

Publisher's Notes

The After-Summer Seed is the second volume of studies published by the William Morris Society. With one exception, the papers were written for the Special Session on The Story of Sigurd the Volsung by William Morris held at the convention of the Modern Language Association in New York, December 1976. The contribution of John Hollow, chairman of the Session, was written later.

John Hollow edited this collection of studies. Carole Silver and Joseph Dunlap prepared it for publication. Scholastic and Manuscript Typing Service made the text camera ready. Design and production were in the hands of S. A. Russell of Oriole Editions and William Burton of the Moretus Press.

The Story of Sigurd the Volsung is contained in Volume XII of The Collected Works of William Morris. All references in the text to pages in that volume are given without the XII: (123). References to pages in other volumes of The Collected Works are accompanied by the volume number: (VII, 123).

THE
AFTER-SUMMER SEED

RECONSIDERATIONS OF WILLIAM MORRIS'S
The Story of Sigurd the Volsung

Edited, with an Introduction, by
JOHN HOLLOW

Papers read at the Annual Meeting
of the Modern Language Association
December, 1976

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NEW YORK AND LONDON
THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY

1978

ICELAND AND WILLIAM MORRIS:
In Search of the Whole

Emily Meredith

The Victorian artist faced a disquieting world. Polarization and disintegration had become the new norm for a people accustomed to order and stability. Because one way of life appeared to be ending and another seemed about to begin, the Victorian often buried himself in the past or hurled himself into the future, recognizing little historical continuity. The labor of his hands had no connection with the work of his imagination and intellect; artists who conceived ideas relied upon other men to implement them, while workmen seldom saw the final results of their own labor. Art gave way to clutter, as the Victorian surrounded himself with objects that were neither functional nor beautiful. Morality and religion wavered between dogmatism and relativity; the Victorian no longer felt bound to see himself as created in God's image, and yet he clung desperately to the security of belief. He often felt constrained to redefine the heroic act, and he had difficulty reconciling the power of his personal will with a universe that appeared to be increasingly mechanistic.

William Morris tried to re-unite these fragments, to integrate the disintegrated, to strengthen through synthesis. Unable to tolerate polarization, he fought with immense energy to unify extremes, to wrest from each its strengths and to bind them into a potent whole. Nor was this compulsion to integrate, for Morris, a way to avoid taking a position. Synthesis was his driving genius, demanding and receiving from him constant and total commitment.

As is so readily apparent in his visual arts, Morris sought to blend the functional with the beautiful, and the practical with the ideal, whether in furniture, printing, fabrics, wallpaper, or stained glass. He sought to integrate the hand, the intellect, and the imagination, and to link the essential with the ornamental, the conception with the execution, the modern with the antique, spontaneity with control, tradition with invention.

He dealt with many of these same antitheses in his literature, but expanded the range of his concern. Increasingly dissatisfied with undiluted romance, he retained elements of the romantic while adding an epic dimension. Rather than "escaping" into the past, he sought historical continuity. In addition, he wanted to perform as well as to compose, and to entertain as much as to enlighten or to inspire. He also appreciated the savage along with the civilized and, most significantly, he felt that art is not a single act but a pattern of beautiful actions, that art is both the expression and the property of a folk although contributed by individuals.

Morris' concern for the function of art mirrors his equally deep interest in the quality of action. The Morris "hero" is an integrated man exerting his will within predetermined limits; the integrated hero acts as the integrator of his larger community; and the heroic act is linked to honorable motive and appropriate emotion. Morris attempted to describe such creative conduct by means of functional art, a relationship apparent in Norse, and particularly in Icelandic, literature and most especially in the ancient story of Sigurd the Volung: "All his Icelandic study and travel, all his feeling for the North, led [to Sigurd]."¹

II

Morris' persistent interest in the past has drawn charges that through his art he fled from his surrounding chaos into the more stable Middle Ages. In fact, however, rather than abandoning the Victorian perspective in favor of the medieval, Morris emphasized historical continuity, attempting to bring the past into closer contact with the present. Even in his earliest poetry, he had drawn upon ancient European chronicle and romance and had reached into both Greek and Scandinavian mythology, but these materials offered an inadequate historical bridge. It was the Norse saga, in all its forms, which provided him with the appropriate sense of history.

