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WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE VOLSUNGS

DAVID ASHURST

William Morris's interest in the Old North is already evident in his first publications, the pieces that he contributed, at twenty-two years of age, to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, which appeared at intervals during 1856. At this point in his life, when he had recently graduated from the University of Oxford, Morris was a competent reader of Latin, Greek, and French but his knowledge of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture was secondhand and limited in scope. The Scandinavian materials available in English were relatively scarce at this date but those that Morris encountered clearly caught his imagination, as he himself declares in the apparently autobiographical, though possibly fictive, preamble to the *Magazine* story called 'Lindenberg Pool' (Morris 1910–15 (hereafter *Works*), I 245):

I read once in lazy humour Thorpe's Northern Mythology,¹ on a cold May night when the north wind was blowing; in lazy humour, but when I came to the tale that is here amplified there was something in it that fixed my attention and made me think of it; and whether I would or no, my thoughts ran in this way, as here follows. So I felt obliged to write, and wrote accordingly.

In this passage the phrase 'the tale that is here amplified' is particularly significant because it announces the literary approach that would be Morris's chief *modus operandi* as a poet during the next two decades, which culminated in the publication, in 1876, of *The Story of Sigurd and the Fall of the Niblungs* (*Works* XII), a work that for many an admirer of Morris is quite simply 'the greatest of all his poems' (Paul Thompson 1977, 200) and which is based closely on *Volsunga saga* and parts of the *Poetic Edda* with a few elements taken from the *Nibelungenlied*. For Morris in these decades, as for the medieval authors to whom he felt closest, the act of literary creation was primarily and unabashedly one of re-creation, of refashioning received material.

Malory and Froissart are the chief sources for the items in Morris's first book of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, which was published in 1858 (*Works* I). This collection contains some of Morris's

¹ Thorpe 1851–52. In addition to 'Lindenberg Pool', two other of the eight *Magazine* tales have Scandinavian content with medieval settings.

most frequently anthologized works but the poems in it, with their concentrated expression and their evocative but sometimes puzzling allusiveness, are not representative of his more mature style, in which he is characteristically expansive and at pains to elucidate whatever he thinks the reader needs to know.

More typical in every way is the next large-scale project that came to fulfilment: *The Earthly Paradise* (*Works* III–VI).² This is a huge compilation of twenty-four stories in verse, originally published in three volumes (1868–70), with a framing narrative in which a group of voyagers, referred to in the Argument of the Prologue (*Works*, III 3) as ‘certain gentlemen and mariners of Norway’, flee the Black Death in the fourteenth century and go in search of the Earthly Paradise, partly encouraged in this venture by stories of the Greenlanders’ discovery of Vineland (13); instead of Paradise, however, they come at last to an unknown island where the inhabitants are, as they put it, ‘the seed of the Ionian race’ (5), i.e. descendants of the Greeks; there they are made welcome and agree, at the islanders’ suggestion, to hold a gathering twice every month; at each gathering one tale will be told for the sake of entertainment and understanding—first by an islander, then by a voyager, and so on alternately for a year. Hence *The Earthly Paradise* consists of twelve stories that might reasonably be called ‘southern’, of ancient Greek origin and told by the hosts, alternating with twelve narratives suitable for telling by medieval Scandinavians and their associates. This scheme allows Morris maximum opportunity to range through his favourite types of source material, the Classical, the mainstream medieval European, and the Nordic. In connexion with this, the weighting of material in favour of the Classical sources serves as a reminder that Morris was by no means fixated on ‘northernness’ despite his growing love for Old Norse literature: towards the end of the 1850s, after publishing the Scandinavian-influenced stories in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* and the predominantly French-influenced pieces in *The Defence of Guenevere*, he worked on a set of dramatic poems now known as ‘Scenes from the Fall of Troy’ (*Works* XXIV), which he left as fragments; in the 1860s he produced *The Life and Death of Jason* (see note 2) and the Greek-derived stories of *The Earthly Paradise*; immediately before working on *The Story of Sigurd*, at the height of his involvement with Icelandic

² *The Life and Death of Jason* was published first (1867, *Works* II) but had originally been meant for inclusion in *The Earthly Paradise*. It quickly outgrew its intended context and took on independent life. A success with critics and the public, it was *Jason* that made Morris’s name as a poet.

literature, he produced an impressive verse translation of Virgil's *Æneid* (published 1875 but dated 1876, *Works* XI); and in 1887–88 he issued a poetical version of Homer's *Odyssey* (*Works* XIII), of which Oscar Wilde wrote that 'of all our English translations this is the most perfect and the most satisfying' (Faulkner 1973, 302). These works represent an important aspect of Morris's literary output to set beside his achievements as a translator and re-fashioner of Old Norse material.

