

## II

### SCALE OF THE POEMS

THE following are the extant poems on native heroic themes, written in one or other of the dialects of the Teutonic group, and in unrhymed alliterative measures.

(1) *Continental*.—The *Lay of Hildebrand* (c. A.D. 800), a Low German poem, copied by High German clerks, is the only remnant of the heroic poetry of the continental Germans in which, together with the national metre, there is a national theme.

(2) *English*.—The poems of this order in old English are *Beowulf*, *Finnesburh*, *Waldere*, and *Byrhtnoth*, or the *Lay of Maldon*. Besides these there are poems on historical themes preserved in the Chronicle, of which *Brunanburh* is the most important, and two dramatic lyrics, *Widsith* and *Deor*, in which there are many allusions to the mythical and heroic cycles.

(3) *Scandinavian and Icelandic*.—The largest number of heroic poems in alliterative verse is found in the old Northern language, and in manuscripts written in Iceland. The poems themselves may have



come from other places in which the old language of Norway was spoken, some of them perhaps from Norway itself, many of them probably from those islands round Britain to which a multitude of Norwegian settlers were attracted,—Shetland, the Orkneys, the Western Islands of Scotland.<sup>1</sup>

The principal collection is that of the manuscript in the King's Library at Copenhagen (2365, 4°) generally referred to as *Codex Regius* (R); it is this book, discovered in the seventeenth century, that has received the inaccurate but convenient names of *Elder Edda*, or *Poetic Edda*, or *Edda of Sæmund the Wise*, by a series of miscalculations fully described in the preface to the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*. Properly, the name *Edda* belongs only to the prose treatise by Snorri Sturluson.

The chief contents of *Codex Regius* are a series of independent poems on the Volsung story, beginning with the tragedies of *Helgi and Swava* and *Helgi and Sigrun* (originally unconnected with the Volsung legend), and going on in the order of events.

The series is broken by a gap in which the poems dealing with some of the most important parts of the story have been lost. The matter of their contents is known from the prose paraphrase called *Volsunga Saga*. Before the Volsung series come a number of poems chiefly mythological: the *Sibyl's Prophecy*, (*Volospá*); the *Wooing of Frey*, or the *Errand of Skirnir*; the *Flyting of Thor and Woden* (*Harbarz-*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Vigfusson, *Prolegomena to Sturlunga* (Oxford, 1878); *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (*ibid.* 1883); *Grimm Centenary Papers* (1886); Sophus Bugge, *Helgedigtene* (1896).



lióð); *Thor's Fishing for the Midgarth Serpent*, (Hymiskviða); the *Railing of Loki* (Lokasenna); the *Winning of Thor's Hammer* (prymskviða); the *Lay of Weland*. There are also some didactic poems, chief among them being the gnomic miscellany under the title *Hávamál*; while besides this there are others, like *Vafþrúðnismál*, treating of mythical subjects in a more or less didactic and mechanical way. There are a number of prose passages introducing or linking the poems. The confusion in some parts of the book is great.

*Codex Regius* is not the only source; other mythic and heroic poems are found in other manuscripts. The famous poem of the *Doom of Balder* (Gray's "Descent of Odin"); the poem of the *Rescue of Menglad*, the enchanted princess; the verses preserved in the *Heiðreks Saga*, belonging to the story of Angantyr; besides the poem of the *Magic Mill* (Grottasöngur) and the *Song of the Dart* (Gray's "Fatal Sisters"). There are many fragmentary verses, among them some from the *Biarkamál*, a poem with some curious points of likeness to the English *Lay of Finnesburh*. A Swedish inscription has preserved four verses of an old poem on Theodoric.

Thus there is some variety in the original documents now extant out of the host of poems that have been lost. One conclusion at least is irresistible—that, in guessing at the amount of epic poetry of this order which has been lost, one is justified in making a liberal estimate. Fragments are all that we possess. The extant poems have escaped the deadliest risks; the



fire at Copenhagen in 1728, the bombardment in 1807, the fire in the Cotton Library in 1731, in which *Beowulf* was scorched but not burned. The manuscripts of *Finnesburh* and *Maldon* have been mislaid; but for the transcripts taken in time by Hicke and Hearne they would have been as little known as the songs that the Sirens sang. The poor remnants of *Waldere* were found by Stephens in two scraps of bookbinders' parchment.

When it is seen what hazards have been escaped by those bits of wreckage, and at the same time how distinct in character the several poems are, it is plain that one may use some freedom in thinking of the amount of this old poetry that has perished.

The loss is partly made good in different ways: in the Latin of the historians Jordanes, Paulus Diaconus, and most of all in the paraphrases, prose and verse, by Saxo Grammaticus; in Ekkehard's Latin poem of *Waltharius* (c. A.D. 930); in the *Volsunga Saga*, which has kept the matter of the lost poems of *Codex Regius* and something of their spirit; in the *Thidreks Saga*, a prose story made up by a Norwegian in the thirteenth century from current North German ballads of the Niblungs; in the German poems of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which, in a later form of the language and in rhyming verse, have preserved at any rate some matters of tradition, some plots of stories, if little of the peculiar manner and imagination of the older poetry.

The casual references to Teutonic heroic subjects in a vast number of authors have been brought



together in a monumental work, *die deutsche Heldensage*, by Wilhelm Grimm (1829).

#### THE WESTERN GROUP

*Hildebrand, Finnesburh, Waldere, Beowulf, Byrhtnoth*

The Western group of poems includes all those that are not Scandinavian; there is only one among them which is not English, the poem of *Hildebrand*. They do not afford any very copious material for inferences as to the whole course and progress of poetry in the regions to which they belong. A comparison of the fragmentary *Hildebrand* with the fragments of *Waldere* shows a remarkable difference in compass and fulness; but, at the same time, the vocabulary and phrases of *Hildebrand* declare that poem unmistakably to belong to the same family as the more elaborate *Waldere*. *Finnesburh*, the fragmentary poem of the lost Lambeth MS., seems almost as far removed as *Hildebrand* from the more expansive and leisurely method of *Waldere*; while *Waldere*, *Beowulf*, and the poem of *Maldon* resemble one another in their greater ease and fluency, as compared with the brevity and abruptness of *Hildebrand* or *Finnesburh*. The documents, as far as they go, bear out the view that in the Western German tongues, or at any rate in England, there was a development of heroic poetry tending to a greater amplitude of narration. This progress falls a long way short of the fulness of Homer, not to speak of the extreme diffuseness of some of the French



*chansons de geste*. It is such, however, as to distinguish the English poems, *Waldere*, *Beowulf*, and *Byrthnoth*, very obviously from the poem of *Hildebrand*. While, at the same time, the brevity of *Hildebrand* is not like the brevity of the Northern poems. *Hildebrand* is a poem capable of expansion. It is easy enough to see in what manner its outlines might be filled up and brought into the proportions of *Waldere* or *Beowulf*. In the Northern poems, on the other hand, there is a lyrical conciseness, and a broken emphatic manner of exposition, which from first to last prevented any such increase of volume as seems to have taken place in the old English poetry; though there are some poems, the *Atlamál* particularly, which indicate that some of the Northern poets wished to go to work on a larger scale than was generally allowed them by their traditions.

In the Northern group there is a great variety in respect of the amount of incident that goes to a single poem; some poems deal with a single adventure, while others give an abstract of a whole heroic history. In the Western poems this variety is not to be found. There is a difference in this respect between *Hildebrand* and *Waldere*, and still more, at least on the surface, between *Hildebrand* and *Beowulf*; but nothing like the difference between the *Lay of the Hammer* (*Þrymskviða*), which is an episode of Thor, and the *Lay of Weland* or the *Lay of Brynhild*, which give in a summary way a whole history from beginning to end.

*Hildebrand* tells of the encounter of father and



son, Hildebrand and Hadubrand, with a few references to the past of Hildebrand and his relations to Odoacer and Theodoric. It is one adventure, a tragedy in one scene.

*Finnesburh*, being incomplete at the beginning and end, is not good evidence. What remains of it presents a single adventure, the fight in the hall between Danes and Frisians. There is another version of the story of *Finnesburh*, which, as reported in *Beowulf* (ll. 1068-1154) gives a good deal more of the story than is given in the separate *Finnesburh Lay*. This episode in *Beowulf*, where a poem of *Finnesburh* is chanted by the Danish minstrel, is not to be taken as contributing another independent poem to the scanty stock; the minstrel's story is reported, not quoted at full length. It has been reduced by the poet of *Beowulf*, so as not to take up too large a place of its own in the composition. Such as it is, it may very well count as direct evidence of the way in which epic poems were produced and set before an audience; and it may prove that it was possible for an old English epic to deal with almost the whole of a tragic history in one sitting. In this case the tragedy is far less complex than the tale of the Niblungs, whatever interpretation may be given to the obscure allusions in which it is preserved.

