I

THE HEROIC AGE

THE title of Epic, or of "heroic poem," is claimed by historians for a number of works belonging to the earlier Middle Ages, and to the medieval origins of modern literature. "Epic" is a term freely applied to the old school of Germanic narrative poetry, which in different dialects is represented by the poems of Hildebrand, of Beowulf, of Sigurd and Brynhild. "Epic" is the name for the body of old French poems which is headed by the *Chanson de Roland*. The rank of Epic is assigned by many to the *Nibelungenlied*, not to speak of other Middle High German poems on themes of German tradition. The title of prose Epic has been claimed for the Sagas of Iceland.

By an equally common consent the name Romance is given to a number of kinds of medieval narrative by which the Epic is succeeded and displaced; most notably in France, but also in other countries which were led, mainly by the example and influence of France, to give up their own "epic" forms and subjects in favour of new manners.

This literary classification corresponds in general history to the difference between the earlier "heroic" age and the age of chivalry. The "epics" of Hildebrand and Beowulf belong, if not wholly to German heathendom, at any rate to the earlier and prefeudal stage of German civilisation. The French epics, in their extant form, belong for the most part in spirit, if not always in date, to an order of things unmodified by the great changes of the twelfth century. While among the products of the twelfth century one of the most remarkable is the new school of French romance, the brilliant and frequently vainglorious exponent of the modern ideas of that age, and of all its chivalrous and courtly fashions of thought and sentiment. The difference of the two orders of literature is as plain as the difference in the art of war between the two sides of the battle of Hastings, which indeed is another form of the same thing; for the victory of the Norman knights over the English axemen has more than a fanciful or superficial analogy to the victory of the new literature of chivalry over the older forms of heroic narrative. The history of those two orders of literature, of the earlier Epic kinds, followed by the various types of medieval Romance, is parallel to the general political history of the earlier and the later Middle Ages, and may do something to illustrate the general progress of the nations. The passage from the earlier "heroic" civilisation to the age of chivalry was not made without some contemporary record of the "form and pressure" of the times in the changing

fashions of literature, and in successive experiments of the imagination.

Whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy. A general distinction of this kind, whatever names may be used to render it, can be shown, in medieval literature, to hold good of the two large groups of narrative belonging to the earlier and the later Middle Ages respectively. Beowulf might stand for the one side, Lancelot or Gawain for the other. It is a difference not confined to literature. The two groups are distinguished from one another, as the respectable piratical gentleman of the North Sea coast in the ninth or tenth century differs from one of the companions of St. Louis. The latter has something fantastic in his ideas which the other has not. The Crusader may indeed be natural and brutal enough in most of his ways, but he has lost the sobriety and simplicity of the earlier type of rover. If nothing else, his way of fighting—the undisciplined cavalry charge—would convict him of extravagance as compared with men of business, like the settlers of Iceland for example.

The two great kinds of narrative literature in the Middle Ages might be distinguished by their favourite incidents and commonplaces of adventure. No kind of adventure is so common or better told in the earlier heroic manner than the defence of a narrow place against odds. Such are the stories of Hamther and Sorli in the hall of Ermanaric, of the Niblung kings in the hall of Attila, of the Fight of Finnesburh,

of Walter at the Wasgenstein, of Byrhtnoth at Maldon, of Roland in the Pyrenees. Such are some of the finest passages in the Icelandic Sagas: the death of Gunnar, the burning of Njal's house, the burning of Flugumyri (an authentic record), the last fight of Kjartan in Svinadal, and of Grettir at Drangey. The story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard in the English Chronicle may well have come from a poem in which an attack and defence of this sort were narrated.

The favourite adventure of medieval romance is something different,—a knight riding alone through a forest; another knight; a shock of lances; a fight on foot with swords, "racing, tracing, and foining like two wild boars"; then, perhaps, recognition—the two knights belong to the same household and are engaged in the same quest.

> Et Guivrez vers lui esperone,
> De rien nule ne l'areisone,
> Ne Erec ne li sona mot.
>
> *Erec*, l. 5007.

This collision of blind forces, this tournament at random, takes the place, in the French romances, of the older kind of combat. In the older kind the parties have always good reasons of their own for fighting; they do not go into it with the same sort of readiness as the wandering champions of romance.

