



Georgiana Burne-Jones, c. 1860, drawn by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

95 • TO CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

26 Queen Squ:
Bloomsbury
December 21 [1869]

My dear Norton

I suppose I had better waste neither invention nor materials in excuses for not writing, so I will only say how very glad I shall be to hear from you again despite my 'lachesse'. I don't know if you have my book by this time, or have begun to deal with its somewhat elephantine bulk, wh: I should feel penitent about, only it is principally caused by the length of Gudrun which I feel sure is the best thing I have done — however no more of that. I have begun a translation of the Nibelungen¹ which I find very amusing; I have also another Icelandic translation in hand, the Völsunga Saga² viz, which is the Ice: version of the Nibelungen, older I suppose, and, to my mind, without measure nobler and grander: I daresay you have read abstracts of the story, but however fine it seemed to you thus, it would give you little idea of the depth and intensity of the complete work here and there indeed it is somewhat

disjointed, I suppose from its having been put together from varying versions of the same song; it seems as though the author-collector felt the subject too much to trouble himself about the niceties of art, and the result is something which is above all art; the scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than any thing 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, and all this in 2 pages of moderate print. In short it is to the full meaning of the word inspired; touching too though hardly wonderful to think of the probable author; some 12 century Icelander, living the hardest and rudest of lives, seeing few people and pretty much the same day after day, with his old religion taken from him and his new one hardly gained — It doesn't look promising for the future of art I fear — Perhaps you think my praise of the work somewhat stilted; but it has moved us one and all in the same way, and for my part I should be sorry to attempt reading aloud the scene I have told you of before strangers. I am not getting on well with my work, for in fact I believe the Völsunga has rather swallowed me up for some time past, I mean thinking about it, for it hasn't taken me long to do — 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 only be a flatter and tamer version of a thing already existing.³

My wife is better I think on the whole for the Ems sojourn, though still far from well: Ned, from whom I suppose you have heard lately, is pretty well, and working hard: Georgie gave us a little fright last week by falling decidedly ill, but she is much better now, and I hope will be none the worse for it. Webb is as usual working hard and looking thin (apropos I believe that *Im* grown thinner) Rossetti is hard at work on his poems⁴ and I believe will publish in the spring: I hope so — thank you very much by the way for your extracts from The French Omar⁵ — Ned has the book now.

Please give my kindest rembrances to Mrs. Norton and all your fellowship: my wife I believe intends writing to Mrs. Norton directly so I will send no message from her —

Yrs affectionately
W Morris

MS: Harvard. Extract published: Mackail, I, 73; MM, I, 471-73; Henderson, *Letters*, 31-32.

¹ According to May Morris (*CW*, 7, xxxiii), Morris abandoned the translation after completing 216 stanzas.

² *The Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*, translated in collaboration with Magnússon, was published by F. S. Ellis in 1870.

³ Morris did in fact write an epic based on the *Völsunga Saga*, titled *Sigurd the Volsung*. It was published in 1876. See letter no. 311, n. 2.

⁴ Rossetti's *Poems* was published in April 1870. This volume contained the poems that had been buried with Elizabeth Siddal in 1862 and disinterred in 1869.

⁵ Possibly *Les Quatrains tr. de Persan* by J. B. Nicolas (Paris, 1807).

96 • TO ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

26, Queen Square,
Bloomsbury, London,
December 21, 1869

My dear Swinburne¹

Many thanks for your kind letter and the criticism therein; I am delighted to have pleased you with the Gudrun;² for the rest I am rather painfully conscious myself that the book would have done me more credit if there had been nothing in it but the Gudrun, though I don't think the others quite the worst things I have done — yet they are all too long and flabby — damn it! —

I am glad you see anything to like in the Rhodope;³ I thought myself I had tried to make her too much of a character for the importance of the tale wh: is such a very slight one — Acontius I know is a spoony, nothing less, and the worst of it is that if I did him over a dozen times, I know I should make him just the same: I am hard at work now, but am making blunder on 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.

Thorgerd plays a fine part in a beautiful episode of the Egils Saga where Egil loses his favourite son, and is minded to starve himself to death because of it; I could tell you more about it when I saw you. The whole story is very remarkable, admirably written and full of incident, but the most distinctly northern of all the Sagas, and Egil himself a strange savage character, though his poetry seems to me to have been really fine, but quite untranslatable.⁴

I am about an Icelandic translation now which quite throws all the other stories into the shade (for the story of Gudrun is told very disjointedly in the original, and generally in bald way very different from *Njðla*.) This is the *Völsunga*, the story of the *Nibelungen* in fact: I daresay you have read an abstract of it somewhere, but it would give you very little idea of the complete work. I should like very much to

show you the translation which is nearly finished now; you couldn't fail to be moved by it I'm sure —

I am proudly conscious of my position as *the* Christian poet of the age;⁵ though I must risk that position first by communicating with you, and next by impugning the statement of holy writ, 'Blessed are those that seek, for they shall find', at least in my case —

Yrs affectionately
W Morris

ms: BL, Ashley Add. mss. 3871. Published: MM, I, 642-43; Henderson, *Letters*, 30-31.

¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909). In 1859, while an undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford, Swinburne became an enthusiastic admirer and follower of Rossetti and Morris. By 1869, however, he had established his own standing with *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Poems and Ballads* (1866), and though still an affectionate well-wisher, he clearly regarded Morris as a peer rather than a leader. In 1867 he had favorably reviewed *The Life and Death of Jason*.

² "The Lovers of Gudrun," based on the *Laxdaela Saga*, is the second story for November and completes Part III of *The Earthly Paradise*.

³ "The Story of Rhodope" is the first tale for November in Part III of *The Earthly Paradise*.

⁴ Morris may have been at work on the illuminated manuscript, which was never finished, of "The Story of Egil." See *CW*, 9, xxi, xxiii and Fairbank, p. 67.

⁵ In *The Athenaeum*, December 25, 1869, the reviewer of the third part of *The Earthly Paradise* had praised Morris for "his Christian viewpoint."

97 • TO JAMES RICHARD THURSFIELD

[26 Queen Square
Bloomsbury, London
1869]

Dear Sir¹

I am sorry you are in trouble about the works at the Union,² and hope I shan't increase it by my letter: I can speak distinctly about two of the pictures in question, Mr. Hughes', the one at the North end, and Mr. Burne-Jones' (*Nimue and Merlin*). Of these I think the design of Mr. Hughes to be quite among the best works of that painter, and a very beautiful and remarkable one: I think I have been told it is in a bad state; but I suppose something might be done to it. Mr. Burne-Jones' is a beautiful work, and admirably suits its space as to decoration; it would be quite absurd to cover it up. Mr. Pollen's,³ opposite Mr. Hughes',⁴ was never finished; two others, one by Mr. Prinsep,⁵ another by Mr. Stanhope,⁶ though not very complete in some ways, yet looked very well in their places I think. As for my own, I believe it *has* some merits as to colour, but I must confess I should feel much more com-