ANONYMOUS

THE LAY OF THE NIBELUNG MEN

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INTRODUCTION

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If we accept as our definition of an Epic:—(a) A long poem, (b) of an interest not less than national[1], describing (c) in noble language (d) a series of naturally and organically connected actions (e) of heroic actors, we shall find that, while we must deny the name to some so-called epics[2], we have to thank the spirit, the imagination, the genius, of the Middle Ages for two great epics. If some critics are inclined to place these on a lower plane, for the alleged reason that the language is lacking in nobility, we may reply that it is a rash literary judgment which appraises the language and style of a far-off time by the standards either of a later civilization and culture, or by those of a quite different race, as of Greece. That is entitled to be called noble language which stirred with heroic impulses, and lifted above themselves, the hearers to whom it was addressed, and this great essential was, we know, amply fulfilled by the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Nibelungenlied*. These are both Primitive Epics, as distinguished from the epics of the study. They are National Epics, in the same sense in which the *Iliad* is, and in a sense in which the *Aeneid* is not one. By a strange coincidence, the great national epics of the world are unfathered. Of the authorship of the epics of the study, as of Virgil, Milton, Tasso, in which the imagination of a poet bodied forth the life of a long-past age, the scenes of a far-off world, there has never been the shadow of a doubt; but those which paint in everlasting colours the life, the stir of action, the thrill of passion, of an age in which the poet lived and moved and had his being, these songs which pulsate with the very life-blood of the past—when we ask, “Who was the singer?” there comes back only a muffled voice from behind a veil. In India, in France, in Germany, stand thrones waiting for ever empty of the kings of song, and in Greece upon the most imperial of all sits only a featureless shadow, to whose very name is denied by some the attribute of personality.

For this obscurity of authorship there is, in the case of the *Nibelungenlied*, more reason than with the other epics. What is conjectural with respect to the *Iliad* and the *Chanson*, is indubitable with respect to the *Lied*, viz. that both in its origin and in its construction it was composite, that the elements of which it is a union are in date, perhaps in place of origin, widely remote from each other. The Saga of the Niblungs, of which the *Nibelungenlied* is the finished poetical development, is a union of mythical and historical elements.

1. *The Mythical Element*, The groundwork of this is the Saga of Siegfried, or Sigurd, as he is named in the Northern versions of the myth. In the old heroic age of the Teuton tribes, perhaps during the period of the Migrations of the Peoples, in the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries, there took shape this legend of a demigod hero[3]. The supernatural pervades the whole atmosphere of this primitive form of the myth. The Gods still walk the earth, the hero is descended from a God, he woos a cloud-maiden, there is something more than earthly in his sword, in his horse, in the glance of his eyes. But as the Germanic tribes to whom this myth was

a common inheritance broke up and wandered far apart, it came to pass that it was just with those who remained in the ancient home, the birth-land of the myth, that it became most modified, and that its supernatural elements were removed or toned down, as the result of admixture with more civilized peoples, and, still more, of the acceptance of Christianity by the Germans themselves. Christian teachers were too grimly in earnest to tolerate poems which assumed the existence of heathen deities, and glorified non-Christian virtues. Hence it came to pass that the tribes of Teutonic origin which longest preserved the original form of the myth were those which wandered farthest from the old home-land, and which were the last to abandon the old faith.

The Norse form of the legend, which is most fully preserved for us in the Eddas, or prose epics of Iceland, presents us with the original story, transfigured with all gleams of fancy and splendours of imagination which had gathered round it as it was handed down through generations of bards. There is no need here to tell the story of this Northern version of the Saga, since it has been told for all English lovers of noble poetry by William Morris in his *Story of Sigurd*, which has well been characterized as “the one great English epic of the nineteenth century,” and which is the most Homeric-spirited poem since Homer. It is an expanded verse-rendering of the Volsunga-saga of the prose Edda, a literal prose version of which is also accessible to all readers, executed by the same author[4].

