CHAPTER III
MORRIS'S APPRECIATION AND CRITICISM OF OLD NORSE LITERATURE
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I

No writer so susceptible to the merits of medieval literature as Morris was, could read as much Old Icelandic literature as he without forming a definite conception of its spirit and beauty. Not only did he form such an opinion, but fortunately he gave forth his appreciations in various letters, prefaces, and original poems. The sources for Morris's formal and casual observations on Old Norse literature are as follows:

A. Letters and conversations, quoted in:


B. Prefaces:

I. To *Grettir the Strong*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. VII.

II. To *The Völsunga Saga*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. VII.

III. To *The Saga Library* (London, 1891-1905); Morris wrote only pp. v-xii of Preface to Vol. I.

IV. Magnusson's Preface to *Saga Library*, Vol. VI, which concerns some of Morris's critical opinions.

1 Magnusson's hand must always be presupposed in the other Prefaces also.
C. Morris's Icelandic Journals, Collected Works, VIII.


E. A summary of Morris's attitude toward the literature of the world, Collected Works, XXII, Introduction, especially pp. xi-xvii.

Most of the remarks contained in the documents listed are those showing his fondness for the Volsung material, his appreciation of the tragic and fatalistic which pervades nearly all Old Icelandic literature, and his belief in what he considered to be the ethical value of the sagas. With (1) the tragic, the ethical, and the fatalistic; (2) Morris's

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2 Morris's Journal of Travels in Iceland, while containing some evidence of criticism and appreciation of the Old Norse literature, more generally states Morris's reactions upon visiting various Saga-steads. It is filled with such comments as: "Here Grettir slew Thorir Red-beard," etc. In the Journals, Collected Works, VIII, are found Morris's remarks upon the important places connected with the saga literature. References to Njála: pp. 21,45,47,48,49,62,89, 171,195,196, 197,207; to Grettli: pp. 77,85,96,98,99,100,102, 110,114; to the Eddas: p. 41; to Gunnlaugs Saga: pp.61 (note), 83,158,159; to Sturlinga Saga: pp. 111,112; to Laxdala Saga: pp. 109,110,112,113,114, 115; to Bandamanna Saga: pp.94,97; to Finnboga Saga: p. 94; to Hoensa-Thorís Saga: pp. 115,157; to Eyrbyggja Saga: pp. 118,125,135; to Víglunda: pp.139,151; etc.
appreciation of the realism of the sagas; (3) his criticisms of various sagas; (4) his appreciation of Iceland and its people; and (5) a summary of his ideas regarding the comparative position of the literature of the North in world literature, the remaining sections of this Chapter will deal.

II

O Muse that swayest the sad Northern Song,
Thy right hand full of smiting and of wrong,
Thy left hand holding pity; and thy breast,
Heaving with hope of that so certain rest: 3

In these lines Morris first sums up the tragedy and the fate, yet the ultimate reward of life, which seemed to him to govern the destiny of the Icelandic hero. Grettir was brave, yet he was the unluckiest of all fellows; Sigurd and Brynhild bore their 'smiting and wrong' with pitiable stoicism, and Gudrun lived on to know the terrible deeds of Jormunrek. But all of them, in spite of the

... Grief without knowledge,

and the

... Courage that may not avail; 4

would march in great triumph, from the byre of Sigurd or the adder-pit of Gunnar, to "that so certain rest." Whether his

3 The Muse of the North, Collected Works, IX, 116. (Written 1869).
4 Both lines quoted from Iceland First Seen, Ibid., p.126.
reading of Icelandic literature had anything to do with the fact that Morris, who started his career intent upon taking Holy Christian orders, ended it by being a pagan, one cannot say. But the assurance of Valhalla for the warrior and his promised participation at the great ragna rok, were to Morris beautiful and reassuring, if not palpable and credible. In the scheme of Eddie ethics, as Morris understood them, the hero, with unbreakable will and courage, strove always, in the face of terrific obstacles and unconquerable fate, to 'fight the good fight,' and his ability to suffer was merely another part of his courage. Like Grettir's brother, about whom Morris composed the following lines:

At least thy life moved men so, that e'en I, 
Thy mother's wail in the lone eve and drear, 6
Thy brother's laugh at death for thee can hear—

the Norse hero scorned to fear death. He could laugh, or like Gunnar in Njála, he could sing, when he had been deprived of everything except his courage. Concerning him Morris wrote:

I don't know anything more consoling, or grander in all literature (to use a beastly French word) than Gunnar's singing in his house under the moon and drifting clouds.... What a glorious outcome of the worship of Courage these stories are!