The Norse sagas reach forward as well as backward. They include genealogies which extend back through history into mythology, even to the gods themselves. The sagas recognize, respect and respond to their own past, retelling stories that have "been told from ancient days, and in tales of long ago" (VII, 294). In Sigurd the Volung, for example, the very first words spoken to the infant Sigurd tell of his father and his father's father. The hero, "the best sprung forth from the best" (63), is not isolated from history but is a significant link in its process.

And the continuity persisted into nineteenth-century Iceland where the ancient tales were still told in lonely steads; where the somber, spectacular landscape had scarcely changed in a thousand years; and where the Icelandic language remained so nearly pure that modern speakers could read medieval manuscripts in their own tongue with little difficulty. The literature, the land and its language offered the continuity and integration for which Morris hungered, symbolizing a kind of graphic and geographic immortality. In addition, the appeal of

the sagas was broad, and the range of its characters was democratic; while the Normans, the Angles, and the Saxons indeed had their chronicles, they were not the property of Everyman, nor were they about him, as were the sages in Iceland.

Morris' attempt to relieve the tension between epic and romance in his own poetry reflects this same concern for artistic synthesis. The early romantic Guenevere volume (1858), with its distinct Pre-Raphaelite content and style, had burst forth almost spontaneously in a single, powerful flow, and the late prose romances, such as The Story of the Glittering Plain (1890) and The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1895), returned to this same romantic well-spring. Morris had apparently agreed with such contemporary critics as Swinburne and Rossetti, who felt he should counteract the "indolent" tendencies of the earlier, more romantic, poetry, and during the period of his greatest poetic strength, marked by "The Lovers of Gudrun" (1870) and Sigurd the Volsung (1876), Morris found in Icelandic literature an opportunity to add epic energy without abandoning his penchant for romance. He recognized that

The most perfect heroic literature of the Northern nations is to be found in the country where the heroic polity and society had most room and leisure; and in Iceland the heroic ideals of life had conditions more favourable than are to be discovered anywhere else in history.²

John Purkis, discussing Morris' visits to Iceland, suggests that the poet's actual passage through the Faroe Island Straits symbolizes his shift away from romance.³ However, at no time in his life or in his work did Morris completely abandon the medieval or

the romantic. He always remained fascinated by medieval manuscripts and printing, by archaic language and traditional crafts, and he did return to the prose romance in his later years. However, the particular strength of the poetry which he drew from Icelandic sources suggests that he felt most secure with a blend of romance and epic.

In Sigurd the Volsung, for example, much of the tone is romantic, while the ferocious action and powerful passions are nearly epic. In particular, the sections derived directly from the Nibelungenlied retain the romantic flavor, the courtly medieval trappings, of the original. Sigurd, "by far above other men in courtesy and goodly manners, and well nigh in all things else" (VII, 341), receives a courtly education in a kingdom governed by chivalric custom. For that matter, Sigurd, feeding his lust for revenge alone in the forest, resembles the medieval "wild-man." The landscapes in the poem are frequently so romantic, the love interest so crucial, that the reader is strongly reminded of medieval romance.

But in Sigurd, epic power balances chivalric grace. Consider Gudrun, in silent ferocity presiding with her husband over the slaughter of her brothers, and the Volsungs, chained in the forest, witnessing as one by one their own brothers are devoured by wolves. In addition, the gods assume epic roles, intervening to restrict and to encourage, and the romantic questing hero takes on new levels of communal responsibility, while corrosive passions and treacherous ambitions reach colossal proportions. In Sigurd the Volsung, therefore, the courtly and the cosmic cohere, as do the psychological and the mythic, in one epic, yet romantic, amalgam.

