

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 *Atlamá* 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 *Atlamá* 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 *málahátt*, 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.