

THE VICTORIAN SKALD:  
Old Icelandic and the Evolution of  
William Morris' Sigurd the Volsung

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A century ago William Morris' Sigurd the Volsung appeared to essentially enthusiastic reviews and, to the poet's dismay, a largely indifferent public. Whether or not critics of the past hundred years have agreed with an early American response to Sigurd as "at once the manliest and the liveliest work of Mr. Morris' genius,"<sup>1</sup> or Shaw's estimate of the poem as "the greatest epic since Homer,"<sup>2</sup> the generally indifferent public has remained indifferent on both sides of the Atlantic. Morris himself was disturbed by public reaction to what he perceived as his greatest poetic achievement, and the critical estimates of the epic have fluctuated from the early esteem of Gosse and Shaw to the later guarded condemnation of Dorothy M. Hoare<sup>3</sup> and Graham Hough,<sup>4</sup> ending now in a contemporary response exemplified by J. W. Blench: "Nothing like the avid enthusiasm of the Wagnerians is likely to be roused by Sigurd, nor indeed does it deserve it. However it does merit sympathetic reading, and given this, I believe it will be recognized as a poem of major interest."<sup>5</sup> Current criticism of Sigurd the Volsung amounts to a plea for understanding.

In a curious way, however, the recent reaction to William Morris has been marked by a response to the sum total of his life's labor as opposed to an appreciation of any single task. Certainly the contemporary response to Morris belies Alfred Noyes' assertion that he would be chiefly remembered by his poetry.<sup>6</sup> The several classes of students to whom I have taught Morris have admirably seized upon the sheer creative energy of the man as his distinguishing characteristic; they are generally much more eager to study his design or the prose romances than they are to plunge into The Earthly Paradise or Sigurd the Volsung. Initially,

they are baffled by his enthusiasm for Nordic roots and a Teutonic past. They express agreement with Philip Henderson's estimate of Morris: "His greatness lies not so much in any one activity: his greatness is in his vision and in what he was."<sup>7</sup>

If we do plead for an understanding of Sigurd the Volsung in the light of its place in that vision, we are obliged to understand the role of the North in Morris' creative life. His fascination with Teutonic myth and the Old Icelandic language caused Morris to shift his allegiance to an essentially Nordic conception of his role as a poet; he consciously altered his style and diction. Sigurd stands at a significant crossroads in Morris' life. The epic represents the final fruit of his sustained poetic effort and the initiation of the political activity which occupied his later years. This paper, in examining the growth of Sigurd from Morris' first encounter with the Volsungasaga, will discuss the role of Old Icelandic in marking this vital stage in Morris' creative development. The years between 1868, when he first met his tutor in Icelandic and collaborator in translation, Eiríkr Magnússon, and 1876, when Sigurd emerged in print, mark the first intensity of his enchantment with the North.

Morris' early response to the sagas and eddas involved an active determination to draw from them the emotive life and sentiment that Morris the Victorian found buried in the sparse and hardy Old Norse. The literature in which his age was immersed, the inheritance and continuation of Romanticism, was very different from what he found in the sagas; yet what he drew from the Old Icelandic tradition bore an unmistakable Romantic stamp. Morris' invocation to the Muse of the North to "wrap me in the grief of long ago"<sup>8</sup> stands in marked contrast, for example, to Gisli's troubled reaction to the dark woman of his dream. The

Icelandic hero seeks to fend off the very grief that Morris embraces. Sensitive to these thematic tensions, medievalist critics like Dorothy Hoare bristle at the fact that "the Norse matter which he deals with turns in his hands to something quite other than its real nature."<sup>9</sup> Yet there is no doubt that Morris engaged himself in the Nordic past with the active energy of the artist, consciously intending to draw renewed energy from a Nordic source. He had little inclination for the scholar's more passive attempts at absorption and understanding. Morris realized his intentions in retrospect as he wrote, upon seeing Iceland for the last time, ". . . surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed."<sup>10</sup>

The first manifestation of that true instinct followed upon the appearance of the first volume of The Earthly Paradise. It is ironic that this earlier work, so enthusiastically received by the public which later failed to respond to Sigurd, produced so profound a depression in its creator. Perhaps Morris was dissatisfied with his role as "idle singer of an empty day." That the day was empty, Morris felt no doubt. That the singer was idle in the process of producing three volumes of narrative poetry, decorating St. James Palace and the Green Dining Room at South Kensington, and carrying on the business of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., is a conviction Morris could not have comfortably espoused. He was, with certainty, sensitive to a note of condescension in the response of his associates to The Earthly Paradise. Edmund Gosse judged that "the chord of melancholy languor was dwelt upon almost to excess."<sup>11</sup> This was a kind and courtly estimate, compared to Swinburne's response to the last volume, revealed in a letter to Rossetti: ". . . his Muse is like Homer's Trojan women—she drags her robe

as she walks; there is such a thing as a swift and spontaneous style. Top's [Morris'] is spontaneous and slow; and, especially my ear hungers for more force and variety of sound in the verse."<sup>12</sup> (Even more cutting is Rossetti's famous cartoon sent to Jane Morris, depicting William absorbed in his volumes of The Earthly Paradise and oblivious to his wife in the bath beside him.)

