

## PART I.

### SUBJECT-MATTER.

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#### CHAPTER I. — THE EPIC.

EVERYONE knows that two of the most important factors in human affairs are Church and State. Again, every student of history is aware that the further back we go, the more intimate are the relations between these two great powers. Looking towards the beginnings of civilization, we see the lines of statecraft and priestcraft steadily converging. Where a Gladstone stands to-day, stood, some three centuries ago, a Cardinal Wolsey. In the remote past, in the dawn of history (a relative term, differing with different nations), we find law and religion to be convertible terms. Even in highly-civilized Greece, the Laws — *cf.* Sophocles, *Oed. Tyr.* 864 *sqq.* — were sacred. So it was with our own ancestors, the Germanic tribes, whose nature and customs fell under the keen eyes of Tacitus, and are noted down in his *Germania*. Let us take his description of the Germanic custom of casting lots, — a ceremony at once legal and religious. He says (c. 10) that “a branch is cut from a fruit-bearing tree and divided into little blocks, which are distinguished by certain marks, and scattered at random

over a white cloth. Then the state-priest if it is a public occasion, the father of the family if it is domestic, after a prayer to the gods, looking toward heaven, thrice picks up a block. These he now interprets according to the marks previously made."

What renders the ceremony of importance to us is the fact that the "interpretation" Tacitus mentions was *poetical*, and that the "marks" were *runes*, *i.e.*, the rude alphabet employed by the Germanic tribes. According as these mystic symbols fell, the priest made *alliterating verses* declaring the result of the ceremony. The letters gave the key to the rimes. Since the beech-tree (Anglo-Sax. *bôc*, "book," but also "beech," like German *Buch* and *Buche*) was a favorite wood for the purpose, and the signs were cut in (A.-S. *writan*, "cut into," then "write"), we win a new meaning for the phrase "to write a book." Further, *to read*, really means to *interpret*, — as in the common "rede the riddle." So in the original, literal sense, the priest *read the writing of the book*. Since he read it poetically, and as a decree of the gods, and as something legally binding on the people, we may assume (bearing in mind the antiquity of priestcraft) that *poetry, the earliest form of literature, begins among the priesthood in the service of law and religion*. [Cf. p. 3 of the Introduction.]

But this unit of sacred law had two sides. On the one hand were such ceremonies as the above, — a practical use, which concerned the people. Late "survivals" of these rites may still be found in the peasant's hut and in the modern nursery, *e.g.*, the time-honored custom of saying a rime to see who shall be "*it*" for a game. But on the other hand was formal

worship, — the purely religious side. The tribe boasted its origin from a god, and at stated seasons joined in solemn worship of its divine ruler and progenitor. To this god the assembled multitude sang a hymn, — at first merely chorus, exclamation and incoherent chant, full of repetitions. As they sang, they kept time with the foot in a solemn dance, which was inseparable from the chant itself and governed the words (*cf.* our metrical term "foot"). As order and matter penetrated this wild ceremony, there resulted a rude *hymn*, with intelligible words and a connecting idea. Naturally this connecting idea would concern the *deeds* of the god, — his birth and bringing up and his mighty acts. Thus a thread of *legend* would be woven into the hymn, — a thread fastened at one end to the human associations of the tribe, but losing itself in the uncertainty of a miraculous and superhuman past.

But a third element comes in. Besides the legendary thread, we have the *mythological*. In order to explain the natural processes about him, early man peopled the universe with a multitude of gods. Or, to speak more clearly, he attributed will and passion to the acts of nature. Something dimly personal stood behind the flash of lightning, the roaring of the wind. The ways and doings of these nature-gods were set in order, and, of course, were in many cases brought in direct connection with the tribal or legendary god. Hence a second sort of thread woven into the hymn, — *mythology*. But both legend and mythology are *narrative*. The hymn thus treated ceased to be a mere hymn. The chorus and the strophe were dropped; instead of sets of verses (strophe) the verses ran on in

unbroken row. Single persons (minstrels) took the place of the dancing multitude, and chanted in a sort of "recitative," some song full of myth and legend, but centred in the person of the tribal god. Now what is such a song? It is *The Epic*. [Epic, from Greek *Epos*, a "word," then a "narration": cf. *Sagâ* = something *said*.]

It is important to remember that the Epic was not the result of that individual effort to which we now give the name of poetical composition.

To use Mr. Tylor's words (*Primitive Culture*, 1. 273), epic poetry goes back "to that actual experience of nature and life which is the ultimate source of human fancy." Perhaps "source" is not quite accurate; we should prefer to say that it is experience of nature and experience of life (*i.e.*, mythology and legend), which awaken and stimulate the inborn human fancy, that is, the creative power of poetry. This creative power, in early times, when the great epics were forming, when their materials were gradually drawing together, lay rather in the national life itself than in any individual. There were no poets, only singers. The race or nation was the poet. For the *final shape* in which these epics come down to us, we must assume the genius of a singer-poet.

We note further that the personages of the Epic must be humanized, — *i.e.*, partake of our passions and other characteristics. Otherwise they could not awaken human interest. But the background across which these huge beings move must be the twilight of legend and myth. — Instead of taking the Homeric poems as illustration, we prefer to give a brief outline of our own national epic, — *Beowulf*.

[*Beowulf*, the only complete epic preserved from Anglo-Saxon heathen poetry, is based on legends and myths that arose among the northern Germanic tribes before the conquest of Britain in the Fifth Century. The poem in its present shape was probably composed at one of the Northumbrian courts before the Eighth Century. The Ms. is a West Saxon copy of the Tenth Century. There are besides a few fragments preserved. Probably many other Anglo-Saxon epics were lost in the wholesale and wanton destruction of Mss. when the monasteries were broken up under Henry VIII.]

The story of *Beowulf* is now becoming familiar to all readers; we give a bare outline. A powerful king of the Danes (Hrôthgâr) builds a banquet-hall. But he does not enjoy it long. A dreaded monster (Grendel) lives in the neighboring fen, and hears with envious heart the sounds of revelry. So he comes at dead of night, enters the hall, seizes thirty of the sleeping vassals, and bears them off to be devoured in his home. Nothing can withstand him. The banquet-hall lies empty and useless. Over the sea lives a hero who is moved to help Hrôthgâr. The hero's name is Beowulf. He bids his men make ready a boat, and with fourteen vassals puts to sea. He arrives at Hrôthgâr's court, and a grand banquet is held in the hall; but at night the Danes retire, leaving Beowulf and his warriors to guard the post of danger. Grendel comes, and a terrific combat follows between him and Beowulf, which ends in victory for the latter. He tears out Grendel's giant arm from its socket; with "shrill death-song" the monster reels away to die amid his fen. That day the Danes and their deliverers rejoice, and there is another feast. The Danes now remain in the hall; Beowulf goes elsewhere. With night comes the mother of Grendel, a huge and terrible monster, to avenge her

son's death, and kills one of the dearest vassals of the king. The next morning Beowulf goes on a quest of vengeance. He comes to the dismal home of the monster, plunges into the dreary waters, and far below the surface meets and conquers the hideous being. The foes of Hrôthgâr are now put to death, and Beowulf, laden with gifts and honor, returns home.

Fifty years pass. Beowulf is an old king who has ruled with strong hand and gentle heart over his people. But now a dragon comes to waste the land. The old hero girds on his armor for a final struggle. He goes down to the dragon's cave; but at sight of the monster, belching flame, the vassals of Beowulf ignominiously fly, and the king fights single-handed and weary against the fire and poison of the dragon. At last, one young warrior, ashamed of his flight, returns; and together, king and vassal slay the monster. But Beowulf is mortally wounded. After a few strong words, exulting that he has fought the good fight of life, he dies. They build a great mound for him by the sea, and bury him with honors of flame and song.

This is the epic of *Beowulf*. Now let us try to trace those threads of myth and legend mentioned above. We should guard against a too implicit trust in apparently conclusive parallels between mythology and epic; but still, in taking the following analysis (mainly that of Müllenhoff and Ten Brink), we shall not be far out of the way. The principle is sound.

The northwest coast of Europe, where our epic had its origin, is exposed to the ravages of ocean storms. Over the low lands, along the borders of the Cimbric peninsula, swept in fury the tempests of spring and fall.

The sea broke its bounds and raged over the flat country, sweeping away houses and men. Against these wild storms came the gentle spring-god, the god of warmth and calm. This god men called *Beowa*. The god conquers the monsters of the stormy sea, follows them even into their ocean home and puts them to death. Grendel and his mother may fairly be taken as types of these storms. In autumn they burst forth afresh. The waning power of summer closes with them in fiercest struggle. After long combat both the year and the storms sink into the frost-bound sleep of winter.

So much for "the experience of nature,"—*i.e.*, mythology. Now for the "experience of life,"—legend. History tells us that early in the Sixth Century, one Hygelac, king of the Getæ, came down from the north and went plundering along the Rhine. The Frankish king, Theudebert, met and fought Hygelac, and the latter fell. His follower and nephew, however, Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, did great deeds. Fighting until all others had fallen, he escaped by a masterful piece of swimming, and went back to his island home. His fame spread far and wide. He grew to be a national hero. Songs were sung about him. Wandering minstrels chanted his praise from tribe to tribe. What these wandering minstrels were, and how important was their profession, may be gathered from an Anglo-Saxon poem, which is probably "the oldest monument of English poetry,"—*Widsith*, "the far-wanderer." In the one hundred and forty-three verses preserved to us, the minstrel tells of his travels, of the costly gifts he has received, of maxims of government he has heard, of famous heroes, kings and queens whom he has visited

(a wild confusion of half historical, half mythical names from different lands and times), and of the countries he has seen. He refers to some evidently well-known legends. Widsith is the ideal minstrel; and this strange poem gives us ample hints as to the spread of legends by men of his craft. Then, too, Tacitus tells us of this custom (*Ann.* 2, 88); Arminius, liberator of Germany, "*caniturque adhuc barbaras apud gentes.*"<sup>1</sup> In all this singing, there was small risk that Beowulf's deeds would lose any of their greatness. In fact, they acquired at length certain touches of the supernatural.

Thus, then, we have hymns in honor of Beowa, the liberating and national god; songs in honor of Beowulf, the national hero. Little by little, the two became one person; and myth and legend, hymns and songs, crystallized about the common centre, until some gifted minstrel gave them form and unity in the epic of Beowulf. Unfortunately the form halts behind the matter: owing to the rapid christianizing of England, the epic, says Ten Brink, was "frozen in the midst of its development." Such as it is, however, it is a noble herald of the long line of English poetry. — We now abandon the historic method, and look at the epic as it lies before us as well in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as in *Beowulf*.

<sup>1</sup> Jornandes, writing about 552 A.D., mentions the legendary songs of the Goths. Thus, in regard to their migration toward the Black Sea: "*quemadmodum in priscis eorum carminibus, pæne historico ritu, in comune recolitur.*" Cf. W. Grimm, *Heldensage*, 1.

### § 1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPIC.

1. The epic must rely solely on Imagination and Memory. It deals with the past, while lyric poetry deals with the present. The *individual author* has little to do with the epic. The singer is a part of what he sings, whereas in lyric poetry the lyric is a part of the singer, is subjective. We may call most modern poetry a manufacture, something *made*; the epic is a *growth*. It is based on what has happened (history), or what men think has happened (legend and myth). An epic nearly always begins by telling *what* it is going to sing: it is the wrath of Achilles, the wanderings of Ulysses, the woes of the Nibelungen. Very striking is the form of the Germanic epic, "We have heard," or "I (the singer) have heard." There is no invention. Indeed, the fate and story of his hero were generally well known to the minstrel's audience. His skill lay in presenting the legend with freshness and force.

2. The epic is simple in construction. It must flow on with smooth current, bearing the hearer to a definite goal. The metre must be uniform.

3. The epic enforces no moral. It tells a story, and the moral is in solution with the story. As Aristotle says, the epic "represents only a single action, entire and complete." There is no comment on that action.

4. The epic concentrates its action in a short time. In the *Iliad* the important events happen in a few days, though the war lasts ten years. In the *Odyssey* the time is six weeks. In *Beowulf* we have two main situations, in the first part taking up little time, and in the second part one brief scene.

5. Among the minor characteristics of the epic may be mentioned its love for *Episodes*. An episode is a story apparently not needed for the main plot of the poem, but really necessarily connected with some part of the action. In the *Aeneid*, the story of the destruction of Troy is a good example of the episode.

6. The singer's memory in those days of no written records was prodigiously strong. Often, too, he improvised passages. Hence he needed rests in his song. These were supplied by the repetition of certain sentences, often of whole speeches — as frequently in the *Odyssey*. So there were many phrases and epithets which were common property and became epic formulas: "the wine-dark sea" was such an epithet; "now when they had put away the wish for meat and drink" was such a sentence. Epithets were particularly characteristic of our own epic. Thus for "sea" we have "the whale's path," — a trope known to the Norse epic as a *Kenning*. (Cf. Part II.)

7. The epic loves *dialogues*. This dramatic element makes the story livelier, and gives the singer opportunity to do a little acting as he chants his verses.

8. Finally, we must remember, that in general it is the action of the whole, rather than the character of the particular, that is of chief importance in the epic. In the drama, on the contrary, the action depends on the characters; they shape it, determine it: in any mind the character of Hamlet outweighs, in importance, his story.

These are the more prominent traits of the epic. In its purity such a form of poetic composition is national, *i.e.*, it is the spontaneous growth of a whole people.

It belongs to the first vigorous manhood of a race, just as the race is becoming conscious of itself and its importance, and mostly it springs from some victorious contact with neighboring tribes. Thus the Greek epic points to the struggle between Hellenic tribes of the western and eastern shores of the Aegean.

[For a fair summary of the rise of an epic, see the brief Introduction to Butcher and Lang's translation of the *Odyssey*.]

## § 2. THE WRITTEN EPIC.

Fancy and memory, the factors of the national epic, soon have a rival. As in individual life, so in the life of the race, close upon imagination and memory follows *reason*. As reason waxes, fancy wanes. Reason induces man to search after causes, not to trust the mere impression of the senses. But belief in the impressions of sense is the foundation of the early epic. To illustrate: a child, and the world in its youth, are alike satisfied, if told that the fire is *eating* the wood. That is an impression of sense; that 'tongues' of flame 'devour' the wood is still a poetic figure. But reason begins to ask what fire really is, — to seek the cause, to exercise the judgment instead of the fancy.

Henceforth reason and fancy are at strife; *poetry* and *science* separate. This means, too, that *poetry becomes conscious of itself*. Conscious poetry cannot be spontaneous, like the old national poetry. Hence, further, the poet becomes a distinct personage; there is a "maker" as well as a singer. The word "maker," which is exactly equivalent to the Greek word "poet," is used by our earlier writers: *cf.* Dunbar's *Lament for*

*the Makaris*. Now it is on the threshold of this new age that the great epics are written,—such as the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*, and our own *Beowulf*. The singer is still lost in his song; no personality peeps out of his work; but it is his genius which binds together the scattered songs and hymns, and breathes into this mass the creative breath of a rich imagination. While the result is still national and spontaneous in origin, while the poet has simply given an artistic unity to his materials, we must not lose sight of this unifying process and its importance. The *Odyssey*, for example, with its consummate art of construction, is no mere collection of ballads jostled into unity.

But in the next epoch, the period of the written epic, when the “maker” claims the material as well as the form to be his own work, there is a great change. It is not the epic; it is epic poetry. Men ask, “Who wrote this?”

Thus, our *Beowulf* is impersonal—a true epic. The epic poems of Cynewulf (Eighth Century), though like *Beowulf* in style, are very different in other respects. First, the poet weaves his own name (in Acrostics) into his verse, thus claiming ownership; secondly, *he uses a written account as the basis of his narrative*. He reads (not “hears” as the older minstrel did) a story, and puts it into verse. But this implies another characteristic of the new age,—literature. Further, this literature is not only *national*;—the spread of Latin and sacred lore makes it *international*. Poetry can now deliberately choose its subject; it has different roads before it. The epic process still goes on, but new customs disturb it and break up the grand march into petty detachments.