We will confine ourselves to indicating the features which reappear, under some form or other, in the *Nibelungenlied*[5]. Sigurd, son of Sigmund, slays Fafnir, the man who had been transformed into a dragon, and takes the dragon-guarded treasure, three horse-loads of gold, with a magic ring, the begetter of gold. But to this Hoard cleaves the curse pronounced by the Dwarf Andvari, from whom it had been taken, that it should prove the destruction of every possessor. With this he rides away, and comes to a hill-top begirt with a wall of fire. He rides through the fire, and finds Brynhild, a Valkyr-maid, who had been cast into a trance-sleep by Odin for transgressing his behests. He awakens her; they love, and plight their troth. But Sigurd, to fulfil his destiny, has to ride on, and so comes to the realm of the Niblungs (people of Mistland), who dwell by the Rhine. Here Grimhild, mother of King Gunnar, gives him a drugged wine-cup which makes him forget Brynhild, and so he weds Gudrun, the sister of the King. He goes with Gunnar to help him to win Brynhild, who is again begirt with the wall of fire. Gunnar cannot ride through it; so Sigurd, transformed by a spell into Gunnar's semblance, does so, and, still in his shape, lies three nights by Brynhild, but lays his sword between them. Gunnar is wedded to Brynhild, who sees at his palace Sigurd wedded to Gudrun, while Sigurd at the same time recovers memory of the past, and knows how he has been beguiled into proving false to his first love. The queens in their jealousy quarrel, and Gudrun tells Brynhild the truth about her wooing. The latter insists upon having vengeance in Sigurd's death, and he is murdered in his sleep. Brynhild, after brief exultation in her revenge, slays herself to be united in her death to the only man she has ever loved: her body is burnt with his, and together they enter Valhalla. After this, the story, though with many differences of detail, follows substantially the same broad lines as the *Nibelungenlied*, in the second marriage of Gudrun, and the great vengeance wreaked in the hall of the Hun-king.

Now this older version was a tale of a dateless past, when men lived who were near in birth to Gods, and when Gods came down to earth as freely as they do in Homer. It is suffused with a glamour of the supernatural, with a weird magnificence, both of nature and of man. Its actors are led on, or thrust on, by inevitable doom, their fates are foretold to them, and they go clear-eyed to the consummation of all. There is no pettiness about any of them, they are all moulded on the heroic scale, and the light about them is not the light of common day. But the poet of the *Nibelungenlied*, as we have it (however it may have been with the lost original form of the lay), essayed a practically impossible task, namely, to bring the essential characters of the old Saga into the scenes and social atmosphere of the twelfth century, with the supernatural elements left out. Hence he makes a different story of the early life of Siegfried, which has the effect of making his parents' fears for his safety, on his departure for Burgundy, unreasonable in the light of his past exploits. He makes a different tale of the slaying of the dragon, and of the winning of the Hoard, the amount of which he enormously exaggerates, while omitting all mention of the curse attached to it, though it does work in the poem. He has to construct a different Brynhild, and a different wooing, while he leaves unexplained Siegfried's previous acquaintance with her, and her antipathy to him from the beginning. These flaws in construction are not all;

the characters also suffer. Deeds of violence and wrong, which are accepted in the old Saga much as we accept the incidents of a fairy-tale, especially as the actors are not masters of their own fate, are now transferred to men and women who are made as amenable to our judgment as, say, our early Norman Kings, and who, moreover, live in a Christian land of minsters, monasteries and priests. Hence they cannot but lose in moral dignity; and it needs a mediaevally constituted mind to admire or respect a man simply on the score of his unflinching courage and fidelity to a cause which he has made a tainted cause. This weakness of treatment, which we may fairly say was inevitable for any poet, however great, who undertook to transfer the original story into so alien a setting, is confined to the first half of the poem, which ends with the death of Siegfried and its immediate sequel. In this first part he redeems his work from failure, and (with its inevitable limitations) makes it a triumphant success, by his charm of description, his beauty of execution, his fertility in the invention of incident, and the unfailing vivacity and energy with which it is described, and by his command of pathos and power to stir the deepest springs of sympathy. In the second part, where the poet has no longer to mutilate an old-world giant, in order to fit him to a latter-day bed of Procrustes, he treads surely and strongly, and proceeds unfalteringly to his goal, steadily rising with his theme to its magnificent climax. It is in this second part that the mythical element is largely superseded by the historical.