Morris, not oblivious to the criticism of others, was dissatisfied with his own work. A few days after Swinburne's letter to Rossetti, Morris writes to Swinburne as if in response: "I am hard at work now, but I am making blunder upon blunder, and if I could find anything else that really amused me except writing verses I would give up that art for the present, for I am doing no good."<sup>13</sup> He had already begun to perceive the Norse sagas as a counterpoint to his own problems with style. Although he responded with good grace to Swinburne's appreciation of an early saga adaptation, the story of Gudrun in The Earthly Paradise, he felt that some essential quality of economy was missing from his tales: "Yet they are all too long and flabby, damn it!"<sup>14</sup> This estimation of his own defects was made in the light of his first encounter with the Volsung Saga, a meeting which profoundly affected his perspective upon his own work and which later produced Sigurd the Volsung. He recommended his almost completed translation of the saga to Swinburne and promised, "you couldn't fail to be moved by it I'm sure." A letter to Charles Eliot Norton on the same day identifies the saga as "without measure nobler and grander" than the Nibelunglied and identified precisely those qualities which elicit his admiration:

. . . 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 am not getting on well with my work, for in fact I believe the *Volsunga* has rather swallowed me up for some time past, I mean thinking about it, for it hasn't taken me long to do.<sup>15</sup>

Restrained expression and beauty without ornament--these are the virtues of the saga and the qualities which he found lacking in his own work. The *Volsung Saga* provided him with relief from what he found to be a tiresome quality not only in his own work, but in the work of his contemporaries. Even at Oxford Morris had been alone in questioning the reputation of Tennyson, and Lionel Stevenson postulates that Morris "may have adopted his blunt declarative syntax and elementary ballad rhythm to challenge Tennyson's ornateness."<sup>16</sup> He now found his own work touched with ornateness, plagued with repetitiveness, and overstrained; he drank deeply of Old Icelandic and the sagas as an antidote. He engaged in several years' efforts at prose translation in collaboration with Magnússon and suspended for a time his production of lengthy poetic narrative.

The exact nature of Morris' collaboration with Magnússon is a vexing problem. He first met the Icelandic, who was looking for an English man of letters to render the vigorous sagas in lively English prose, in 1868; and each of them found satisfaction in their mutual endeavor. Although the poet took lessons from Magnússon in Icelandic and later developed enough proficiency to converse in the language, his absorption of Old Icelandic never included schooling in the subtler qualities of the

tongue. He used Magnússon as a "reference grammar," and the Icелander provided him with rough and literal translations which Morris later rendered into his own prose, a process which Dorothy Hoare characterizes as "poetising a prose translation."<sup>17</sup> This is unfair in that it presumes no knowledge of the language on the part of a man who spoke it with at least some facility; Morris achieved the passive understanding of the sympathetic admirer rather than the linguistic acumen of the critical scholar. His exposure to the text of the Volsung Saga passed through the filtering screen of Magnússon's interlinear translation. Nevertheless, J. N. Swannell, working from Magnússon's manuscript of The Saga of St. Olaf at the Brotherton Library of Leeds University, demonstrates that Morris wrote in considered imitation of Norse vocabulary and syntax.<sup>18</sup> A look at passages from the scene which Morris admired so greatly, the last interview between Sigurd and Brynhild, demonstrates the stylistic relationship between Morris' translation and Morris' prose rendition.

The following selections from the Old Icelandic are from an unpublished edition of the saga, relying upon the Codex Regius 1824 B40 in the Royal Library at Copenhagen,<sup>19</sup> which was the source manuscript for the early nineteenth-century editions of the saga. Following the Icelandic is a prose translation of the original accurately and studiously rendered in contemporary English by George K. Anderson, editor of the edition. This will serve as a basis for comparison with Morris' prose translation of the saga, a translation which was the genesis of his epic.

