VI

'The Undying Glory of Dreams':
William Morris and the 'Northland of Old'

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'I am touched by your kindness about my poetry', wrote William Morris in 1883 to Georgiana Burne-Jones. 'Though I admit that I am a conceited man, yet I really don't think anything I have done (when I consider it as I should another man's work) of any value except to myself: except as showing my sympathy with history and the like.' The concern of Lady Burne-Jones had been aroused by the fact that William Morris, after many years of notable fecundity, had almost completely ceased to compose in verse: although in 1883 part of his considerable poetic output remained to be published, only The Pilgrims of Hope and a handful of socialist songs were yet to be written. The reason, as Morris gives it in that letter, was sheer disillusionment with poetry as a relevant literary form. Not merely his own but all poetry, together with what he called 'the hand-arts', seemed to him to have become unreal, so that 'the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again'. Meanwhile, though he still derived pleasure from composing verse, personal and political preoccupations combined to outweigh his 'mere inclination to do what I know is unimportant work'.

It would clearly be foolish to accept as Morris's final, balanced judgement this despondent evaluation; but it is interesting that the feature which he regarded as the saving grace of his poetical works was their value 'as showing my sympathy with history'. This sympathy, which some critics have seen rather as an obsession with the past, is revealed throughout Morris's life and work. He is reputed to have begun at the age of four to read the Waverley novels, which he

continued to re-read throughout his life; and of his education at Marlborough he claimed that

I learned next to nothing there, for indeed next to nothing was taught; but the place is in very beautiful country, thickly scattered over with prehistoric monuments, and I set myself eagerly to studying these and everything else that had any history in it.3

A letter written from school to his sister Emma reveals that his knowledgeable enthusiasm was as great for medieval church architecture as for pre-historic monuments.4 Indeed, the influence of Gothic architecture on Morris’s vision of the Middle Ages was very important and profound, suggesting as it did ideas of purity, strength and noble aspiration. This is clearly brought out in one of William Morris’s early essays in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine on the cathedral at Amiens:

I think those same churches of North France the grandest, the most beautiful, the kindest and most loving of all the buildings that the earth has ever borne; and, thinking of their past-away builders, can I see through them, very faintly, dimly, some little of the medieval times, else dead, and gone from me for ever,—voiceless for ever.5

Thanks to this intuitive appreciation of medieval architecture, and to his avid reading of Scott’s novels and other historical romances, William Morris went up to Oxford in 1853 with a mind predisposed to the sort of romantic medievalism which was fostered by Tennyson’s Arthurian poems, and was to be illustrated by many Pre-Raphaelite paintings. (Morris’s enthusiasm for Tennyson’s early poetry, up to and including Maud, is vouched for by his friend Canon Dixon,6 but Morris and all his friends found the poetry which Tennyson published after 1855 sadly disappointing. This is very clear in a letter Morris wrote in 1872, in which he says: ‘I suppose you see that Tennyson is publishing another little lot of Arthurian legend. We all know pretty well what it will be; and I confess I don’t look forward to it.’) Morris’s prescribed studies in Classics formed the least important part of his university career. He did the minimum of work required to take only a pass degree, and his reading of Latin and Greek seemed completely without influence on his imaginative development: when later he wrote poems on classical themes, and even when he trans-

2 Mackail, I, pp. 5-11. 3 Letters, p. 185. 4 Ibid., p. 4. 5 February 1850. 6 Mackail, I, pp. 44 f. 7 Letters, p. 49.
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lated Virgil and Homer, he did so with an implicitly medievalist approach; this announces itself clearly in the medieval title, *The Aeneids*, which he gave to his translation of Virgil. Morris himself said that:

I by nature turn to Romance rather than classicalism, and naturally, without effort, shrink from rhetoric. I may say that I am fairly steeped in medievalism generally.\(^8\)

The time William Morris spent at Oxford was chiefly valuable for the friendships he made there, notably with Edward Burne-Jones, with whom he shared and extended his enthusiasm for and knowledge of poetry, theology, architecture and ancient myth and history, and through whom in 1856 he met Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Especially important to Morris's career was his discovery, while at Oxford, of Chaucer, Malory and Froissart, whose works supplied the primary influence on the matter of Morris's earliest original compositions. This is revealed mainly in *The Defence of Guenevere* and the poems published with it in 1858, and in Morris's prose contributions to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* during 1856. Twenty-five years later Morris described this work as 'exceedingly young and very medieval';\(^9\) young it certainly is, with both the faults and the vitality of youth, but its medievalism is very largely of a kind accepted at that time as a recognized part of a poetic convention represented by much of Scott's poetry and by Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.

When medieval influence on Morris's work is considered, there is a tendency to remember the old gibes of Henley and of Vigfusson and York Powell about his 'Wardour Street English' or 'pseudo-Middle-English'; in fact, these criticisms were levelled primarily at the language of Morris's translations from Old Norse. It seems worthwhile to invoke the translations here, partly for contrast with the style of his early original work, but partly also to bring out an aspect of Morris's attitude to his work which remained constant throughout his career. When Morris in 1895 wrote, in the latter part of his translation of *Heimskringla*, 'I wot not but that thou deemest thyself now my loafward', or 'No man should fare with weapons in cheaping-steads sackless',\(^10\) his experiments in reproducing as closely as possible the

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\(^8\) Mackail, I, p. 197.  
\(^9\) Letters, p. 186.  
\(^10\) These quotations, from pp. 395 and 380 respectively of *Saga Library*, V, represent the Old Norse: 'Vetka ek, nema þú þykktik nú minn lúvarðr', and '... engi miðr skyldi fara med våpni í kaupstöðum at öskjju.'
language of the original saga created a vocabulary quite unlike that of the *Defence of Guenevere* poems. These early pieces contain plenty of heaumes and hauberks, glaives and garths, dastards and damozels, but the diction never goes beyond the permitted archaism of poetic convention, based largely on ballad usage, nor does it cause any confusion or difficulty to the average reader. The archaisms are there almost entirely to describe archaic referents inseparable from the medieval setting of the poems; there is no dedicated attempt to medievalize the whole vocabulary, and there is little or no distortion of the modern syntax. In strong contrast is Morris's regrettable attempt, in 1892-4, to write a poetic translation of *Beowulf*. His explicit reason for embarking on the project was that no-one could appreciate *Beowulf* in the versions at that time available, yet Morris's own version taxes the comprehension of anyone not familiar with the Anglo-Saxon original, abounding as it does in lines such as

There me gainst the loathly the body-sark mine,  
The hard and the hand-locked, was framing me help,  
My battle-rail braided, it lay on my breast  
Gear'd graithly with gold.

It is not perhaps surprising that when Morris's collaborator, the scholar A. J. Wyatt, who provided him with a literal prose translation to work from, saw the finished version, he hurriedly suggested that it be printed with an extensive glossary. Significantly, Morris reacted with hurt surprise:

*I thought that all we wanted was a few very unusual words taken from M.E. such as brim or worth, and perhaps one or two sentences, though I think these would mostly explain themselves by the context except the few words aforesaid, almost all in the glossary I should not hesitate to use in an original poem of my own, you see; and I don't think it would need a glossary.*

As eventually published, the glossary comprises seventy-eight items including such words as *brook* for 'to use', *lithe* for 'a slope', *railings* for 'armour', and *wise* for 'to direct', together with many others more obviously esoteric but less confusing to the reader, since they are merely unknown instead of misleading.