Norse mythology and religion as reflected in the sagas offered William Morris another opportunity for synthesis. Never religiously dogmatic, and suspending judgment to an amazing degree in his personal life, Morris must have felt little attraction for the pervasive Christian influence in the medieval art and literature of the European continent. Nor did the extremes of Victorian Christianity or atheism offer him spiritual solace or moral guidance. For, while granting God's existence, Morris rejected the conventional means of reaching Him. John Hollow further suggests that Morris denied man's ability even to recognize the will of God, making presumptuous any attempt to act upon it.⁴

Iceland, however, isolated from the currents of European thought, was scarcely affected until relatively late in her history by the strong influence of Christianity from the continent, and even then she maintained a common-sense approach to religion, mystical but practical, encompassing even the mundane and the savage. In the family sagas, moral codes tend to be humanistic and legalistic, determined by expediency and human need rather than by absolute supernatural decree. The sagas represent

the lives of adventurers, the rivalries and private wars of men who are not ignorant of right and honour, but who acknowledge little authority over them, and are given to choose their right and wrong for themselves, and abide the consequences.⁵

Such a blend of divine direction and human responsibility mirrored Morris' own unorthodox attitudes.

In Norse mythology, the gods assume, not a superior role, but a feudal partnership with the heroes. Sigurd's father considers himself "the hired of Odin, his workaday will to speed" (8), reminding us that

"When the Gods for one deed asked me I ever gave them twain" (55). While offering guidance to men, the gods realize that they, in turn, must depend upon the good services of these same men when, at ragna rök, gods and heroes must fight together against the giants. In Sigurd the Volsung, resting as it does upon an Icelandic heroic-mythical saga, Morris can almost deify the humans and almost humanize the deities, reducing the distance between them; the Icelandic myth offers him the latitude to reduce divine in favor of human power without threatening the spirit of the narrative. In Morris' poem, for example, enmity between Siggeir and Sigmund does not commence at the appearance of Odin as it does in earlier versions; Morris' Odin merely fans the enmity already smouldering. In Sigurd, Morris deals most directly with mythology in the Hreidmar-Regin-Fafnir episode where, however, he expands the scene impressively, concentrating upon the corrosive power of the gold rather than upon the force of the gods.

The saga, and particularly this story of Sigurd the Volsung, must have appealed to Morris on yet another level, as a worthy example of "organic art." For Morris, art was not the product of a single isolated act; it was rather a growing "organic" composite, exemplified most strikingly by the Gothic cathedrals which he so much admired. Speaking of the Volsung story, Morris wrote to Professor Franklin Petersen on Sept. 12, 1894:

You will understand that I would on no account wish that the curious entanglement of the ages [which] has been thus at work on the greatest story of the world had not taken place: it has on the contrary, it seems to me, produced something of wonderful imagination and clearness of outline, without disturbance of the huge and vague figures of the earlier times.⁶

We see here a kind of literary "Anti-Scrape." As in his activity to keep old buildings intact, Morris wished not only to preserve the ancient but also to resist scraping off the artistic accretions left by subsequent centuries. He felt that the contributions of each successive age and artist added to the growing beauty of the whole, as long as integrity remained. He found, therefore, particular delight in the organic development of the saga:

Successive generations of men, speaking the same or similar forms of language, made poetic experiments in a common subject-manner, trying different ways of putting things, and changing their forms of poetry according to local and personal variations of taste; so that the same story might be told over and over again, in different times, with different circumstances.⁷

And into Sigurd the Volsung, Morris consciously drew all the various versions of the story, "everything he knew about the Volsungs and Niblungs."⁸ The story "is never told alike by two narrators; what is common or essential in it is nothing palpable or fixed, but goes from poet to poet 'like a shadow from dream to dream.'"⁹ Therefore, to the Eddaic lays, the Volsunga Saga, and the Nibelungenlied, Morris added his own invention to tradition. He neutralized the brutality, deleted much of the fantastic, eliminated apparent irrelevancies, and emphasized human motivation rather than divine or supernatural manipulation, thereby becoming another re-creator in a long line of similar poets. Morris had doubted his ability to retell Sigurd's magnificent story, waiting several years after his translation of Volsunga Saga with Magnússon before attempting his own poetic version. But having finally

assumed the task, Morris would have made no apologies for his particular nineteenth-century viewpoint. It was his justified addition to living history and to organic art.