Finn, son of Folcwalda, king of the Frisians, entertained Hnæf the Dane, along with the Danish warriors, in the castle of Finnesburh. There, for reasons of his own, he attacked the Danes; who kept



the hall against him, losing their own leader Hnæf, but making a great slaughter of the Frisians.

The *Beowulf* episode takes up the story at this point.

Hnæf was slain in the place of blood. His sister Hildeburg, Finn's wife, had to mourn for brother and son.

Hengest succeeded Hnæf in command of the Danes and still kept the hall against the Frisians. Finn was compelled to make terms with the Danes. Hengest and his men were to live among the Frisians with a place of their own, and share alike with Finn's household in all the gifts of the king. Finn bound himself by an oath that Hengest and his men should be free of blame and reproach, and that he would hold any Frisian guilty who should cast it up against the Danes that they had followed their lord's slayer.<sup>1</sup> Then, after the oaths, was held the funeral of the Danish and the Frisian prince, brother and son of Hildeburg the queen.

Then they went home to Friesland, where Hengest stayed with Finn through the winter. With the spring he set out, meaning vengeance; but he dissembled and rendered homage, and accepted the sword the lord gives his liegeman. Death came upon Finn in his house; for the Danes came back and slew him, and the hall was made red with the Frisian blood. The Danes took Hildeburg and the

<sup>1</sup> Compare *Cynwulf* and *Cyneheard* in the Chronicle (A. D. 755); also the outbreak of enmity, through recollection of old wrongs, in the stories of Alboin, and of the vengeance for Froda (*supra*, pp. 76-81).



treasure of Finn and carried the queen and the treasure to Denmark.

The whole story, with the exception of the original grievance or grudge of the Frisian king, which is not explained, and the first battle, which is taken as understood, is given in *Beowulf* as the contents of one poem, delivered in one evening by a harper. It is more complicated than the story of *Hildebrand*, more even than *Waldere*; and more than either of the two chief sections of *Beowulf* taken singly—"Beowulf in Denmark" and the "Fight with the Dragon." It is far less than the plot of the long *Lay of Brynhild*, in which the whole Niblung history is contained. In its distribution of the action, it corresponds very closely to the story of the death of the Niblungs as given by the *Atlakviða* and the *Atlamål*. The discrepancies between these latter poems need not be taken into account here. In each of them and in the *Finnesburh* story there is a double climax; first the wrong, then the vengeance. *Finnesburh* might also be compared, as far as the arrangement goes, with the *Song of Roland*; the first part gives the treacherous attack and the death of the hero; then comes a pause between the two centres of interest, followed in the second part by expiation of the wrong.

The story of *Finnesburh* is obscure in many respects; the tradition of it has failed to preserve the motive for Finn's attack on his wife's brother, without which the story loses half its value. Something remains, nevertheless, and it is possible to recognise in this episode a greater regard for unity



and symmetry of narrative than is to be found in *Beowulf* taken as a whole.

The Lambeth poem of *Finnesburh* most probably confined itself to the battle in the hall. There is no absolute proof of this, apart from the intensity of its tone, in the extant fragment, which would agree best with a short story limited, like *Hildebrand*, to one adventure. It has all the appearance of a short lay, a single episode. Such a poem might end with the truce of Finn and Hengest, and an anticipation of the Danes' vengeance :

It is marvel an the red blood run not, as the rain does in the  
street.

Yet the stress of this adventure is not greater than that of Roland, which does not end at Roncesvalles ; it may be that the *Finnesburh* poem went on to some of the later events, as told in the *Finnesburh* abridgment in *Beowulf*.

The story of Walter of Aquitaine as represented by the two fragments of old English verse is not greatly inconsistent with the same story in its Latin form of *Waltharius*. The Latin verses of *Waltharius* tell the story of the flight of Walter and Hildegund from the house of Attila, and of the treacherous attack on Walter by Gunther, king of the Franks, against the advice, but with the unwilling consent, of Hagen, his liegeman and Walter's friend. Hagen, Hildegund, and Walter were hostages with Attila from the Franks, Burgundians, and Aquitanians. They grew up together at the Court of Attila till



Gunther, son of Gibicho, became king of the Franks and refused tribute to the Huns. Then Hagen escaped and went home. Walter and Hildegund were lovers, and they, too, thought of flight, and escaped into the forests, westward, with a great load of treasure, and some fowling and fishing gear for the journey.

After they had crossed the Rhine, they were discovered by Hagen; and Gunther, with twelve of the Franks, went after them to take the Hunnish treasure: Hagen followed reluctantly. The pursuers came up with Walter as he was asleep in a hold among the hills, a narrow green place with overhanging cliffs all round, and a narrow path leading up to it. Hildegund awakened Walter, and he went and looked down at his adversaries. Walter offered terms, through the mediation of Hagen, but Gunther would have none of them, and the fight began. The Latin poem describes with great spirit how one after another the Franks went up against Walter: Camelo (ll. 664-685), Scaramundus (686-724), Werinhardus the bowman (725-755), Ekevid the Saxon (756-780), who went out jeering at Walter; Hadavartus (781-845), Patavrid (846-913), Hagen's sister's son, whose story is embellished with a diatribe on avarice; Gerwicus (914-940), fighting to avenge his companions and restore their honour—

Is furit ut caesos mundet vindicta sodales;

but he, too, fell—

Exitiumque dolens, pulsabat calcibus arvom.

Then there was a breathing-space, before Randolf,



the eighth of them, made trial of Walter's defence (962-981). After him came Eleuther, whose other name was Helmnod, with a harpoon and a line, and the line was held by Trogus, Tanastus, and the king; Hagen still keeping aloof, though he had seen his nephew killed. The harpoon failed; three Frankish warriors were added to the slain; the king and Hagen were left (l. 1060).

Gunther tried to draw Hagen into the fight. Hagen refused at first, but gave way at last, on account of the slaying of his nephew. He advised a retreat for the night, and an attack on Walter when he should have left the fastness. And so the day ended.

Walter and Hildegund took turns to watch, Hildegund singing to awaken Walter when his turn came. They left their hold in the morning; but they had not gone a mile when Hildegund looking behind saw two men coming down a hill after them. These were Gunther and Hagen, and they had come for Walter's life. Walter sent Hildegund with the horse and its burden into the wood for safety, while he took his stand on rising ground. Gunther jeered at him as he came up; Walter made no answer to him, but reproached Hagen, his old friend. Hagen defended himself by reason of the vengeance due for his nephew; and so they fought, with more words of scorn. Hagen lost his eye, and Gunther his leg, and Walter's right hand was cut off by Hagen; and "this was their sharing of the rings of Attila!"—

*Sic, sic, armillas partiti sunt Avarenses* (l. 1404).



Walter and Hildegund were king and queen of Aquitaine, but of his later wars and victories the tale has no more to tell.

Of the two old English fragments of this story, the first contains part of a speech of Hildegund<sup>1</sup> encouraging Walter.

Its place appears to be in the pause of the fight, when the Frankish champions have been killed, and Gunther and Hagen are alone. The speech is rhetorical: "Thou hast the sword Mimming, the work of Weland, that fails not them that wield it. Be of good courage, captain of Attila; never didst thou draw back to thy hold for all the strokes of the foeman; nay, my heart was afraid because of thy rashness. Thou shalt break the boast of Gunther; he came on without a cause, he refused the offered gifts; he shall return home empty-handed, if he return at all." That is the purport of it.

The second fragment is a debate between Gunther and Walter. It begins with the close of a speech of Gunther (Guðhere), in which there are allusions to other parts of the heroic cycle, such as are common in *Beowulf*.

The allusion here is to one of the adventures of Widia, Weland's son; how he delivered Theodoric from captivity, and of Theodoric's gratitude. The connexion is obscure, but the reference is of great value as proving the resemblance of narrative method

<sup>1</sup> Hildegyth, her English name, is unfortunately not preserved in either of the fragmentary leaves. It is found (Hildigið) in the *Liber Vitae* (Sweet, *Oldest English Texts*, p. 155).



in *Waldere* and *Beowulf*, not to speak of the likeness to the Homeric way of quoting old stories. Waldere answers, and this is the substance of his argument: "Lo, now, Lord of the Burgundians, it was thy thought that Hagen's hand should end my fighting. Come then and win my corselet, my father's heirloom, from the shoulders weary of war."<sup>1</sup>

The fragment closes with a pious utterance of submission to heaven, by which the poem is shown to be of the same order as *Beowulf* in this respect also, as well as others, that it is affected by a turn for edification, and cannot stand as anything like a pure example of the older kind of heroic poetry. The phrasing here is that of the Anglo-Saxon secondary poems; the common religious phrasing that came into vogue and supplemented the old heathen poetical catch-words.