5 "In religion I am a pagan," Quoted by May Morris from a "Bewell-Note" of Morris by S.C. Cocke, Collected Works, XXII, Introduction, p. xxxii.
7 Quoted by Mackail, op. cit., I, 335.
So with "That eager life in ill-luck's meshes caught," Grettir and Njáll, Sigurd, Brynhild, Gunnar, and Gudrun, could still struggle "To gain a little mirth amidst of pain..." without too much rancour, following still what Morris imagined to be one of their guiding principles: "Curse not the hand that smites." The fact that the reward was not always good, but more often evil, did not change Morris's feeling toward it. He was no less favorable toward the bravery of Grettir than toward that of Njáll, for Grettir, though all his deeds were mischievous, most of them decidedly harmful, still was foremost in the various prowess which his contemporaries considered to be the marks of the hero. He had a giant's strength, brutality, skill in Grettir, and a will to do just as he pleased; hence Morris said of him, without criticizing his rather useless ambitions, that he was "Far above his fellows in all matters valued among his times and people..." and as such he was a great hero.

It was a splendid appreciation for stark realities, for the essential mingling of joy and grief, and a sort of personal, brusque, almost brutal attitude toward life in

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9 Ibid., p. xix.

10 Prologue in Verse (To Völunga Saga), Collected Works, VII, 290.

Morris's own make-up, that allowed him to extol, in Icelandic characters, what less robust persons might have condemned. Grettir, at best, is a thief, a murderer, and a brute; but Morris forgave him all his undesirable traits, remembering, possibly, his stern defence of his life when he was already half dead with an infected leg, recalling his saving a whole stead from the berserkers, bringing to mind his long swim to "fetch fire." Morris's esteem for Grettir is another bit of evidence of the Viking spirit in a Victorian born out of his time. The other saga characters who were of paramount interest to Morris, those in the Njála and Volsunga stories, are people who have, of course, aroused the admiration of almost every one who has read of their manifold woes. But Morris's reaction to Grettir is evidence merely of consistency in his own character, and is of more biographical importance than anything he ever wrote or said about the rest of Old Norse literature. And so Morris viewed the robustness of life in saga times without alarm; he did not think it too harsh, nor too brutal, nor did he regard it as inhuman, as did so many of his countrymen. Morris perceived, as they did not, the true character of the Norse hero, how he struggled against his enemies, and conquered them all, all except the greatest: Fate; he gave

12 The English reviews of the Old Norse translations of Morris and others, are full of squeamish criticism.
and took with equal grace, and he sang of his own deeds. There was some share of joy mixed with the Viking's tragedy, some pity to make his life less barbarous. Coming finally to (Morris's) "So certain rest," he awaited, in Valhalla, the day when he could rise from the board to defend his Gods against their enemies, as he defended himself against his, when he dwelt in midgård. His life, like his eternity, was active—a courageous crusade—characterized by the same sort of restlessness and energy with which Morris himself accomplished his own purposes in literature, socialism, and art.

III

Morris also admired the purely literary aspects of the sagas. Chief among these, he held, was the realistic representation of both character and episode. Of this, Magnusson wrote:

What charmed Morris most was the directness with which a saga-man would deal with the relations of man to man; the dramatic way in which he arranged the material of his story; his graphic descriptions of the personal appearance of the actors.  

It was especially this directness that appealed to him in the case of Grettla, of which he wrote:

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;

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13 Saga Library, VI, Preface; p. xiv.

14 For another attitude toward didacticism, see Morris's remarks on the Volsung material, Section IV, below.
the reader is left to make his own commentary on the events...in short, the simplest and purest form of epical narration is the style of these works.  

The important observation to make with regard to this last sentence is, that besides showing Morris's delight in the realism of the Saga-man, it also points out another recurrent characteristic of his criticism of Old Norse literature: in using the term "epical narration," he for the first time states what was later a firm conviction with him,—that the best sagas were those which were closest to the epic form. Without going into the rather dangerous discussion of what an epic actually is, let it be recorded that in Morris's conception, it apparently was any great tale of the heroism of a man or a people. It should also be remarked that Morris probably considered all of the great sagas to be epics. If simple, or 'epic' narration is one of the literary characteristics of the sagas which Morris thought to be particularly fine, one could wish that he had followed this style more closely in his own adaptations from the Old Norse, rather than expanding the stories, and dwelling upon detail in the manner which makes some of his poems less readable than they otherwise might be.