2. *The Historical Element*. The Siegfried myth is supposed to have taken shape as a connected story, as a sort of

primitive epic, somewhere about the fifth century, among that German tribe known as the Rhine Franks, who lived between the east of Belgium and the Rhine and Moselle, Cologne being about the middle of their territory. Their next neighbours up the Rhine were another Germanic tribe, the Burgundians, dwelling in a more mountainous district, of which Worms may have been the middle point. Among these the Niblungs of the original story seem to have been located; and it is curious that in ancient Burgundian records may be found the names of three kings, Gundahar, Godomer and Gislahar, the resemblance of whose names to those in the *Lied* is sufficiently suggestive. In the year 437 A.D. this Burgundian tribe, with its king, whose name (as latinized by the chronicler) was Gundicarius, was utterly defeated and practically annihilated by an invasion of the Huns in the reign of Attila. This disaster preceded, and perhaps gave the most powerful impulse to, that general break-up of the old Germanic settlements, and the period of stormy wanderings and wars, which lasted through nearly two hundred years, and is known as the Migration of the Peoples. The destruction of the Burgundians by Attila's host became incorporated with the story as the destruction of the Niblungs by Atli. Its locality was shifted (perhaps for the honour of the race) from a German district invaded by Huns to the capital of Hunland into which the heroes are entrapped by treachery.

The story had reached this stage of development when the northward-wandering tribes carried it to Norway, and in due course to Iceland, where it underwent much less modification than it did among those who remained, or who finally settled down, in central Europe. What changes it underwent during the wanderings of the tribes, by what influences and by what steps a legend originally heathen and tribal was modified by Christianity and feudalism, till after some six hundred years it emerges to view in something approaching its present form—of all this we have no real knowledge, and no subject of literary criticism has been more fruitful of conjecture. We may assume that it was handed down by oral tradition until, with the development of chivalry, with its natural affinity for romance and poetry, there came in the 12th and 13th centuries a great revival of interest in the old heroic literature. Its cultivation became a passion with the nobility, who followed it on two main lines, leading to the production (or revival) of epic poetry of two classes:—(1) the Court Epic, which took for its subject the romance of knight-errantry, and (2) the National Epic, which took the old popular heroic tradition, and gave it permanence in a metrical form peculiar to itself. The *Nibelungenlied* is essentially, in its subject and spirit, a national epic; but, as it was remodelled by courtier-poets, their treatment of it made it approximate in some respects very closely to the court epic, especially in what we may call the veneer of chivalrous refinement laid over the more elemental characters of the original story. Hence it bears throughout, both in characters and incidents, evidences of the influence of feudalism and chivalry, on the one hand, and of Christianity on the other.

It is curious to note how the poet, having undertaken to shape a credible, intelligible story, the actors of which have a known geographical position, out of a tale of wonders wrought in some misty land the gate to which has been lost, is sometimes confused by the consequent contradictions, and sometimes triumphantly surmounts them. Thus, the Nibelungs are, in the first part of the story, quite distinct from the Burgundians: they seem to be a tribe of warriors dwelling by themselves on some uncharted shore. But, after the Kings have got the Nibelung Hoard into their possession, and have set out with their followers for Hunland, with a contingent of these Nibelungs in their train, we find that the names Nibelung and Burgundian have become interchangeable. For this no reason is given: the possession of the Hoard does not of itself confer its name on the owner, for that title is never applied to Siegfried, nor is it applied to the Burgundians during all the years that it remains in their hands before they set out for Hunland. The real explanation may be, that there were still extant old folk-songs, familiar to all, which gave all the information required to fill gaps in the *Nibelungenlied*, and which also gave a full account of Siegfried’s early life and exploits[6], so that the poet felt himself emancipated from the necessity of “beginning at the beginning,” which has been a rock steadily avoided by great epic poets from Homer downwards.