When Morris began working on *The Earthly Paradise* he still had to rely on secondhand accounts for his northern stories. It seems likely, for example, that he planned and possibly wrote what became the December tale entitled 'The Fostering of Aslaug'—in which the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr is brought up as the thrall of peasants but eventually marries Ragnarr loðbrók—at a time when he was not directly acquainted with either *Volsunga saga* or *Ragnars saga*, and that he adapted the story from the account in Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (Hodgson 1987, 85, and May Morris's comment in *Works*, VII xxxii). In the autumn of 1868, however, Morris seized the opportunity to improve the state of his knowledge when he was put in touch with the Icelander Eiríkr Magnússon. Eiríkr tells of his first meeting with the poet (printed by May Morris in *Works*, VII xv–xvi): arriving at Morris's residence, he was soon drawn into enthusiastic conversation in which Morris displayed a knowledge of George Dasent's translations of *Njáls saga* and *Gísla saga* (1861 and 1866), Benjamin Thorpe's translation of the *Poetic Edda* (1866), Amos Cottle's *Icelandic Poetry* (1797) and Percy's *Northern Antiquities* (1770 and 1847), also Sir Walter Scott's account of *Eyrbyggja saga* (1814) and several modern travel books about Iceland;³ Eiríkr was asked to visit three times per week to give translation classes and it was agreed, at his suggestion, that the first work to be tackled would be *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. This was finished in a fortnight, whereupon the two men began work on *Grettis saga*. Eiríkr further explains (xvii) that it was their habit to go through a passage together, with Eiríkr explaining points of grammar so that Morris could learn the subject piecemeal since he was averse to memorizing grammatical paradigms, after which the Icelander would go away and write out a close translation to be delivered at the next meeting; Morris would then go over the passage again at his leisure and put Eiríkr's translation into his own

³The translators' original preface to *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (*Works* VII, xxxvii) also indicates that Morris had a knowledge, at least by early 1869, of Edmund Head's translation of *Víga-Glúms saga* (1866), Samuel Laing's rendering of *Heimskringla* (1844), and Dasent's version of Snorri's *Edda* (1842).

preferred style. This last point indicates that Morris was intent on publication from the very first, and in fact ‘The Saga of Gunnlaug Worm-Tongue’ (*Works X*) appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* in January 1869, only a few months after the first meeting, to be followed in May of the same year by *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (*Works VII*), published by F. S. Ellis, who was also at this time issuing *The Earthly Paradise*. Morris and Eiríkr worked in addition on *Laxdæla saga*, but in this case the fruit of their labour did not appear as a joint translation; rather it formed the basis for Morris’s poem ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, which re-fashions the central story of the saga as something tantamount to a verse novel, and which forms the high point of the final *Earthly Paradise* volume as published in 1870 (*Works V–VI*).

The same year also saw the publication of *Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda* (*Works VII*). According to Eiríkr’s account of his first meeting with Morris (*Works, VII xvi*), the poet was on that occasion in 1868 ‘already preoccupied with the grand types of the heroes (Sigurd the Volsung) and heroines (Brynhild, Gudrun) of the Elder Edda’, with which he was familiar from Thorpe’s translation (Thorpe 1851–52). Like many another reader who approaches *Völsunga saga* itself from this direction, however, Morris seems to have been initially disappointed by it when he finally made its acquaintance in the summer of 1869. At this point he was taking a cure in Bad Ems, though working as ever; here he received Eiríkr’s preliminary translation of the saga and wrote a letter home in which he described the saga as ‘rather of the monstrous order’ (*Works, VII xx*); but it seems he had not made time to read beyond the first part of the story before his return to England. Eiríkr’s description of subsequent developments is worth quoting at length (*Works, VII xx*):

I resumed lessons with him on the old system—three days a week—this time taking the story of the men of Salmonriverdale (Laxdæla). Some time afterwards—I forget how long—when I came for the appointed lesson, I found him in a state of great excitement, pacing his study. He told me he had now finished reading my translation of the ‘grandest tale that was ever told.’ He would at once set about copying it out, and procure the original for himself, which he promptly did. On my suggesting that it would be desirable for him to go through the originals of the Edda songs on which the story was based, he set aside for a while the Laxdæla Saga and we got to work on the heroic songs of the Edda.

Four points of interest arise from this passage, the first being that Morris eventually found in the saga, or rather in the story underlying it, the grandeur for which his earlier reading of the *Poetic Edda* in translation