The detailed care with which Morris establishes a scene in his longer poems is absent in the saga. Sigurd, at Gudrun's urging, enters upon his last encounter with Brynhild:

Sigurðr gekk út ok fann opinn salinn. Hann hugði hana sofa ok brá af henni klæðum ok mælti: "Vaki þú, Brynhildr! Sól skínn um allan bæinn, ok er ærit sofit. Hritt af þér harmi ok tak gleði!"

Hon mælti: 'Hví sætir þin dirfð, er ðú ferr mik at hitta? Mér var engi verri í þessum svikum.'

Sigurðr spyrr: 'Hví mælir þú eigi við menn eða hvat angrar þik?'

Brynhildr svarar: 'þér skal ek segja mína reiði.'

Sigurd went out and found the hall-door open. He thought Brynhild was asleep, and lifted the covers from her and said: 'Wake up, Brynhild! The sun has been shining all over this dwelling, and you have slept long enough. Push away this sorrow from you and be glad!'

She said, 'What does your boldness mean, that you come to see me? No one has acted worse than you in my betrayal!'

Sigurd asked: 'Why do you not speak to people? And what vexes you?'

Brynhild answered: 'I will tell you the cause of my anger.'

This passage represents the economy of expression, the "beauty without ornament," that affected Morris so deeply in his letter to Norton. We find Morris faithful to this economy in his rendition of the passage, but his choice of diction and his faithfulness to Norse syntax causes the prose to take on a romantic cast and a flavor of archaism:

Then Sigurd went out, and found the door of Brynhild's chamber open; he deemed she slept,

and drew the clothes from off her, and said--

'Awake, Brynhild! the sun shineth now over all the house, and thou has slept enough; cast off grief from thee, and take up gladness!'

She said. 'And how then hast thou dared to come to me? In this treason none was worse to me than thou.'

Said Sigurd, 'Why wilt thou not speak to folk? for what cause sorrowest thou?'

Brynhild answers, 'Ah, to thee will I tell of my wrath!'<sup>20</sup>

Note immediately that Morris has changed salinn, "hall door," to "the door of Brynhild's chamber" and thus evoked all the Romantic connotations associated with the medievalized image of the maiden's chambre. Even within the limitations set by the economy he avowed to admire, Morris has not been able to resist carefully setting a scene. Of the same order are the thou's and thee's which lend the dialogue an archaic atmosphere, even while they preserve the distinctive singular pronoun of the original. Dorothy Hoare sees this self-imposed "remoteness" as a defect in Morris' translation, brought about by two "faults in manner": "by making too literal a translation where the idiom needs to be translated by a corresponding English idiom, or by using phrases and syntax not in modern usage, and thus giving a kind of remote, medieval flavour to what is fresh and modern in spirit."<sup>21</sup> Hoare forgets, of course, that the sagas themselves employed archaic language with deliberate regularity and that the concept of a 'fresh, modern spirit' was quite foreign to an early Germanic literature which celebrated nothing if not the past. Morris' archaic diction strives to re-create that historic flavor; yet when he does not draw

his word directly from the Icelandic source, he relies upon his available vocabulary which in turn is drawn from a Romantic poetic heritage. The result is the subtle evocation of an atmosphere which is not present in the original.

Note, however, that the choice of words with Romantic roots in the etymological sense is a departure from Morris' stated policy. He strives to be faithful to the syntax and structure of Old Norse, thus uncovering the related Anglo-Saxon roots of his own tongue. "Cast off grief from thee, and take up gladness" is closer to the syntax of the Norse expression than is "Push away this sorrow from you and be glad." Thus Morris' work with the Icelandic gave rise to his conviction that the Germanic roots of the language penetrated rich veins of poetic possibility. His estrangement from the South and from Rossetti first expressed itself in linguistic terms. Magnússon observes:

He often used to say that the Teutonic was the poetical element in English, while the Romance element was that of law, practice and business. . . . Morris was strongly impressed by the simple dignity of the Icelandic saga. There must be . . . many of his friends who heard him frequently denounce it as something intolerable to have read an Icelandic saga rendered into the dominant literary dialect of the day—the English newspaper language.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, whereas Morris' contemporaries and associates would be inclined to feature Romance elements in English, Morris would now be inclined to suppress them. Modern English is marked by the extensiveness of its loan words from other languages, while Old Norse is a strongly indigenous Germanic language in which loan

words are rare. His decision to rely when possible upon Norse vocabulary and syntax was a conscious attempt to recapture an underlying poetic strain in what he perceived to be a corrupted tongue. His choice of "he deemed she slept, and drew the clothes from off her" violates the modern idiom which Hoare would use to render the Norse, yet it preserves the concise syntactical structure of the Icelandic: "Hann hugði hana sofa ok brá af henni klæðum. . ." The word deemed is an archaism, but one with strong Anglo-Saxon justification, as is clothes in place of "bedclothes" or "covers."

