I

ICELAND AND THE HEROIC AGE

THE epic poetry of the Germans came to an end in different ways and at different seasons among the several nations of that stock. In England and the Continent it had to compete with the new romantic subjects and new forms of verse. In Germany the rhyming measures prevailed very early, but the themes of German tradition were not surrendered at the same time. The rhyming verse of Germany, foreign in its origin, continued to be applied for centuries in the rendering of German myths and heroic stories, sometimes in a style with more or less pretence to courtliness, as in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun;* sometimes in open parade of the travelling minstrel's "public manners" and simple appetites. England had exactly the opposite fortune in regard to verse and subject-matter. In England the alliterative verse survived the changes of inflexion and pronunciation for more than five hundred years after *Maldon*, and uttered its last words in a poem written like the *Song of Byrhtnoth* on a contemporary battle,—the poem of *Scottish Field.*[1]

[1] Ed. Robson, Chetham Society, 1855, from the Lyme MS.; ed. Furnivall and Hales, *Percy Folio Manuscript*, 1867.

There was girding forth of guns, with many great stones;
Archers uttered out their arrows and eagerly they shotten;
They proched us with spears and put many over;
That the blood outbrast at their broken harness.
There was swinging out of swords, and swapping of heads,
We blanked them with bills through all their bright armour,
That all the dale dinned of the derf strokes.

But while this poem of Flodden corresponds in its subject to the poem of *Maldon*, there is no such likeness between any other late alliterative poem and the older poems of the older language. The alliterative verse is applied in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to every kind of subject except those of Germanic tradition. England, however, has the advantage over Germany, that while Germany lost the old verse, England did not lose the English heroic subjects, though, as it happens, the story of King Horn and the story of Havelock the Dane are not told in the verse that was used for King Arthur and Gawain, for the tale of Troy and the wars of Alexander. The recent discovery of a fragment of the *Song of Wade* is an admonition to be cautious in making the extant works of Middle English literature into a standard for all that has ceased to exist. But no new discovery, even of a Middle English alliterative poem of Beowulf or of Walter of Aquitaine, would alter the fact that the alliterative measure of English poetry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, like the ancient themes of the German rhyming poems, is a survival in an age when the chief honours go to other kinds of poetry. The author of *Piers Plowman* is a notable writer, and so

are the poets of *Gawain*, and of the *Mort Arthure*, and of the *Destruction of Troy;* but Chaucer and not Langland is the poetical master of that age. The poems of the *Nibelungen* and of *Kudrun* are rightly honoured, but it was to the author of *Parzival*, and to the courtly lyrics of Walther von der Vogelweide, that the higher rank was given in the age of the Hohenstaufen, and the common fame is justified by history, so often as history chooses to have any concern with such things.

In the lands of the old Northern speech the old heroic poetry was displaced by the new Court poetry of the Scalds. The heroic subjects were not, however, allowed to pass out of memory. The new poetry could not do without them, and required, and obtained, its heroic dictionary in the *Edda*. The old subjects hold their own, or something of their own, with every change of fashion. They were made into prose stories, when prose was in favour; they were the subjects of *Rímur*, rhyming Icelandic romances, when that form came later into vogue.[1] In Denmark they were paraphrased, many of them, by Saxo in his *History;* many of them became the subjects of ballads, in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroes.

In this way some of the inheritance of the old German world was saved in different countries and languages, for the most part in ballads and chap-books, apart from the main roads of literature. But these heirlooms were not the whole stock of the heroic age. After the failure and decline of the old poetry there

[1] See below, p. 324.

remained an unexhausted piece of ground; and the great imaginative triumph of the Teutonic heroic age was won in Iceland with the creation of a new epic tradition, a new form applied to new subjects.

Iceland did something more than merely preserve the forms of an antiquated life whose day was over. It was something more than an island of refuge for muddled and blundering souls that had found the career of the great world too much for them. The ideas of an old-fashioned society migrated to Iceland, but they did not remain there unmodified. The paradox of the history of Iceland is that the unsuccessful old ideas were there maintained by a community of people who were intensely self-conscious and exceptionally clear in mind. Their political ideas were too primitive for the common life of medieval Christendom. The material life of Iceland in the Middle Ages was barbarous when compared with the life of London or Paris, not to speak of Provence or Italy, in the same centuries. At the same time, the modes of thought in Iceland, as is proved by its historical literature, were distinguished by their freedom from extravagances,—from the extravagance of medieval enthusiasm as well as from the superstitions of barbarism. The life of an heroic age—that is, of an older stage of civilisation than the common European medieval form—was interpreted and represented by the men of that age themselves with a clearness of understanding that appears to be quite unaffected by the common medieval fallacies and "idolisms." This clear self-consciousness is the distinction of Icelandic civilisation and literature.

It is not vanity or conceit. It does not make the Icelandic writers anxious about their own fame or merits. It is simply clear intelligence, applied under a dry light to subjects that in themselves are primitive, such as never before or since have been represented in the same way. The life is their own life; the record is that of a dispassionate observer.

While the life represented in the Sagas is more primitive, less civilised, than the life of the great Southern nations in the Middle Ages, the record of that life is by a still greater interval in advance of all the common modes of narrative then known to the more fortunate or more luxurious parts of Europe. The conventional form of the Saga has none of the common medieval restrictions of view. It is accepted at once by modern readers without deduction or apology on the score of antique fashion, because it is in essentials the form with which modern readers are acquainted in modern story-telling; and more especially because the language is unaffected and idiomatic, not "quaint" in any way, and because the conversations are like the talk of living people. The Sagas are stories of characters who speak for themselves, and who are interesting on their own merits. There are good and bad Sagas, and the good ones are not all equally good throughout. The mistakes and misuses of the inferior parts of the literature do not, however, detract from the sufficiency of the common form, as represented at its best. The invention of the common form of the Saga is an achievement which deserves to be judged by the best

in its kind. That kind was not exempt, any more than the Elizabethan drama or the modern novel, from the impertinences and superfluities of trivial authors. Further, there were certain conditions and circumstances about its origin that sometimes hindered in one way, while they gave help in another. The Saga is a compromise between opposite temptations, and the compromise is not always equitable.