The style of *Waldere* makes it probable that the action of the story was not hurried unduly. If the author kept the same proportion throughout, his poem may have been almost as long as *Waltharius*. It is probable that the fight among the rocks was described in detail; the *Maldon* poem may show how such a subject could be managed in old English verse,

<sup>1</sup> The resemblance to Hildebrand, l. 58, is pointed out by Sophus Bugge: "Doh maht du nu aodlihho, ibu dir din ellen taoc, In sus heremo man hrusti giwinnan." (Hildebrand speaks): "Easily now mayest thou win the spoils of so old a man, if thy strength avail thee." It is remarkable as evidence of the strong conventional character of the Teutonic poetry, and of the community of the different nations in the poetical convention, that two short passages like *Hildebrand* and *Waldere* should present so many points of likeness to other poems, in details of style. Thus the two lines quoted from *Hildebrand* as a parallel to *Waldere* contain also the equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon phrase, *Donne his ellen deah*, a familiar part of the Teutonic *Gradius*.



and how the matter of *Waltharius* may have been expressed in *Waldere*. Roughly speaking, there is about as much fighting in the three hundred and twenty-five lines of *Maldon* as in double the number of hexameters in *Waltharius*; but the *Maldon* poem is more concise than the extant fragments of *Waldere*. *Waldere* may easily have taken up more than a thousand lines.

The Latin and the English poems are not in absolute agreement. The English poet knew that Guðhere, Guntharius, was Burgundian, not Frank; and an expression in the speech of Hildegyth suggests that the fight in the narrow pass was not so exact a succession of single combats as in *Waltharius*.

The poem of *Maldon* is more nearly related in its style to *Waldere* and *Beowulf* than to the *Finnesburh* fragment. The story of the battle has considerable likeness to the story of the fight at Finnesburh. The details, however, are given in a fuller and more capable way, at greater length.

*Beowulf* has been commonly regarded as exceptional, on account of its length and complexity, among the remains of the old Teutonic poetry. This view is hardly consistent with a right reading of *Waldere*, or of *Maldon* either, for that matter. It is not easy to make any great distinction between *Beowulf* and *Waldere* in respect of the proportions of the story. The main action of *Beowulf* is comparable in extent with the action of *Waltharius*. The later adventure of *Beowulf* has the character of a sequel, which extends the poem, to the detriment



of its proportions, but without adding any new element of complexity to the epic form. Almost all the points in which the manner of *Beowulf* differs from that of *Finnesburh* may be found in *Waldere* also, and are common to *Waldere* and *Beowulf* in distinction from *Hildebrand* and *Finnesburh*. The two poems, the poem of *Beowulf* and the fragments of *Waldere*, seem to be alike in the proportion they allow to dramatic argument, and in their manner of alluding to heroic matters outside of their own proper stories, not to speak of their affinities of ethical tone and sentiment.

The time of the whole action of *Beowulf* is long. The poem, however, falls naturally into two main divisions—*Beowulf in Denmark*, and the *Death of Beowulf*. If it is permissible to consider these for the present as two separate stories, then it may be affirmed that in none of the stories preserved in the old poetic form of England and the German Continent is there any great length or complexity. *Hildebrand*, a combat; *Finnesburh*, a defence of a house; *Waldere*, a champion beset by his enemies; *Beowulf in Denmark*, the hero as a deliverer from pests; *Beowulf's Death* in one action; *Maldon* the last battle of an English captain; these are the themes, and they are all simple. There is more complexity in the story of *Finnesburh*, as reported in *Beowulf*, than in all the rest; but even that story appears to have observed as much as possible the unity of action. The epic singer at the court of the Dane appears to have begun, not with the narrative of the



first contest, but immediately after that, assuming that part of the story as known, in order to concentrate attention on the vengeance, on the penalty exacted from Finn the Frisian for his treachery to his guests.

Some of the themes may have less in them than others, but there is no such variety of scale among them as will be found in the Northern poems. There seems to be a general agreement of taste among the Western German poets and audiences, English and Saxon, as to the right compass of an heroic lay. When the subject was a foreign one, as in the *Héliand*, in the poems of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, in *Andreas*, or *Elene*, there might be room for the complexity and variety of the foreign model. The poem of *Judith* may be considered as a happy instance in which the foreign document has of itself, by a pre-established harmony, conformed to an old German fashion. In the original story of *Judith* the unities are observed in the very degree that was suited to the ways of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. It is hazardous to speak generally of a body of poetry so imperfectly represented in extant literature, but it is at any rate permissible to say that the extant heroic poems, saved out of the wreck of the Western Teutonic poetry, show a strong regard for unity of action, in every case except that of *Beowulf*; while in that case there are two stories—a story and a sequel—each observing a unity within its own limit.

Considered apart from the Northern poems, the poems of England and Germany give indication of a



progress in style from a more archaic and repressed, to a more developed and more prolix kind of narrative. The difference is considerable between *Hildebrand* and *Waldere*, between *Finnesburh* and *Beowulf*.

It is the change and development in style, rather than any increase in the complexity of the themes, that accounts for the difference in scale between the shorter and the longer poems.

For the natural history of poetical forms this point is of the highest importance. The Teutonic poetry shows that epic may be developed out of short lays through a gradual increase of ambition and of eloquence in the poets who deal with common themes. There is no question here of the process of agglutination and contamination whereby a number of short lays are supposed to be compounded into an epic poem. Of that process it may be possible to find traces in *Beowulf* and elsewhere. But quite apart from that, there is the process by which an archaic stiff manner is replaced by greater freedom, without any loss of unity in the plot. The story of Walter of Aquitaine is as simple as the story of Hildebrand. The difference between *Hildebrand* and *Waldere* is the difference between an archaic and an accomplished mode of narrative, and this difference is made by a change in spirit and imagination, not by a process of agglutination. To make the epic of *Waldere* it was not necessary to cobble together a number of older lays on separate episodes. It was possible to keep the original plan of the old story in



its simplest irreducible form, and still give it the force and magnificence of a lofty and eloquent style. It was for the attainment of this pitch of style that the heroic poetry laboured in *Waldere* and *Beowulf*, with at least enough success to make these poems distinct from the rest in this group.

With all the differences among them, the continental and English poems, *Hildebrand*, *Waldere*, and the rest, form a group by themselves, with certain specific qualities of style distinguishing them from the Scandinavian heroic poetry. The history of the Scandinavian poetry is the converse of the English development. Epic poetry in the North becomes more and more hopeless as time goes on, and with some exceptions tends further and further away from the original type which was common to all the Germans, and from which those common forms and phrases have been derived that are found in the "Poetic Edda" as well as in *Beowulf* or the *Héliand*.

In England before the old poetry died out altogether there was attained a certain magnitude and fulness of narrative by which the English poems are distinguished, and in virtue of which they may claim the title *epic* in no transferred or distorted sense of the term. In the North a different course is taken. There seems indeed, in the *Atlamdíl* especially, a poem of exceptional compass and weight among those of the North, to have been something like the Western desire for a larger scale of narrative poem. But the rhetorical expansion of the older forms into an equable and deliberate narrative was counteracted by the still stronger affection for



lyrical modes of speech, for impassioned, abrupt, and heightened utterance. No epic solidity or composure could be obtained in the fiery Northern verse; the poets could not bring themselves into the frame of mind required for long recitals; they had no patience for the intervals necessary, in epic as in dramatic poetry, between the critical moments. They would have everything equally full of energy, everything must be emphatic and telling. But with all this, the Northern heroic poems are in some of their elements strongly allied to the more equable and duller poems of the West; there is a strong element of epic in their lyrical dialogues and monologues, and in their composition and arrangement of plots.

#### THE NORTHERN GROUP

In comparing the English and the Northern poems, it should be borne in mind that the documents of the Northern poetry are hardly sufficient evidence of the condition of Northern epic at its best. The English documents are fragmentary, indeed, but at least they belong to a time in which the heroic poetry was attractive and well appreciated; as is proved by the wonderful freshness of the *Maldon* poem, late though it is. The Northern poems seem to have lost their vogue and freshness before they came to be collected and written down. They were imperfectly remembered and reported; the text of them is broken and confused, and the gaps are made up with prose explanations. The fortunate preservation of a second copy of *Volospá*,



in Hauk's book, has further multiplied labours and perplexities by a palpable demonstration of the vanity of copiers, and of the casual way in which the strophes of a poem might be shuffled at random in different texts; while the chief manuscript of the poems itself has in some cases double and incongruous versions of the same passage.<sup>1</sup>

The *Codex Regius* contains a number of poems that can only be called *epic* in the widest and loosest sense of the term, and some that are not *epic* in any sense at all. The gnomic verses, the mythological summaries, may be passed over for the present; whatever illustrations they may afford of early beliefs and ideas, they have no evidence to give concerning the proportions of stories. Other poems in the collection come under the denomination of epic only by a rather liberal extension of the term to include poems which are no more epic than dramatic, and just as much the one as the other, like the poems of *Frey's Wooing* and of the earlier exploits of Sigurd, which tell their story altogether by means of dialogue, without any narrative passages at all. The links and explanations are supplied, in prose, in the manuscript. Further, among the poems which come nearer to the English form of narrative poetry there is the very greatest variety of scale. The amount of story told in the Northern poems may vary indefinitely within the widest limits. Some poems contain little

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *C.P.B.*, i. p. 375, for double versions of part of *Hamðismál*, and of the *Lay of Helgi*. On pp. 377-379, parts of the two texts of *Volospá*—R and H—are printed side by side for comparison.



more than an idyll of a single scene ; others may give an abstract of a whole history, as the whole Volsung story is summarised, for instance, in the *Prophecy of Gripir*.

