

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 *Heliand* 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, *Atlamdál* (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 Skaldedigtningens 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 makeshift 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 Niblung 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 *Héliand*. 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.