## 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.