Some of the poems are found in such a confused and fragmentary form, with interruptions and interpolations, that, although it is possible to make out the story, it is hardly possible to give any confident judgment about the original proportions of the poems. This is particularly the case with the poems of which the hero bears the name of Helgi. The difficulties of these were partly appreciated, but not solved, by the original editor.

The differences of scale may be illustrated by the following summary description, which aims at little more than a rough measurement of the stories, for purposes of comparison with *Beowulf* and *Waldere*.

The *Lay of Weland* gives a whole mythical history. How Weland and his brother met with the swan-maidens, how the swan-brides left them in the ninth year, how Weland Smith was taken prisoner by King Nidad, and hamstrung, and set to work for the king ; and of the vengeance of Weland. There are one hundred and fifty-nine lines, but in the text there are many defective places. The *Lay* is a ballad history, beginning at the beginning, and ending, not with the end of the life of Weland, nor with the adventures of his son Widia, but with the escape of Weland from the king, his enemy, after he had killed the king's sons and put shame on the king's daughter Bodvild.



In plan, the *Lay of Weland* is quite different from the lays of the adventures of Thor, the *Þrymskviða* and the *Hymiskviða*, the songs of the Hammer and the Cauldron. These are chapters, episodes, in the history of Thor, not summaries of the whole matter, such as is the poem of *Weland*.

The stories of Helgi Hundingsbane, and of his namesakes, as has been already remarked, are given in a more than usually complicated and tangled form.

At first everything is simple enough. A poem of the life of Helgi begins in a way that promises a mode of narrative fuller and less abrupt than the *Lay of Weland*. It tells of the birth of Helgi, son of Sigmund; of the coming of the Norns to make fast the threads of his destiny; of the gladness and the good hopes with which his birth was welcomed. Then the *Lay of Helgi* tells, very briefly, how he slew King Hunding, how the sons of Hunding made claims for recompense. "But the prince would make no payment of amends; he bade them look for no payment, but for the strong storm, for the grey spears, and for the rage of Odin."<sup>1</sup> And the sons of Hunding were slain as their father had been.

Then the main interest begins, the story of Helgi and Sigrun.

"A light shone forth from the Mountains of Flame, and lightnings followed." There appeared to Helgi,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Maldon*, l. 45 sq., "Hearest thou what this people answer? They will pay you, for tribute, spears, the deadly point, the old swords, the weapons of war that profit you not," etc.



in the air, a company of armed maidens riding across the field of heaven; "their armour was stained with blood, and light went forth from their spears." Sigrun from among the other "ladies of the South" answered Helgi, and called on him for help; her father Hogni had betrothed her, against her will, to Hodbrodd, son of Granmar. Helgi summoned his men to save her from this loathed wedding. The battle in which Helgi slew his enemies and won the lady of the air is told very shortly, while disproportionate length is given to an interlude of vituperative dialogue between two heroes, Sinfiotli, Helgi's brother, and Gudmund, son of Granmar, the warden of the enemy's coast; this passage of *Vetus Comoedia* takes up fifty lines, while only six are given to the battle, and thirteen to the meeting of Helgi and Sigrun afterwards. Here ends the poem which is described in *Codex Regius* as the *Lay of Helgi* (*Helgakviða*). The story is continued in the next section in a disorderly way, by means of ill-connected quotations. The original editor, whether rightly or wrongly, is quite certain that the *Lay of Helgi*, which ends with the victory of Helgi over the unamiable bridegroom, is a different poem from that which he proceeds to quote as the *Old Lay of the Volsungs*, in which the same story is told. In this second version there is at least one interpolation from a third; a stanza from a poem in the "dialogue measure," which is not the measure in which the rest of the story is told. It is uncertain what application was meant to be given to the title *Old Lay of the Volsungs*, and whether



the editor included under that title the whole of his second version of Helgi and Sigrun. For instance, he gives another version of the railing verses of Sinfiotli, which he may or may not have regarded as forming an essential part of his *Old Volsung Lay*. He distinguishes it at any rate from the other "Flyting," which he definitely and by name ascribes to *Helgakviða*.

It is in this second version of the story of Helgi that the tragedy is worked out. Helgi slays the father of Sigrun in his battle against the bridegroom's kindred: Sigrun's brother takes vengeance. The space is scant enough for all that is told in it; scant, that is to say, in comparison with the space of the story of Beowulf; though whether the poem loses, as poetry, by this compression is another matter.

It is here, in connexion with the second version, that the tragedy is followed by the verses of the grief of Sigrun, and the return of Helgi from the dead; the passage of mystery, the musical close, in which the tragic idea is changed into something less distinct than tragedy, yet without detriment to the main action.

Whatever may be the critical solution of the textual problems of these *Lays*, it is impossible to get out of the text any form of narrative that shall resemble the English mode. Even where the story of Helgi is slowest, it is quicker, more abrupt, and more lyrical even than the *Lay of Finnesburh*, which is the quickest in movement of the English poems.



The story of Helgi and Sigrun is intelligible, and though incomplete, not yet so maimed as to have lost its proportions altogether. Along with it, however, in the manuscript there are other, even more difficult fragments of poems about another Helgi, son of Hiorvard, and his love for another Valkyria, Swava. And yet again there are traces of a third Helgi, with a history of his own. The editors of *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* have accepted the view of the three Helgis that is indicated by the prose passages of the manuscript here; namely, that the different stories are really of the same persons born anew, "to go through the same life-story, though with varying incidents."<sup>1</sup> "Helgi and Swava, it is said, were born again," is the note in the manuscript. "There was a king named Hogni, and his daughter was Sigrun. She was a Valkyria and rode over air and sea; *she was Swava born again.*" And, after the close of the story of Sigrun, "it was a belief in the old days that men were born again, but that is now reckoned old wives' fables. Helgi and Sigrun, it is reported, were born anew, and then he was Helgi Haddingjaskati, and she Kara, Halfdan's daughter, as is told in the songs of Kara, and she was a Valkyria."

It is still possible to regard the "old wives' fable" (which is a common element in Celtic legend and elsewhere) as something unessential in the poems of Helgi; as a popular explanation intended to reconcile different myths attaching to the name. However that may be, the poems of *Helgi and Swava* are so

<sup>1</sup> *C.P.B.*, i. p. 130.



fragmentary and confused, and so much has to be eked out with prose, that it is impossible to say what the complete form and scale of the poetical story may have been, and even difficult to be certain that it was ever anything else than fragments. As they stand, the remains are like those of the story of Angantyr; prominent passages quoted by a chronicler, who gives the less important part of the story in prose, either because he has forgotten the rest of the poem, or because the poem was made in that way to begin with.

Of the poem of *Kara*, mentioned in the manuscript, there is nothing left except what can be restored by a conjectural transference of some verses, given under the name of Helgi and Sigrun, to this third mysterious plot. The conjectures are supported by the reference to the third story in the manuscript, and by the fact that certain passages which do not fit in well to the story of Helgi and Sigrun, where they are placed by the collector, correspond with prose passages in the late Icelandic romance of *Hromund Greipsson*,<sup>1</sup> in which *Kara* is introduced.

The story of Helgi and Swava is one that covers a large period of time, though the actual remnants of the story are small. It is a tragedy of the early Elizabethan type described by Sir Philip Sidney, which begins with the wooing of the hero's father and mother. The hero is dumb and nameless from his birth, until the Valkyria, Swava, meets him and gives him his name, Helgi; and tells him of a magic sword in an island, that will bring him victory.

<sup>1</sup> *C.P.B.*, Introduction, p. lxxviii.



The tragedy is brought about by a witch who drives Hedin, the brother of Helgi, to make a foolish boast, an oath on the Boar's head (like the vows of the Heron or the Peacock, and the *gabs* of the Paladins of France) that he will wed his brother's bride. Hedin confesses his vanity to Helgi, and is forgiven, Helgi saying, "Who knows but the oath may be fulfilled? I am on my way to meet a challenge."