15 Saga Library, I, Preface, p. xi.
16 See also his remark on the epic character of the Völsunga Saga, Collected Works, VII, Preface, p. 283.
The realism of which he was so fond, however, was not altogether of purely intrinsic value in character delineation, or in the presentation of episode; it was likewise a device which lent universality of appeal to the sagas. Such appeal, in the case of the *Volsunga Saga*, was especially significant to the English race, and Morris’s continual plea for Englishmen to consider the griefs of the Volsungs as the tribulations of their racial forbears, has not been met, in all quarters, with approbation. The nature of the story, and its method of presentation, should make its tragedy a part of human understanding as long as men are motivated by the same feelings and desires that have always moved them, he thought.

[The] reader will be intensely touched by finding, amidst all its [the *Volsunga Saga’s*] wildness and remoteness, such startling realism, such subtlety, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move himself today.18

It is to be expected that even without the realism which Morris so appreciated, the Volsung-Nibelung tale should be almost the last of all Germanic stories to die, for certainly its tragedy and its grotesque, yet human, situations have given it a high place among the great narratives of all literatures. But that Morris should hold the same brief for the *Grettis Saga* forces one to recall the fact that when he

17 See Morris's comparison of the importance of the Volsung matter to the English with that of the Troy matter to the Greeks, Preface to *Volsunga Saga*, VII, and below, p. 97.

18 Preface to the *Volsunga Saga*, *Collected Works*, VII, 286.
composed his *Grettir Sonnets*, he had not yet read the *Volung* stories in their complete form. For when he wrote:

May, with the dead I deal not; this man lives,
And that which carried him through good and ill,
Stern against fate while his voice echoed till

one wonders if he is not over-romanticizing Grettir a bit. That the courageous spirit of Grettir ["that which carried him through good and ill"], as a reflection of one of the dominant traits in saga literature, has already engraved its permanence upon the mind of man, scarcely anyone will deny. But one of Morris's less admirable traits in the translation, and fostering of Icelandic writings in England, is this sort of over-enthusiasm. He attempted to recommend too highly to the reader the sagas which he translated. To say "this man lives," about Grettir, is certainly to state the truth, but the context of Morris's *Grettir* Prefaces and Sonnets gives one the impression that he is praising the Saga more than necessary; his criticism, in other words, sinks for the moment, to the level of adulation.

Concerning the individual sagas Morris has left enough


20 In this Section, an attempt has been made to separate what are really criticisms of the sagas in general, from Morris's remarks upon individual sagas, which are treated below, in Section IV. Wherever he mentions a saga-characteristic which has impressed him, and which he has discovered in two or three sagas, it has been included here; the more specific material is reserved for Section IV.
of his critical opinions so that one has no difficulty in learning that three; the Völsunga, Grettla, and Njála, affected him most deeply. And it is interesting to notice that in each of these three sagas, courage is treated differently. The courage of the Völsung group is displayed in the face of tragic domestic situations, and in which an inescapable fate adds the complications of love to the usual machinations of wyrd. In Grettla, the courage is that displayed by a brute, himself personally adequate, by virtue of his absolute refusal to admit fear into his life, to meet any situation which fate provides for him. The courage of the Njála characters, especially that of Gunnar, is at once the mingling of defiance and resignation, best epitomized in Gunnar's singing in his home. It is defiance of, and resignation to, the indiscriminate distribution of tragic consequences. The best qualities of courage, which Morris had decided was one of the prime attributes of the Icelandic temperament, are summarized in these three sagas: Morris's admiration for them is hence easily explicable.

21 In speaking here of the Völsunga Saga, one should include also the Eddic Lays pertaining to the Völsung; it was the whole mass of this material, not the Saga alone, upon which Morris formed his critical judgment. See Magnusson's note on Morris and The Elder Edda, Saga Library, VI, Preface, pp. xiv-xv.

22 Morris apparently made allowances for, or was unaffected by, Grettir's great fear of the dark after the troll-woman episode.
The other reasons for his considering the three to be eminently superior to the rest, are also logical. "Njala," states the Preface to Grettir the Strong, "[is] a work in our estimation to be placed beside the few great works of the world." Aside from the characteristic mentioned above, and which, in part, caused the poet to reserve such a high place for Njala, its complete evidence of artistry, in character, and doubtless in episode, impressed Morris.