This is a far cry from the mild medieval flavour of the language of

11 *Letters*, p. 351.  
the *Defence* volume, where the basic vocabulary has the timelessness of extreme simplicity; but the early poems do reflect one of Morris's basic attitudes to his literary work which is also revealed very clearly in the letter to Wyatt concerning the *Beowulf* translation. The significant point is Morris's complete failure to realize that in the latter work he was not writing in a language which could be readily comprehended. The failure underlines a quality in Morris of self-sufficiency and an egocentricity that had little to do with selfishness. Morris, it is plain, throughout his career wrote primarily for his own personal pleasure, secondarily for a close circle of admiring friends; if he considered his wider readership at all, it was with the assumption that the readers' tastes and abilities matched his own, so that what was plain to him must be equally obvious to them, and no concessions to possible ignorance need be made. While this is most conspicuous in the effectively private language of the translations, it is implicit too in the way in which, in much of his early work, Morris omits all explanation of setting or situation, hinting at rather than telling a story. For example, in one of the best and best-known poems from *The Defence*, 'The Haystack in the Floods', there is no explanation of why the lovers are fleeing or from whom, or precisely why Jehane is in danger of being burned or drowned if she returns to Paris. It would, I am sure, be wrong, since 'The Haystack in the Floods' has a remarkable immediacy and concreteness, to suggest that it was Morris's intention to mystify the reader, though he could when he wished evoke a sense of mystery (quite another matter), as in 'Rapunzel' and 'The Blue Closer', not to mention the prose romance, *The Hollow Land*. One could argue more cogently that Morris was less interested in the construction of a story than in the behaviour of his characters within the contrived situation, their solution to the dilemma of life and death. But further, since William Morris knew in his own mind the answers to these questions, he was unable to envisage uncertainty on the part of the reader. He was justified in his expectation that the reader would appreciate his intentions, since at least the setting of most of the early poetry and prose, specific usually in neither time nor place, requires no specialized knowledge to expand the hints given; it is generally part of the familiar chivalric never-never-land of Malory, Spenser and Tennyson.
Both the method of displaying character in a climactic situation and the wide range of verse forms in *The Defence of Guenevere*—dramatic monologue, ballad, lyric, fragments of poetic drama—suggest comparison with the work of Browning above all others. It is interesting, finding that Morris himself recognized the resemblance, to know that he wrote, with reference to Browning’s *Men and Women*,

In fact it does not often help poems to *solve* them, because there are in poems so many exquisitely small and delicate turns of thought running through their music, and along with it, that cannot be done into prose. (*Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, March 1856).

Yet the satisfactions of Morris’s own poetry, which make ‘solution’ irrelevant, are, despite some notably musical verses in such simple lyrics as those scattered in *The Hollow Land*, less musical than visual, since even when scenes are undefined there is an insistence on colour which has considerable visual impact. The effects are rarely subtle: there is a certain childlike love of pageantry and brilliance, in clear, heraldic colours. Blood spills on daffodils or on golden gilliflowers, damsels in purple and green watch the scarlet pennons of their knights, and:

The silver cups beside her stand;
The golden stars on the blue roof
Yet glitter. (*Spellbound*)

The colours move in formal procession or mingle in the organized tumult of the tournament lists, scenes taken from manuscript illuminations, with added suggestions of undeveloped symbolism. The brief poem ‘Near Avalon’ epitomizes these qualities:

A ship with shields before the sun,
Six maidsens round the mast,
A red-gold crown on every one,
A green gown on the last.

The fluttering green banners there
Are wrought with ladies’ heads most fair,
And a portraiture of Guenevere
The middle of each sail doth bear.

13 Mackail, I, p. 132.
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A ship with sails before the wind,
And round the helm six knights,
Their heaumes are on, whereby, half blind,
They pass by many sights.

The tatter'd scarlet banners there,
Right soon will leave the spear-heads bare,
Those six knights sorrowfully bear
In all their heaumes some yellow hair.

For the most part the picture presented is of a rather general vividness, but Morris can also display closely observed detail of background or ornament in a way reminiscent of the finest medieval tapestry work, such as *La Dame à La Licorne*, or of some of the work of Morris's Pre-Raphaelite 'brothers', for example Holman Hunt's painting of *The Lady of Shalott* (Plate 2), or Millais's *Lorenzo y Isabella*. Sometimes in Morris's poems a single detail may be used to evoke, without any further sketching in of background, a complete picture, as when in Sir Peter Harpdon's summary of the political situation in fourteenth-century Europe there is a sudden concretion in the visual, almost tactile image of the lines:

Edward the king is dead, at Westminster
The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.

On the other hand, in 'The Wind' for example, the detail may be part of a fuller scene-setting, which it brings into sharp focus:

For my chair is heavy and carved, and with sweeping green behind it is hung, and the dragons thereon grin out in the gusts of the wind;
On its folds an orange lies, with a deep gash cut in its rind.

Yet this precision of detail is constantly at war with an all-pervasive and essential vagueness:

I knew them by the arms that I was used to paint
Upon their long thin shields; but the colours were all grown faint,
And faint upon their banner was Olaf, king and saint.

In their immediate context these last lines describe 'the ghosts of those that had gone to the war', but more generally they evoke the sense of remoteness in presence which is the property of faery. It
is the same sense so superbly conveyed in the Middle English lay of
_Sir Orfeo_, when

> bę king ọ fairy wǐp his rout
> Com to hunt him āl about
> Wǐp dim cri & bloweings.

We have an impression of two worlds co-existent yet totally without
contact, of an arbitrary and invisible barrier. It is a dream, in which
the dreamer observes, but is unable to influence or perhaps even to
comprehend events. The elliptical presentation of narrative contributes
powerfully to this atmosphere of dream or of faery, whose logic is not
that of the waking, human world. The unexplained deaths of Margaret
in ‘The Wind’ and of Jehane du Castel Beau in the poem ‘Golden
Wings’ produce a rather nightmarish sense of ineluctable Fate, and
even the most elaborately plotted pieces, such as the strange and beau-
tiful prose romance of _The Hollow Land_, leave questions maddeningly
unanswered, backgrounds bewilderingly blank. It is of course a critical
commonplace to describe William Morris as a dreamer, but it is none-
theless true, and it was he who called himself, in the _Envoi to The
Earthly Paradise_, ‘Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time’, and
wrote that ‘My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or
another’. As one would expect from the dreams of a romantic
medievalist, the situations are nearly all variations on the theme of
love—love unrequited, love passionately returned in defiance of
society, the lover deserted, or the couple divided (or undivided) by
death. Again as one would expect, a tragic or pathetic dénouement
is chosen whenever possible.

All these tendencies of Morris’s early work are most clearly epitom-
ized not in one of the poems, but in an ink and pencil drawing which
he made during the same period (c. 1857). This represents Iscult on the
ship—a classic type of tragic love—in very simple flowing draperies,
the visual monochrome equivalent of the simple primary colours of
the verse. There is a suggestion in one or two places that the figure is
not quite finished, yet on the turned-back lining of one sleeve Morris
has lavished a wealth of meticulously detailed ornament to represent
embroidery. This elaboration contrasts strangely with the complete
lack of definition of the background, where a few faint lines hint at

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15 _Letters_, p. 17.
the high side of the ship, so that Iseult becomes a figure isolated in a dream.

It would be superficial, however, to classify all the poems in The Defence of Guenevere as belonging to a romantic dream of the Middle Ages: a small and most interesting group of poems in this volume presents a quite different vision of that period. These derive their inspiration rather from Froissart than from Malory, and Froissart, despite a certain idealism about chivalry, chronicled with directness deeds of treachery and brutality. The most important poem of this group is 'The Haystack in the Floods'. On the surface, it shares romantic features typical of the Defence poems: the central situation, only hazily accounted for, is common to 'The Little Tower', 'Concerning Geoffray Teste Noire' and the prose Golden Wings,16 where we similarly find lovers attempting to escape together from their society; in all but 'The Little Tower', which ends on a note of confidence, the outcome is the violent death of the man at least. Yet the difference in tone and effect in 'The Haystack in the Floods' is profound: the difference between romantic charade and chilling realism. This is particularly plain if the starkness of the poem is compared to the elaborate pageantry of Golden Wings, the final scene of which provides the closest parallel in plot. Lady Alys, in the prose romance, arms her knight for battle, with a tress of her hair for a favour on his helm; Jehane, conspicuously divorced from the role and behaviour appropriate to fair maidens,

rode astride as troopers do;
With kirtle kilted to her knee,
To which the mud splash'd wretchedly.

She endures not heroic trials but the sodden discomforts of 'dirt and rain' and numbed, frozen feet. The hero of Golden Wings performs prodigies of valour, supported by loyal companions sworn to a chivalrous defence of his lady, and although the details of his death are brutal, he goes to it with noble dignity after an exchange of passionate farewell embraces with Lady Alys. Robert, on the other hand, is permitted only one heroic gesture, which fails miserably when his own man, accepting defeat without a struggle, treacherously hand him over to Godmar. Thereafter, bound and gagged so that he cannot even utter noble defiance, reduced to a mere object, a bargaining counter, Robert

must wait ‘gloomily’ watching the rain for an hour while Jehane, with whom lies the option of saving him, does not agonize aloud about life and honour, but sleeps in utter exhaustion, ‘her head on a wet heap of hay’. Robert the romantic lover is forced

To part at last without a kiss
Beside the haystack in the floods.