Helgi is wounded mortally, and sends a message to Swava to come to him, and prays her after his death to take Hedin for her lord. The poem ends with two short energetic speeches: of Swava refusing to have any love but Helgi's; and of Hedin bidding farewell to Swava as he goes to make amends, and avenge his brother.

These fragments, though their evidence tells little regarding epic scale or proportions, are, at least, illustrations of the nature of the stories chosen for epic narrative. The character of Hedin, his folly and magnanimity, is in strong contrast to that of Dag, the brother of Sigrun, who makes mischief in the other poem. The character of Swava is a fainter repetition of Sigrun.

Nothing very definite can be made out of any of the Helgi poems with regard to the conventions of scale in narrative; except that the collector of the poems was himself in difficulties in this part of his work, and that he knew he had no complete poem to offer his readers, except perhaps the *Helgakviða*.

The poem named by the Oxford editors "The Long Lay of Brunhild" (i. p. 293) is headed in the



manuscript "Qviða Sigurþar," *Lay of Sigurd*, and referred to, in the prose gloss of *Codex Regius*, as "The Short Lay of Sigurd." "Short" in this place appears to denote the summary character of the poem; there is no other evident reason for it. This is one of the most important of the Northern heroic lays, in every respect; and, among other reasons, as an example of definite artistic calculation and study, a finished piece of work. It shows the difference between the Northern and the Western standards of epic measurement. The poem is one that gives the whole of the tragedy in no longer space than is used in the poem of *Maldon* for the adventures of a few hours of battle. There are 288 lines, not all complete.

There are many various modes of representation in the poem. The beginning tells the earlier story of Sigurd and Brynhild in twenty lines:—

It was in the days of old that Sigurd, the young Volsung, the slayer of Fafni, came to the house of Giuki. He took the troth-plight of two brothers; the doughty heroes gave oaths one to another. They offered him the maid Gudrun, Giuki's daughter, and store of treasure; they drank and took counsel together many a day, Child Sigurd and the sons of Giuki; until they went to woo Brynhild, and Sigurd the Volsung rode in their company; he was to win her if he could get her. The Southern hero laid a naked sword, a falchion graven, between them twain; nor did the Hunnish king ever kiss her, neither take her into his arms; he handed the young maiden over to Giuki's son.

She knew no guilt in her life, nor was any evil found in her when she died, no blame in deed or thought. The grim Fates came between.<sup>1</sup>

"It was the Fates that worked them ill." This

<sup>1</sup> From *C.P.B.*, i. pp. 293, 294, with some modifications.



sententious close of the prologue introduces the main story, chiefly dramatic in form, in which Brynhild persuades Gunnar to plan the death of Sigurd, and Gunnar persuades Hogni. It is love for Sigurd, and jealousy of Gudrun, that form the motive of Brynhild. Gunnar's conduct is barely intelligible; there is no explanation of his compliance with Brynhild, except the mere strength of her importunity. Hogni is reluctant, and remembers the oaths sworn to Sigurd. Gothorm, their younger brother, is made their instrument,—he was “outside the oaths.” The slaying of Sigurd by Gothorm, and Sigurd's dying stroke that cuts his slayer in two, are told in the brief manner of the prologue to the poem; likewise the grief of Gudrun. Then comes Sigurd's speech to Gudrun before his death.

The principal part of the poem, from line 118 to the end, is filled by the storm in the mind of Brynhild: her laughter at the grief of Gudrun, her confession of her own sorrows, and her preparation for death; the expostulations of Gunnar, the bitter speech of Hogni,—“Let no man stay her from her long journey”; the stroke of the sword with which Brynhild gives herself the death-wound; her dying prophecy. In this last speech of Brynhild, with all its vehemence, there is manifest care on the part of the author to bring out clearly his knowledge of the later fortunes of Gudrun and Gunnar. The prophecy includes the birth of Swanhild, the marriage of Attila and Gudrun, the death of Gunnar at the hands of Attila, by reason of the love between Gudrun and



Oddrun; the vengeance of Gudrun on Attila, the third marriage of Gudrun, the death of Swanhild among the Goths. With all this, and carrying all this burden of history, there is the passion of Brynhild, not wholly obscured or quenched by the rhetorical ingenuity of the poet. For it is plain that the poet was an artist capable of more than one thing at a time. He was stirred by the tragic personage of Brynhild; he was also pleased, intellectually and dispassionately, with his design of grouping together in one composition all the events of the tragic history.

The poem is followed by the short separate Lay (forty-four lines) of the *Hell-ride of Brynhild*, which looks as if it might have been composed by the same or another poet, to supply some of the history wanting at the beginning of the *Lay of Brynhild*. Brynhild, riding Hell-ward with Sigurd, from the funeral pile where she and Sigurd had been laid by the Giuking lords, is encountered by a giantess who forbids her to pass through her "rock-built courts," and cries shame upon her for her guilt. Brynhild answers with the story of her evil fate, how she was a Valkyria, punished by Odin for disobedience, set in the ring of flame, to be released by none but the slayer of Fafni; how she had been beguiled in Gunnar's wooing, and how Gudrun cast it in her teeth. This supplies the motive for the anger of Brynhild against Sigurd, not clearly expressed in the *Lay*, and also for Gunnar's compliance with her jealous appeal, and Hogni's consent to the death of Sigurd. While, in the same manner as in the *Lay*, the formalism and pedantry of



the historical poet are burnt up in the passion of the heroine. "Sorrow is the portion of the life of all men and women born: we two, I and Sigurd, shall be parted no more for ever." The latter part of the *Lay*, the long monologue of Brynhild, is in form like the *Lamentation of Oddrun* and the idyll of Gudrun and Theodoric; though, unlike those poems, it has a fuller narrative introduction: the monologue does not begin until the situation has been explained.

On the same subject, but in strong contrast with the *Lay of Brynhild*, is the poem that has lost its beginning in the great gap in *Codex Regius*. It is commonly referred to in the editions as the *Fragmentary Lay of Sigurd* ("Brot af Sigurðarkviðu"); in the Oxford edition it is styled the "Fragment of a short Brunhild Lay." There are seventy-six lines (incomplete) beginning with the colloquy of Gunnar and Hogni. Here also the character of Brynhild is the inspiration of the poet. But there does not seem to have been in his mind anything like the historical anxiety of the other poet to account for every incident, or at least to show that, if he wished, he could account for every incident, in the whole story. It is much stronger in expression, and the conception of Brynhild is more dramatic and more imaginative, though less eloquent, than in the longer poem. The phrasing is short and emphatic:—

Gudrun, Giuki's daughter, stood without, and this was the first word she spoke: "Where is Sigurd, the king of men, that my brothers are riding in the van?" Hogni made answer to her words: "We have hewn Sigurd asunder with



the sword ; ever the grey horse droops his head over the dead king."

Then spake Brynhild, Budli's daughter : "Have great joy of your weapons and hands. Sigurd would have ruled everything as he chose, if he had kept his life a little longer. It was not meet that he should so rule over the host of the Goths and the heritage of Giuki, who begat five sons that delighted in war and in the havoc of battle."

Brynhild laughed, the whole house rang : "Have long joy of your hands and weapons, since ye have slain the valiant king."<sup>1</sup>

The mood of Brynhild is altered later, and she "weeps at that she had laughed at." She awakens before the day, chilled by evil dreams. "It was cold in the hall, and cold in the bed," and she had seen in her sleep the end of the Niblungs, and woke, and reproached Gunnar with the treason to his friend.

It is difficult to estimate the original full compass of this fragmentary poem, but the scale of its narrative and its drama can be pretty clearly understood from what remains. It is a poem with nothing superfluous in it. The death of Sigurd does not seem to have been given in any detail, except for the commentary spoken by the eagle and the raven, prophetic of the doom of the Niblungs. The mystery of Brynhild's character is curiously recognised by a sort of informal chorus. It is said that "they were stricken silent as she spoke, and none could understand her bearing, that she should weep to speak of that for which she had besought them laughing." It is one of the simplest forms in narrative ; but in this case the simplicity of the rhetoric goes along with some variety

<sup>1</sup> From *C.P.B.*, i. p. 307, with some changes.



and subtlety of dramatic imagination. The character of the heroine is rightly imagined and strongly rendered, and her change of mind is impressive, as the author plainly meant it to be.

The *Lay of Attila* (*Atlakviða*) and the Greenland poem of *Attila* (*Atlamál*) are two poems which have a common subject and the same amount of story: how Attila sent for Gunnar and Hogni, the brothers of Gudrun, and had them put to death, and how Gudrun took vengeance on Attila.

In the *Atlakviða* there are 174 lines, and some broken places; in *Atlamál* there are 384 lines; its narrative is more copious than in most of the Norse Lays. There are some curious discrepancies in the matter of the two poems, but these hardly affect the scale of the story. The difference between them in this respect is fairly represented by the difference in the number of their lines. The scenes of the history are kept in similar proportions in both poems.