"His [Morris's] talk about the artistic handling of the characters of Njals Saga was as striking as it seemed, and still seems to me, true," wrote Magnusson to May Morris. And the actual style, a characteristic of the Old Norse literature which Morris seldom discussed, he also approved. He says in a letter written after the publication of Sigurd, in 1876:

I had been reading the Njala in the original before I came down here [to Leicester]; it is better even than I remembered; the style is most solemn (as enlivened now and then by a word too homely, I think, which brings it down a little):26

Morris does not mention Njala by title in his list of

23 Collected Works, VII, Introduction, p. xxxvii. Again it should be pointed out, this time in connection with the Njals Saga, that when Morris formed this statement [1868-9] he had not yet read the original Volsung stories. Before he met Magnússon, he had read Njála in Dase's translation, and it must be assumed that he had probably formed quite a definite opinion of it at that time. [1868].

24 Quoted by Miss Morris, Collected Works, VII, Introduction, p. xvi.

25 This was probably the first time he had done so,—some ten years after he first read it in Dase's version.

26 From a letter, quoted by Mackail, op. cit., I, 335.
the world's greatest books, but anyone who is acquainted with the temperament of Morris, and who has also read the Njáls Saga will easily understand his placing it among the greatest literary works of all time.

His criticisms and appreciations of the Grettis Saga, on the other hand, are more exact, and his comparisons of Grettla with other sagas which he had read or translated, are quite enlightening, both in regard to Morris's opinion of Grettir the Strong, and the works with which he compares it.

In his Preface to Grettir the Strong, he wrote of Grettla, that it was: (1) "As personal and dramatic as ... Gunnlaug ...." His accentuation of the dramatic element here may be open to question, for the continuous conflict and rivalry of Gunnlaug and Raven [Hраф] in the Gunlaugs Saga makes it dramatic from beginning to end, even though it is one of the shorter of the important sagas. There is such a dramatic juxtaposition of characters in the Grettis Saga also, but no single relationship is carried through to the end of the saga. (2) "Full-

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27 He says here: "Some half-dozen of the best-Icelandic Sagas," of which he certainly considered Njála as one. Collected Works, XXII, Introduction, p. xiv. See also below, Section VI.

28 All of these comparisons are from the Preface to Grettir the Strong, in Collected Works, VII, p. xxxvii.

29 This work he knew thoroughly.
er and more complete than ... Gisli...." This is a comparative statement of considerable worth, for in Gisli and Grettir, Morris has chosen two outlaws, both of whom lived by their strength and wits. Morris very evidently had observed the fragmentary and episodic character of the Gisli Saga. (3) "Less frightful than...Egil...." Although there may be a basis for such a comparison, it must be remarked that both of them are 'frightful' enough, and Morris's only reason for making such a comparison must have been his desire to prepare the English reader for a series of brutal episodes to which he was not accustomed in his own literature. (4) "More of a work of art than that [the Laxdala]...Eyrbyggja, and...the History of the Kings of Norway." This is the most astounding of all his remarks on Old Icelandic literature, and forces one to wonder upon what grounds Morris made this judgment. Although the statement is not objectionable with regard to the Eyrbyggja Saga and the Heimskringla, the fact that the artistry of Egil or the Laxdala Saga is in almost every respect superior to that of Grettla makes the opinion regrettable. If it is true, as Magnusson infers, that the Laxdala Saga

30 The Gisli he knew from Dasent's translation.

31 The Egils Saga he started to translate in the early 1870's, but finished only a few pages.

32 Morris paraphrased the Laxdala in The Lovers of Gudrun, and translated both the Eyrbyggja and Heimskringla, with Magnusson, for the Saga Library.

33 Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. xv.
was read after Morris and he had translated the Grettis Saga, we must assume that many of the ideas in the Grettir the Strong Preface were original with Magnusson, and that Morris, where the subject concerned a saga he had not read, was willing to accept Magnusson's opinion without question. The usual harmony of their work together supports this assumption. But the fact still remains that the artistry of either the Landnám Saga or the Egils Saga is unexcelled by that of any Saga save Njal. (5) "It yields only to the story of Njál and his sons ..." From this Preface it may be gathered that what Morris (and Magnusson) said concerning Grettla was in so many words: 'next to Njál, it is the greatest of all Icelandic sagas.' Without taking issue with this opinion, the present writer wishes merely to point out, that such was the position which Morris took in 1869, it certainly was not what he believed in 1870, after he became thoroughly acquainted with the Völsunga Saga.