had caused him to hope. This should be borne in mind when considering the style that he adopted for his translation of the saga; it also has a bearing on the fact, discussed below, that for several years he hesitated over whether he could or should write a poem of his own on the basis of the story. Secondly there is the matter of Morris's 'state of great excitement', surely indicative of a strong personal and emotional involvement with the story and its characters. This connects with the third point, which concerns the role of *Laxdæla saga* in the evolution of Morris's response to the Volsung tale: Eiríkr implies that, having found the poet less impressed with *Volsunga saga* than he had hoped, he suggested working on the Laxdale story; if so, it was a canny move on his part because there is a well recognized though inexact correlation between the central story of *Laxdæla saga*, with its set of love-triangles involving Guðrún, Bolli, Kjartan, and Hrefna, and that of *Volsunga saga*, with Brynhildr, Gunnarr, Sigurðr, and Guðrún, and because the idea of the love-triangle was peculiarly important to Morris. The relationships between Morris, his wife Janey, and his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whatever their exact nature, caused Morris a certain amount of emotional stress during the late 1860s as he suffered jealousy aroused by Janey's involvement with Rossetti and yet to some extent acquiesced in their liaison (MacCarthy 1994, 221–27);⁴ his imaginative portrayal of love-triangles had begun much earlier than this, however, for they play a major role in his stories issued in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856, particularly 'The Story of the Unknown Church' and 'Frank's Sealed Letter' (*Works* I). Even if Eiríkr did not engineer it, therefore, the choice of *Laxdæla saga* as a subject of study was likely, in the long run, to stimulate Morris's interest in the kind of story that lies at the heart of *Volsunga saga*; it certainly did so in the short term, as is shown by the production of 'The Lovers of Gudrun'. Finally it should be noted that Eiríkr's promotion of the lays of the *Poetic Edda*, given that Morris was already predisposed to honour these works, surely encouraged the publication of the translation in the particular form it took, in which several eddic poems have been interpolated in the saga narrative at points where they add to the aesthetic effect.

⁴ The generosity of Morris's acquiescence in the period immediately after the publication of the *Volsunga saga* translation is shown by the fact that in 1871 he secured Kelmscott Manor on a joint tenancy with Rossetti. As E. P. Thompson (1977, 161) remarks, 'There is no doubt that Morris hoped it would provide a home where Janey and the children could share Rossetti's company during his own absence.'

In connection with the filling out of the text, it should be noted that the preface to *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* indicates an awareness that the saga is less than wholly satisfactory as it stands and that the reader has to make an effort to get beyond the occasional defects in the narrative so as to reach the heart of the matter (*Works*, VII 286):

As to the literary quality of this work we might say much, but we think we may well trust the reader of poetic insight to break through whatever entanglement of strange matters or unused elements may at first trouble him, and to meet the nature and beauty with which it is filled.

Morris and Eiríkr were determined, therefore, to deliver the tale in a way that would minimize the defects while still acknowledging their existence. Their method does not involve any sleight of hand or deception of the public, for the preface and Eiríkr's endnotes list the translators' interventions clearly and unambiguously, though in the text itself the eddic interpolations are worked in seamlessly so as to improve, or at least not to impede, the narrative flow. The most important of these interpolations are the following: the song of the birds to Sigurðr after he has killed Fáfnir and Reginn, which is taken from *Fáfnismál* 40–44 (eliminating the name Sigrdrífa) and serves to amplify the prose text's all-too-brief mention of Brynhildr as the woman whom Sigurðr should seek and marry (*Works*, VII 332);⁵ the verses associated with the waking of Brynhildr, which are taken from the beginning of *Sigrdrífomál* and serve to balance the long passage borrowed from the same poem by the medieval saga writer, as well as to increase the solemnity of the fatal moment when Sigurðr and the valkyrie meet (*Works*, VII 335); and the whole of *Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta*, which is given a chapter of its own just after Guðrún has declared that her kinsmen have slain her husband, and greatly increases the emotional impact of this climactic part of the narrative (*Works*, VII 366). The preface, furthermore, outlines the points of contact between the saga and the *Poetic Edda*, indicating on each occasion whether the relevant eddic poems have been offered in the appendix if they have not been subsumed into the main text. In short, everything reasonable has been done to give the novice reader a clear idea of the story in its various ramifications as they appear in the saga and the *Poetic Edda* (but not in Snorri's *Edda* or *Þiðreks saga*) and at the same time to provide the fullest, simplest, and most satisfying experience of story-telling. As regards the form of the *Völsunga saga* translation, then, it can be seen that the work is above all that of men

⁵ All references to eddic poems are to Neckel and Kuhn 1983.

who cared about their material and wanted others to share their enjoyment of it.

It has already been noted that Morris responded to *Volsunga saga* with strong emotion. He articulated this response in a letter to his friend Charles Eliot Norton (quoted by Paul Thompson 1977, 200):

The scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature; there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in two pages of moderate print.

To be touched in similar fashion by the deep but restrained pathos of the saga is what Morris and Eiríkr expected for ‘the reader of poetic insight’ who would take the trouble to overcome the initial difficulties of the work’s strangeness, as they say in their preface (*Works*, VII 286):

We cannot doubt that such a reader will be intensely touched by finding, amidst all its wildness and remoteness, such startling realism, such subtlety, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move himself to-day.

It is clearly with the intention of heightening the reader’s emotional response, as mentioned above, that the translators interpolate *Guðrúnar-qviða in fyrsta*, which they say is the ‘the most lyrical, the most complete, and the most beautiful of all the Eddaic poems’ (285); they add that it is ‘a poem that any age or language might count among its most precious possessions’. Though it chiefly portrays the grief of Guðrún, however, they say that they have inserted it ‘before the death of the heroine’ (285), thus showing that their primary focus is on Brynhildr, as Morris also implies in his verse prologue to the translation (290), when he says that the saga tells

Of Brynhild’s glorious soul with love distraught,
Of Gudrun’s weary wandering unto naught.