It seems clear, then, that both the form and the content of the Icelandic saga presented William Morris with opportunity to reconcile many of the conflicts which confronted him.

III

In Icelandic literature, William Morris found the metaphor for creative conduct as well as for functional art. Sigurd the Volsung, derived from ancient Germanic and Icelandic sources, reflects Morris' concept of individual heroism, another ideal blending and balancing disparate elements into an integrated whole.

In Sigurd, heroism is the integration of "hand and heart" (5, 8), uniting action with wisdom and understanding, thus insuring fame by embracing fate. When man understands why he acts and knows the extent of his far-reaching communal obligations, he can retain significant control over his own fate. He can then act from self-direction, freeing himself from fear of man or of god. Such creative action assures fame and becomes a force for continued integration.

Wisdom, essential to heroism, is the realization that good and evil co-exist and that they must be kept separate from each other. Among both gods and men, entangled strands of good and evil, creation and uncreation, cause chaos and disunity. Good must first be distinguished from evil, "lest the world run backward and the blind heart have its will, / And once again be tangled the sundered good and ill" (116). For evil to triumph, after all, goodness need not disappear; it need only be obscured.

In Morris' poem, Sigmund and Sigurd explore almost ritually the natures of both good and evil. Sigmund silently nurtures plans for revenge in his isolated woodland smithy, where he acquires the skills of a creative god and the reputation of a destructive giant. Threatening to deny his services at ragna rök, Sigmund becomes a beast, until having explored fully the natures of both creation and destruction, he gratefully embraces his own humanity.

Later, Sigmund's son relinquishes control over his own life to Regin upon whose skill he must rely for the forging of his wonderful sword. One favor exacts another, according to Regin, and, as Regin's instrument for vengeance, Sigurd leaves the peaceful land which fostered him to challenge and defeat Fafnir, the dwarf-turned-dragon. Sigurd ingests Fafnir's understanding of good and evil, recognizes the extent to which he has given up control of his own destiny to Regin, and establishes new, more heroic directions for himself.

Distinguishing between good and evil is only one requirement of the Morris hero. He must also recognize and accept the full extent of his obligations. Many critics have considered the socio-political implications of Morris' poetry,¹⁰ but Morris himself considered that man's community--and, by extension, his communal obligations--extends far beyond family, tribe or nation. Starting from such a narrow point, communal ties reach outward in time; the hero has responsibilities to those around him, debts to pay to those who have gone before, and legacies to leave to those who will follow. For the great men in Sigurd, communal boundaries swing even wider. Meeting earthly responsibilities leaves man eligible to support the gods in their ultimate confrontation with the giants at ragna rök. By recognizing that neither his

obligations nor his opportunities for glory cease with his death, by embracing the mortality which he shares with the gods, man frees himself from fear. He can then act independently of the will of others, the restrictions of society and the demands of religion and superstition. He can integrate his individual will with cosmic fate.

Understanding the nature of both good and evil and accepting his broad obligations, man is freed to act joyfully and creatively. Such action promises fame for the action, not necessarily for the actor. It is not the doer who is important, but his deed, the creation itself, and its ability to elicit similar significant acts in those who follow.¹¹ The role of man, allied with the good, the creative, is to do, not merely to live.

The Morris hero, then, integrates his understanding with his sense of responsibility into significant, creative action. Ironically, in Sigurd the Volsung, Morris defines such heroism by denying us a hero. He suggests integration by describing fragments. He presents parts of heroes, pieces of heroism, some of them larger than others, but none of them complete. Even Sigurd, the poem's central character, who possesses all of the essentials for heroic stature at some point in his career, fails to integrate them with permanence.