In his treatment of the supernatural, which so dominates the action of the old Saga, but which was based wholly upon that faith in the old Gods which the Christian poet not merely rejected, but ignored, he was far more successful. As Carlyle expresses it:

“Yet neither is the *Nibelungen* without its wonders; for it is poetry and not prose; here too a supernatural world encompasses the natural, and, though at rare intervals and in calm manner, reveals itself there. It is truly wonderful with what skill our simple untaught poet deals with the marvellous, admitting it without reluctance or criticism, yet precisely in the degree and shape that will best avail him. Here, if in no other respect, we should say that he has a decided superiority to Homer himself. The whole story of the Nibelungen is fateful, mysterious, guided on by unseen influences; yet the actual marvels are few, and done in the far distance: those Dwarfs, and Cloaks of Darkness, and charmed Treasure-caves, are heard of rather than beheld; the tidings of them seem to issue from unknown space. Vain were it to inquire where that Nibelungen-land specially is: its very name is Nebel-land or Nifl-land, the land of Darkness, of Invisibility. The Nibelungen Heroes, that muster in thousands and tens of thousands, though they march to the Rhine or Danube, and we see their strong limbs and shining armour, we could almost fancy to be children of the air. Far beyond the firm horizon, that wonder-bearing region swims on the infinite waters, unseen by bodily eye, or at most discerned as a faint streak, hanging in the blue depths, uncertain whether island or cloud. And thus the Nibelungen Song, though based on the bottomless foundations of Spirit, and not unvisited of skyey messengers, is a real, rounded, habitable earth, where we find firm footing, and the wondrous and the common live amicably together. Perhaps it would be difficult to find any poet, of ancient or modern times, who in this trying problem has steered his way with greater delicacy and success."

As a drama of action and of destiny, the poem rises to real greatness. To quote Carlyle again:

“The *Nibelungen* has been called the Northern Epos; yet it has, in great part, a dramatic character: those thirty-nine *Aventiuren* (Adventures) which it consists of, might be so many scenes in a Tragedy. The catastrophe is dimly prophesied from the beginning; and, at every fresh step, rises more and more clearly into view. A shadow of coming Fate, as it were, a low inarticulate voice of Doom falls, from the first, out of that charmed Nibelungen-land: the discord of two women is as a little spark of evil passion, which ere long enlarges itself into a crime: foul murder is done; and now the Sin rolls on like a devouring fire, till the guilty and the innocent are alike encircled with it, and a whole land is ashes and a whole race is swept away.”

It is in the delineation of character that the poet is most embarrassed by the intractable nature of the old material which he must needs work up with the new. He had the same difficulty as Homer had in dealing with Achilles’ revenge on the body of Hector, or with Odysseus’ revenge on the faithless servants; and, if he made the best of a bad case, it must be admitted that in his best there is somewhat jarring. The poem has been called the Northern Iliad, but the all-round nobility of the heroes of Homer, and, indeed, of epics generally (in intention at least), is strangely lacking in the chief Nibelungs. Hagen is a treacherous murderer of his niece’s husband, whom he assassinates in expiation of an offence of which the victim has proved himself innocent; and he is a thief who robs the same helpless woman twice. Gunther is an accomplice and an ingrate. The other champions are fully conscious of the iniquity of those whose cause they support: their merit is that which in those times covered a multitude of sins—unflinching bravery and fidelity to their cause and to each other. Hagen shows a cynical disregard of righteousness and of honesty: he faces the consequences of his sin without a tremor: his callous contempt for the hearts he tramples on is matched by his reckless defiance of the retribution which involves a nation with himself. There is no word of repentance, no hint of remorse; and it is characteristic that none of his companions reproach him amid their ruin, and that even Rüdiger, the flower of chivalry, receives him as his most honoured guest, confers on him the most distinguished tokens of regard, and sympathizes with him to the end. The author shows less consideration for Kriemhild than for him in the final catastrophe; for, while the King and the stainless heroes lament his fall, no hand is raised to stay the vengeance upon Kriemhild that swiftly follows, no word of regret is uttered over her. This recalls to our mind certain characteristics of that period: first, the supreme importance of a great warrior and leader of men, whose life is held of more account, not merely to his party, but to the world, than that of many women. Secondly, we are reminded how thin was the veneer of courtesy to women in the so-called age of chivalry. It is significant that in the Volsunga-saga, which is instinct with the old unalloyed Teutonic spirit, no man thinks of taking vengeance on a woman: they may poison, betray, or assassinate, but they are always immune from the last penalty. The third characteristic here exemplified is well set forth by Dr. Arnold:

“Philip de Comines praises his master Louis XI as one of the best of princes, though he witnessed not only the crimes of his life, but the miserable fears and suspicions of his latter end, and has even faithfully recorded them. In this respect Philip de Comines is in no respect superior to Froissart, with whom the crimes committed by his knights and great lords never interfere with his general eulogies of them: the habit of deference and respect was too strong to be broken, and the facts which he himself relates to their discredit, appear to have produced on his mind no impression" (*Lectures on Modern History*, II).

In the historical characters which he introduced, the poet probably meant to adhere to historic truth, as he apprehended it; but we have to make large allowances for the utterly uncritical historic lore of the time, and for the probability, we might say the certainty, that some of the history was based on popular tradition, which is fruitful in confusion of personalities and in anachronisms. These characters are three:—

1. Attila, called Etzel in the *Lied*. The Atli of the Volsunga-saga much more nearly resembles the Attila of the historians of Rome and Constantinople than does Etzel. He here appears as a just and generous king, whose court is a rendezvous of foreign knights from every land, proud to enlist in his service. Not only is he no party to the treacherous entrapping of the Nibelungs, but he is utterly ignorant of it; and is only driven to countenance hostilities against them by their slaughter of his child and the intolerable insults they hurl at himself. The reason for this presentment of him may be, that Attila really was just, generous, and merciful to his own subjects, and to the large numbers of foreign mercenaries, many of them Germans,

who took service under him. Some of these, on their return home, would always speak of him as a great king and a good master, whose court was magnificent; and this character of him might well persist in tradition through the generations, and be an essential part of the popular lays which formed the groundwork of the finished epic.

2. Theodoric, called in the *Lied* Dietrich of Bern, where Bern has nothing to do with Switzerland, but is the German form of Verona. The poet no doubt meant the great Theodoric the Ostrogoth, conqueror of Italy. But he (born 455 A.D.) lived a generation after Attila (died 453). Theodoric, king of the Visigoths, was indeed a contemporary of Attila, but he was an enemy, and died fighting against him in the great battle of Châlons, in 451. In Carlyle’s words, “some commentators have fished out another Theodoric, eighty years prior to him of Verona, and who actually served in Attila’s hosts with a retinue of Goths and Germans.” If this last be really historical, or was even traditional, he might have been the original Dietrich of the old lays who in the *Lied* serves in proud independence in Attila’s palace-guard. But popular tradition and the poets knew as their only Dietrich the great Theodoric, and were serenely unconscious that for him it was, on every ground, as possible to have served under Attila, as for our Alfred the Great to have served under Charlemagne.

3. Bishop Pilgrim. His introduction is a gross anachronism indeed, for he lived more than 500 years after Attila’s time. He owes his inclusion, or intrusion, to the fact that he had the Saga rendered into Latin verse by his secretary, Konrad, as he heard it from the lips of bards, some two hundred

years before the poem took shape as a German epic. No doubt this Latin poem was used by the composers of the epic; and, if they were conscious at all of the anachronism, it would have troubled them as little as Walter Scott was troubled by the anachronisms, of which he cheerfully makes confession, in *Ivanhoe*.

We have spoken of a “poet”; but in truth there was a long succession of them. While the names of the authors of several of those trivial romances, the Court Epics, have been carefully handed down, there is no record of the authorship of the great National Epic; and this is the more remarkable, as, during the period of the Literary Revival, successive remodellings of it by different hands were produced, each, we may presume, regarded as an improvement on its predecessor; yet no trustworthy clue survives to the name of the composer of any one of them.