There is no doubt that Morris was naive by modern standards of scientific linguistics; yet Morris, like J.R.R. Tolkien, was concerned with an aesthetic rather than a cumulative analysis of language. Morris' letter to Henderson in 1885 clarifies the view that early Nordic language was qualitatively superior to the linguistic medium of the modern era:

Things have very much changed since the early days of language: once everybody who could express himself at all did so beautifully, was a poet for that occasion, because all language was beautiful. But now language is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself. . . .<sup>23</sup>

This perspective on the obligation of modern poets to forge a new language "each for himself" sheds light on other qualities of Morris' translation. Hoare has charged that Morris often infuses his translation with near unintelligibility "to a reader who has no knowledge of Icelandic" through Morris' insistence upon maintaining a tone of dignity.<sup>24</sup> Yet the evidence suggests that Morris often intentionally removed his translation from the realm of effortless comprehension in order both to

forge a new linguistic medium closer to the pristine purity of Germanic and also to engage the mind of his reader in an attempt at comprehension. Following is the Icelandic and a clear translation of Brynhild's accusation of Sigurd:

Brynhildr svarar: 'Eigi standa þinn orð af litlu fári, síðan þer svikuð mik frá öllu yndi, ok ekki hirði ek um lífit.'

Brynhild answered: 'Your words come from no little madness! Since you have betrayed me out of all joy, I care not about living.'

Morris' rendition in this case is more complex than the original:

Brynhild answers, 'Enough and to spare of bale is in thy speech, since thou bewrayedst me, and didst twin me and all bliss;—naught do I heed my life or death.'

The word fár, signifying "anger, enmity," Morris renders with the Anglo-Saxon "bale"; he replaced "no little" with "enough and to spare." Morris uses "twin" in the old, northern sense of "sunder" and supplies the meaning in a note to the edition. He has thus compounded the Norse svikja frá, "to betray out of," into two archaized verbs, "bewrayedst" and "didst twin," in order to convey the two actions of betrayal and estrangement compressed in the one Icelandic expression. His deliberate extension of the passage serves to infuse the translation with a supply of Anglo-Saxon roots and a dramatized, archaic word order. The need to supply a note on the passage certainly indicates that it has been removed from the realm of immediate comprehension.

Yet the quality of "remoteness" with which Morris infuses his translation is, he believes, a necessary

component of the freshness and wonder of the original. Morris has chosen, in effect, to forge a new language for himself out of the Germanic elements of his present-day speech. His preface to the translation indicates that he wishes his reader to participate actively in the act of discovery, not only in encountering the subject matter of the original, but also in grasping something of its linguistic substance:

As to the literary quality of this work we might say much, but we think we may well trust the reader of poetic insight to break through whatever entanglement of strange manners or unused element may at first trouble him, and to meet the nature and beauty with which it is filled: we cannot doubt that such a reader will be intensely touched by finding, amidst all its wildness and remoteness, such a startling realism, such subtilty, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move himself to-day.<sup>25</sup>

The "strange manners" and "unused elements" are clearly qualities which Morris intends to incorporate into his translation. The poetic reader must penetrate that "entanglement" in order to perceive the inner beauty of the text. In a sense, the reader is himself a translator, encountering the Germanic antiquity which Morris incorporates into his rendition of the translation and thus discovering and realizing the poetic beauty with which the earlier forms of his language is suffused. Thus Morris is not a linguistic archaeologist whose mission is to unearth the archaic for its own sake; he seeks to resurrect what he perceives as the innate vitality of Old Norse and creatively incorporate it into his "new tongue," distinct and separate from the bastardized linguistic medium of his age. He wishes this new tongue to be unique;

his intent is to convey a "startling realism" very different from the remote and idealized Romanticism which Hoare identifies as his ultimate motive.

We have seen Morris' tendency to visualize an essentially medievalized, Romantic setting in his choice of "Brynhild's chamber" to convey salinn, or "hall." There were limitations to his ability to forge a new poetic vocabulary; remnants of his accessible vocabulary were drawn from the Romantic diction from which he had only recently become estranged. In his stylistics, however, we see the immediate effect of his contact with Old Norse. The power of the Icelandic word to incorporate many concepts into a single expression results in a new economy, distinct from the multiplicity of adjectives in The Earthly Paradise and Morris' earlier work. As Anderson notes, Old Norse prose narrative involves a pattern of compound sentences and coordinate phrases and clauses, with little reliance upon grammatical subordination.<sup>26</sup> This stylistic quality in the sagas leads to a multiplicity of conjunctions and especially adverbials to relate temporal and causal relationships; thus the profusion of therewithal's, thereto's and similar adverbials in Morris' new and concise pattern of independent clauses. Many habits which seem idiosyncratic relate to qualities inherent in the original: the second person singular of both pronoun and verb is preserved with the thee's, thou's, and -st forms of the verb. These stylistic changes, continually reinforced through Morris' work on the Saga Library, found their way into Sigurd the Volsung, which Victorian reviewers found markedly different in style from his Earthly Paradise. Gosse remarks: "The style he has adopted is more exalted and less idyllic, more rapturous and less luxurious--in a word, more spirited and more virile than that of any of his earlier works."<sup>27</sup> This final achievement of his poetic effort is marked