To possess wisdom alone, for example, is to be fragmented and therefore destructive. Although the primary requisite for heroism, wisdom becomes a curse rather than a blessing when not tempered by love and transformed into action; by itself, it has infinite power to entangle good with evil. Fafnir, for example, hoards his wisdom as he hoards his gold, denying it an outlet into meaningful action; "he had held him apart / Nor spilt on the sons of men-folk [his] knowledge of ancient days, / Nor bartered one whit for their love, nor crowed for the people's praise" (88). Fafnir

becomes ever more calloused, less sensitive as, in silent bestiality, he restrains the seething power of this compressed wisdom. While Fafnir denies his knowledge an outlet, both Regin and Grimhild employ consciously their godlike wisdom to entangle further the skeins of good and evil. They act, but deny responsibility beyond their own narrow interests. Regin, sensing his own fragmentation, searches for a man to complete him:

"And myself a little fragment amidst it all
I saw,
Grim, cold-heart, and unmighty as the tempest-
driven straw;" (76)

while Grimhild, aggressively directing all men's lives to her own pattern, orchestrates the final tragedy.

The spectrum of fragmented characters reaches to the opposite extreme, to those like Siggeir, Sinfiotli and Atli who act with neither perception nor sensitivity. Lacking wisdom, their action is brutal and self-destructive. Siggeir, aspiring to be equal to gods and superior to men, becomes, in fact, the Lord of Un-Wisdom, deceived by his own wife and destroyed by the young man he thought was his son. While Siggeir pretends to divinity, Sinfiotli identifies with the beasts. Of superhuman physical strength and endurance, Sinfiotli nevertheless lacks the perception to control his own destiny, allowing himself to be manipulated as the instrument for Sigmund's vengeance. Without compassion, more inclined to claim justice than to dispense it, Sinfiotli is another fragment, a man of undirected passionate action, untempered by either wisdom or sensitivity.

These characters all lack the essential requirement for the Morris hero, the blend of "hand and heart." Perception lifts one close to the gods but, when severed

from action and compassion, it is only a fragment, causing further disintegration. On the other hand, action based upon limited or inaccurate understanding brings one close to the beasts and, again, results in disunity. In Sigurd the Volsung, therefore, heroism is a joyful embracing of humanity, a state more blessed and more powerful than that of either the beasts or the gods. While recognizing and accepting human mortality and fallibility, the hero nevertheless insists that sensitive intelligent human action is significant.

Although Sigurd's life does not span the entire poem, it holds a central position in the narrative. We might suspect, therefore, that he is also a model for the Morris hero. The son of Hiordis and Sigmund whose "wisdom and valour have kissed" (55; my emphasis), he is tutored by Regin, the master-craftsman, and nurtured in the utopian land of Elf where he grows both "wise of heart . . . and of body wondrous strong" (68). Initially exploited by Regin, and later initiated into the natures of both creation and destruction, Sigurd subsequently assumes responsibility for determining his own path. His deeds have new direction and motivation. He leaves his limited community for wider realms, intending to serve with both wisdom and strength and, in return, expecting to receive from this larger community assurance of fame. He says,

"I am young, but have learned me wisdom; I am
lone, but deeds have I done;
I have slain the Foe of the Gods, and the Bed
of the Worm have I won.
But meseems that the earth is lovely, and
that each day springeth anew
And beareth the blossom of hope, and the
fruit of deeds to do.

And herein thou sayest the sooth, that I seek
the fame of Kings,
And with them would I do and undo and be
heart of their warfarings." (142)

Sigurd, the sun-king, nearly integrates his wisdom, courage, passion and sensitivity into a heroic whole. But momentarily unguarded, he accepts Grimhild's position, abdicating his self-determination. His actual death, therefore, occurs long before Guttorm's fatal attack. Temporal unity disintegrates for Sigurd as he loses memory of the past, understanding of the present, and hope for the future. His emotions and passions wither; he no longer feels anger, hope, wonder or fear. He acts without understanding, the motives for his deeds having been obscured. Even his ties to the gods are confused and unstable.