The nature of the emotional experience that Morris invites us to enjoy is indicated in the first lines of the same stanza, which issue this exhortation:

So draw ye round and hearken, English Folk,
Unto the best tale pity ever wrought!

We are to respond with compassion; and if we are moved to admiration also, for the tale of the Volsungs is ‘the grandest tale that was ever told’, it must be an admiration that cannot be severed from pity. This, indeed, is the response that Morris asks from us in the lines on ‘Iceland First

Seen' (*Works*, IX 126), in which Brynhildr is held up as the emblem of Iceland itself, apostrophized here as the land of bleakness and story:

For what is the mark on thy brow but the brand that thy Brynhild doth bear?
Lone once, and loved and undone by a love that no ages outwear.

This combination—of grandeur, of a love that moves one to admiration and pity, and of a story that endures through centuries—should be borne in mind while considering the implications of Morris and Eiríkr's announcement, made in the opening sentence of their preface to the *Volsunga saga* translation (*Works*, VII 283), that what they are offering the reader is 'the great Epic of the North'. In the final paragraph of the same preface they elaborate their meaning (286):

This is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks—to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been—a story too—then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.

Clearly this passage indicates a sense of kindred between all the Germanic peoples of northern Europe, for whom the Volsung story is conceived as providing a common literary bond; in this respect the writers are to some extent aligning themselves with the movement known as pan-Germanism, which exerted so profound an influence on Richard Wagner in his handling of the same material in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Árni Björnsson 2003, 68–117). Their remarks, however, should not be understood as indicating a racist chauvinism of the north: in the first place Morris's admiration for the epics of the Mediterranean, discussed above and demonstrated by his translations of Homer and Virgil, shines through the comments about the tale of Troy; in addition, the remarks are striking for the emphasis they put on the fact that 'our race' will in due course become 'nothing more than a name'—except that it will also be a story. If there is any implied satisfaction in the achievements of the northern European peoples, the great imperial powers of the nineteenth century, it is no more than that they will in time become the subject of one story among others. Perhaps one may say 'one epic among others'.

The use of the term 'epic' in the context of the industrial and imperial world of the Victorian age has been problematized by several critics, especially in connection with *The Story of Sigurd*, Morris's own attempt to write a poetic narrative on the subject of 'the great Epic of the North' (see the unsigned article from the *International Review* reprinted in Faulkner 1973, 263–67, and Dentith 1999). Dentith in particular sees it as paradoxical that a poet who was one of the most committed to the

values of epic should also have been one of the most admirable critics of the British empire. Morris makes it clear, however, that what he means by epic, in connection with his *Volsunga saga* translation, is radically at odds with the pomp of empire. The verse prologue specifies that ‘the North’, to which this epic pertains, is primarily represented by Iceland (*Works*, VII 289):

O hearken, ye who speak the English Tongue,
How in a waste land ages long ago,
The very heart of the North bloomed into song
After long brooding o’er this tale of woe!
Hearken, and marvel how it might be so.

Far from being an epic of empire and power it is the expression of those who have neither—nor do they have industry or material assets of any kind (289):

Or rather marvel not, that those should cling
Unto the thoughts of great lives passed away,
Whom God has stripped so bare of everything,
Save the one longing to wear through their day,
In fearless wise.

It has already been noted that the idea of greatness passing away and becoming a story is crucial to Morris’s concept of epic as expressed in the preface; so it is fitting, according to Morris’s view of things, that the Great Story of the North should be produced by a people destitute of everything except endurance and the gift of story-telling. Nor is the story that they tell, after long brooding, one that hankers for the power and riches that they lack; rather it is, as the penultimate line of the verse prologue puts it, a tale ‘Of utter love defeated utterly’ (290). It is an epic of defeat, therefore, and this is exactly what one would expect, according to Morris’s view; for the place where the heart of the North bloomed into song is characterized, in ‘Iceland First Seen’ (*Works*, IX 126), as the land ‘of the courage that may not avail, / Of the longing that may not attain, / of the love that shall never forget’—and it is in this context that Brynhildr is taken to be its emblem.