The change of temper and fashion represented by the appearance and the vogue of the medieval French romances is a change involving the whole world, and going far beyond the compass of literature and

literary history. It meant the final surrender of the old ideas, independent of Christendom, which had been enough for the Germanic nations in their earlier days; it was the close of their heroic age. What the "heroic age" of the modern nations really was, may be learned from what is left of their heroic literature, especially from three groups or classes,—the old Teutonic alliterative poems on native subjects; the French *Chansons de Geste;* and the Icelandic Sagas.

All these three orders, whatever their faults may be, do something to represent a society which is "heroic" as the Greeks in Homer are heroic. There can be no mistake about the likeness. To compare the imaginations and the phrases of any of these barbarous works with the poetry of Homer may be futile, but their contents may be compared without reference to their poetical qualities; and there is no question that the life depicted has many things in common with Homeric life, and agrees with Homer in ignorance of the peculiar ideas of medieval chivalry.

The form of society in an heroic age is aristocratic and magnificent. At the same time, this aristocracy differs from that of later and more specialised forms of civilisation. It does not make an insuperable difference between gentle and simple. There is not the extreme division of labour that produces the contempt of the lord for the villain. The nobles have not yet discovered for themselves any form of occupation or mode of thought in virtue of which they are widely severed from the commons, nor have they

invented any such ideal of life or conventional system of conduct as involves an ignorance or depreciation of the common pursuits of those below them. They have no such elaborate theory of conduct as is found in the chivalrous society of the Middle Ages. The great man is the man who is best at the things with which every one is familiar. The epic hero may despise the churlish man, may, like Odysseus in the *Iliad* (ii. 198), show little sympathy or patience with the bellowings of the multitude, but he may not ostentatiously refuse all community of ideas with simple people. His magnificence is not defended by scruples about everything low. It would not have mattered to Odysseus if he had been seen travelling in a cart, like Lancelot; though for Lancelot it was a great misfortune and anxiety. The art and pursuits of a gentleman in the heroic age are different from those of the churl, but not so far different as to keep them in different spheres. There is a community of prosaic interests. The great man is a good judge of cattle; he sails his own ship.

A gentleman adventurer on board his own ship, following out his own ideas, carrying his men with him by his own power of mind and temper, and not by means of any system of naval discipline to which he as well as they must be subordinate; surpassing his men in skill, knowledge, and ambition, but taking part with them and allowing them to take part in the enterprise, is a good representative of the heroic age. This relation between captain and men may be found, accidentally and exceptionally, in later and more

sophisticated forms of society. In the heroic age a relation between a great man and his followers similar to that between an Elizabethan captain and his crew is found to be the most important and fundamental relation in society. In later times it is only by a special favour of circumstances, as for example by the isolation of shipboard from all larger monarchies, that the heroic relation between the leader and the followers can be repeated. As society becomes more complex and conventional, this relation ceases. The homeliness of conversation between Odysseus and his vassals, or between Njal and Thord Freedman's son, is discouraged by the rules of courtly behaviour as gentlefolk become more idle and ostentatious, and their vassals more sordid and dependent. The secrets also of political intrigue and dexterity make a difference between noble and villain, in later and more complex medieval politics, such as is unknown in the earlier days and the more homely forms of Society. An heroic age may be full of all kinds of nonsense and superstition, but its motives of action are mainly positive and sensible,—cattle, sheep, piracy, abduction, merchandise, recovery of stolen goods, revenge. The narrative poetry of an heroic age, whatever dignity it may obtain either by its dramatic force of imagination, or by the aid of its mythology, will keep its hold upon such common matters, simply because it cannot do without the essential practical interests, and has nothing to put in their place, if kings and chiefs are to be represented at all. The heroic age cannot dress up ideas or sentiments to play the part of characters.

If its characters are not men they are nothing, not even thoughts or allegories; they cannot go on talking unless they have something to do; and so the whole business of life comes bodily into the epic poem.

How much the matter of the Northern heroic literature resembles the Homeric, may be felt and recognised at every turn in a survey of the ground. In both there are the *ashen spears*, there are the *shepherds of the people;* the retainers bound by loyalty to the prince who gives them meat and drink; the great hall with its minstrelsy, its boasting and bickering; the battles which are a number of single combats, while "physiology supplies the author with images"[1] for the same; the heroic rule of conduct (ἴομεν);[2] the eminence of the hero, and at the same time his community of occupation and interest with those who are less distinguished.