The first part of Sigurd the Volsung progresses upward toward integration, following Sigurd's personal development and his subsequent power as unifier of his broadened community; in the second part, the poem's tone darkens as the characters plunge irresistibly downward toward destruction. Deception, like the sword which separated Brynhild from the disguised Sigurd, splits the characters apart and severs them from each other; "And the Lie is laid between them, as the sword lay while agone" (204). None of the characters has complete truth about the situation which entangles them all, and to the extent that their insight is clouded, their baser emotions grow: Sigurd, increasingly confused, can no longer mesh his understanding with his deeds; Gudrun becomes more self-centered, arrogant, unloving and scornful "of every soul save Sigurd" (203); Brynhild's powerful passions and profound wisdom are eroded by fear, suspicion and a growing sense of betrayal.

And the three Niblung brothers, like three splinters of a single man, stumble blindly toward violent ends. Guttorm is the man of action whose limited understanding, "blind-eyed through right and wrong" (202), makes logical his selection as Sigurd's murderer. Hogni, "wise-heart" (203), sacrifices his wisdom to his pride. Like Fafnir's, his heart increases in value when separated from his body; like Fafnir, Hogni is as much a fragment with his heart as without it. Gunnar, merciful, generous, powerful, just, courageous, talented and sensitive, offers the greatest hope for real heroism. But he is the victim of the same deception which brought him the beautiful Brynhild. Grimhild keeps him half-blind, feeding his greed and ambition until he, too, loses perceptive control over his own actions. "She tells of king's supplanters" (204) so relentlessly that Gunnar, like Sigurd, splinters in her hands.

Fascinated by the possibilities for beauty in individual conduct, Morris nevertheless seems more respectful of those "heroes" who embrace their humanity than of those who try to transcend it. For example, the most inspiring moments in Sigurd occur during Sigurd's moving speech as, dying without an apparent heir, isolated and unlauded, he confronts the full implications of his mortality--and during Gunnar's final moments when, the last of a line, he quietly faces his death by blending history with song.

Sigurd the Volsung reflects Morris' concern with integration, this time as it is expressed by and in the individual personality. Since the essentials of heroism as they appear in Sigurd--the transformation of wisdom and love into meaningful action--are not limited to those with particular abilities, education or privilege, every man can aspire to a measure of heroism. Achieving full

integration would, after all, raise the human to divinity; being incomplete is a part of being human. Nevertheless, Morris' understanding of "heroism," like his dream of a utopian integrated society, is no less meaningful because it is essentially unattainable.

It seems contradictory to exalt an integrated whole by describing only the disintegrated fragments which, I suggest, is William Morris' method in Sigurd the Volsung. This may be one reason, in fact, for Sigurd's relative obscurity as a literary work. We do not find what we expect, and we close the book with vague disappointment. We have been looking for heroes and have found only humans.

IV

To William Morris, then, the force of the integrated culture and literature of Iceland must have been overwhelming. He could identify respectfully and perhaps even enviously with a world that encompassed all of his values, and that even from the distance of a thousand years, had successfully brought together all the extremes. He found in Norse literature and especially in the story of Sigurd the Volsung, a reflection of his own desire to describe artistic action by means of functional art.

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Notes

1. May Morris, ed., The Collected Works of William Morris, With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris (London: Longmans, Green, 1910-1915), XII, Sigurd the Volsung, xxiii. Subsequent volume and page references in the text are to this edition.

2. William Paton Ker, Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature (1908; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1957), p. 60.

3. John Purkis, The Icelandic Jaunt: A Study of the Expeditions Made by Morris to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 (The William Morris Society, 1962), pp. 12-13.

4. John Hollow, "William Morris and the Judgment of God," PMLA, 86 (1971), 446-51.

5. Ker, p. 60.

6. William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, MS J842.

7. Ker, p. 146.

8. Karl Litzenberg, "William Morris and Scandinavian Literature: A Bibliographical Essay," Scandinavian Studies and Notes, 13 (1933-35), 103.

9. Ker, p. 26.

10. Among these are Charles H. Herford, Norse Myth in English Poetry (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1970); Jessie Kocmanova, The Poetic Maturing of William Morris (Prague: Brno Studies in English, 1964); and Karl Litzenberg, "The Victorians and the Vikings," University of Michigan Contributions in Modern Philology, No. 3, April, 1947.

11. John W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), II, 93.