The other material available for aiding one to ascertain Morris’s conception of the Grettis Saga concerns the handling of Grettir's character, and the "Lady of Spes" episodes at the end of the Saga. "The Saga-man never relaxes his grasp of Grettir's character," he wrote concerning the former, "and

34 See the Völsung discussion, below.

35 A more reserved criticism is found also in the Grettir Preface: "For the original tale, we think little apology is due; that it holds a very high place among the Sagas of Iceland no student of that literature will deny...." Collected Works, VII, Introduction, p. xxxvii.
he is the same man from beginning to end." ... Incidental to Grettir's character, Morris condones the discredited Spes matter on the grounds that even though Grettir is long dead, when these episodes are introduced, and the Saga scene moves to Constantinople, the writer never loses sight of Grettir. A more accurate piece of criticism would not have involved a defense of the Saga-man for his inclusion of an obviously extraneous epilogue. In treating Grettir the Strong, more than in any of his other writings on Old Norse, as we have already observed, Morris confused the aims of criticism and appreciation. But his lapses from accuracy can all be explained by his inordinate desire to accomplish the purpose to which not alone he and Magnusson, but also Dasent before him, and Powell and Vígmís in his own day, had dedicated a great share of their time and services: the popularizing of the Old Norse literature in England.

If Morris had shown enthusiasm for Grettir the Strong and Njála, his appreciation of the Volsung material, and the widening of his literary horizon which it brought about, must be said to be the chief accomplishments of all his Old Icelandic studies. So much opposed was he to the terrifying aspects of the story when he first read it, and so completely and unreservedly did he accept it after its greatness dawned


37 Ibid., p. xlv
upon him, that not only his final opinion, but also the development of his attitude toward "the great Epic of the North" are important phases of his treatment and criticism of Old Icelandic stories. All his other remarks to the contrary, there can be no doubt that to Morris, the Volsunga Saga and those Eddic Lays which deal with the Volsungs, were the most important documents in the whole range of his Old Norse reading.

Morris went down to Ems, in the summer of 1869, almost a year after he had begun study with Magnússon, and with him he took a manuscript translation of the Volsunga Saga which Magnússon had prepared for him. Writing to Philip Webb in August, he says:

Magnússon's Saga [the Volsunga] has turned up and I have begun it; it is rather of the monstrous order but I shall go through with it, partly to see what there is good in it, partly to fill up the time--

He did not finish reading it until he returned to London. But when in the autumn of the same year, he came to Magnússon for a lesson on the Eyrbyggja Saga, his attitude toward the Volsung story was no longer conciliatory. Magnússon says:

He told me he had now finished reading my translation of the 'grandest tale that ever was told.' He would at once set about copying it out, and procure the original for himself, which he promptly did.

To give Morris a more thorough understanding of the Volsung

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38 Quoted by May Morris, Collected Works, V, Introduction, p. xvi.

story as a whole, Magnusson suggested that they translate together the Volsung lays from the Edda, and to this Morris agreed. After the completion thereof, Magnusson was able to say:

Much delight as he took in the Sagas, the work that fetched Morris most was the Elder Edda, especially the cycle of heroic lays that deals with the grim tragedy of the Volsungs and Gylfungs. 40

"The most complete and dramatic form of the great Epic 41 of the North," when it was published in English, was heralded by a "Prologue in Verse," and a Preface. Morris's esteem for the Saga, as well as his insistence that it was especially worthy of the attention of Englishmen, is summed up in the following sentence from the Preface:

For 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. 42

It is quite probable that the eloquence of this praise will at first carry the casual reader away from critical and comparative objection, but upon analysis, one cannot help but observe the wide gulf which separates these two stories. Regardless of literary merit, without weighing the tragic and dramatic elements of the Troy story and that of the Volsungs, we

40 Saga Library, VI, Preface, p. xiv.
41 Preface to Volsunga Saga, Collected Works, VII, 283.
42 Ibid., p. 286.
may see that there is one characteristic of the latter which will not allow of its being called a racial heritage of the English peoples, even though another objection,—the error in Morris's ethnology,—were removed. That barrier to the realization of Morris's hopes for the hearty reception of the Volsunga Saga on national grounds consists of one simple fact: that inasmuch as the Volsung story does not inherently possess the same elements of national struggle, of Greek versus Trojan, or of Icelander versus Arab, Turk, or Gaul, no matter how great its love story, or how brave its characters, it can never, on the basis of racial or national history, be to Englishmen, Swede, or Dane what the "Troy Tale" was to the Greeks.