Robert the heroic knight is rendered helpless before he can strike one blow, and is very callously dispatched by an efficient butcher, who robs him in the act of every last vestige of human dignity:

Right backward the knight Robert fell,
And moan’d as dogs do, being half dead,
Unwitting as I deem: so then
Godmar turn’d grinning to his men,
Who ran, some five or six, and beat
His head to pieces at their feet.

Morris in this poem is deliberately stripping all romance from the conventions he himself regularly uses romantically, the whole reductive process being symbolized by the setting—a ditch beside that epitome of the unromantic, a stack of ‘old, soak’d hay’.

Despite the immediacy of ‘The Haystack in the Floods’ and the impression Morris gives throughout the early work of being completely at home and deeply involved in the Middle Ages of his imagination, there is about almost all the poems a profound sense of distance produced by their construction. That they are set in historical or legendary times is largely irrelevant to the distancing process, since Morris had imaginatively made those times his own; it is far more significant that the characters who speak in these poems are looking back on what to them is the past. We are presented with climactic situations in which passionate emotions are revealed, but very frequently the climax is shown us by one of the protagonists through the perspective of memory, so that the passions which seem so turbulent are in fact petrified in the past. Thus in ‘The Wind’ the speaker ‘will sit and think of love that is over and past, O! so long ago’, and in ‘Shameful Death’ the narrator tells us:

I am threescore and ten,
And my hair is all turn’d grey,
But I met Sir John of the Fen
Long ago on a summer day,
And am glad to think of the moment when
I took his life away.

Even the title piece of *The Defence of Guenevere*, while treating vividly the intense moment of the Queen’s accusation, is for the most part concerned to trace the course, through Guenevere’s recollection of it, of her love-affair with Launcelot. One of the most complex examples of this distancing process occurs in ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’, where an old knight recalls a past campaign, an incident of which caused him at the time both to remember his first, much earlier experience of violence, and to reconstruct the story of the long-ago fight and flight of a pair of doomed lovers.

III

After the poor reception of *The Defence of Guenevere* in 1858, Morris turned for a while from writing poetry to concentrate his energies on work for ‘the Firm’ of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., and when he resumed, many of the qualities which had made the earlier volume—though uneven—powerful and exciting had gone for ever. The vigour, the lyrical intensity and above all the conciseness in vivid scene-painting had given way to leisurely and melodious sentimentality, while the dominant mode had changed from dramatic lyric to sustained verse narrative. If the earlier mode seemed to derive inspiration from the ballad, the later has more in common, particularly in its defects, with medieval romance.

*The Life and Death of Jason*, Morris’s next poetical work to be published (in 1867), was originally planned as part of *The Earthly Paradise*, on which he was working from 1866 to 1870, and although it outgrew this scheme by its sheer length, it shows most of the same characteristics of style and treatment as the shorter tales of the Wanderers and Elders, and can usefully be considered with them. Indeed, it served as a kind of sample for the later volumes, and Morris might well have hesitated to embark fully on the ambitious plan of *The Earthly Paradise* had the reception of *Jason* been less enthusiastic than was the case. It is ironical that *Jason*, enjoying immediate popularity and critical acclaim, should go rapidly through several editions while the vastly superior *Defence of Guenevere* sold only one edition in a dozen years.

In the plan of *The Earthly Paradise* the primary influence, quite
explicitly, is that of Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* provide the pattern of a frame-story bringing together the tellers of (in theory at least) a wide range of tales. Morris's Wanderers are, moreover, also pilgrims of a sort although, as the name he gives them indicates, their goal is of a very different kind. Chaucer's pilgrimage is an event within the framework of his contemporary society, undertaken by people whose social roles are as important in the poem as their personal characteristics. *The Earthly Paradise* opens with an injunction to the reader to forget contemporary life and dream of the fourteenth century, in which the Wanderers in their turn are seeking to escape from their society, not in any case an integrated culture; in their search, as in the Grail quest, to succeed is to be taken from the world, which can have no further relevance. Therefore the distancing process at work in *The Defence of Guenevere* is developed even further in *The Earthly Paradise*, where all the tales are told to a dramatic audience in the past by an often unidentified and always shadowy narrator, and all are specifically ancient tales even to their tellers. (This is true of many of the *Canterbury Tales*, set for example in the romantic days of 'thise olde gentil Britouns', but because the frame-story is both contemporary, functional and convincing, the distancing is very much less than in *The Earthly Paradise*.) Many of the tales contain further distancing devices of dream and recollection within the story. The supreme example is unquestionably 'The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon', of which a contemporary critic wrote:

Mr. Morris dreams of certain old mariners of Norway who dream of Gregory, who dreams of someone else, who he also dreams to be himself: and this two-faced Janus of a dreamer dreams of another dreamer still, who lives on the edge of two worlds, and like the old monk who sat before the Cenacolo, can hardly discriminate between the shadow and the substance.17

Morris directly invokes Chaucer as his master, both in *Jason* and in the Envoi to *The Earthly Paradise*, yet he was incapable of learning from him. Chaucer's dramatic gift—the ability to create characters whose opinions and tales are reflections of their personalities rather than his—is not shared by Morris; whichever of the Wanderers or Elders is supposed to be speaking, there is no significant difference in the manner of the narration, though the metre may change, and little

17 Quoted in Mackail, I, p. 207.
variation indeed in the kind of subject-matter, however widely distributed the source material. Moreover, where Chaucer provides a range of characters who are credible at once as individuals, as types, and as representatives of classes of society, Morris's Wanderers are precisely the 'hollow puppets' he speaks of in the Prologue. The stories should have been as richly varied as *The Canterbury Tales*, not through the mixture of genres—fabliau, romance, hagiography—as in Chaucer's work, but because they are drawn variously from classical, from Norse and from oriental sources. Since, however, Morris deliberately chose to present all these tales as he felt they would have been told in the fourteenth century, and since he instinctively selected the stories, from whatever source, for their romantic qualities, there is a sameness of tone throughout *The Earthly Paradise*. The expansive style of the romance displays in detail Morris's limitations, especially in characterization, and gives him far too much scope for displaying vague and drowsy melancholy, 'desiring not to break/The spell that sorrow's image cast on [him]/*As dreamlike she went past with fluttering hem*/. The whole work is, indeed, an extended indulgence in languorous monotony.

What Morris achieved in *The Earthly Paradise*, however, undoubtedly fulfilled his ambitions as he states them in the Envoi, however curious these ambitions may seem in juxtaposition to the invocation to Chaucer, and however much one may feel inclined to censure so wan an aim in the poet who had created *The Defence of Guenevere*:

Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

Yet Morris could also be his own most incisive critic, as when he wrote to Swinburne of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, 'They are all too long and flabby, damn it!'\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) *Letters*, p. 30.
the time when he was at work on *The Earthly Paradise*. It had been around 1860 that Morris first began, in his greed for all kinds of medieval material, to read translations of the Icelandic sagas and eddic poems. Considering the quality of the translations then available, especially of the poetry, it is not surprising that although Morris was interested by the stories he met, he was uninfluenced by the style. If he had met the originals earlier, before his own style became set, it might have been redeemed from prolixity, but the translations, generally expanded and weakened to accord with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taste, did nothing to counteract the influences which were seducing Morris into softness and prettiness. Eddic poetry, for example, is tautly constructed, having much in common with the economy of ballad technique, but in Amos Cottle’s rendering Morris read lines, often twice the length of the original and wildly incorrect as well, such as these:

Passion in Freya’s cheek glowed hot;  
Cold tremors thro’ her bosom shot;  
To her wan eye, the tidings threw  
On all things round a saddening hue:  
The heaving bracelet on her breast  
The sorrows of her soul confest.  
But yet, she cries, ’I’ll not refuse  
Man’s best privilege to use;  
Consent with you to go, I give,  
To confines where the Jömi live.

This sort of thing, if it influenced Morris at all, could only make worse the growing tendency in his poetry, in contrast to the allusiveness of the earlier work, to spell out everything, especially emotion, in expansive detail. In fact we find that Morris’s first three poems based on Norse sources, namely ‘The Wooing of Hallbjorn the Strong’, ‘The Fostering of Aslaug’ and the unfinished ‘Wooing of Swanhild’, vastly elaborate the source material and somehow contrive that same atmosphere of southern, vaguely Arthurian chivalry to which Jason and his fellow Greeks had already succumbed.