with a stylistic distinction inherited from his exposure to Old Norse.

Sigurd the Volsung appeared six years after Morris became enamored of and translated the Volsunga Saga. Considering his earlier views upon the saga, it is remarkable that he ever chose to render the saga in verse at all. He writes, in the same letter to Norton cited earlier:

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 be a flatter and tamer version of a thing already existing.<sup>28</sup>

These views were expressed in the light of Morris' own condemnation of his earlier verse. The overlong and languorous strains of The Earthly Paradise seemed in marked contrast to the vigor of the Volsungassaga. Morris at this point questions his own capability to render the sparse and hardy Norse into an appropriate poetic medium.

The years between his translation of the saga and his writing of the epic saw no abatement of his fascination with the North. He visited Iceland in 1871 and 1873; he continued his work with Magnússon on the Saga Library. He also immersed himself in the work of Morris and Company. There is evidence that his awkward relationship with Rossetti reached a point of intense strain. As Rossetti's involvement with Janey Morris deepened, Morris' estrangement from him increases. Morris writes to Aglaia Coronio in November, 1872: "Another quite selfish business is that Rossetti has set himself down at Kelmscott as if he never meant to go away; . . . also he has all sorts of ways so unsympathetic with the sweet simple old place that I feel his presence there as a kind of slur upon it."<sup>29</sup> Morris'

journeys to Iceland mark an escape from his former mentor--an escape symbolic as well as psychological. In the bleak landscapes of Iceland and in the resolute determination of its heroes, he not only found escape from the lush southern influence represented by Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelites, he found the strength to draw upon his own resources for sustenance. His journeys to Iceland mark a new and profound independence. As he wrote in his first Icelandic Journal: "whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves."<sup>30</sup>

The undertaking of Sigurd the Vdsung is an assertion of that independence. Lionel Stevenson has suggested the extent to which Rossetti had affected Morris' vision of his own poetic work. "Rossetti was adamant in insisting that poetry was a moribund art, whereas English painting was on the threshold of its first triumphs. Hence Morris was encouraged in his heresy that his writing of poems was a sort of pastime to be enjoyed as a relaxation from serious artistic work."<sup>31</sup> Morris' reaction to the criticisms of The Earthly Paradise indicate the seriousness with which he approached his own work as his relationship with Rossetti deteriorated. His negative views of his own stylistic shortcomings, his immersion in the world of the sagas and his new fascination with prose, his journeys to Iceland all prepared the way for his writing of an epic based upon new and different artistic presumptions.

Morris' turbulent psychological state in these years brought about an estrangement from his past creative life and led him to the Norse tradition for new inspiration and sustenance. This estrangement also caused him to look to the world of Norse myth for the models of a new sociological perspective. As Lloyd W.

Eshleman notes, "The Doom of the Gods" rapidly becomes the antecedent of a new order.<sup>32</sup> It is in this sociological realm that Sigurd the Volsung has its real genesis as an epic. In Morris' preface to his translation of the saga, he had addressed his verse prologue to "the English Folk" and proposed the story of the Volsungs as an alternative mythology to be adopted by the English race:

In conclusion, we must again say how strange it seems to us, that this Volsung Tale, which is in fact an unversified poem, should never before have been translated into English. 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. . . .<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly enough, he refers to the saga as "an unversified poem" and chooses the medium of poetry in his prologue to commend the tale to his nation.