We come now to the more specific and detailed of Morris's Volsung appreciations. He found didacticism in the Saga, and learned more from the tragic lives of Gutrun and Brynhild than the mere narrative of their tribulations. He wrote:

Naught vague, naught base our tale, that seems to say:
'Be wide-eyed, kind; curse not the hand that smites;
Curse not the kindness of a past good day,
Or hope of love; cast by all earth's delights,
For very love: through weary days and nights,
Abide thou, striving howsoever in vain,
The inmost love of one more heart to gain!';

His belief that its central theme was love must further add to the impossibility of our accepting his idea concerning the

43 "Prologue in Verse" to the Volsunga Saga, Collected Works, VII, 290.

44 Morris's treatment of Old Norse love themes is discussed below, in Part III.
racial significance of the story. Four more lines from the "Prologue" continue his emphasis on the importance of the love element as he found it in combination with tragedy:

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

    ............

    Of utter love defeated utterly,  
Of Grief too strong to give Love time to die!

The final aspect of Morris's critical attitude toward the Volsung-Nibelung material concerns Wagner's treatment of it. In 1873, he wrote to Buxton Forman:

    [It is] nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gas lights 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 enough to express!  

And the "tweedledeeing" of the German tenor was not Morris's only objection to the Wagnerian trilogy! Wagner's "stage-property" Fafnir quite revolted him. The use of dragons had long been a favorite literary device with Morris. Many of the stories which he adapted for The Earthly Paradise contain dragons as major characters, and he had very likely formed a definite opinion as to the figurative or allegorical functions of

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45 Collected Works, VII, 290.

46 Quoted from the letter, by May Morris, Collected Works, XII, Introduction, p. viii.

47 The most notable and typical example of his use of the dragon, besides those in his adaptations and translations from the Volsung story, is in "The Lady of the Land," in The Earthly Paradise, Part II. Collected Works, IV, 127-142.
the dragon in literature. Miss May Morris comments on his criticism of Wagner's Fafnir on this score:

Father scoffed at the notion that Fafnir, the man-beast of the savage legend, should be represented by modern stage ingenuity—should be a 'practicable' pantomime dragon, puffing steam and showing his red danger-signal like a railway engine; such mechanical realism seemed to him childish and futile. 49

The idealized conception of the Volsungs, which insists on reading about them rather than looking at them on the stage, is perhaps a typical commentary on Morris's belated romanticism, and his words are not the injunctions of an intensely practical Victorian, but those of a Lamb or a Hazlitt.

V

Since Morris's two journeys to Iceland, in the years 1871 and 1873, were undertaken because of his affection for the literature of that country, his view of Iceland as the cradle of

48 It was the Völsunga Saga man-dragon, Fafnir, that gave rise to Morris's much-quoted remark about William Michael Rossetti. Trying to interest Dante Gabriel in the Volsung story, Morris had a hard time over-coming Rossetti's hatred for monsters. The following conversation is supposed to have ensued:

[D.G.R.]: 'I never cared much for all that stuff...there's something unnatural - monstrous - about it. How can one take a real interest in a man who has a dragon for a brother?'

[W.M.]: 'I'd much rather have a dragon for a brother than a bloody fool!'


49 Complete Works, XII, Introduction, p. viii.
a great people with a great literary art, belongs with any discussion of his critical appreciations. Longing for a glimpse of the stead-sites of the sagas he so well knew, he made his first trip with Magnusson, Philip Webb, and Faulkner, in the summer of 1871. Impatiently awaiting the hour when their small craft, the "Diana," would put in at Berufjörður. (Incidentally Magnusson's birth-place), he gazed the land, when that auspicious moment came, with his poem "Iceland First Seen." It is here that he first drew his idealized picture of an island more noted in his time as the place of Geysers than as a home of literature:

O land, as some cave by the sea
Where the treasures of old have been laid,

and he again repeated this view in the poem, "Gunnar's Howe":

Ye who have come o'er the sea to behold
This grey minster of lands,
Whose floor is the tomb of time past, and whose walls
By the toil of dead hands
Show pictures amidst of the ruin of deeds
That have overpassed death,
Stay by this tomb in a tomb to ask
Of who lieth beneath.