In the autumn of 1868, however, Morris made an important departure by beginning formal lessons in Old Norse with an Icelandic scholar, Eiríkr Magnússon. At once he was swept away by enthusiasm and, impelled by an urgent desire to ‘have the story’ as he said, made

19 *Saga Library*, VI, p. xiii.
remarkably swift progress with the language—so swift that within three months he and Magnússon had one saga translation in the press and another almost ready. With a wide gesture Morris dismissed all his old chivalric dream as ‘the maundring side of medievalism’, and claimed of the sagas that ‘the delightful freshness and independence of thought of them, the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm’. It was a storm which had the deepest and most lasting effects on Morris’s subsequent artistic development. It caused him to lavish time and literary energy during the 1870s and 1880s on the production of seven or eight sizable volumes of translations from the sagas; it took him twice on difficult and adventurous ‘pilgrimages’ to Iceland; it inspired a number of his best later lyrics; indirectly, through his translation work, it shaped the language of the late prose romances; and above all, it provided the material for his two most important long poems: *The Lovers of Gudrun* and *Sigurd the Volsung*.

Morris’s friends, tolerant of his enthusiasms, were nonetheless baffled by his growing and persistent devotion to all things Icelandic, and many later critics seem to have shared their bewilderment. Morris, however, has recorded very clearly what Iceland meant to him, and how it fulfilled or failed his hopes. The poem ‘Iceland First Seen’ (1871) gives an important statement:

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Ah! what came we forth for to see
that our hearts are so hot with desire?
Is it enough for our rest,
the sight of this desolate strand,
And the mountain-waste voiceless as death
but for winds that may sleep not nor tire?
Why do we long to wend forth
through the length and breadth of a land,
Dreadful with grinding of ice,
and record of scarce hidden fire,
But that there ’mid the grey grassy dales
sore scarred by the ruining streams
Lives the tale of the Northland of old
and the undying glory of dreams?
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Dorothy M. Hoare, the critic who has given the closest attention to Morris’s use of Norse material, points out rather scathingly that Morris himself brought dreams to the Matter of the North, for only he, and not any sagaman, could interpret that life as ‘a wondrous dream,/And death the murmur of a restful stream’.21 Indeed, there is no literature more immediate and vital, less vague or dream-like, than Norse saga at its best. Yet Miss Hoare fails to realize that Morris was not able to bring his love of dreaming with him unchanged: in his dreams of ‘the Northland of old’ the key-note is ‘glory’, not, as in *The Earthly Paradise*, sweetness. The sagas may be tragic or comic, factual or satirical, but sentimental almost never. Understatement is of their very essence, and reticence a way of life for the characters they portray. It may be objected that the great length of both *Guðrún* and *Sigrfjrd*, suggests that Morris does not seem to have learned much reticence from the sagas; indeed, Miss Hoare goes so far as to say: ‘It is evident that Morris did not grasp the nature of the style and the matter with which he was dealing.’22 This is quite simply untrue. Morris’s critical comments on the sagas make it plain that, except for a tendency to overstate the ‘dignity’ of the style, he had a deep and true appreciation of the essential qualities of the genre. For instance, in the Preface to *The Saga Library*, Volume I, he writes:

Realism is the one rule of the Saga-man: no detail is spared in impressing the reader with a sense of the reality of the event; but no word is wasted in the process of giving the detail. There is nothing didactic and nothing rhetorical in these stories; the reader is left to make his own commentary on the events, and to divine the motives and feelings of the actors in them without any help from the tale-teller.

Yet he will not or cannot re-create this eloquent terseness in his poetry, but appears to think it necessary, as his daughter May certainly does, ‘to present the story to us in a sympathetic form’ by showing us ‘what is moving beneath the surface’.23

There is another sort of reticence, however, which I believe Morris was eager to learn from the sagas. In the Germanic ethos, as recorded by Tacitus in the first century A.D. and as displayed in the Icelandic

sagas of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the brave man does not reveal his grief unless he can transmute it into poetry, which even then must not be too obviously personal. Morris's discovery of Icelandic coincided with one of the most painful periods of his life, when his friend Rossetti and his wife Janey were conducting an affair which, even if it were as some think spiritual rather than physical, decisively that Morris out in the cold. It was against his deepest principles to interfere, and the reticence to which I believe the example of his saga heroes helped him persuaded many of his friends that he was indifferent to the situation, but in his poetry, notably in the lyrical stanzas on the months, which mark the divisions of *The Earthly Paradise*, he occasionally betrayed the depth of his feelings:

Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again
That thou beheldest once with careless eyes!
Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries
To dream again the dream that made him glad
When in his arms his loving love he had. ('September')

There is one poem from this period which is a curiosity rather than a great lyric, but which shows both Morris's real emotion and the solace which Iceland of the nineteenth century failed to give him, yet the saga-age offered. This is an untitled poem of fifty-six lines, written in close imitation of eddic metres and skaldic poetic conventions, and offered as a pretended translation from one *Völuspá*—that is, Morris himself. Briefly, Morris is telling his wife that her eagerness for him to be gone to Iceland would be surpassed by his own if, by some miracle, he could find the saga-age still flourishing, and

live a life there
Too short for sorrow,
Too loud with sword-clash
For any weeping...

But all are gone by;
And the edge-play is over.
And the long frost is fallen upon them.
There the wind wails ever
Without a story;
No whither the sea's way leadeth.
Yet these are they
I must turn to now,
The dead—Yea the dead forgotten.
Fair friends were they
Were they alive;
And now for me meet friends it may be.24

In the light of the Norse habit of expressing grief at one remove in verse, it may be thought significant that of the Norse subjects Morris treated in his poetry all but one, 'The Fostering of Aslaug', are centrally concerned with the rivalry of two men for one woman. Indeed the theme seems to have obsessed him, as if he were continually trying to work out in literature the problem insoluble in his own life. His sole attempt at a contemporary novel was on the theme of the rivalry in love of two brothers, and significantly he abandoned it because he realized that it was not going to work out. Perhaps a contemporary problem, even though fictionalized, was still too close to painful reality to be capable of solution for Morris, although some years later, after Rossetti's death, he was able to contemplate the theme in the contemporary setting of The Pilgrims of Hope, in which the noble, forgiving husband sees his wife and her lover (his best friend) killed together at the barricades in Paris. At the height of the affair, however, Morris seems to have needed to view the problem through a long perspective of past time before he could bear to contemplate it, which he had to do in order to experiment with conclusions to his dilemma. This may help to explain the distancing process at work in the structure of The Earthly Paradise, discussed above, and perhaps also why, in the opinion of most critics, Morris fails hopelessly in his later poems to present tragedy rather than pathos. It is not 'a matter of failing to comprehend the full significance of tragedy', it is not true that 'he cannot go deep enough; a superficial feeling he can attain to; but the central force of this is beyond him';25 on the contrary, Morris fails through his personal involvement in anguish, too deeply felt to be successfully expressed.

Whatever the reason, Morris falls so far short of the intensity of his Old Norse originals that Dorothy Hoare concludes that there is 'unmistakable evidence of... incompatibility between Morris and the

24 For a full text of this poem, with explanatory notes, see my article 'An Unpublished Poem by William Morris', in English, Autumn 1964.
25 Hoare, op. cit., p. 76.
Norse matter". Eiríkr Magnússon, on the other hand, after years of collaboration and friendship with Morris, wrote:

From the very first day that I began work with William Morris on Icelandic literature the thing that struck me most was this, that he entered into the spirit of it not with the preoccupied mind of a foreigner, but with the intuition of an uncommonly wide-awake

It is arguable that Magnússon’s judgement was affected by his personal liking for Morris, or indeed that, his judgement of English literature being largely formed by Morris, he could not be other than biased in his favour. Yet Morris’s critical writing, such as the passage quoted above from the Preface to Saga Library Volume I, almost uniformly supports Magnússon’s contention that his friend was intuitively in sympathy with Icelandic literature, so that if his poems on Norse material fail, the failure is one of execution, not of basic understanding.

In fact even Miss Hoare allows that ‘The Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong’ and ‘The Fostering of Aslaug’ do not fail, largely because Morris is not trying to create in English an equivalent of the original, but simply taking a story which he can handle in one of his established modes. The story of Hallbiorn comes from Landnámabók, ‘The Book of the Settlements’, which is a source-book for many sagas without being one itself. Its purpose is to give, as far as possible, the genealogy of all the settlers who took land for themselves in Iceland between A.D. 870 and 930, together with the boundaries of each man’s claim and, in some cases, a brief mention of the more exalted of his descendants or of some noteworthy adventure in which he had been concerned. Landnáma provides our most trustworthy historical record of the early days of the Icelandic republic, and also the unadorned historical nucleus of many a saga which was later composed as a fine work of literature. The story of Hallbiorn is such a tale in embryo, one never developed, as far as we know, by an Icelandic saga-man, and thus it offers itself without complication to almost any narrative treatment. Morris, although he presents his poem in long verse paragraphs, chooses to employ essentially a ballad technique, complete with refrain, and with the devices of repetition and of development of the action through dialogue. This is something Morris can do brilliantly: he almost recaptures the energy of his earlier ballads from The Defence of Guenevere,

26 Ibid., p. 62. 27 Saga Library, VI, p. xv.
although there is nothing particularly Icelandic about the result except the personal and place names. It is interesting, however, to note how Morris expands his source in this poem. *Landnámabók* says merely: ‘Hallbiorn . . . married Hallgerd daughter of Odd of Tongue; they were with Odd the first winter; Snæbiorn Boar was there. The couple did not get on well together’; but Morris makes ‘the motives and feelings of the actors’, 28 and especially the ambiguous role of Snæbiorn, quite explicit, explaining and softening the mute violence of the catastrophe (the factual details of which he takes straight from *Landnáma*) by giving expression to the uncompromising loves of both Hallbiorn and Hallgerd. Yet the expression is concise and lyrical, so that the force of the original is not lost.

‘The Fostering of Aslaug’ is quite a different kind of poem: a tale from *The Earthly Paradise*, it fits into the scheme of that work with no hint of such incongruity as that with which ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ confronts the reader. The original story, which appears in the manuscripts, indecisively attached half to *Volsunga saga* and half to *Ragnar saga loðbrókar*, really belongs (as Magnússon for one emphatically pointed out) to the latter, a romantic legendary saga of little literary merit. The story of Aslaug is pure folklore or fairytale, which has become associated almost accidentally with the heroine, the tale serving as a spurious link between the semi-legendary Viking Ragnar, who raided in England in the ninth century, and Sigurd, the greatest Germanic hero, who is associated through legend with historical figures from fifth-century Europe. A fairytale full of pathos and romance is not a subject with which saga-writers can commonly deal successfully, but it is one which is perfectly accommodated in Morris’s *Earthly Paradise* manner. Thus we find ‘The Fostering of Aslaug’, light, sweet and innocuous, blending perfectly with the rest of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, no more to be marked as Norse than are the universal folklore motifs it embodies.

V

It is otherwise with ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, which Morris himself saw as standing out from the main body of *The Earthly Paradise* as ‘the best thing I have done’. 29 Mackail regards the difference as that between epic and romance, 30 though May Morris, on the other hand, insists

28 See p. 154 above. 29 *Letters*, p. 32. 30 Mackail, I, p. 196.
that 'Gudrun' fits in to the scheme of *The Earthly Paradise* without clashing with its harmonies. Certainly Morris tried to make it fit in that way, but few would agree that he succeeded. For a start, the material, as Morris found it in *Laxdaela saga*, is too close to naked, unrelieved tragedy to be compatible, however much softened, with the pretty and pathetic romance of the rest of *The Earthly Paradise*. Then again, owing to his close reliance on the saga, Morris has realized the geographical and social setting of 'The Lovers of Gudrun' to a degree quite uncommon in his works. He has not, of course, attempted to use the whole of the saga in his poem. In a letter to Swinburne he remarks that 'the story of Gudrun is told very disjointedly in the original'; this is because the saga is that of the people of Laxdale, not merely of the lovers of Gudrun, whose story takes up only about a third of the whole. Even from this third Morris pares away everything not immediately relevant to the tangled, passionate relationships of Bodli, Kiiartan and Gudrun, so that Bodli’s death and Gudrun’s three other marriages are accorded the barest mention. Yet within his chosen limits Morris keeps remarkably close to his saga source, employing unchanged many of the minor incidents and often even echoing the words of the original text. He probably never completed a formal translation of *Laxdaela* with which we could compare his poem, but a rough draft of a few chapters survives in the British Museum, covering the events of the first sections of *Gudrun*. The incident of the prophecy of Guest the Wise is one which follows the saga closely, though with considerable descriptive ornament added in the passage concerning the young swimmers. For example, in the saga Olaf Peacock asks Guest:

'Now will I that thou tell me which of these young men shall be the mightiest.'

Guest says: 'That will go along with thy dear love if Kiiartan be deemed the worthiest, whiles he is above ground.' Therewithal he smote his horse, and rode away.

In 'The Lovers of Gudrun' this becomes:

'How thinkest thou? hast thou the heart to tell Which in the years to come shall do right well?'

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33 Add. MS 45317.
Guest spake not for a while, and then he said,
But yet not turning any more his head:
‘Surely of this at least thou wouldst be glad,
If Kiartan while he lived more glory had
Than any man now waxing in the land.’

Then even as he spoke he raised his hand
And smote his horse, and rode upon his way
With no word more.

This sort of faithfulness to detail, of which any number of examples could be quoted, ensures that the concrete, realistic world of the saga is reproduced in Morris’s poem; in strong contrast to the situation in any other tale in *The Earthly Paradise*, the reader could trace the actors’ every journey on a map, could say with absolute precision that the action takes place on certain farmsteads in western Iceland, and in Drontheim in Norway between A.D. 997 and 1003. If no other difference existed, this alone would be sufficient to make ‘Gudrun’ stand out sharply from the vague dream-world of *The Earthly Paradise*.

Writing of ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ and *Sigrard the Volsung*, Magnússon says:

In both these noble monuments to Morris’s poetical genius, when critically compared with the original sources, there are many points of excellence yet undiscovered by his reviewers.\(^{34}\)

This challenge cannot be ignored, yet the comparison proves useful in explaining less the ‘points of excellence’ than the failures of ‘Gudrun’. The most superficial comparison reveals that the main area of difference between Morris’s poem and the saga is in the treatment of emotions. It is a convention of saga writing that the author is not omniscient: he can tell only what could logically be known and told either by witnesses or by the actors themselves. Therefore emotions can only be explicitly recorded if they could credibly have been voiced—and, as I pointed out above, open expression of emotion was regarded in the Germanic ethos as shameful. The sagas are by no means devoid of human feeling, but it is revealed in action, voluntary or involuntary, and only occasionally in words, which gain almost shocking force from their sparing use. (This is especially true of the ‘Sagas of the Icelanders’, such as *Laxdæla*, which are realistic historical

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\(^{34}\) *Saga Library*, VI, p. xv.
fications, as compared with the more romantic 'Sagas of Ancient Times', including Ragnar saga loðbrókar and Völungsaga.) Morris's characters, on the other hand, wade and wallow in emotion. A dozen instances of the contrast might be chosen; one, particularly blatant, occurs on Kiartan's return to Iceland to find Gudrun married to Bodli. In the saga Kiartan 'hears of the wedding of Gudrun and shows no emotion'—although there is no lack of indication, including his prompt proposal to Refna, that he is bitterly hurt. Morris's Kiartan—

turned and staggered wildly from the place,
Crying aloud, 'O blind, O blind, O blind!
Where is the world I used to deem so kind,
So loving to me? O Gudrun, Gudrun!'—

—and so on for another seventeen lines. To the reader of sagas—any sagas: one does not need to know Laxdæla in particular to recognize that this scene is out of all keeping with the spirit of Norse literature—this is so false as to be repugnant; and surely on any count the scene is a failure, the emotions forced, rhetorical and unconvincing. One recalls with a sense of irony that Morris was carried away by enthusiasm, when he read the Edda, for the high art these old poets possessed, in never allowing the description of these volcanic passions to pass into mere grandiose platitudes.35

May Morris, who compares 'Gudrun' with Laxdæla, apparently with full approval for her father's work, says—

It is full of the subtleties of modern love—passion, hatred, jealousy, doubt of the reality of life itself. . . . The scoldings of Gudrun are softened, and the grief of the lovers is expressed rather than implied.36

In so doing, Morris has fundamentally altered the characters of the three lovers and shifted the emphasis of the saga. In Laxdæla the character of Gudrun is the most completely realized (the author had a particular gift for portraying women), while Kiartan and Bodli are rather more two-dimensional. Morris radically changes the fierce, passionate, almost masochistic 'heroic' Gudrun of the saga into a

romantic figure. As May Morris says:

Gudrun is transformed into a figure less remote, less stoic in the expression of grief; the interpretation of her is a queen-like being, human and lonely amid the tangle of her tragic passion.37

35 Saga Library, VI, p. XV
37 Ibid.
Thus weakened, Gudrun is no longer so essentially the central figure, and the changed balance is most conspicuous when we look at Morris’s treatment of Bodli. Morris introduces the quite alien, and moreover inordinately long, examination of Bodli’s struggles with his conscience, alien because saga writers rarely if ever pronounce moral judgements. They may subtly guide their readers’ sympathies, but they preserve the illusion of complete impartiality, whereas Morris, understandably enough considering his situation, strives to justify, or at least to excuse Bodli’s behaviour and to reveal the depths of his misery—only to be defeated by the intensity of his own feelings.