The following would appear to have been the different stages through which the *Nibelungenlied*, as a distinct poem, passed:—

I. The original form, in alliterative verse. (Not extant.) If we could recover this, we might find it, both in metrical form and in literary style, more like our Anglo-Saxon poem of *Beowulf* than the existing versions of the *Lied*.

II. The first 12th century version, cir. 1140, by an Austrian court poet (the *Kürnberg Knight* for whom Bartsch argues), in four-line stanzas, or “strophes,” of iambic basis, with assonant endings. (Not extant.)

III. The second 12th century version, cir. 1170, in which rhyme was partially substituted for assonance. (Not extant.)

IV. The third 12th century versions, of two contemporaneous poets, cir. 1190-1200, in which assonances are almost entirely superseded by rhymes. Extant in several MSS. which fall under two heads:—

1. MS. A. The Munich manuscript, of which only one single copy exists; this perhaps represents the poem just as this *rédacteur* left it. It is based on a good and ancient original, but is very carelessly written, and omits (apparently through oversight) a number of strophes. This, the shortest version, was adopted by Lachmann as the basis of his edition.

2. MS. B. The St. Gall manuscript. This represents the text as modified by later hands in the 13th and 14th centuries. Of this there are numerous copies. It was adopted by Bartsch as the basis of his edition.

V. MS. C. The fourth 12th century version, of about the same date as the preceding. It presents the same metrical characteristics, but aims

1. In its matter, at reconciling contradictions and inconsistencies in the original Saga;

2. At establishing a connexion between the *Lied* and *Lament for the Niblungs* (a poetically inferior continuation), which it does by a reference in the concluding strophe, and more especially by the insertion of a series of strophes at various points in the text, the tendency of which is to excite and maintain sympathy with Kriemhild, and to present her in the light of a righteous avenger. The author also, in the last line of the poem, changes the title from the original *Nibelungen-nôt* to *Nibelungen-lied*. Extant in the

Donaueschingen manuscript, the additional strophes of which are included in Simrock's modern German version.

The poem, after the Revival of Learning, suffered the same eclipse through the fascination and superior literary finish of classical literature, as did the *Chanson de Roland* in France. Its rescue from oblivion dates from the year 1757, when the first imperfect edition of it was published from an old manuscript by Prof. Bodmer. The labours of later scholars and critics produced more and more perfect editions; and the interest of the German public in it was gradually awakened, till it grew to an enthusiasm for what was at last recognised as a great national epic. It was not only a subject for patriotic pride, but, from its memories of old-time greatness, from its heroic spirit, and, from that soul of loyalty to fatherland and king which pervades it, and which is a fundamental trait of the German character, it became an inspiration to great effort and noble sacrifice, coming just at the time when these were pre-eminently called for. It was when the old spirit of freedom awoke with tenfold strength, and all Germany rose as one man against the Titanic tyranny of Napoleon, that this book became for Germans what the Iliad was for Greeks. It helped to fan patriotism into a flame of heroism; it was a voice crying from the past, a great battle-call that blended with the voices of such soldier-singers as Körner. In the year of Waterloo a cheap edition for the use of soldiers was issued—which reminds us of the claim Aeschylus (in Aristophanes' *Frogs*) puts forth for his two dramas of war, that they made every spectator long to be a warrior, and nerved him to resolve to conquer or die. And the national instinct which then recognised and claimed for its own that spirit of loyalty to king and country, through evil report and good report, which takes for its watchword, “My country!—may she always be in the right; but my country, right or wrong!” is fundamentally sound. It recognises that he who sets up his private conscience against that of his country in the hour of her need, must himself beware lest he make himself a traitor in sinning against those to whom he owes the greatest earthly debt a man can owe. It recognises that a man may be committing a far deeper wrong by refusing to help his country in a cause in which he thinks he detects some flaw, still more by striving with word or pen to paralyse the efforts of those who are fighting for her, than if he fought in a cause of which his conscience disapproves. Hence United Germany has been no congenial foster-mother for “the friends of every country save their own”; and her scholars are not wrong in claiming for their great epic its share in thus moulding the patriotic conscience.

This translation is based on the text of Bartsch (edit. 1886), but the strophes of MS. C have been incorporated with it, so that it thus corresponds with the widely read modern German version of Simrock. For the English reader it may be explained that a marginal C denotes that the four lines which follow are taken from that source, and he will note that their ethical tendency is designed to be cumulative, to excite and maintain sympathy for the murdered hero and his widow, and to supply what justification can be found for her revenge. They appeal to the modern reader’s sense of justice, and are in themselves poetically not unworthy of being included, as they often elaborate a picturesque or stirring scene, and add touches of beauty, tenderness, or pathos which we could not wish away.

The metre adopted is that on which William Morris fixed, with true poetic instinct, for his *Story of Sigurd*, the great sister-poem to the *Nibelungenlied*, from which, indeed, he really seems to have taken it, as it preserves the “ringing caesura” of that original, and, accentually, the same measure. It is not in essentials different from that of the Middle High German text, for the basis of that is accentual and not numerical, though other translators have thought that it was best reproduced by rigidly adhering to an iambic structure. This, in a long poem, is apt to have a somewhat heavy, monotonous effect, whereas the anapaestic-iambic measure not only secures something of the lightness of the movement of the original, but has for English readers a variety, freedom and swiftness, a “lilt,” which has made it of late years widely popular.

The old division into “strophes” has been discarded. It has always seemed to me a literary offence so to print an epic as to convey the suggestion that it is but a long ballad. I cannot help thinking that this device was one adopted for convenience’ sake by the mediaeval reciters or chanters of the *Lied*, as was the gap in the line after the caesura, to mark artificially the cadence of the line. These, however, have a somewhat pedantic, formal, and so irritating effect on the modern reader who wants to enter into the spirit of an epic. The literary argument against the division into strophes is well stated by Bartsch: “I do not think that, fine as the Nibelungen strophe is in itself, and admirably as it lends itself to lyric treatment, its employment for the epic was a happy inspiration. A division into regular strophes is altogether antagonistic to the Epic: the even flow of the epic narrative does indeed require pauses, not, however, at prescribed, but at free intervals. And this principle we see invariably adhered to wherever a true epic has developed itself, in India, in Greece, in France."

In dropping the strophic arrangement, I have of course dropped the extra two syllables which lengthened the fourth line of each strophe. I incline to think that their presence is another indication that the *Lied* was originally intended, not for reading, but for chanting or recitative, like the older lays on which it was founded. It is a common device of singers thus to lengthen the last line of a verse; it helps to the satisfaction of the ear: but the effect is quite different in reading. As a reviewer in the *Athenæum* says: "No doubt it is theoretically proper to follow the original form with absolute fidelity, but unfortunately the line in English, or even, for that matter, in Modern German, is very different from the line in Middle High German. It drags grievously, and though it breaks the monotony to a certain extent, and occasionally produces a fine effect, yet more often it is merely irritating." The adoption of the principle laid down by the only English translator who has preserved this peculiarity, that "the very essence of a poem is its exact metrical quality," would at once condemn all translations of Homer and Virgil into blank or heroic verse, or indeed, into anything but English hexameters, and all translations of the classical drama into anything but trimeter iambics and unrhymed choruses in the impossible metres of the originals—a theory which surely needs only to be stated to expose its untenability. The essence of a poem lies in its spirit more than its formal structure; and whatever jars on the reader, and puts a drag on the swift and easy movement of the verse, so far interferes with his entering into the spirit of that poem.

A. S. W.
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THE LAY OF THE NIBELUNG MEN

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I.

Of Kriemhild, and of her Dream

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Many a marvellous story have the ancient singers told
Of heroes and their glory and their travail manifold,
Of great feasts splendour-flashing that with weeping and wailing ended,
Of the thunder of war-waves clashing—in the Lay shall ye hear all blended.
In the Land Burgundian nurtured was a maiden princely of birth;
Though ye searched, ye should find none fairer to the uttermost ends of the earth;
And her name far-sung was Kriemhild, she was sweeter than speech may tell.
Ah, many a valiant champion in battle for her sake fell!