Enduring almost unbelievable hardships, traveling virtually the whole circuit of the saga-places on pony-back, eating unwholesome food, and drinking soured whiskey to keep warm,—these were the sacrifices which Morris made in order to traverse

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50 Collected Works, IX, 125.
51 Ibid. p.179.
the land which had inspired so vast and so great a litera-
ture. To see at first hand the relics of a noble and a re-
markable past, he crossed the sea in a boat so small that it
trembled with every wave. He questioned himself, at the out-
set, asking why he had come, and he found the answer to his
query both logical and satisfactory:

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 the 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?52

That the natural beauties, the abundance of fish and
game, rather than the history written on every stone should
attract tourists to Iceland was almost unthinkable to Morris.
He often expressed his opinion on this score, in his Journals
of Travel in Iceland, and mentions the fact that the natives
were both pleased and surpried to discover that there were
some Englishmen who came out to Iceland to explore its liter-
ary scenes, and to learn more of its history. Not only the

52 Ibid., p. 25.
53 In Collected Works, Vol. VIII.
wild-game hunters, but the geyser-hunters as well were subject to Morris’s scorn. At the great stead of many geysers, he wrote in his Journal:

This is the place which has made Iceland famous to Manegall’s Questions and the rest, who have never heard the names of Sigurd and Brynhild, of Njal or Gunnar or Grettir or Gisli or Gudrun.54

The desolate inland country, the disagreeable weather, the far-off location of Iceland all made their impressions upon Morris’s memory; yet he thought one trip was not sufficient for a real student of the sagas. A year and a half before the 1871 journey, he had written:

Hearken, and marvel how it might be so,
That such a sweetness so well crowned could be
Betwixt the ice-hills and the cold grey sea.55

and because of an unsatisfied longing to understand the country which was so difficult, yet so productive of this sweetness, he returned on a second journey in 1873. No document which Morris has written gives more convincing testimony to his tremendous enthusiasm for Old Norse literature than does the record he made of these two trips. If Iceland and its literature were ever a passion with Morris, the period of Icelandic travel even more than the earlier two years in which he worked so feverishly over translations with Magnusson, should be named as the time of its height.

54 Collected Works, VIII, 66.
55 "Prologue in Verse" to the Völsunga Saga, VII, 289.
But if Morris marveled at the circumstance, that "such a sweetness" could grow "between the ice-hills and the cold grey sea," he also thought it extremely fortunate for Scandinavian literature that its cradle was a far-off place. He wrote in the Introduction to the *Saga Library*:

The fact that the Icelandic historians and tale-tellers were cut off from the influence of the older literature of Europe, was, we think, a piece of good luck to them rather than a misfortune. For the result was that, when the oral traditions and histories came to be written down, and had to receive literary form, the writers had to create that form for themselves, and thereby escaped the meshes of the classical Latin pedantry which so grievously encumbers the medieval literature of the rest of Europe.  

This insularity in modern times, Morris held, was also a remarkable influence upon the natives, for it gave them that solitude which is properly conducive to reading. He wrote:

In Iceland every homestead, one may almost say every field, has its well-remembered history, while the earlier folklore is embedded in that history, and no peasant, however poor his surroundings may be, is ignorant of the traditions of his country, or dull to them;  

The *Journals* are full of specific examples of what Morris observed regarding this remarkable self-education of the people in the history of their literature; and not alone that,

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57 Ibid., p. vi.

58 For instance, in the entries in the *Journals* during the visit to the Oddi country, he wrote: "The men who dwelt here [Sammund, Ari, and Snorri Sturlason], or herabouts still live in people's minds as the writers of most of the great stories and both the Eddas." *Collected Works*, VIII, 41.
Morris makes several mentions of finding volumes of Shakespeare, and Milton, and the English Bible in little homesteads so far from civilization that one has to ford dangerous streams to reach them.