‘At the climax,’ writes the poet’s daughter, ‘it is all Morris’, and it is at the climax that Morris’s shortcomings are most apparent. One slight but typical alteration which he introduced into his account of the ambush of Kiartan is particularly interesting. The herdsman and his master, witnesses of Kiartan’s last stand, are taken together with their dialogue almost straight from the saga, but in the saga there is no question of putting the account of the fight into their mouths. If you like, their presence is necessary to ensure that there will be a saga; it makes public knowledge of private words and actions plausible. But there could be no question of telling the story through them, for a saga is always told directly, without the benefit of flash-backs, exposition or second-hand reminiscence, hence in part its vivid immediacy. It is natural for Morris, on the other hand, to employ the herdsman as a narrator and thus to distance the climax of the action, as always in The Earthly Paradise:

So told the herd, time long agone, the tale
Of that sad fight within the grey-sloped vale.

Morris obviously felt deeply the tumultuous emotions surrounding the death of Kiartan, but his attempts to give expression to them are laboured. He cannot trust to the starkness of the saga style to convey to others all the passion he recognized, but his striving for tragic effect results only in histrionic overstatement. In the saga, for example, the name of Gudrun is never mentioned between Bodli and Kiartan as they confront one another for the last time, and this very silence stresses her fatal influence, whereas in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ her name is invoked at every turn and nothing at all is left to the imagination. Kiartan in the saga speaks twice, once to urge Bodli to action in a brief, strange

speech, half taunt, half encouragement, showing his foster-brother, yet without pleading, that he has still the option of helping rather than fighting him. All the ambiguity of their relationship seems to be epitomized in these few words, and when he realizes that Bodli has decided against him, Kiartan accuses him, insultingly, of nýtingsverk (a dastard’s deed) but in the same breath chooses to be killed rather than to kill, and flings down his weapons. Morris’s Kiartan rants at Bodli, bidding him

thrust from off the earth
The fool that so hath spoilt thy days of mirth,
Win long lone days of love by Gudrun’s side!

As for his speech as he throws down his weapons, it has distinct echoes of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’. Bodli’s agonized outcry when he realizes that he has killed his friend, claiming that he himself had been seeking death ‘for Gudrun’s sake/ And for thy sake’, fails to convince in face of his aloofness from the battle, quite apart from the fact that it is unjustifiable as an interpretation of the saga, where it is quite plain that Bodli kills Kiartan deliberately, although he repents immediately and, as in Morris’s poem, Kiartan dies with his head in Bodli’s lap.

A modern poet is of course free, in his treatment of a medieval story, when he does not pretend simply to reproduce his source, to reinterpret the characters of the protagonists, introducing motivations not found in the original, and to adjust the plot to fit his interpretation. The widely differing presentation of the Arthurian story by Malory, by Tennyson and by a score of modern novelists gives some indication of the scope of this freedom, but it also has its limits, the most important being the need for consistency. The writer who has decided to present Arthur as the dux bellorum of Nennius, defending civilization, in the form of Romano-British Christian culture, against the invading Saxons, is unlikely to succeed if he tries also to use much of the Celtic mythical material; and the author who prefers to see Arthur as a pagan barbarian will not convince if he confuses the ritual of divine kingship with that of fine amour. To be credible, the character must match the context.

Only a purist would object to Morris’s taking slight liberties with details of the action, even had he intended to give a faithful reproduction of the story of Gudrun from Laxdæla, since the sagas of the Icelanders are in any case historical fiction, not fact. It matters little,
for instance, that Morris drastically alters Kiartan’s crude but effective revenge for the theft of a coif—he is, after all, writing for Victorians—nor need one object to the change by which Kiartan’s body is carried to Bathstead, rather than a neutral farm, so that there can be a confrontation between Bodli and Gudrun over the corpse. Neither alteration, in itself, conflicts with the psychology of the saga-age. Morris, however, while accepting from the saga most of the social structure and patterns of behaviour it presents, then attempts to superimpose the incompatible psychology of a later age. If the innovations were successful in modern terms they might be more acceptable, despite the jarring incongruity, but in trying to give clearer expression to the stark tragedy he evidently felt so deeply Morris loses all that the saga had, without replacing it with anything which carries conviction. The more he strives to express feeling, the emptier and more sentimental it seems.

The scene between Bodli and Gudrun is less bad than the death scene, but Morris’s dogged insistence on the awesomeness of their grief through its effect on the observers (as if he knows that he cannot succeed in simple account or demonstration) only confirms the reader in his impatient disbelief:

Yet folk must gaze
With awe and pity upon Bodli’s face,
And deem they never might such eyes forget....
They trembled then at what might come to pass,
For that grey face the face of Gudrun was,
And they had heard her raving through the day.

The parallel scene in Laxdaela saga is simple and terrible, and emphasizes the great distance between Morris and his source in the revelation of feelings. Gudrun welcomes the news of Kiartan’s slaying with apparent enthusiasm, mocking Bodli for calling it a luckless deed, and reckoning up its advantages to them. With sudden betraying venom she concludes:

‘Refna will not go laughing to bed tonight.’
Then said Bodli, and was very angry: ‘It seems to me unlikely that she will turn paler at this news than you, and I suspect that you would have shown less emotion if we were left lying on the battlefield and Kiartan should tell the news.’

In ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ there is more reticence in this than in the death scene, although there are still jarring references to Gudrun’s
'raving' and Bodli's 'wail', but there is also poignancy in his first bitter plea:

Thy will is done.
Is it enough? Art thou enough alone
As I am?

The poignancy comes perhaps less from the essentially artificial scene at Bathstead than from the personal note of these lines, personal to Morris himself, revealing with brief clarity his identification of himself with the desperate and defeated Bodli, for they echo plainly lines from his poem 'To the Muse of the North' in Poems by the Way:

Come thou, for sure I am enough alone
That thou thine arms about my heart shouldst throw
And wrap me in the grief of long ago.

No plainer statement could be found of the way in which Morris is attempting to exorcize his personal tragedy by re-enacting it in his poetry.

Instead of trying and failing to express the emotional reactions of the nineteenth century in the context of the eleventh, Morris could have transposed the story completely into his spiritual homeland—the timeless chivalrous dream-world, inhabited by knights and princesses, in which the great majority of both his poems and his prose works are set—and have been, within the limitations of The Earthly Paradise, successful. The theme, after all, is not tied to its saga setting, as is plain from its persistent recurrence in Morris's own work. Indeed, many critics, from W. P. Ker on, have thought that the author of Laxdala himself was consciously reworking in an Icelandic setting the tragic conflict of loves between Sigurd, Brynhild and Gunnar, known to the saga-man from the poems of the Elder Edda. For any reader there must be at least a tension between the tone of 'Gudrun' and that of the rest of The Earthly Paradise, and between the factual setting

39 Morris was probably not in a position to recognize this when he wrote 'Gudrun', for although he knew the eddic poems in Benjamin Thorpe's translation before he began to study Icelandic, and even discussed with Magnússon at their first meeting the possible influence of characterization in the Edda on such sagas as Njála (see Collected Works, VII, p. xvi), it was as a completely fresh and almost revelatory experience that he encountered 'the best tale pity ever wrought' (Collected Works, VII, p. 292) a couple of months after he finished writing 'The Lovers of Gudrun'.
of the poem and its emotional extravagance; nor is this combination of hysteria and sentimentality, which results from Morris's insistent attempts to leave nothing of the tragedy unexpressed, likely to appeal in these days even to the reader quite unprejudiced by knowledge of Laxdæla. To the reader who knows and appreciates the understated forcefulness and immediacy of saga writing, the posturings of the protagonists of 'The Lovers of Gudrun' can only be intolerable.