The story of Gudrun's vengeance has been seen (p. 96) to correspond, as far as the amount of action is concerned, pretty closely with the story of Hengest and Finn. The epic unity is preserved; and, as in the *Finnesburh* story, there is a distribution of interest between the *wrong* and the *vengeance*,—(1) the death of Hnæf, the death of Gunnar and Hogni; (2) the vengeance of Hengest, the vengeance of Gudrun, with an interval of dissimulation in each case.

The plot of the death of Attila, under all its manifold variations, is never without a certain natural fitness for consistent and well-proportioned narrative.



None of the Northern poems take any account of the theory that the murder of Sigfred was avenged by his wife upon her brothers. That theory belongs to the *Nibelungenlied*; in some form or other it was known to Saxo; it is found in the Danish ballad of *Grimild's Revenge*, a translation or adaptation from the German. That other conception of the story may be more full of tragic meaning; the Northern versions, which agree in making Attila the slayer of the Niblung kings, have the advantage of greater concentration. The motive of Attila, which is different in each of the poems on this subject, is in no case equal to the tragic motive of Kriemhild in the *Nibelungen*. On the other hand, the present interest of the story is not distracted by reference to the long previous history of Sigfred; a new start is made when the Niblungs are invited to Attila's Court. The situation is intelligible at once, without any long preliminary explanation.

In the *Lay of Attila* the hoard of the Niblungs comes into the story; its fatal significance is recognised; it is the "metal of discord" that is left in the Rhine for ever. But the situation can be understood without any long preliminary history of the Niblung treasure and its fate. Just as the story of *Waldere* explains itself at once,—a man defending his bride and his worldly wealth against a number of enemies, in a place where he is able to take them one by one, as they come on,—so the story of *Attila* can begin without long preliminaries; though the previous history is to be found, in tradition, in common



stories, if any one cares to ask for it. The plot is intelligible in a moment: the brothers inveigled away and killed by their sister's husband (for reasons of his own, as to which the versions do not agree); their sister's vengeance by the sacrifice of her own children and the death of her husband.

In the *Atlamál* there is very much less recognition of the previous history than in *Atlakviða*. The story begins at once with the invitation to the Niblung brothers and with their sister's warning. Attila's motive is not emphasised; he has a grudge against them on account of the death of Brynhild his sister, but his motive is not very necessary for the story, as the story is managed here. The present scene and the present passion are not complicated with too much reference to the former history of the personages. This mode of procedure will be found to have given some trouble to the author, but the result at any rate is a complete and rounded work.

There is great difference of treatment between *Atlakviða* and the Greenland poem *Atlamál*, a difference which is worth some further consideration.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, no very great difference of scale; at any rate, the difference between them becomes unimportant when they are compared with *Beowulf*. Even the more prolix of the two, which in some respects is the fullest and most elaborate of the Northern heroic poems, yet comes short of the English scale. *Atlamál* takes up very little more than the space of the English poem of *Maldon*, which is a simple narrative of a

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 168-180 below.



battle, with nothing like the tragic complexity and variety of the story of the vengeance of Gudrun.

There is yet another version of the death of Gunnar the Giuking to compare with the two poems of *Attila*—the *Lament of Oddrun* (*Oddrúnargrátr*), which precedes the *Atlakviða* in the manuscript. The form of this, as well as the plot of it, is wonderfully different from either of the other two poems. This is one of the epic or tragic idylls in which a passage of heroic legend is told dramatically by one who had a share in it. Here the death of Gunnar is told by Oddrun his mistress, the sister of Attila.

This form of indirect narration, by giving so great a dramatic value to the person of the narrator, before the beginning of her story, of course tends to depreciate or to exclude the vivid dramatic scenes that are common everywhere else in the Northern poems. The character of the speaker leaves too little independence to the other characters. But in none of the poems is the tragic plot more strongly drawn out than in the seventy lines of Oddrun's story to Borgny.

The father of Oddrun, Brynhild, and Attila had destined Oddrun to be the bride of Gunnar, but it was Brynhild that he married. Then came the anger of Brynhild against Sigurd, the death of Sigurd, the death of Brynhild that is renowned over all the world. Gunnar sought the hand of Oddrun from her brother Attila, but Attila would not accept the price of the bride from the son of Giuki. The love of Oddrun was given to Gunnar. "I gave my love to Gunnar as Brynhild should have loved him. We could not



withstand our love: I kept troth with Gunnar." The lovers were betrayed to Attila, who would not believe the accusation against his sister; "yet no man should pledge his honour for the innocence of another, when it is a matter of love." At last he was persuaded, and laid a plot to take vengeance on the Niblungs; Gudrun knew nothing of what was intended.

The death of Gunnar and Hogni is told in five-and-twenty lines:—

There was din of the hoofs of gold when the sons of Giuki rode into the Court. The heart was cut out of the body of Hogni; his brother they set in the pit of snakes. The wise king smote on his harp, for he thought that I should come to his help. Howbeit I was gone to the banquet at the house of Geirmund. From Hlessey I heard how the strings rang loud. I called to my handmaidens to rise and go; I sought to save the life of the prince; we sailed across the sound, till we saw the halls of Attila. But the accursed serpent crept to the heart of Gunnar, so that I might not save the life of the king.

Full oft I wonder how I keep my life after him, for I thought I loved him like myself.

Thou hast sat and listened while I have told thee many evils of my lot and theirs. The life of a man is as his thoughts are.

The Lamentation of Oddrun is finished.

The *Hamðismál*, the poem of the death of Ermanaric, is one that, in its proportions, is not unlike the *Atlakviða*: the plot has been already described (pp. 81-82). The poem of 130 lines as it stands has suffered a good deal. This also is like the story of Hengest and the story of Gudrun in the way the action is proportioned. It began with the slaying of Swanhild, the wrong to Gudrun—this part is lost. It goes on to



the speech of Gudrun to her sons, Sorli and Hamther, and their expedition to the hall of the Goth; it ends with their death. In this case, also, the action must have begun at once and intelligibly, as soon as the motive of the Gothic treachery and cruelty was explained, or even without that explanation, in the more immediate sense of the treachery and cruelty, in the story of Swanhild trampled to death, and of the news brought to Gudrun. Here, also, there is much less expansion of the story than in the English poems; everything is surcharged with meaning.

The *Old Lay of Gudrun* (*Guðrúnarkviða in forna*), or the tale of Gudrun to Theodoric, an idyll like the story of Oddrun, goes quickly over the event of the killing of Sigurd, and the return of Grani, masterless. Unlike the *Lament of Oddrun*, this monologue of Gudrun introduces dramatic passages. The meeting of Gudrun and her brother is not merely told by Gudrun in indirect narration; the speeches of Hogni and Gudrun are reported directly, as they might have been in a poem of the form of *Atlakviða*, or the *Lay of Sigurd*, or any other in which the poet tells the story himself, without the introduction of an imaginary narrator. The main part of the poem is an account of the way in which Gudrun's mother, Grimhild, compelled her, by a potion of forgetfulness, to lose the thought of Sigurd and of all her woes, and consent to become the wife of Attila. This part is well prefaced by the quiet account of the life of Gudrun in her widowhood, before Grimhild began her schemes; how Gudrun



lived in the house of Half, with Thora, daughter of Hakon, in Denmark, and how the ladies spent their time at the tapestry frame, working pictures of the heroes, the ships of Sigmund, the ranks of Hunnish warriors.

In the manuscript there are found at the end of the *Old Lay of Gudrun*, as if they were part of it, some verses which have been separated from it by the editors (*C.P.B.*, i. 347) as a "Fragment of an Atli Lay." They came from a poem of which the design, at any rate, was the same as that of the *Old Lay*, and Gudrun is the speaker. She tells how, after the death of Gunnar and Hogni, she was wakened by Atli, to listen to his evil dreams, foreboding his doom, and how she interpreted them in a way to comfort him and put him off his guard.

In English poetry there are instances of stories introduced dramatically, long before the pilgrimage to Canterbury. In *Beowulf* there are various episodes where a story is told by one of the persons engaged. Besides the poem of Hengest chanted in Heorot, there is Beowulf's own narrative of his adventures, after his return to his own people in the kingdom of the Gauts, and passages still nearer in form to the *Lament of Oddrun* and the *Confession of Gudrun* are the last speech of Beowulf before his death (2426-2537), and the long speech of Wiglaf (2900-3027) telling of the enmity of the Gauts and the Swedes. But those are not filled with dramatic pathos to the same degree as these Northern *Heroïdes*, the monologues of Oddrun and Gudrun.