There are other resemblances also, but some of these are miraculous, and perhaps irrelevant. By what magic is it that the cry of Odysseus, wounded and hard bestead in his retreat before the Trojans, comes over us like the three blasts of the horn of Roland?

> Thrice he shouted, as loud as the head of a man will bear; and three times Menelaus heard the sound thereof, and quickly he turned and spake to Ajax: "Ajax, there is come about me the cry of Odysseus slow to yield; and it is like as though the Trojans had come hard upon him by himself alone, closing him round in the battle."[3]

[1] Johnson on the Epic Poem (*Life of Milton*). [2] *Il.* xii. 328.
[3] *Il.* xi. 462.

It is reported as a discovery made by Mephistopheles in Thessaly, in the classical *Walpurgisnacht*, that the company there was very much like his old acquaintances on the Brocken. A similar discovery, in regard to more honourable personages and other scenes, may be made by other Gothic travellers in a "south-eastward" journey to heroic Greece. The classical reader of the Northern heroics may be frequently disgusted by their failures; he may also be bribed, if not to applaud, at least to continue his study, by the glimmerings and "shadowy recollections," the affinities and correspondences between the Homeric and the Northern heroic world.

Beowulf and his companions sail across the sea to Denmark on an errand of deliverance,—to cleanse the land of monsters. They are welcomed by Hrothgar, king of the Danes, and by his gentle queen, in a house less fortunate than the house of Alcinous, for it is exposed to the attacks of the lumpish ogre that Beowulf has to kill, but recalling in its splendour, in the manner of its entertainment, and the bearing of its gracious lord and lady, the house where Odysseus told his story. Beowulf, like Odysseus, is assailed by an envious person with discourteous words. Hunferth, the Danish courtier, is irritated by Beowulf's presence; "he could not endure that any one should be counted worthier than himself"; he speaks enviously, a biting speech—*θυμοδακὴς γὰρ μῦθος*—and is answered in the tone of Odysseus to Euryalus.[1] Beowulf has a story to tell of his former

[1] *Od.* viii. 165.

perils among the creatures of the sea. It is differently introduced from that of Odysseus, and has not the same importance, but it increases the likeness between the two adventurers.

In the shadowy halls of the Danish king a minstrel sings of the famous deeds of men, and his song is given as an interlude in the main action. It is a poem on that same tragedy of Finnesburh, which is the theme of a separate poem in the Old English heroic cycle; so Demodocus took his subjects from the heroic cycle of Achaea. The leisure of the Danish king's house is filled in the same manner as the leisure of Phaeacia. In spite of the difference of climate, it is impossible to mistake the likeness between the Greek and the Northern conceptions of a dignified and reasonable way of life. The magnificence of the Homeric great man is like the magnificence of the Northern lord, in so far as both are equally marked off from the pusillanimity and cheapness of popular morality on the one hand, and from the ostentation of Oriental or chivalrous society on the other. The likeness here is not purely in the historical details, but much more in the spirit that informs the poetry.

If this part of *Beowulf* is a Northern *Odyssey*, there is nothing in the whole range of English literature so like a scene from the *Iliad* as the narrative of Maldon. It is a battle in which the separate deeds of the fighters are described, with not quite so much anatomy as in Homer. The fighting about the body of Byrhtnoth is described as strongly

as "the Fighting at the Wall" in the twelfth book of the *Iliad*, and essentially in the same way, with the interchange of blows clearly noted, together with the speeches and thoughts of the combatants. Even the most heroic speech in Homer, even the power of Sarpedon's address to Glaucus in the twelfth book of the *Iliad*, cannot discredit, by comparison, the heroism and the sublimity of the speech of the "old companion" at the end of *Maldon*. The language is simple, but it is not less adequate in its own way than the simplicity of Sarpedon's argument. It states, perhaps more clearly and absolutely than anything in Greek, the Northern principle of resistance to all odds, and defiance of ruin. In the North the individual spirit asserts itself more absolutely against the bodily enemies than in Greece; the defiance is made wholly independent of any vestige of prudent consideration; the contradiction, "Thought the harder, Heart the keener, Mood the more, as our Might lessens," is stated in the most extreme terms. This does not destroy the resemblance between the Greek and the Northern ideal, or between the respective forms of representation.