Even though the kind of epic conceived by Morris belongs to the poor and is an epic of defeat, it is nevertheless grand; this fact has consequences for the kind of language to be used in the *Volsunga saga* translation (and in the other translations from Old Norse, though the issue is particularly relevant to this work). The archaic diction and syntax employed by Morris, and the terms he coined on the basis of etymological connections, have always been the focus of criticism: see,

for example, the 1870 review written by G. A. Simcox with the help of Guðbrandur Vigfússon (Faulkner 1973, 152–56) and the comments by Eiríkr himself printed in May Morris’s introduction to the 1911 edition (*Works*, VII xvii–xix). There are two main objections to Morris’s language, the first being that it misrepresents the style of saga prose, which would not have seemed archaic to the audience for which it was written, and the second being that it puts an obstacle in the way of the modern reader who, as Morris and Eiríkr were aware and as discussed above, already has to cope with much strangeness on encountering the narrative. In connection with the first point, however, it should be acknowledged that much saga prose, in the original Old Icelandic, has a peculiar dignity which cannot be reproduced in modern English; a really close translation will inevitably be stiff, choppy, and strange, whilst one in free-flowing colloquial language will miss the lapidary quality of the original and falsify its style just as much as Morris does, though in a different way. Although it is out of fashion, therefore, there is still something to be said for Morris’s solution. There is insufficient room here for a full discussion, but the point may be illustrated with an example drawn from the final dialogue between Brynhildr and Sigurðr, which Morris so admired: *‘Heldr en þú deyir, vil ek þik eiga, en fyrirláta Guðrúnu,’ segir Sigurðr, en svá þrútnuðu hans síður at í sundr gengr brynjuhringar* (Finch 1965, 56). Finch’s well-respected translation renders this as follows (56): “‘Rather than you should die, I’ll marry you and leave Gudrun,’ said Sigurd, and his breast so heaved that the links of his hauberk snapped.’ Compare this with Morris’s rendering of the same passage (*Works*, VII 362): “‘Rather than thou die, I will wed thee, and put away Gudrun,’ said Sigurd. But therewithal so swelled the heart betwixt the sides of him, that the rings of his byrny burst asunder.’ Is the version by the modern scholar self-evidently better in either tone or accuracy of meaning? Morris has in fact managed to retain more of the Icelandic wording; also the climactic rhythm of the final clause and its onomatopoeic alliteration are rather fine, whilst the rendering of *en* as ‘but’, rather than Finch’s ‘and’, captures more fully the dramatic irony of Sigurðr’s emotions, since he actually loves Guðrún to some extent, and thus it makes better sense of Brynhildr’s immediate response, which is to dismiss Sigurðr in anger.

The second objection to Morris’s language, concerning the obstacles it places in the way of easy comprehension, is more damaging, however, for it is true that Morris is often likely to confuse a reader who is not already immersed in medieval literature. Again a single example must

suffice here: in the interpolated poem which shows Guðrún lamenting over the body of Sigurðr, Morris makes Brynhildr curse the woman ‘Who gained greeting / For thee, O Gudrun’ (*Works*, VII 372). Here the word ‘greeting’ (= ‘weeping’) translates the Old Norse *grátr* (*Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta*, 23), so Morris has adopted an archaic word, which now survives only in Scots and northern dialects,⁶ for the sake of alliteration and of using a term etymologically related to the original; but he has done so at the cost of possibly being misunderstood. It must be conceded, nevertheless, that in other contexts Morris’s interest in etymology and his love of recovering uncommon usages may result in creative and illuminating amplifications of the text, for example when he makes Brynhildr, speaking to Sigurðr in their final interview, say, ‘I might not see clearly, or divide the good from the evil’ (*Works*, VII 360), rendering *fekk ek þó eigi víst skilit* (Finch 1965, 55). Eiríkr’s additional endnote (*Works*, VII 484) says that the phrase ‘or divide the good from the evil’ is not in the original; this is correct, but Morris’s amplification is one appropriate to Brynhildr’s state of mind in the context and it is prompted by the fact that the basic meaning of the verb *skilja* (here ‘to discern’) is ‘to divide, separate’. By introducing the idea with this justification, furthermore, Morris has managed to touch on a theme that would be of major significance in his re-working of the story in his *Sigurd* poem, as discussed below.

The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs (*Works* XII) was begun in October 1875 and appeared in November 1876, though the book is dated 1877.⁷ For several years after publishing the *Volsunga saga* translation Morris had hesitated over the attempt to make a new poem out of the saga material, in part because he thought ‘no verse could render the best parts of it, and would only be a flatter and tamer version of a thing already existing’, as he said in the letter to C. E. Norton mentioned above (quoted by Paul Thompson 1977, 200). There is little that is flat or tame about the *Sigurd* poem as he eventually wrote it, however. Wisely, he chose not to compete with the saga on its own terms but to give the story an essentially novelistic treatment, especially in the middle two books of the four, filling out the thoughts and emotions of the characters and floating the narrative on a stream of incidental details. For the verse he adopted a line already used in ‘Iceland First Seen’, a predominantly anapaestic hexameter with its caesura falling

⁶ *OED* sub *greeting*, *vbl. n.*²

⁷ From this point on, names of characters will be spelled as they appear in the poem.

almost always after the third foot, which is frequently followed by an extra syllable. It is an incantatory measure, heavily accented but variable enough when read intelligently as if out loud, and capable of sustaining long sweeps of narrative or description. Particularly impressive among the many evocative descriptions are the opening sequence, which brings the dwelling of King Volsung before the reader's eyes (*Works*, XII 1–2) and the ascent of Sigurd to the Glittering Heath (102–08) through a landscape reminiscent of Iceland, which Morris had seen for himself in 1871 and again in 1873. The line is well adapted, also, to be the vehicle for elevated set-piece speeches such as Signy's prophecy of *ragnarök* and the renewal of the world (22–23) or Regin's power-crazed rant when he pictures himself as possessor of the magic gold (88–89). If the poetry does flatten out and grow tame anywhere it is in the love scenes between Sigurd and Brynhild (147–48) or Sigurd and Gudrun (180–81), which are decidedly Victorian; but the scene of casual sex between Sigmund and his sister (29), in contrast, is thoroughly impressive though by no means sensationalist.