The *Lay of Gudrun* (*Gudrúnarkviða*) which



comes in the manuscript immediately before the *Lay of Sigurd*, is a pure heroic idyll. Unlike most of its companions, it leaves the details of the Volsung story very much in neglect, and brings all its force to bear on the representation of the grief of the queen, contrasted with the stormy passion of Brynhild. It is rightly honoured for its pathetic imagination of the dumb grief of Gudrun, broken up and dissolved when her sister draws away the covering from the face of Sigurd. "But fire was kindled in the eyes of Brynhild, daughter of Budli, when she looked upon his wounds."

The refrain of the poem increases its resemblance to the form of a Greek idyll. The verse is that of narrative poetry; the refrain is not purely lyrical and does not come in at regular intervals.

The *Tregrof Guðrúnar*, or *Chain of Woe*, restored by the Oxford editors out of the most confused part of the original text, is pure lamentation, spoken by Gudrun before her death, recounting all her sorrows: the bright hair of Swanhild trampled in the mire; Sigurd slain in his bed, despoiled of victory; Gunnar in the court of the serpents; the heart of Hogni cut out of his living body—"Saddle thy white steed and come to me, Sigurd; remember what we promised to one another, that thou wouldst come from Hell to seek me, and I would come to thee from the living world."

The short poem entitled *Qviða Guðrúnar* in the manuscript, the *Ordeal of Gudrun* in the English edition, is distinctly episodic. The subject is the calumny which was brought against Gudrun by



Herkja, the cast-off mistress of Attila, that "she had seen Gudrun and Theodoric together"; and the ordeal of water by which Gudrun proved her innocence, while the falsehood was brought home to Herkja, the bondwoman. The theme is slighter and simpler than all the rest, and this poem, at least, might be reckoned not unfit to be taken up as a single scene in a long epic.

Some of the Northern poems in the epic measure are almost wholly made up of dialogue. The story of *Balder's Doom* is a dialogue between Odin and the witch whom he raises from the dead. The earlier part of the story of Sigurd in the "Elder Edda" is almost all dialogue, even where the narrative measure is employed.

There is hardly any mere narrative in the poems remaining of the cycle of Angantyr. In several other cases, the writer has only given, perhaps has only remembered clearly, the dramatic part of the poems in which he was interested; the intervals of the story he fills up with prose. It is difficult to tell where this want of narrative connexion in the poetry is original, and where it is due to forgetfulness or ignorance; where the prose of the manuscripts is to be taken as standing in the place of lost narrative verses, and where it fills a gap that was never intended to be filled with verse, but was always left to the reciter, to be supplied in his own way by passages of story-telling, between his chantings of the poetic dialogue of Hervor and the Shepherd, for instance, or of Hervor and Angantyr.



The poems just mentioned are composed in narrative measure. There are also other dialogue poems in a measure different from this, and peculiarly adapted to dialogues, the measure of the gnomic *Hávamál* and of the didactic mythological poems, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál*, *Grímnismál*. These pieces are some distance removed from epic or ballad poetry. But there are others in this gnomic measure which it is not easy to keep far apart from such dialogue poems as *Balder's Doom*, though their verse is different. By their peculiar verse they are distinguished from the English and Saxon heroic poetry; but they retain, for all their peculiar metre and their want of direct narrative, some of the characteristics of Teutonic epic.

The *Lokasenna* has a plot, and represents dramatically an incident in the history of the gods. The chief business is Loki's shameless rehearsal of accusations against the gods, and their helpless rejoinders. It is a masque of the gods, and not a ballad like the *Winning of Thor's Hammer*. It is not, however, a mere string of "flytings" without a plot; there is some plot and action. It is the absence of Thor that gives Loki courage to browbeat the gods; the return of Thor at the end of the poem avenges the gods on their accuser.

In the strange poem of the *Railing of Thor and Harbard*, and in a very rough and irregular kind of verse, there is a similar kind of plot.

The *Contention of Atli and Rimgerd the Giantess* is a short comic dialogue, interposed among the frag-



ments of the poem of Helgi Hiorvard's son, and marked off from them by its use of the dialogue verse, as well as by its episodic plot.

Helgi Hiorvard's son had killed the giant Hati, and the giant's daughter comes at night where Helgi's ships are moored in the firth, and stands on a rock over them, challenging Helgi and his men. Atli, keeping watch on deck, answers the giantess, and there is an exchange of gibes in the old style between them. Helgi is awakened and joins in the argument. It is good comedy of its kind, and there is poetry in the giantess's description of the company of armed maidens of the air whom she has seen keeping guard over Helgi's ships—"three nines of maids, but one rode foremost, a white maid, enhelmed. Their rearing horses shook dew from their manes into the deep dales, and hail upon the lofty woods; thence come fair seasons among men. But the whole sight was hateful to me" (*C.P.B.*, i, p. 154).

The giantess is kept there by the gibes of Atli till the daybreak. "Look eastward, now, Rimgerd!" And the giantess is turned into stone, a great harbour mark, to be laughed at.

In some other poems there is much more action, and much more need for an interpreter to act as chorus in the intervals between the dialogues. The story of the wooing of Gerd is in this form: how Frey sat in the seat of Odin and saw a fair maid in Jotunheim, and got great sickness of thought, till his swain Skirnir found the cause of his languishing, and went to woo Gerd for him in Gyml's Garth. Another



love-story, and a story not unlike that of Frey and Gerd, is contained in the two poems *Grógaldr* and *Fiölsvinnsmál*, that tell of the winning of Menglad by her destined lover.

These two latter poems are not in *Codex Regius*, and it was only gradually that their relation to one another was worked out, chiefly by means of the Danish ballad which contains the story of both together in the right order.

In the first, Svipdag the hero comes to his mother's grave to call on her for counsel. He has been laid under a mysterious charge, to go on a quest which he cannot understand, "to find out Menglad," and Menglad he has never heard of, and does not know where she is to be found.

The second poem, also in dialogue, and in the dialogue measure, gives the coming of Svipdag to the mysterious castle, and his debate with the giant who keeps the gate. For Menglad is the princess whose story is told everywhere, and under a thousand names,—the lady of a strange country, kept under a spell in a witch's castle till the deliverer comes. The wooing of Gerd out of Jotunheim is another version of the same story, which in different forms is one of the oldest and most universal everywhere,—the fairy story of the princess beyond the sea.

The second dialogue is very much encumbered by the pedantries of the giant who keeps the gate; it ends, however, in the recognition of Svipdag and Menglad. Menglad says: "Long have I sat waiting for thee, many-a-day; but now is that befallen that



I have sought for, and thou art come to my bower.  
Great was the sorrow of my waiting ; great was thine,  
waiting for the gladness of love. Now it is very truth  
for us : the days of our life shall not be sundered."

The same form is used in the older poems of Sigurd, those that come before the hiatus of the great manuscript, and have been gathered together in the Oxford edition under the title of the *Old Play of the Wolsungs*. They touch briefly on all the chief points of the story of the Niblung hoard, from the capture and ransom of Andvari to the winning of the warrior maiden Sigdrifa by Sigurd.

All these last-mentioned dialogue poems, in spite of their lyric or elegiac measure, are like the narrative poems in their dependence upon traditional, mythic, or heroic stories, from which they choose their themes. They are not like the lyrical heroic poems of *Widsith* and *Deor* in Anglo-Saxon literature, which survey a large tract of heroic legend from a point of vantage. Something of this sort is done by some of the Norse dialogue poems, *Vafþrúðnismál*, etc., but in the poems of Frey and Gerd, of Svipdag and Menglad, and of the Niblung treasure, though this reflective and comparative method occasionally makes itself evident, the interest is that of the story. They have a story to represent, just as much as the narrative poems, though they are debarred from the use of narrative.

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It must be confessed that there is an easily detected ambiguity in the use of the term epic in



application to the poems, whether German, English, or Northern, here reviewed. That they are heroic poems cannot be questioned, but that they are epic in any save the most general sense of the term is not quite clear. They may be epic in character, in a general way, but how many of them have a claim to the title in its eminent and special sense? Most of them are short poems; most of them seem to be wanting in the breadth of treatment, in the amplitude of substance, that are proper to epic poetry.

*Beowulf*, it may be admitted, is epic in the sense that distinguishes between the longer narrative poem and the shorter ballad. The fragments of *Waldere* are the fragments of a poem that is not cramped for room, and that moves easily and with sufficient eloquence in the representation of action. The narrative of the *Maldon* poem is not pinched nor meagre in its proportions. Hardly any of the other poems, however, can be compared with these in this respect. These are the most liberal in scale of all the old Teutonic poems; the largest epic works of which we know anything directly. These are the fullest in composition, the least abstract or elliptical; and they still want something of the scale of the *Iliad*. The poem of *Maldon* for instance corresponds not to the *Iliad*, but to the action of a single book, such as the twelfth, with which it has been already compared. If the story of the English *Waldere*, when complete, was not more elaborate than the extant Latin *Waltharius*, it must have come far short of the proportions of Homer. It is a story for a single recitation,



like the story of Finnesburh in *Beowulf*. The poem of *Beowulf* may have more in it than the story of Walter and Hildegund, but this advantage would seem to be gained at the expense of the unity of the poem. It is lengthened out by a sequel, by the addition of a new adventure which requires the poet to make a new start. In the poem of *Hildebrand* there is a single tragedy contained in a single scene. It is briefly rendered, in a style evidently more primitive, less expansive and eloquent, than the style of *Beowulf* or *Waldere*. Even if it had been given in a fuller form, the story would still have been essentially a short one; it could not well have been longer than the poem of *Sohrab and Rustum*, where the theme is almost the same, while the scale is that of the classical epic.

If the old English epic poetry falls short of the Homeric magnitude, it almost equally exceeds the scale of the Northern heroic poems. If *Beowulf* and *Waldere* seem inadequate in size, the defect will not be made good out of the Northern lays of *Helgi* or *Sigfred*.

The Northern poems are exceedingly varied in their plan and disposition, but none of them is long, and many of them are in the form of *dramatic lyric*, with no place for pure narrative at all; such are the poems of *Frey's Wooing*, of *Svipdag and Menglad*, and others, in which there is a definite plot worked out by means of lyric dialogue. None of them is of anything like the same scale as *Beowulf*, which is a complex epic poem, or *Byrhtnoth*, which is an



episodic poem liberally dealt with and of considerable length.

The Teutonic poetry presents itself, at a first view, as the complement of Homer. Here are to be found many of the things that are wanting at the beginning of Greek literary history. Here are single epic lays, or clusters of them, in every form. Here, in place of the two great poems, rounded and complete, there is the nebulous expanse of heroic tradition, the outline of an heroic cycle, together with a number of episodic poems taking their origin from one point or another of the cycle, according as the different parts of the story happen to catch the imagination of a poet. Instead of the Homeric scale of epic there are a number of brief epic tragedies, the plots of which are chosen from the multitude of stories current in tradition.

Among these shorter epic poems, if such they may be called, there are to be distinguished great varieties of procedure in regard to the amount of action represented in the poem.

There is one class of poem that represents a single action with some detail; there is another that represents a long and complex story in a summary and allusive way. The first kind may be called *episodic* in the sense that it takes up about the same quantity of story as might make an act in a play; or perhaps, with a little straining of the term, as much as might serve for one play in a trilogy.

The second kind is not episodic; it does not seem fitted for a place in a larger composition. It is a



kind of short and summary epic, taking as large a province of history as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.

*Hildebrand*, the *Fight at Finnesburh*, *Waldere*, *Byrhtnoth*, the *Winning of the Hammer*, *Thor's Fishing*, the *Death of the Niblungs* (in any of the Northern versions), the *Death of Ermanaric*, might all be fairly regarded as belonging to the first kind of story; while the *Lay of Weland* and the *Lay of Brynhild* cover a much larger extent of story, though not of actual space, than any of those.

It is not quite easy to find a common measure for these and for the Homeric poems. One can tell perhaps from Mr. Arnold's poem of *Sohrab and Rustum* how much is wanting to the *Lay of Hildebrand*, and on what scale the story of Hildebrand might have been told if it had been told in the Homeric instead of the archaic German manner. The story of Walter of Aquitaine in the Latin hexameters of *Waltharius* takes up 1456 lines. Although the author of this Latin poem is something short of Homer, "a little overparted" by the comparison, still his work is designed on the scale of classical epic, and gives approximately the right extent of the story in classical form. But while those stories are comparatively short, even in their most expanded forms, the story of Weland and the story of Helgi each contains as much as would suffice for the plot of an *Odyssey*, or more. The *Lay of Brynhild* is not an episodic poem of the vengeance and the passion of Brynhild, though that is the principal theme. It begins in a summary manner with Sigurd's coming to



the house of the Niblungs, the wedding of Sigurd and Gudrun, the wooing of Brynhild for Gunnar; all these earlier matters are taken up and touched on before the story comes to the searchings of heart when the kings are persuaded to kill Sigurd. Then the death of Sigurd is told of, and the rest of the poem is filled with the tragedy of Brynhild and Gudrun; the future history of Gudrun is spoken of prophetically by Brynhild before she throws herself on the funeral pile. Plainly this cannot be considered in the same sense "episodic" as the poem of Thor's fishing for the Midgarth snake. The poems of Thor's fishing and the recovery of the hammer are distinctly fragments of a legendary cycle. The *Lay of Brynhild* makes an attempt to complete the whole Volsung story from beginning to end, while giving special importance to one particular incident of it,—the passion of Brynhild after the death of Sigurd. The poems of *Attila* and the *Lay of the Death of Ermanaric* are more restricted.

It remains true that the great story of the Niblung tragedy was never told at length in the poetical measure used for episodes of it, and for the summary form of the *Lay of Brynhild*. It should be remembered, however, that a poem of the scale of the *Nibelungenlied*, taking up the whole matter, must go as far beyond the Homeric limit as the *Lay of Brynhild* falls short of it. From one point of view the shorter episodic poems are more Homeric in their plots than either the summary epics which cover the whole ground, as the *Lay of Brynhild* attempts to cover it,



or the longer works in prose that begin at the beginning and go on to the end, like the *Volsunga Saga*. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are themselves episodic poems; neither of them has the reach of the *Nibelungenlied*. It should not be forgotten, either, that Aristotle found the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* rather long. The Teutonic poems are not to be despised because they have a narrower orbit than the *Iliad*. Those among them that contain matter enough for a single tragedy, and there are few that have not as much as this in them, may be considered not to fall far short of the standard fixed by Aristotle for the right amount of action to be contained in an heroic poem. They are too hurried, they are wanting in the classical breadth and ease of narrative; but at any rate they are comprehensible, they observe an epic unity. They do not, like certain of the endless French poetical histories, remind one of the picture of incomprehensible bulk in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the animal 10,000 stadia long.

Thus, though it is natural at first to imagine that in the old Teutonic poetry one is possessed of such separate lays or ballads as might be the original materials of a larger epic, an epic of the Homeric scale, this impression will hardly remain long after a closer criticism of the workmanship of the poems. Very few of them correspond in the amount of their story to the episodes of the Homeric poems. Many of them contain in a short space the matter of stories more complicated, more tragical, than the story of Achilles. Most of them by their unity and self-



consistency make it difficult to think of them as absorbed in a longer epic. This is the case not only with those that take in a whole history, like the *Lay of Brynhild*, but also with those whose plot is comparatively simple, like *Hildebrand* or *Waldere*. It is possible to think of the story of Walter and Hildegund as forming part of a larger story of the fortunes of the Huns. It has this subordinate place in the *Thidreks Saga*. But it is not easy to believe that in such a case it preserves its value. *Thidreks Saga* is not an epic, though it is made by an agglutination of ballads. In like manner the tragedy of *Hildebrand* gains by its isolation from the stories of the other chiefs, Theodoric and Odoacer. The stories of Walter and of Hildebrand, like the story of Hamlet the Dane, are too strong in themselves to form part of a larger composition, without detriment to its unity and harmony. They might be brought in allusively and in a subordinate way, like the story of Thebes and other stories in the *Iliad*; but that is not the same thing as making an epic poem out of separate lays. So that on all grounds the first impression of the Teutonic epic poetry has to be modified. If ever epic poetry was made by a conglomeration of ballads, it must have had other kinds of material than this. Some of the poems are episodic; others are rather to be described as abridgments of epic than as separate epic scenes. But neither in the one case nor in the other is there to be found the kind of poetry that is required by the hypothesis of composite epic. There are short epics that might conceivably have served as the framework,



or the ground-plan, of a more elaborate work, containing, like the *Lay of Helgi* or the *Lay of Brynhild*, incidents enough and hints of character enough for a history fully worked out, as large as the Homeric poems. If it should be asked why there is so little evidence of any Teutonic attempt to weave together separate lays into an epic work, the answer might be, first, that the separate lays we know are too much separate and individual, too strong in themselves, to be satisfactorily cobbled into a more expansive fabric; and, secondly, that it has not yet been proved that epic poems can be made by process of cobbling. The need of a comprehensive epic of the Niblungs was not imperative. Neither was there any demand in Athens, in the time of Sophocles and Euripides, for a comprehensive work—a *Thebaid*, a *Roman de Thèbes*—to include the plots of all the tragedies of the house of Cadmus. It was not a poet, but a prose journeyman, who did this sort of work in the North, and it was not till the old school of poetry had passed away that the composite prose history of the Volsungs and Niblungs, of Sigmund and Sinfiotli, Sigurd, Brynhild, Gudrun, and Atli, was put together out of the old poems. The old lays, Northern and Western, whatever their value, have all strong individual characters of their own, and do not easily submit to be regarded as merely the unused materials, waiting for an epic composer who never was born.