### § 3. LATER FORMS OF EPIC POETRY.

#### (1) LEGENDS ACCEPTED AS TRUE.

The tendency to sing about national heroes, and the battles which they fight, continues in force. Thus in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, scattered songs flash out from the monotony of prose; e.g., *The Battle of Brunanburh* (937). Another such battle-ballad (not in the Chronicle) is *Byrhtnoth's Fall* (sometimes called *The Battle of Maldon*), a spirited song, composed, says Rieger, so soon after the fight that the poet is ignorant of the hostile leader's name. All the fire and the impetuosity of the old epic style live again in this ‘ballad’ (993). Under the Norman yoke, our forefathers still sung their favorite heroes; though not preserved to us, these songs were used by the later prose chroniclers of England. Then there were legendary characters of a less definite kind: cf. the Lay of *Horn* and of *Havelok*. In another similar story, Ten Brink sees a late form of the *Beowulf* myth.

The most important of these legendary poems is the famous *Brut* of Layamon (about the beginning of the Thirteenth Century). It is simply the mythical history of Britain. In tone and manner the *Brut* approaches the old national epic; it is partly based on tradition by word of mouth, though Wace's *Geste des Bretons* was Layamon's chief authority. Compared, however, with modern ventures in the same field—say, with Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*—the *Brut* has much of the real epic flavor. From Layamon down, these national legends have been extensively drawn upon by our poets. A

catalogue of such poems belongs to the history of our literature. — The above concerns (a) *National* legends. We now glance at (b) *Legends of the Church*.

In the first place, many paraphrases were made of the Bible. The Old Testament was partly done into English verse. Thus, that Ms. which Franciscus Junius took to be the work of Beda's hero, Cædmon, but which is really a collection of poems by several authors and from different times, contains, among other poetical versions of the books of the Bible, a splendid paraphrase of *Exodus*. Later, there were other versions of Genesis and Exodus. There is also preserved the conclusion of a noble Anglo-Saxon epic poem, — *Fudith*. Cynewulf turned for material to the numerous sacred legends: cf. his *Elene, or the Finding of the Cross*. Later poets treated the lives of the saints. Hovering between national and sacred legend are such cycles of poetry as that which treats the legend of the Holy Grail, — e.g., the story of "Joseph of Arimathie." These all have a strongly marked moral purpose, — something foreign to early epic. But in the way of pure narrative for the narrative's sake, nothing can be better than those of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* which treat sacred legend: e.g., the exquisite *Prioresses Tale*.

We have, further, international literature as source for poetry, — *Legends based on General History* (c). Latin once made possible the ideal for which Goethe sighed, — a world-literature. In the mediæval Latin there was already collected a rude history of the world. In distorted shape, the heroes of old time passed through the Latin into the various literatures of Europe, which all began with and in the Latin itself. Each great hero

formed a centre for certain 'cycles' of stories and legends: prominent were the Alexander Legends, the Æneas Legends; — later, the Legends of Charlemagne, though these are more *national*. A branch of the Æneas or Troy legend was that of *Troilus*, which afterwards busied the pens of Chaucer and Shakspeare, and was immensely popular in the middle ages. A great aid to these legends was the mass of stories which had their origin in the East, — in India and elsewhere, — and came in the wake of the returning crusades, gradually drifting into every literature in Europe. Such is the famous story of the *three caskets*, brought in with so much effect in *The Merchant of Venice*. [Cf. the story itself in the E. E. T. Soc.'s ed. of the *Gesta Romanorum*.] Stimulated by these stories, and fed by them in great measure, arose a vast array of *Romances*, all of a historical coloring. Their name is derived from the Romance or corrupted and popular Latin, in which many of these tales appeared. Romances were greatly beloved in the middle ages, and made an important part of the first books printed by Caxton, — "joyous and pleasant histories of chivalry." Finally, they were killed by their folly and extravagance. Cf. Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*; for the prose romances, *Don Quixote* was at once judge and executioner. — More serious work — not strictly romances — may be seen in Chaucer's *Legende of Goode Women*, and above all in the great *Canterbury Tales*. As writer of tales, as "narrative poet," Chaucer is without a peer in English Literature. His reticence, in that garrulous age, is sublime. He omits trifling details, not caring "who bloweth in a trump or in a horn." — We must here note a strange use