the fashion

and temper of mythical fable or romance, and less of matter of fact. More particularly, the old sword, the sword of light, in the possession of Grendel's dam in her house under the water, makes one think of other legends of mysterious swords, like that of Helgi, and the "glaives of light" that are in the keeping of divers "gyre carlines" in the *West Highland Tales*. Further, the whole scheme is a common one in popular stories, especially in Celtic stories of giants; after the giant is killed his mother comes to avenge him.

Nevertheless, the controlling power in the story of *Beowulf* is not that of any kind of romance or fantastic invention; neither the original fantasy of popular stories nor the literary embellishments of romantic schools of poetry. There are things in *Beowulf* that may be compared to things in the fairy tales; and, again, there are passages of high value for their use of the motive of pure awe and mystery. But the poem is made what it is by the power with which the characters are kept in right relation to their circumstances. The hero is not lost or carried away in his adventures. The introduction, the arrival in Heorot, and the conclusion, the return of Beowulf to his own country, are quite unlike the manner of pure romance; and these are the parts of the work by which it is most accurately to be judged.

The adventure of Grendel is put in its right proportion when it is related by Beowulf to Hygelac. The repetition of the story, in a shorter form, and in the mouth of the hero himself, gives strength and

body to a theme that was in danger of appearing trivial and fantastic. The popular story-teller has done his work when he has told the adventures of the giant-killer; the epic poet has failed, if he has done no more than this.

The character and personage of Beowulf must be brought out and impressed on the audience; it is the poet's hero that they are bound to admire. He appeals to them, not directly, but with unmistakable force and emphasis, to say that they have beheld ("as may unworthiness define") the nature of the hero, and to give him their praises.

The beauty and the strength of the poem of *Beowulf*, as of all true epic, depend mainly upon its comprehensive power, its inclusion of various aspects, its faculty of changing the mood of the story. The fight with Grendel is an adventure of one sort, grim, unrelieved, touching close upon the springs of mortal terror, the recollection or the apprehension of real adversaries possibly to be met with in the darkness. The fight with Grendel's mother touches on other motives; the terror is further away from human habitations, and it is accompanied with a charm and a beauty, the beauty of the Gorgon, such as is absent from the first adventure. It would have loosened the tension and broken the unity of the scene, if any such irrelevances had been admitted into the story of the fight with Grendel. The fight with Grendel's mother is fought under other conditions; the stress is not the same; the hero goes out to conquer, he is beset by no such apprehension as in the case of the

night attack. The poet is at this point free to make use of a new set of motives, and here it is rather the scene than the action that is made vivid to the mind. But after this excursion the story comes back to its heroic beginning; and the conversation of Beowulf with his hosts in Denmark, and the report that he gives to his kin in Gautland, are enough to reduce to its right episodic dimensions the fantasy of the adventure under the sea. In the latter part of the poem there is still another distribution of interest. The conversation of the personages is still to be found occasionally carried on in the steady tones of people who have lives of their own, and belong to a world where the tunes are not all in one key. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the story of the *Death of Beowulf* is inclined to monotony. The epic variety and independence are obliterated by the too obviously pathetic intention. The character of this part of the poem is that of a late school of heroic poetry attempting, and with some success, to extract the spirit of an older kind of poetry, and to represent in one scene an heroic ideal or example, with emphasis and with concentration of all the available matter. But while the end of the poem may lose in some things by comparison with the stronger earlier parts, it is not so wholly lost in the charms of pathetic meditation as to forget the martial tone and the more resolute air altogether. There was a danger that Beowulf should be transformed into a sort of Amadis, a mirror of the earlier chivalry; with a loyal servitor attending upon his death, and uttering the rhetorical panegyric

of an abstract ideal. But this danger is avoided, at least in part. Beowulf is still, in his death, a sharer in the fortunes of the Northern houses; he keeps his history. The fight with the dragon is shot through with reminiscences of the Gautish wars: Wiglaf speaks his sorrow for the champion of the Gauts; the virtues of Beowulf are not those of a fictitious paragon king, but of a man who would be missed in the day when the enemies of the Gauts should come upon them.

The epic keeps its hold upon what went before, and on what is to come. Its construction is solid, not flat. It is exposed to the attractions of all kinds of subordinate and partial literature,—the fairy story, the conventional romance, the pathetic legend,—and it escapes them all by taking them all up as moments, as episodes and points of view, governed by the conception, or the comprehension, of some of the possibilities of human character in a certain form of society. It does not impose any one view on the reader; it gives what it is the proper task of the higher kind of fiction to give—the play of life in different moods and under different aspects.