VI

_Sigurd the Volsung_ is the culmination of Morris's poetical work, and we know from Mackail that 'he himself regarded [it] as his highest achievement in literature'.

In his own judgement, it stood apart from the rest of his poetry, less because it showed any higher perfection in craftsmanship than because the subject was the story which he counted the first in the world, and because he was convinced that he had treated this story with a fidelity and a largeness of manner for which he could answer to his own conscience.

Morris's passion for the Volsung story was of quite another order than his enthusiastic interest in the story of Gudrun, or in the sagas of Egil and Njál, great though that was. In the Preface to his translation, eagerly made during the winter of 1869-70, of _Völsunga saga_ and the eddic poems on which it is based, Morris writes:

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.

Since this is the great tragedy common to the traditions of all the Germanic peoples, and comparable (to my mind) rather to the basic story of Arthur than to the Tale of Troy, it is accessible as the Arthurian legend is—and as the story of Gudrun is not—to whatever treatment or interpretation the poet may choose. That Morris recognized his freedom is clear in his treatment of the last part of the story of _Völsunga saga_ (sensibly omitted from _Sigurd_) in the unfinished 'Wooing of Swan-hild', which he intended as part of _The Earthly Paradise_. May Morris,

40 Mackail, I, p. 311.
41 Ibid., I, p. 330.
on the basis of the chivalric setting and intensely romantic treatment, decided that

It was certainly written before his Northern studies had replaced the earlier background of medieval romance by the simpler and more heroic setting of the Edda fragments. Such lines as

In tilt and pageant and high feast went by
The next few days...

could not have been written by my father coming fresh from the 'Lay of Hámdir'.42

In fact there is every reason to suppose that the poem was written very shortly after Morris first read and translated *Hamðismál* in 1869–70, and the profound difference in atmosphere indicates the poet's realization that the Volsung story, being timeless, could be set in almost any period and treated in any manner which served to reveal the fundamental qualities of the tale. His having left 'The Wooing of Swanhild' unfinished suggests that Morris saw the savage manner of the heroine's death in the saga as incompatible with the atmosphere of chivalry he had evoked. Although he might perhaps have found a way to soften this scene had he continued, it is difficult to regret that the poem was abandoned; the gloomily passionate, introverted hero has become tedious before a third of the projected poem is complete (to judge by the progress of the plot), and the air is claustrophobically doom-laden.

In 'Sigurd the Volsung' Morris makes no attempt to place the story in his familiar Middle Ages; rather he stresses the primeval nature of the setting 'ere the world was waxen old', when 'the Gods were unforgetton, yea whiles they walked with men'. This setting is as unhistorical as ever his chivalric dream-world was, but it is fitting for a story which comes from the misty times of the Germanic migrations, when the borders of nations were undefinable, and legend has made mock of the limitations of time by making the heroes of different tribes and generations brothers-in-law or brothers-in-arms. The atmosphere, though far more elaborately developed, is consonant with that of *Völsunga saga* and the rest of the Sagas of Ancient Times. Into such a remote setting the poet may, of course, introduce whatever conventions or ideals of conduct he pleases, and on so ancient and universal a story he may put whatever interpretation he favours.

Morris's understanding of the story when he wrote 'Sigurd the

42 Collected Works, VII, p. xxiii.
Volsung constitutes a development of ideas already in his mind when he translated the saga and the eddic poems six years previously. The sublimation of his own sufferings is present only faintly by comparison with the story of Gudrun, but it is still perceptible when he writes, in the 'Prologue in Verse' to the translation,

we awhile
With echoed grief life's dull pain may beguile.\(^{43}\)

This essentially private preoccupation is quite overshadowed by a new element, vague at first in Morris's attitude to the translation, but clarifying during his years of brooding on the story until it is quite plain in 'Sigurd the Volsung'. The story of Sigurd, in Volsunga, is one which seems to hint at a wider significance than is in fact worked out in the saga; it demands, like the Arthurian story, to be treated in more depth than as mere straightforward narrative. The saga claims superhuman stature for its protagonists and thus surely cosmic significance for its catastrophe, yet the tragedy is not earth-shattering but intensely, powerfully human. Nevertheless, the hints are there for the poet to work on:

Whenso all the noblest men and greatest kings are named in the olden tales, Sigurd is ever put before them all, for might and prowess, for high mind and stout heart, wherewith he was far more abundantly gifted than any man of the northern parts of the wide world.\(^{44}\)

Another beside Morris has been inspired to see in this hero and his tragedy a deeper significance than the saga itself holds, and Wagner introduces just those cosmic reverberations which the story lacks in Old Norse. To do this he has mixed the tale with a hodge-podge of quite unrelated themes from other Norse sources, together with a deal of bombast, and I have never found myself convinced of the logic by which he links the Doom of the Gods irrevocably to the deaths of Siegfried and Brünhilde. William Morris was totally out of sympathy with all Wagner tried to do, and expresses himself strongly on the subject in a letter to H. Buxton Forman:

I look upon it as nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gaslights of an opera: the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art—the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical

\(^{43}\) Collected Works, VII, p. 289.  \(^{44}\) Ibid., VII, p. 317.
enough to express! Excuse my heat: but I wish to see Wagner uprooted, however clever he may be, and I don’t doubt he is: but he is anti-artistic, don’t doubt it.\textsuperscript{45}

Morris’s own interpretation of the story is less complex, perhaps less profound than Wagner’s, but closer to the Icelandic saga, and its germ is to be found already in the ‘Prologue in Verse’ to the translation of \textit{Völsunga saga}:

\begin{quote}
Then rose a seeming sun, the lift gave place
Unto a seeming heaven, far off, but clear.
\end{quote}

Here is a new sense of what Morris means when he speaks of Iceland enshrining ‘the undying glory of dreams’. He is not talking about vague imaginings or romantic tales set in a context of magic and make-believe, but about vision: vision of the possibility of true human greatness, of social justice, of the freedom and value of the individual; the socialist vision, in fact, which was just beginning to become dominant in his mind. It is clear, although it has been ignored, that Morris’s studies in Icelandic formed one of the forces which developed his social and political conscience. He took, for example, an idealistic view of that remarkable experiment in government, the old Icelandic republic (whose founders were probably guided more by pride and self-interest than by humanistic principles, and which deteriorated into oligarchy and the rule of force, for lack of an executive). The idea that ‘some twelfth century Icelander, living the hardest and rudest of lives’\textsuperscript{46} could nonetheless, under that republic, produce the beauties of \textit{Völsunga saga} moved him deeply, and his visits to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 provided him with a political lesson, as he writes to Andreas Scheu:

Apart from my pleasure in seeing that romantic desert, I learned one lesson there, thoroughly I hope, that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes.\textsuperscript{47}

In the same letter Morris links the date of the composition of \textit{Sigurd} with the delivery of his first Socialist lectures—wrongly, but significantly.

Thus Sigurd becomes the symbol, to Morris, of hope in a dark age, a hope which must wait centuries for fulfilment, but which is nevertheless a force for good in its own time. His dream of Sigurd is related to his \textit{Dream of John Ball} (1888), although the latter belongs to the period when Morris’s socialist principles are fully worked out, not

\textsuperscript{43} Letters, p. 60. \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 32. \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 187.
tentative as in Sigurd the Volsung, and its purpose is rather more to teach than to delight. The justification, from Volsunga saga or the eddic poems, for regarding Sigurd as the potential redeemer of society is slight, but Morris's enthusiastic vision makes the most of such lines as

His sport and pleasure it was to give aid to his own folk, and to prove himself in mighty matters, to take wealth from his unfriends, and give the same to his friends.\textsuperscript{48}

and similarly

Now Sigurd the older he grew, the more he grew in the love of all men, so that every child loved him well.\textsuperscript{49}

This last point is one of many taken directly from the saga into Morris's poem, where it is used as the climax to a description of Sigurd which shows clearly how the poet has developed his character from openhandedness towards his friends to true generosity of heart:

It was most in these latter days that his fame went far abroad, The helper, the overcomer, the righteous sundering sword; The loveliest King of the King-folk, the man of sweetest speech, Whose ear is dull to no man that his helping shall beseech; The eye-bright seer of all things, that wasteth every wrong, The straightener of the crooked, the hammer of the strong; Lo, such was the Son of Sigmund in the days whereof I tell, The dread of the doom and the battle; and all children loved him well.

