

SIGURD THE VOLSUNG

1876

37. Theodore Watts, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*

December 1876, no. 2563, 753-5

According to his biographers, this was the first of ten reviews of Morris's books which Watts—later Watts-Dunton—(1832-1914) contributed to the *Athenaeum* between 1876 and 1897; see T. Hake and A. Compton-Ricketts, *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton*, 2 vols (London, 1916), esp. Appendix to Vol. II. Watts knew Morris personally and had a high regard for Morris's writings, though he was hostile to his later Socialism.

Purely narrative sections of the review are omitted, as is the introductory account of the sources.

Mr. Morris is the very *Frunsmidr Bragar*—the Poetry-smith of the Northern Olympus. There is no affectation in such antiquarianism as we get here. The poet is quite soaked in Odinism,—soaked as completely as Charles Lamb was soaked in Elizabethanism,—as completely as Thackeray was steeped in the genteel perfumes of the eighteenth century. Mischance has thrown Mr. Morris among railways, telegraphs, newspapers, and much 'smoke.' He cannot help being surrounded by such foolish comforts as these; but how he hates them he has told us in the *Earthly Paradise*. His body is in Queen Square, but his soul is in Ultima Thule,—far away in that mysterious 'Island of Darkness,' where everything is magical, where, according to Tacitus, the very sun himself utters a cry when he gets up, and on whose shores, washed by the billows of an infinite ocean, 'many shapes of gods' stand clustering—gods who are nothing more than heroes—fraternizing

with heroes who are nothing less than gods. He consents to breathe the smoke with us, but it is in the atmosphere of the Golden Past that he lives. The consequence is, that the spontaneity—real, and not apparent merely—of this reproduction of the temper of a bygone age is as marvellous as the spontaneity of the form in which it is embodied; while, for purity of English, for freedom from euphuism and every kind of ‘poetic diction’ (so called), it is far ahead of anything of equal length that has appeared in this century.

[section omitted]

On the whole, we cannot but think this poem Mr. Morris’s greatest achievement. It is more masculine than *Jason*—more vigorous and more dramatic than the best of the stories in the *Earthly Paradise*. For it is, as we have said, a more genuine expression of a genuine mood. And this mood, though not the highest, is yet high; the mood of the simple fighter, whose business it is to fight, to yield to no power whatsoever, whether of earth, or heaven, or hell—to take a buffet from the Allfather himself, and to return it; to look Destiny herself in the face, crying out for quarter neither to gods nor Norns; knowing well that the day prophesied is sure, when, breast to breast, gods and men shall stand up to fight the brood of evil, storming the very gates of Asgard; when Loki shall take and throttle the mighty Freir, and strangle him, the while the Fenrir Wolf gulps down the Father of the Gods himself, digesting in a sea of gastric juice the universe to chaos! And that quaint homeliness blent with sublimity which is the characteristic of the Northern mythology, finds a sympathizer in Mr. Morris, such as it has never had before outside the nations that are purely Teutonic.

The verse is exceedingly musical. With regard, however, to the selection of the metre, we cannot think it a happy one for a poem of such a length. Rask has pointed out the hexametrical character of Icelandic verse, but English hexameters are essentially lyrical, and therefore are unfit for the heavy business of dramatic narrative. That law of accentuated verse, the effect of which is that, when the pause falls after the third foot (as in hexameter), it is double the length of the pause falling after any earlier or later foot, becomes intensified when the line is either dactylic or anapæstic. The result of this is, that in English hexameters the back of every line is broken exactly in the middle, and produces an unpleasant monotony, unless the writer, every now and then, quite alters the character of the line,—as Mr.

Tennyson does in 'Maud,' and as Mr. Swinburne does in 'Hesperia,'
e.g.:—

Comes back to me, stays by me, lulls me with touch of forgotten caresses,
One warm dream clad about with a fire as of life that endures;
The delight of thy face, and the sound of thy feet, and the wind of thy tresses,
And all of a man that regrets, and all of a maid that allures.

Note the splendid effect of the third line. But to get this one must,
no doubt, write in quatrains.

That this is a noble poem there can be no doubt; but whether it will meet with ready appreciation and sympathy in this country is a question not so easily disposed of. Dr. Hueffer is no doubt right in saying that the story of the Niblungs is the epic of all the Teutonic peoples; but are we of these? There has of late been a great deal of talk about our 'Teutonic forefathers,' and our close kinship with the Germans of to-day. Of such a close kinship we should be quite willing to be proud, if it could be proved to exist. It does not follow that because we speak a German tongue we must be a German people. Language is not a final and absolute test of race, and almost everything else but language—almost everything that denotes the temperament of a people—seems to point to the conclusion that the basis of the population did not cease, after the arrival of the shadowy White Horse, to be Celtic, as it had been. One proof, perhaps, of this is that, although the very names of the days of the week are the names of the Northern gods, there is scarcely a tittle of folk-lore derived from Odin, or Freir, or Thor, or Loki, whose doings are not much more familiar to our non-reading classes than those of the gods of Polynesia. And a people cannot read itself into a folk-lore. A great novelist used to say that he believed no tales that were not told him by his great-grandmother. To the Scandinavian, the Edda was literally, as the word imports, a 'great-grandmother' telling her tales. And the truth is that we in this country have, properly speaking, no great-grandmother's tales older than the legends about Robin Hood. Even Arthur has no more real vitality than Jack the Giant-killer and Cormoran. Not Blackmore, nor Bulwer, nor even Mr. Tennyson, can ever galvanize him into the hero of a popular epic. What with Saxon upon Celt, and Norman upon Saxon, we have lost both 'Sigurd the Golden' and the 'Blameless King.'