On the whole the story shadows that of the saga and the corresponding poems of the *Edda*, but some changes have been made for the sake of consistent characterization and sustained drama. In the fourth book, for example, Gudrun vindictively encourages her second spouse, Atli, to take action against her brothers for the slaying of her first husband, Sigurd, as she does in *Das Nibelungenlied* but not in the Icelandic tradition. Thus Morris completes his picture of a woman who is led by emotion, whose loving but dangerous nature is indicated by her jealousy, soon after she has met Sigurd and before she knows anything of his relationship with Brynhild, when she perceives that he longs for someone else 'and her heart grows cold as a sword' (163), and concerning whose passionate nature the narrator, putting the thought into Sigurd's mind, says, 'From the heart of a loving woman shall the death of men arise' (205). Other changes seem to have been made so as to preserve the heroic dignity of the characters; hence Morris emphasizes Sigmund's lupine nature in the account of the fight with the she-wolf (21) and makes it clear that Sigmund fought with his teeth while his hands were still fast in the stocks, but he omits the saga's comic grotesquery concerning the fact that Sigmund bit the tongue of the wolf while she was licking honey off his face. Though willing to relate the incestuous union of Sigmund and Signy, furthermore, he preserves some of the Victorian proprieties concerning cruelty to children: Gudrun does not kill the sons she has had with Atli, as she does in the saga; nor is there any mention of Sigurd's

infant son, whom the saga says was killed at Brynhild's instigation and who shared their funeral pyre; and the Sigmund of the poem, unlike the same figure in the saga, does not kill the son (singular) of Signy and Siggeir when the boy fails the test of the flour bag, but sends him home to his parents (25–26). In making the last-mentioned change, it should be noted, Morris not only gives Sigmund a more sympathetic nature but also brings his behaviour into line with that revealed by his later refusal, in the poem (36) as in the saga, to kill the children who discover his hiding-place in King Siggeir's hall—though in this case the outrage is then committed by the wild and grim Sinfiotli.

As in the Old Norse sources, the gods play a role that is by no means morally unambiguous or benevolent. The appropriate attitude to be shown towards them is outlined by Brynhild in the advice she gives Sigurd at their first meeting (127):

Love thou the Gods—and withstand them, lest thy fame should fail in the end,
And thou be but their thrall and their bondsman, who wert born for their very
friend.

By implying that the gods can be tyrannical, Brynhild partly agrees with their enemy Regin, who tells Sigurd that Loki 'gathered his god-head together' in order to kill Otter because he recognized in him 'a king of the free and the careless' (77). Sigurd, however, gives his allegiance to the gods as their friend in accordance with Brynhild's words: when he meets Odin, Sigurd declares that he will slay Fafnir for the god's sake, and adds, 'I love thee, friend of my fathers, Wise Heart of the holy folk' (109); and he addresses Regin as 'Foe of the Gods' moments before cutting off his head (117). In striking the blows against Regin and Fafnir, Sigurd is performing acts that the gods themselves cannot, for apart from their one ill-judged adventure concerning the kindred of Otter, they exhibit a strange passivity. The value of their friendship, furthermore, is to be doubted. As the dying Fafnir says with the percipience of the fey (111):

I have seen the Gods of heaven, and their Norns withal I know:
They love and withhold their helping, they hate and refrain the blow;
They curse and they may not sunder, they bless and they shall not blend;
They have fashioned the good and the evil; they abide the change and the end.

The gods, in fact, function chiefly as an audience within the narrative itself (and thus exemplify the concept of the world as story, discussed below). This can be seen best in the passage that describes the moment when Sigurd, now married to Gudrun, sees Brynhild enter the Niblung hall for the first time, recognizes her as the power of Grimhild's magic

potion passes off, and understands that he must carry the burden of his knowledge ‘till the last of the uttermost end’ (200–01):

The Gods look down from heaven, and the lonely King they see,
And sorrow over his sorrow, and rejoice in his majesty.
For the will of the Norns is accomplished, and outworn is Grimhild’s spell,
And nought now shall blind or help him, and the tale shall be to tell.

In many ways Sigurd is presented as a conventional hero of a type likely to appeal to an ethically-minded Victorian readership. He is the golden boy (102, 160), in fact a nineteenth-century solar hero (Hodgson 1999, 78), as is shown especially by his transfiguration before the dragon slaying, when Regin turns from the newly risen sun and beholds Sigurd as ‘another light’ (106). He is one to whom guile is alien (101) and who is troubled, after tasting the dragon’s blood, when he perceives the guile and malice of the world (115). At his birth, furthermore, it is recognized that ‘the best was sprung from the best’ (63) and he becomes his people’s hope and joy (65–67); later the Niblungs, whom he has joined, celebrate him as a bringer of law and order, of peace, freedom, and prosperity (161):

Yea, they sing the song of Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And they sing of the prison’s rending and the tyrant laid alow, [. . .]
And they tell how the ships of the merchants come free and go at their will,
And how wives in peace and safety may crop the vine-clad hill.

Even when his sorrow has fallen on him and he finds himself having to share the Niblung hall with Brynhild and her husband, he is all the more ‘the helper, the overcomer, the righteous sundering sword’ and ‘the eye-bright seer of all things, that wasteth every wrong’; and although he has become a kind of moral enforcer he remains ‘the loveliest King of the King-folk’—‘and all children loved him well’ (205–06).

It is clear, nevertheless, that Sigurd, though an almost messianic figure, is only a ‘straightener of the crooked’ (206) in piecemeal fashion. The world as seen by Morris, in this period when he was becoming actively involved in politics (he became treasurer of the liberal Eastern Question Association in November 1876) but was still several years away from his adoption of Marxism (he joined the Democratic Federation in January 1883), is not capable of total and permanent transformation for the better through human means. Such a transformation belongs to the mythological *ragnarøk* which no power can either delay or hasten, for even the gods, having made the good and the evil as Fafnir says (111, quoted above), wait for the change and the end. In this poem, in fact, Morris repudiates those who wish to bring about the wholesale

reformation of life and its conditions, for he portrays them as self-glorifying and self-deceiving. Hence Grimhild, who ‘deemed her life was great, / And her hand a wonder of wonders’ (166), imagines that her potions will enable her to do better than the gods (166):

For she thought: I will heal the smitten, I will raise up the smitten and slain,
And take heed where the Gods were heedless, and build on where they began,
And frame hope for the unborn children and the coming days of man.

In reality, however, all she does is create ‘the eyeless tangle’ (222) that enmeshes Sigurd and her own royal kin. Similarly and more chillingly, Regin imagines that if he can once obtain the accursed gold, on which his brother Fafnir is lying in dragon form, he will become the unique god who will have absolute control of a grateful world. Nothing at all would be done, he thinks, ‘but the deed that my heart would fashion’ (89):

And there shall be no more dying, and the sea shall be as the land,
And the world for ever and ever shall be young beneath my hand.

Against this vision of a totalitarian paradise, Sigurd, Regin’s slayer, chooses the gods and the extant world with all its violence, its potential for peace and plenty, its good and its evil. He says to Regin, who fears that death may come upon him before the gold has been obtained (106):

It is me, it is me that thou fearest, if indeed I know thy thought;
Yes me, who would utterly light the face of all good and ill,
If not with the fruitful beams that the summer shall fulfill,
Then at least with the world a-blazing, and the glare of the grinded sword.

Contrasted with Sigurd, the warrior who illuminates good and ill in battle, is his killer, Guttorm, who returns from seafaring ‘and is waxen fierce and strong, / A man in the wars delighting, blind-eyed through right and wrong’ (202). The ability to perceive good and ill, and to distinguish them, is crucial: it is what Sigurd temporarily loses in ‘the eyeless tangle’, and even when his memory returns and he can see all things clearly, the situation left behind by Grimhild’s plot, as Sigurd understands it, is such that ‘seared is the sight of the wise, / And good is at one with evil till the new-born death shall arise’ (205)—the death in question being that of Sigurd himself, and of Brynhild who brings it about. It is with reference to the same situation in the *Volsunga saga* translation, in fact, that Morris had made Brynhild say that she could not see clearly ‘or divide the good from the evil’ (*Works*, VII 360), as discussed above. Making good and evil indistinguishable, furthermore, is presented in the *Sigurd* poem as the worst of actions, for it is not only Grimhild’s crime but also the thing to which Fafnir and Regin aspired, as

shown by the fact that Sigurd, having destroyed them, characterizes them in death not as evildoers but as those who ‘would blend the good and the ill’ (*Works*, XII 117). As to his own destruction, it is not clear whether Sigurd looks ahead to it merely as the result of the situation in which good is at one with evil, or also as a possible remedy for it; but when the moment of death comes, he certainly looks back on his life (and forward to the telling of it as a tale) and sees it as it is. ‘I have done and I may not undo,’ he says, but ‘nought now is left to repent of, and the tale abides to tell’ (230).

Sigurd’s thoughts concerning the eventual tale do not simply represent the heroic wish for fame at whatever cost, as perhaps Hogni’s do when he says that he will ride the steed of the Norns ‘till he see great marvels and wonders, and leave great tales to be told’ (203); rather they echo and answer the words spoken by Fafnir as he prepares to transform himself into a dragon and do nothing other than lie on the accursed hoard (86):

Lo, I am a King for ever, and alone on the Gold shall I dwell
And do no deed to repent of and leave no tale to tell.

It is a neat irony that in taking this course of action Fafnir fulfils the injunction mockingly laid by his father, Reidmar, on Odin (80):

Then curse the world, and depart, and sit in your changeless mirth;
And there shall be no more kings, and battle and murder shall fail,
And the world shall laugh and long not, nor weep, nor fashion the tale.

Against the backdrop of these speeches it is clear that to Sigurd, the friend of the gods, as opposed to Fafnir and Reidmar, their enemies, it is better that there should be a tale than that the world should be free of weeping, battle or murder—even murder of himself. One of the morals of this, it would seem, is that passivity is not an option, except possibly for the gods in their role as audience (and hence for us in our role as readers), even though action will implicate the actor in guilt and involve him or her in pain; another is that a part of acting in the world must be the transformation of actions into narrative. This much is clear and certain, but we may be able to go further, albeit cautiously, since Morris makes one notable foray into the realm of the eschatological.⁸ Early in the poem he makes Signy steel her brother Sigmund to face the years of

⁸ Eschatology, the study of ‘the last things’, may be characterized as an attempt to describe the world as it ought to be but has not yet become. Eschatological thinking is predominantly religious but has clear relevance to some political systems such as Marxism.

strife and hardship ahead by picturing him at *ragnarøk*; as the fight begins, she says, he will review the history known to him, and though he will have a clearer understanding of why things happen as they do, this will not change the categories of good and ill, which will remain distinct to his perception (22):

There as thou drawest thy sword, thou shalt think of the days that were,
And the foul shall still seem foul, and the fair shall still seem fair.

Even after the transfiguration of the world, when the last battle has ended and Baldur has returned, the memories of this life, as it now is, will remain clear and be transformed into story (22–23):

By the side of the sons of Odin shalt thou fashion a tale to be told
In the hall of the happy Baldur: nor there shall the tale grow old
Of the days before the changing, e'en those that over us pass.

To put this in other words, Signy imagines that the essential nature of the world as it ought to be in its refashioned state will be one that preserves the essence of the present world by transforming it into narrative, and in which this narrative transformation has become the sole remaining act. The passage needs to be treated circumspectly because it is a piece of rhetoric put into the mouth of a peculiarly grim woman and elaborates some elements of a mythology in which Morris, of course, did not believe; nevertheless it is in no way at odds with the rest of the poem, and it serves to show us how the theme of the perception of good and ill might be combined with that of the transformation of events into narrative, and how the two might then be taken to their logical, or at least their eschatological, conclusion. If we take this aspect of the passage seriously, we find Morris putting forward, on his own terms, the Aesthetes' idea that the world exists for art, and perhaps anticipating the modern idea that its essential nature is that of a linguistic construct—the world as narrative. On the ethical and political levels, finally, it may be seen that the eschatological vision of the poem has little in common with the Marxists' end of history, to which Morris would subsequently give his allegiance, and even less with the Christians' New Jerusalem, which is more like Regin's dream of a place where all thoughts are happy, grateful, and centred on an absolute monarch; instead it is akin to what Nietzsche would later call a *yea-saying*, in this case one in which the world, with all its good and ill, its foul and fair, is perceived and affirmed in a narrative that is forever repeated and renewed.

In the remaining twenty years of his life, Morris changed his politics and shifted the focus of his literary output to prose, in which he produced,

among other important works, the romances that initiated the genre now known as fantasy, but he never repudiated *Sigurd* or ceased to regard it as the book ‘he held most highly and wished to be remembered by’, according to his daughter May (*Works*, XII xxiii). Many admirers of Morris have agreed with the poet’s own valuation of *Sigurd*, and no doubt there are many reasons for this, but there are two that make the judgement especially appropriate. The first is that *Sigurd*, in execution, is the most accomplished essay in refashioning by a man for whom the refashioning of existent tales was the chief mode of his poetic creativity, and who gave the idea of narrative transformation so prominent a place in his writings—above all in this poem itself. The second reason is that the Old Norse material that Morris was here seeking to make new is the story that he judged to be ‘the best tale pity ever wrought’ and in fact ‘the grandest tale that was ever told’, irrespective of language or culture. In addition there is the fact that for Morris, who came to regard Old Norse-Icelandic culture so highly and who put so much effort into making its literature available in English, the story of the Volsungs was the quintessential product of that culture, the one that appeared when ‘the very heart of the North bloomed into song’. As to whether *Sigurd* is likely to be the literary work for which Morris will chiefly be remembered, this is more doubtful because some of his political pieces and romances are strong contenders in an age with little interest in narrative verse. Anyone with an interest in Old Norse, however, really ought to take a good look at this poem. The saga translations have grown old—indeed one could say that they were born old—although several, including that of *Volsunga saga*, have acquired a new lease of life on the internet; but *Sigurd*, with its length and complex nature, has the quality of all great poems: although the printed text is fixed, the telling is made new every time it is read.

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