Morris saw the epic, then, as the proper medium for committing this "Great Story of the North" to race-memory. In overcoming his resistance to turning the story of the Volsungs into verse, he had to reject his former adopted role as an idle spinner of tales. This new mythic material and this new language infused him with a sense of mission; no longer a spinner of tales, he became a forger of words, unlocking the Anglo-Saxon word-hoard and relying upon his Germanic forbears for inspiration. His debt to the Norse tale-teller is expressed in a manuscript poem of 1871 in which he expresses his gratitude for a new sense of poetic vocation:

. . . Thou and thy brethren sure did gain  
That thing for which I long in vain,  
The spell, whereby the mist of fear  
Was melted, and your ears might hear

Earth's voices as they are indeed.  
Well, ye have helped me at my need.<sup>34</sup>

In 1871, Morris yet "longed in vain" for this new poetic capability. Sigurd the Volsung is the result of that interaction between the Norse teller of tales and William Morris, a self-styled scop in a new and different era. Morris now saw his "day" as not only empty, but cruel and unregenerate. The Icelandic sagas dispersed his "mist of fear" and allowed him to overcome his former despair. In his later, more consciously political years, he often turned to Iceland as the model of class equality. Sigurd is his epic celebrating an ancient yet (to his age) new mythology, an ancient yet (to his age) new social order. Far from depicting an earthly paradise, the epic asserts the value of resolute courage in facing an earthly hell.

The decision to render the saga in epic form placed new demands upon Morris' poetic capability. He attempted to capture the spare essence of Old Norse prose, the strength of which consisted, according to Morris himself, in its economy and ability to convey "beauty without ornament." His medium was a poetry which had suffered from what Morris identified as "flabbiness." The dilemma was not only that stylistic and temperamental gap between periods which Thompson identifies: "Morris felt his main problem to be the rendering into English, with due dignity, of literature whose spirit was so discordant with that of Victorian England."<sup>35</sup> The challenge struck at the very source of Morris' personal discontent with his own work. His translations of the sagas had afforded him some relief from his own stylistic difficulties. The medium for those translations had been prose; now he would have to return to the medium of narrative verse and apply those lessons he had drawn from the well-spring of Teutonic literature.

Much critical work with Sigurd the Volsung has dealt with Morris' adaptation of sources. Although the saga rests at the base of his epic, he felt free to draw upon other eddic material and, most notably, he adopted the ending of Das Nibelungenlied and ended his epic with the death of Gudrun. His free adaptation of source materials may at times suggest an attempt to retaylor the saga to Victorian sensibilities; yet his faithful rendition of the saga itself made no such attempt. Morris felt the same freedom with the Great Tale of the North that the sagaman himself had exercised, the freedom to draw upon a multiplicity of sources in order to structure the tale of the Volsungs as a single coherent narrative. Morris' choice of the title indicates his decision to focus the epic more singlemindedly upon the fortunes of a single hero, more suitable than the Arthur embraced by Tennyson, as the mythic model for the modern English nation.

A superficial glance at Sigurd indicates that Morris more than quadrupled the length of the original saga. This immediately introduces the question of economy into a discussion of Morris' style. It would seem that Morris felt the need to compromise the economy and beauty without ornament that he so admired in the original Old Norse. If we return to the episode in the saga that Morris praised so highly, the last meeting between Sigurd and Brynhild, we find that he did grasp the dimensions of his problem with economy. The scene underwent multiple revisions in his version of the saga. He rejected many passages which he had written to convey this scene, passages which dwell upon the earlier love between Sigurd and Brynhild.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, however, he trimmed his rendition of the scene in order to preserve the stark confrontation of the Icelandic version. A look at passages from that one scene which the paper has examined thus far indicates that Morris

did preserve and at times even extend the emotive economy of the original. We see only the barest suggestion of the inner psychological or spiritual turmoil of these characters drawn into the tragic death of their race. What Morris adds to the original and what accounts for the increase in length is his concentration upon the stage of the drama, the descriptive capacity present in his earlier work but now focused severely upon landscape and details of setting which outwardly manifest the inner dimensions of his characters.

The scene describing Sigurd's entrance into Brynhild's quarters vividly depicts the dimension of the epic which Morris superimposes upon the sparse economy of the original. Morris builds a cosmic setting upon the merest hint of the sun's presence in the saga. Sigurd sits alone throughout the previous day contemplating his mission to Brynhild; Morris lingers not only upon a description of Sigurd arrayed in gold but also carefully conveys the changing light-pattern within the scene as the sun's brightness gives way to the dark, moonless night. The hope with which Sigurd invests his mission is signaled in the dawn:

Then reddened the Burg of the Niblings, and the  
    walls of the ancient folk,  
And a wind came down from the mountains and  
    the living things awoke  
And cried out for need and rejoicing; till lo,  
    the rim of the sun  
Showed over the eastern ridges, and the new day  
    was begun;  
And the beams rose higher and higher, and white  
    grew the Niblung wall,  
And the spears on the ramparts glistened and  
    the windows blazed withal,

And the sunlight flooded the courts, and through-  
 out the chambers streamed:  
 Then bright as the flames of the heaven the  
 Helm of Aweing gleamed,  
 Then clashed the red rings of the Treasure, as  
 Sigurd stood on his feet,  
 And went through the echoing chambers, as the  
 winds in the wall-nook beat; . . . (221)<sup>37</sup>

Although Morris draws the presence of the sun from his source, he introduces it as the first herald of the climactic scene and includes it as a part of a complex pattern of sun and moon imagery throughout the epic. Sigurd's mythic dimensions, suggestive of a Germanic sun-god, are carefully incorporated into the epic; but Morris shows restraint and control in doing so. The pale promise of dawn gathers first to a redness on the Niblung fortress and then whitens as the sun's rays spread inward to the place where Sigurd broods. The diffuse light of the scene then draws to a fiery focus, reflected in the Helm of Aweing; and like an inverted Hero-on-the-Beach theme in Beowulf, when the Geats march off to Heorot and ultimate triumph with their boar-helmets glinting in the sun, Sigurd courageously sets out on his mission of death and defeat. All of Morris' earlier descriptive powers are here, but gathered to a focus and given a force of concentration with the help of his exposure to Old Norse syntax and themes. The multiple independent clauses, a pattern present throughout Sigurd and reflecting a similar quality in the Norse, allows Morris to draw out his narrative into a series of independent but sequentially related events relentlessly drawing toward the inevitable tragic conclusion.

The presence of the sun having been given an intense symbolic significance, a significance which has

its roots in old Germanic lore, Morris proceeds to depict the first words between Sigurd and Brynhild:

But on to the chamber of Brynhild alone in the  
morning he goes  
And the sun lieth broad across it, and the door  
is open wide  
As the last of the women had left it; then he  
lifted his voice and cried:

"Awake, arise, O Brynhild! for the house is  
smitten through  
With the light of the sun awakened, and the  
hope of deeds to do."

She spake: "Art thou come to behold me? thou,  
the mightiest and the worst  
Of the pitiless betrayers, that the hope of my  
life hath nursed."

He said: "It is I that awake thee, and I give  
thee the life and the days  
For fulfilling the deedful measure, and the cup  
of the people's praise."

(222)

Sigurd's injunction to "take up gladness" in Morris' translation now changes in character. The sun is no harbinger of joy, but a warrior which "smites" the scene with "the hope of deeds to do." Sigurd does not question Brynhild as to the cause of her grief, but immediately asserts himself as the agent of her potential renewal: "It is I that awake thee." Morris takes the twelve exchanges between Sigurd and Brynhild in the saga's dialogue and incorporates them into five; the four exchanges succeeding this initial one often become longer speeches. The burden of questioning shifts from Sigurd to Brynhild. In the saga, it is Brynhild who assails the pleading Sigurd with direct charges of his offense, as we have seen in her angry response, "Enough and to spare of

bale is in thy speech." Morris places the pleading tone in the voice of Brynhild; asserting the inevitability of their ultimate destruction, she yet conveys more regret and grief than she does anger and rage:

She cried: "O the gifts of Sigurd!--Ah, why  
didst thou cast me aside,  
That we twain should be dwelling, the strangers,  
in the house of the Niblung pride?  
What life is the death in life?"

(222)

Thus Morris, in each of the subsequent exchanges, draws directly from the Old Norse saga for the substance of the dialogue but diverges from it in tone. Simple, stark references to their mutual plight become heroic challenges in the mouth of Sigurd:

. . . "I am Sigurd the Volsung, and belike the  
tale shall be true  
That no hand on the earth may hinder what my  
hand would fashion and do: . . ."

(223)

And Brynhild's direct and impassioned cries of offense against Sigurd become rhetorically dramatic pleas against the cruel contrast between former hope and present despair:

"O late, and o'erlate!" cried Brynhild--"may  
the dead folk hearken and hear?  
All was today and is not--and the Oath unto  
Gunnar is sworn.  
Shall I live the days twice over, and the life  
thou has made forlorn?"

(223)

Two elements inject themselves directly into the dialogue which are only implied in the Norse version: a sense of mission and a sense of hope. Sigurd proposes the "hope of deeds to do" as the motive for Brynhild's

revival from despair and she rejects him. The Germanic hero, presented to a Victorian audience which has lost the ancient sense of epic heroism which permeates Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature, must constantly assert his heroic mission and the hope which his heroism offers to his people. Morris takes these two elements, which are implicit but often unstated in the earlier literature, and makes them a vital part of his epic. Sigurd, despite his awareness of ultimate defeat, offers hope in the face of despair. Morris in his Socialist days made frequent reference to "the hope of past times," and E. P. Thompson offers a definition of hope as Morris referred to it: "By 'hope' he meant all that gives worth and continuity to human endeavor, all that makes man's finest aspirations seem possible of achievement in the real world."<sup>38</sup> Sigurd the Volsung marks the end of the sweet note of despair in The Earthly Paradise, and Morris as the Victorian skald has taken up the mission of his Germanic hero. In taking upon himself the mission of telling the tale, he has redeemed Sigurd from "the death of the People's praise" which marks the end of the era of hope in the epic. The poet has taken upon himself the role of the skald and Old English scop in preserving the oral record of past glory. He concludes the epic:

Ye have heard of Sigurd aforetime, how the foes  
of Gǫð he slew;  
How forth from the darksome desert the Gold  
of the Waters he drew;  
. . . . .  
Now ye know of the Need of the Niblungs and  
the end of broken troth,  
All the death of kings and of kindred and the  
Sorrow of Odin the Goth.

(306)

Thus Morris, like his early Germanic counterpart, intended the epic for oral presentation. Shaw remarks that Morris "used to recite passages from it, marking its swing by rocking from one foot to the other like an elephant."<sup>39</sup> The four books of the epic can be read aloud in four four-hour segments, and the meter easily lends itself to oral presentation. The irregularly anapaestic hexameter depends upon accents rather than syllables, as does Old English or Old Icelandic verse. The medial pause contained in each line duplicates the half-line structure of Anglo-Saxon or Old Norse meter. The difference, of course, lies in the lyrical strain of English hexameter and the regular rhyme, which unconsciously struggles against the effect Morris is trying to achieve. The influence of the Romantic ballad tends to undermine the strongly accented and rhythmic Germanic strain with which Morris consciously permeates the poem. The fact that this Romantic effect was contrary to his intention is implied in his prejudicial view of Wagner's ring cycle.<sup>40</sup> Morris wanted to duplicate the strong oral poetic tradition of his Germanic forebears. In a sense, he was correct in his estimates of the limited capacity of modern English to achieve those ends. Despite his schooling and conscious attempts to create a new poetic language in his translations of the sagas, the medium which he chose to convey that oral epic was the heritage of a Romantic, and written, literature.

The strength of Sigurd the Volsung is, to the modern audience, more thematic than stylistic. Yet the syntactical simplicity and the tendency to rely upon Germanic rather than Romantic roots is primarily responsible for Morris' success at suggesting heroic themes. He tried very consciously to be an oral poet, to rely upon metrical and stylistic devices which were

the heritage of an oral poetic tradition, and he succeeded in at least suggesting that tradition and adapting the content of the epic to his own concept of artistic mission in an industrialized age. Given the task that Morris had undertaken, the honest critic cannot justly estimate that Morris' epic fails. Once appreciating the epic and gleaning what it has to offer, however, the critic can fairly judge that the poet had undertaken an impossible task. Albert B. Lord in The Singer of Tales has substantially altered the modern perspective of early Germanic literature through his study of the techniques of the oral poet and the nature of oral poetry. He judges that no poet is capable of advancing from a written tradition to recapture or duplicate the methodology of the oral poet:

Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained. The written technique, on the other hand, is not compatible with the oral technique, and the two could not possibly combine to form another, a third . . . technique. It is conceivable that a man might be an oral poet in his younger years and a written poet later in life, but it is not possible that he be both an oral and a written poet at any given time in his career. The two by their very nature are mutually exclusive.<sup>41</sup>

Morris had placed upon himself an impossible demand. He tried, with the wordhord of a Victorian romantic, to duplicate the Great Northern Epic. His conscious effort to forge a new poetic language was successful in lending a vigorous Germanic diction to his verse and giving a more concise syntactical base to his narrative, but it simply could not re-create the effect of the earlier literature he so admired. The tale itself, once celebrated by Germanic peoples to

whom Sigurd was a living mythic entity, now fell upon the ears of an audience who were not disposed to hear it. As one of Morris' contemporaries realized, "A people cannot read itself into folklore."<sup>42</sup> The modern critic must, then, in fairness to Morris, take care not to judge the work according to the standards which the author had set for himself. Morris did not succeed in presenting the English nation with its Great Northern oral Epic. He did, through his conscious immersion in Nordic style, syntax, and themes, write a momentous Victorian epic which articulated his sense of poetic mission and his hope. Morris' turn to the North thus asserted a poetic independence which both brought his former work to maturity and marked his entry into a new and highly politicized future. If Morris' true worth lies not so much in any single thing he did as in the totality of his vision and achievements, Sigurd the Volsung is a work which lies at a crucial juncture in the saga of his life and vision.

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### Notes

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