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.