There was no man whose pride had warded his breast against love's dart
Shot from the eyes victorious, from the snare of many a heart:
She was lovely beyond all measure that speech or thought may find,
Yea, queenly withal and gracious, a glory of womankind.
Three high-born Kings and wealthy guarded and held her dear;
Gunther and Gernot, heroes in prowess without a peer,
And Giselher the youngest, unmatched in foughten field:
Their sister was she and their glory, and her sword were they and her shield.
Lords were they of noble lineage, and of courtesy the crown,
And their aweless might was matchless, and limitless their renown;
And over the Land Burgundian they stretched the sceptred hand,
Ere the strange, grim end of their story was told in Etzel's land.
In the City of Worms by the Rhine-flood these Kings in their might abode,
And the best in the whole land served them, the proudest knights that rode,
With glory of homage served them through their life's triumphant tide—
Till the day when in woeful battle through the Feud of the Queens they died.

And the mother that bare them was Uta, and the treasures of queens were hers,
And their father the old king Dankart, and he made them heritors
Of his realm in the hour of his dying, a champion mighty of old,
Who in days of his youth reaped harvest of glory manifold.
As the tale of their goodlihead telleth, such kings were they, these three,
Strong, fearless lords; and the vassals that bent before them the knee
Were the best of all of whose doings their songs have the minstrels made,
Stalwart and aweless of spirit, in battle unafraid.
For these were Hagen of Troneg, and Dankwart his brother withal
The battle-eager, and Ortwein the warder of Metz’s wall;
And with these stood Gere and Eckwart, lords of the marches twain,
And Volker the Knight Alsatian, the name without a stain;
And Rumold the feast-arrayer, a worship-worthy lord;
Sindold and Hunold, which ever kept heedful watch and ward
For the state of the palace royal, that all should be ordered well;
And with these were there knightly vassals whose tale no bard may tell.
Dankwart was their palace-marshal, and beside the feastful board

Waited his nephew Ortwein, of Metz was he overlord;
And Sindold bare them the wine-cup, a goodly baron he;
And Hunold was chamberlain, perfect in utterest courtesy.
But of all their palace-splendour, and their might renowned afar,
And the majesty of their worship, and their knightly deeds of war,
And the joy that the kingly heroes therein had all their days—
No minstrel hath wholly told it, no harp sung all their praise.
Now it fell, in the midst of their glory, that a dream unto Kriemhild appeared:
A strong, fair, tameless falcon in a bower of dreams she reared.
But before her eyes two eagles swooped upon him and slew—
Never a bitterer sorrow the heart of the maiden knew!
So she told to her mother the vision; but from Lady Uta's eyes
Was it hid, that she could not interpret the dream save in halting wise:
"The falcon reared in thy dream-bower, a princely husband is this—
Now God from evil defend him, else swift dark doom shall be his!"
"What is this that thou talkest of husbands, heart's dearest, mother, to me?
In the net of love untangled will I for ever be.

Unto my death in the beauty of maidenhood I will abide,
That I taste not the manifold sorrows that from love of man betide.”
But she answered: “Not wholly renounce it, for thy vow hath been spoken amiss:
For if ever on earth thou knowest a heart full-brimmed with bliss,
Of the love of a man shall this come; and a fair and happy bride
Shalt thou be, if a noble baron by God’s grace stand by thy side.”
“Let be, let be vain talking, heart’s dearest, mother mine.
In many a wife’s repentance have I read the warning sign,
How love hath sorrow for guerdon when the end of its journey is won:—
I will none of love nor of sorrow, I abide in my bliss alone.”
So Kriemhild in pride of her spirit was a rebel to Lord Love’s sway;
And her heart-peace flowed as a river through many a sunlit day;
And she looked upon earls and champions, but none might the heart of her move:
Yet her hour drew near, and the breaking of the glory-dawn of love.
For in flight even now was the Falcon, the fulfilment drew nigh and nigher
Of the dream half read of her mother—but woe for the vengeance-hire