But admiring the bonders as he did, he at last succumbed, in a moment of pessimistic thoughtfulness, to the oppressive atmosphere of Iceland. After days and days of visiting the place where this outlaw was murdered, or where that chieftain was robbed of his horses, arriving at the house of a parson in the Laxdala country, Morris became intensely aware of the old and the new; he gave vent to his O tempora, O mores:

Just think, though, what a mournful place this is—Iceland I mean...how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory; and withal so little is the life changed in some ways: [here] Olaf Peacock went about summer and winter after his live-stock, and saw to his hay-making and fishing just as this little peak-nosed parson does; setting aside the coffee and brandy, his vienals under his hall, 'marked with famous stories,' were just the same as the little parson in his ten-foot square parlor eats: I don't doubt the house stands on the old ground. But Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once—59

But hope for the return of the courage and pity of old stories was not lost forever; the Iceland of Gudrun, Grettir and Gunnar might live again. Morris addresses the "Queen of the grief without knowledge" in words of expectation:

Ah! when thy Balder comes back,
and bears from the heart of the Sun
Peace and the healing of pain,
and the wisdom that waiteth no more;

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Shall we not linger a little
to talk of the sweetness of old,
Yea, turn back awhile to thy travail 60
whence the Gods stood aloof to behold?

Morris saw Iceland; he trod the haunts of unlaid ghosts,
stood at the foot of the hill where the great men of Iceland,
amost a thousand years before, had met at their first Althing;
slept on the very ground of Olaf and Kjartan,—all a fitting
prelude to the writing of Sigurd the Volsung.

VI

The last task in discussing Morris's appreciation of Old
Norse literature is to examine what place he gave the best of
it with relation to the rest of the world's great literary
monuments. In 1885, Morris, Ruskin, and Swinburne were asked
to make a list of what they considered the "100 Best Books."
Morris, with characteristic individuality, chose to list only
fifty-four which he could classify as "best." In this group 61
were The Hebrew Bible, Homer, AESchylus, Catullus, Plato,

60 "Iceland First Seen," Collected Works, IX, 126.

61 Morris made no distinction between titles and authors; he
classes Homer, Chaucer, etc., as "best books."
The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Chaucer, Malory, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and many others. From these books and writers, the present writer has separated the Scandinavian and Germanic documents which Morris includes, and has append-
ed thereto the poet's comments. They are as follows:

(Number) 4. The Edda—excluding some of the other early Old Norse romantic genealogical poems—

7. Collections of folk-tales headed by Grimm and the Norse Ones.

18. Heimskringla—the tales of the Norse Kings... some of them rise into the dignity of prose epics, so to say, especially in parts. Note, for instance, the last battle of Olaf Tryggvason in Heimskringla;

18. Some half-dozen of the best Icelandic Sagas.

27. The Nibelungennott

28 & 29. The Danish and Scotch... ballads.

54. Grimm's Teutonic Mythology.

The only comment which needs to be added is that when

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62 He omitted Milton, and to justify his action, said that Milton combined two of the things which he hated most in the world: "Puritanism and cold classicism."

63 Taking a liberty with this statement, one might assume that these would probably be: (1) Njála; (2) Völsunga; (3) Grettla; (4) Laxdála; (5) Ærbyggja; (6) Egilssaga, and very probably (7) Gísla.

64 * is used here to denote works not written in Old Icelandic.

Morris named "The Eddas, Heimskringla, and some half-dozen of the best Icelandic sagas," he excluded scarcely a single Old Norse document which should be appraised when such a comparison is undertaken. In his list of the fifty-four "best books" of the world, which correspond to the one hundred chosen by Ruskin and Swinburne, Morris placed a fair proportion of works from the Old Norse. Although there are only four actual items which are from that literature, it should be observed that the Eddas, the Heimskringla, and a half-dozen sagas actually make up a list of about twenty-six titles, at least a third of which, such as both Eddas, Njála, Grettla, Olaf's Saga Tryggvison, Olaf's Saga Helgi, etc., are in themselves tremendously important works.

Morris was of course so well acquainted with Old Icelandic literature that he did not bother to itemize his all-inclusive titles. But in spite of this fact, it must be said that he shows as much or more appreciation of the literature of Iceland in his incidental comments and in his Icelandic adaptations than he does in this summary which he made at the behest of a magazine editor; as his treatment of the Psyche story, in The Earthly Paradise, demonstrates more clearly his esteem for Greek literature than do the Greek titles he included in his list. The measure of his theories, after all, is best observed in his attempts to practice them.
PART II

CONTRIBUTIONS OF OLD NORSE LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TO MORRIS'S STYLE.
CHAPTER I

THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSLATION