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During the past few years the study of early Northern literature has received a strong impulse through the editing and translating of the more important texts, as those of the Eddas, both prose and poetic, and of the *Volsunga Saga*, itself versified by Messrs. Magnússon and Morris. These works, among others of the same class, have been made accessible to the English public since 1842; but for the further effort to popularize this literature by poetic treatment, we are mainly indebted to the abounding labors of Mr. Morris.

To make the Eddas interesting is no easy task, if it be sought to preserve the spirit of the Northern myths in accomplishing it. For us the world of Scandinavian tradition is more archaic; it is separated from us by a wider interval in development than are the remains of Grecian or Indian antiquity, though in time it is a thousand years nearer to us than they; and being thus remoter from modern sympathies, it affords less plastic material for the poet, though for the scholar it has value and interest of the first order. Like the savagery of certain low races, it represents the survival of ruder stages in man's development than are to be found in the oldest records of the more favored races; it abounds in valuable data for study, but is somewhat deficient in available poetic heroes, and for this reason the world has refused to interest itself greatly in the Northern mythologies. From the popular point of view, indeed, the Sagas and the Eddas, in their original spirit, are singularly uninteresting; for modern poetic value they are too primitive, too incoherent in form; they carry us back to a harsh and gloomy current of ideas, to characters and actions completely alien. For modern poetic treatment, therefore, those characters and actions require an elaborate rehabilitation at the hands of the artist.

This is what Mr. Morris has given us in *Sigurd the Volsung*; he has retold, in the modern temper, the story of the Fafnismâl and the Prose Edda, a part of the story which is elaborated in the *Nibelungenlied*. What it is in the original we need not retell; the wranglings of those preternatural beings in battle, in lust, or in the search for the

treasure of gold, recall to our mind the monstrous deities of Polynesian mythology, Pele and Lono, or that demi-porcine god Kamapuaa, whose mighty hoof scored channels for torrents in the walls of a deep valley from which, after he had devastated it, he sprang away and escaped at a single bound. With such crude material, in the increasing stringency of poetic competition, Mr. Morris found himself occupied; and how has he dealt with it, how has he rehabilitated it for English readers? His method is, in a word, the contemporary English method of treating the antique; to recast it, namely, in the forms of modern sentiment. Whether in poetry, painting, or criticism, this method is substantially the same; it is that of Mr. Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King*; it is that of the Italianizing Preraphaelite painters; it is Mr. Ruskin's method when he criticises Greek art or character. To reproduce the antique, not as the ancients felt it, but as we feel it,—to transfuse it with modern thought and emotion,—that is the method that is now 'in the air,' as the French say, among Mr. Morris's fellow-artists; and it is the main source of the interest which Mr. Morris has given to his own work, as well as the source of its weakness.

Now we need hardly remark that this method is essentially falsifying, nor shall we have to seek far in the present poem for illustrative instances. Take, for instance, this passage in the second book, an apostrophe put into Brynhild's mouth:—

All hail, ye Lords of God-home, and ye Queens of the House of Gold!
Hail thou dear Earth that bearest, and thou Wealth of field and gold!
Give us, your noble children, the glory of wisdom and speech,
And the hearts and the hands of healing, and the mouths and hands that teach.

That represents no possible sentiment of the mediæval North; nor does this, of the 'Niblung Maiden,' in the third book:—

She murmured words of loving as his kind lips cherished her breast,
And the world waxed naught but lovely and a place of infinite rest.

Nor, again, does this, taken from the same book:—

They saw their crowned children and the kindred of the kings,
And deeds in the world arising, and the day of better things;
All the earthly exaltation, till their pomp of life should be passed,
And soft on the bosom of God their love should be laid at the last.

Here we are in the full current of the nineteenth century; its self-consciousness, its love of nature, its aspirations, its affectations, its pathetic fallacies, all are in these passages; they even express the tone

of its popular religious sentiment. In these passages we are clearly quite as far from the time of the Eddas as it is yet possible to be; they have nothing in common with the sentiment of the time which they aim to describe. There is abundance of passages more truly imagined than these, but the false tone is always near at hand; in general it must be said that Mr. Morris's mediævalism is unreal, that his heroines and divinities appear not in their ancient forms, but in the 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes' that are at present so dear to English art. Yet the poem, in spite of its unreality, in spite of its mannerism, abounds in beauty and vigor of expression. The imitation of the archaic style is, indeed, carried to excess, as if to cover the lack of the antique spirit; 'learn' for *teach*, 'cherishing' for *kissing*, 'burg,' 'eyen,' 'glaive,' 'tomorn,'—these are a few among hundreds of mannerisms; yet in the main the diction is effective. With the conduct of the story we have to find some fault,—a deficiency in rapidity and directness. In a narrative poem of ten thousand lines, based upon a plot that, as we have intimated, left much to be desired in respect of unity, there was need to accent strongly the linking points of the story, to mark its articulations, so to speak, with especial distinctness. In doing this Mr. Morris has not perfectly succeeded, and in consequence *Sigurd*, as a story, reads a little heavily. The interest of the poem depends in considerable part upon individual passages,—in this respect illustrating again the modern English taste in poetry,—and failing somewhat in the total impression, the ἀρχιτεκτονία of which the ancients thought so much more than we think, and perhaps not erroneously. The metre that Mr. Morris has chosen is an alliterative line of six accents, with a foot generally trisyllabic; and in his hands it is flexible and musical, though it does not escape the dangers of monotony. Whether as to melody, form, or sentiment, the examples we have given must suffice. *Sigurd* abounds in beautiful and quotable lines, and in healthfulness of tone is a distinct advance upon Mr. Morris's previous poems; but much is still wanting to it in this respect. It has undeniable power, undeniable beauty; and yet it is too much the outcome of a transient *vogue* in sentiment to insure a very long remembrance.