The creed of Maldon is that of Achilles:[1] "Xanthus, what need is there to prophesy of death? Well do I know that it is my doom to perish here, far from my father and mother; but for all that I will not turn back, until I give the Trojans their fill of war." The difference is that in the English case the strain is greater, the irony deeper, the

[1] *Il.* xix. 420.

antithesis between the spirit and the body more paradoxical.

Where the centre of life is a great man's house, and where the most brilliant society is that which is gathered at his feast, where competitive boasting, story-telling, and minstrelsy are the principal intellectual amusements, it is inevitable that these should find their way into a kind of literature which has no foundation except experience and tradition. Where fighting is more important than anything else in active life, and at the same time is carried on without organisation or skilled combinations, it is inevitable that it should be described as it is in the *Iliad*, the *Song of Maldon*, the *Song of Roland*, and the Icelandic Sagas, as a series of personal encounters, in which every stroke is remembered. From this early aristocratic form of society, there is derived in one age the narrative of life at Ithaca or of the navigations of Odysseus, in another the representation of the household of Njal or of Olaf the Peacock, and of the rovings of Olaf Tryggvason and other captains. There is an affinity between these histories in virtue of something over and above the likeness in the conditions of things they describe. There is a community of literary sense as well as of historical conditions, in the record of Achilles and Kjartan Olafsson, of Odysseus and Njal.

The circumstances of an heroic age may be found in numberless times and places, in the history of the world. Among its accompaniments will be generally found some sort of literary record of sentiments and

imaginations; but to find an heroic literature of the highest order is not so easy. Many nations instead of an *Iliad* or an *Odyssey* have had to make shift with conventional repetitions of the praise of chieftains, without any story; many have had to accept from their story-tellers all sorts of monstrous adventures in place of the humanities of debate and argument. Epic literature is not common; it is brought to perfection by a slow process through many generations. The growth of Epic out of the older and commoner forms of poetry, hymns, dirges, or panegyrics, is a progress towards intellectual and imaginative freedom. Few nations have attained, at the close of their heroic age, to a form of poetical art in which men are represented freely in action and conversation. The labour and meditation of all the world has not discovered, for the purposes of narrative, any essential modification of the procedure of Homer. Those who are considered reformers and discoverers in later times—Chaucer, Cervantes, Fielding—are discoverers merely of the old devices of dramatic narration which were understood by Homer and described after him by Aristotle.

The growth of Epic, in the beginning of the history of the modern nations, has been generally thwarted and stunted. It cannot be said of many of the languages of the North and West of Europe that in them the epic form has come fully to its own, or has realised its proper nature. Many of them, however, have at least made a beginning. The history of the older German literature, and of old French, is the

history of a great number of experiments in Epic; of attempts, that is, to represent great actions in narrative, with the personages well defined. These experiments are begun in the right way. They are not merely barbarous nor fantastic. They are different also from such traditional legends and romances as may survive among simple people long after the day of their old glories and their old kings. The poems of *Beowulf* and *Waldere*, of *Roland* and *William of Orange*, are intelligible and reasonable works, determined in the main by the same essential principles of narrative art, and of dramatic conversation within the narrative, as are observed in the practice of Homer. Further, these are poems in which, as in the Homeric poems, the ideas of their time are conveyed and expressed in a noble manner: they are high-spirited poems. They have got themselves clear of the confusion and extravagance of early civilisation, and have hit upon a way of telling a story clearly and in proportion, and with dignity. They are epic in virtue of their superiority to the more fantastic motives of interest, and in virtue of their study of human character. They are heroic in the nobility of their temper and their style. If at any time they indulge in heroic commonplaces of sentiment, they do so without insincerity or affectation, as the expression of the general temper or opinion of their own time. They are not separated widely from the matters of which they treat; they are not antiquarian revivals of past forms, nor traditional vestiges of things utterly remote and separate

from the actual world. What art they may possess is different from the "rude sweetness" of popular ballads, and from the unconscious grace of popular tales. They have in different degrees and manners the form of epic poetry, in their own right. There are recognisable qualities that serve to distinguish even a fragment of heroic poetry from the ballads and romances of a lower order, however near these latter forms may approach at times to the epic dignity.