The image of Sigurd as champion of Right appears most plainly in his speech introducing himself to the Niblungs:

For peace I bear unto thee, and to all the kings of the earth, Who bear the sword aright, and are crowned with the crown of worth;

But unpeace to the lords of evil, and the battle and the death; And the edge of the sword to the traitor, and the flame to the slanderous breath:

And I would that the loving were loved, and I would that the weary should sleep,

And that man should hearken to man, and that he that soweth should reap.

In contrast, the villainous Atli is presented as a tyrant and oppressor:

\textsuperscript{48} Collected Works, VII, p. 342. \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., VII, p. 323.
Great are his gains in the world, and few men may his might withstand,
But he weigheth sore on his people and cumbers the hope of his land;
He craves as the sea-flood craveth, he grieves as the dying hour,
All folk lie faint before him as he seeketh a soul to devour.

Miss Hoare feels that ‘when Morris comes to deal with the Volsunga saga he fails again to deal adequately with his material’ through being unable to grasp the full intensity of the tragedy and, to cover this, using ‘many words to pitch the thing up so that it sounds heroic’. I want to make it clear that, while I agree that Sigurd the Volsung is not a completely successful poem, this is at least not the result of any failure on Morris’s part to appreciate either the full depths of the tragedy or its expression in Volsunga. While working on his translation of the saga, Morris wrote to Professor Charles Eliot Norton that the Norse telling of the tale

... is something which is above all art; 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. ... I had it in my head to write an epic of it, but though I still hanker after it, I see clearly it would be foolish, for no verse could render the best parts of it, and it would only be a flatter and tamer version of a thing already existing.

No-one, then, could be more conscious than Morris of the qualities of the Volsung story and of the pitfalls awaiting the modern poet. By exercising a good deal of restraint, he contrives to mar the great scenes very little, although the long, smooth cadences of his lines inevitably dull the sharpest edges of the stark Norse dialogue. Despite Miss Hoare’s well-argued attack on Morris, it is not here that I find the poet’s failure, since the weightier, slower utterance seems to me inseparable from the epic style and not unsuited to the matter.

My criticisms are two: first, that Morris’s attempt to add universal significance to the tragedy by introducing the idea of Sigurd as a crusader for Good is unsuccessful, not because of any incompatibility

51 Letters, p. 32.
between his virtuous aims and the savagery of the age—Morris himself has drawn up the rules governing the world of the Volsungs and Niblungs, and inconsistency is not apparent here—but because in the event it is impossible to distinguish between the righteous warfare of Sigurd and the 'war-fain' fury of Guttoem, 'blind-eyed through right and wrong', or the self-seeking highway-robbery of Sigmund and Sinfiotl, the exultation is the same, the violence is indistinguishable, and it seems to require impossible naivety to accept the assurance that one instance is noble and virtuous and another evil.

My second point is an extension of the criticism which Mackail makes so lucidly (I, pp. 331 f.) of the disproportion in the structure of the poem caused by Morris's 'almost impossible loyalty to his original'. His argument is that Morris could not hope to produce a coherent, patterned and consistent epic while attempting as he does to incorporate the fundamentally independent tale of Sigmund and Signy into the story of Sigurd. The flaw is a serious one: our attention is focused for far too long on subsidiary characters and has to be reorientated completely after the first of the four books of the poem. Moreover, there is a considerable difference in tone in the first book, in which (even after Morris has softened the outline of the story by deleting the killing of Signy's two elder sons, just as he deletes the deaths of Gudrun's sons from her vengeance on Atli) the dominant motivating forces are affronted vanity, sadism, and the lust for blood-vengeance. To be sure, there is a certain balance with the last book of the poem, in which these elements return, and the flames which consume the hall of Siggeir with its inmates are reflected at the end by the fire with which Gudrun destroys the hall of Atli; yet the final effect of the poem is unbalanced, and the first book distracts from the central theme rather than focusing attention on it.

This has all been said before, by Mackail and others; the particular point I wish to enlarge on is a fault which goes back to the construction of Volsunga saga itself. Morris was not unaware of the saga's imperfections:

Here and there indeed it is somewhat disjointed, I suppose from its having been put together from varying versions of the same song; it seems as though the author-collector felt the subject too much to trouble himself about the niceties of art.52

52 Letters, p. 32.
The cause of the saga's disjointedness is the same as for that of the poem: too close adherence to a source. The poems of the Elder Edda which deal with the Volsung story do not strictly form a cycle. They were composed in different ages and different lands by poets fascinated by the same ancient story, and they represent various traditions which do not form a coherent whole. The compiler ('author' is not the right word) of Volsunga saga tried to use all the available source material, whether or not this led to inconsistencies of plot or to the repetition of the same incident in two versions. Much of the confusion in plot Morris simplified in Sigurd the Volsung, but one class of repetition he retained with evident approval, and it is precisely this which distorts the balance of the poem. It must be understood that each of the Volsung poems of the Edda was originally intended to stand alone, and that the common practice of eddic poetry is to treat a single episode or strand of plot. Thus one poet has chosen to show the tragedy as it affected Gudrun, another as it affected Brynhild. The commonest way to suggest the wider ramifications of the tragedy in a poem dealing with only one incident of it is by either prophecy of coming disaster or reminiscence of the past. The saga compiler omits some of the reminiscences but spares us few of the prophecies and dreams, so that we are asked to accept that the protagonists all have precise foreknowledge of events. Morris not only adopts this feature with eagerness, he elaborates on it: for example, where the saga summarizes the poem 'Gripisspa' ('The Prophecy of Gripir') by saying 'He told him all his life and the fate thereof, even as afterwards came to pass', Morris supplies some fifty lines of oracle.

Since, in the view generally represented in Germanic literature, heroism can only be truly tested in the face of death, it follows that foreknowledge of death provides greater scope for the display of courage than can an unexpected confrontation. Sigurd, especially, being murdered in his sleep, needs foreknowledge of his fate, in reaction to which he can reveal his heroism. It is therefore almost de rigueur for the hero to receive warning, whether by human or by supernatural agency, of the impending attack or the treacherous plot. Used sparingly, as it is in the component parts of the Volsung story, this device can be powerfully effective. Morris, like Addison's young playwright who planned to outdo his rivals by introducing an afflicted widow with no fewer than six children, has overworked an excellent

53 Collected Works, VII, p. 323.
device until it may appear ridiculous. Sigurd, who 'seeth the ways of the burden till the last of the uttermost end', so far from being elevated in heroic stature is reduced to a mere puppet, although Morris asks us to regard as glorious his acceptance of manipulation by the Norns:

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: He hath seen the face of Brynhild, and he knows why she hath come, And that his is the hand that hath drawn her to the Cloudy People's home: He knows of the net of the days, and the deeds that the Gods have bid, And no whit of the sorrow that shall be from his wakened soul is hid: And his glory his heart restraineth, and restraineth the hand of the strong. From the hope of the fools of desire and the wrong that amendeth wrong.

Despite these faults of construction and emphasis, Sigurd the Volsung is the climax of Morris's poetic achievement, a work one can fairly call great. The story is powerful and universal enough not to need the support of the social or political significance Morris tries to give it, and fortunately Morris's own love and respect for it has prevented him from distorting the human tragedy into an allegory. His deep appreciation of the literary quality of the eddic poems has also restrained him, so that Sigurd is unmarred by the hysterical excesses of The Lovers of Gudrun: instead it has a profound dignity controlling the passion, which is thus made credible and moving. The long lines, measured but flexible, have an incantatory power which compels the reader forward over flaws and inconsistencies and passages which, if analysed, would yield little logical meaning. Here in this late poetry, as in the earliest, it is musical rather than explicit meaning and reference that delight and sustain, though now the romantic subtleties of the violin have given place to deep organ tones. Such tones are proper to epic, whose theme is glory, almost by definition, of the ancient past, and inseparable from
this glory is a counterpoint of elegiac lament. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, whatever faults the reason may find, the splendour and the sorrow of its music evoke a direct response to 'the undying glory of dreams'. The glory and the grief alike lie in the fact that this is a dream, of what may be and what might have been:

They are gone—the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:

It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth:
It shall groan in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped,
And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead,

It shall yearn, and be oft-times holpen, and forget their deeds no more,

Till the new sun beams on Baldur, and the happy sealess shore.