



William Morris
and
Old Norse
Literature

TRANSACTIONS OF THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY



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A lecture given by J. N. Swannell

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FOREWORD

Those who heard Mr. Swannell speak in Prince Henry's Room three years ago have been impatient to read this important contribution to Morris studies; they will surely agree that the result has been well worth waiting for.

It is appropriate that this lecture should have been printed in a city in which Morris publicly acknowledged his debt to Old Norse Literature—in his address, "Iceland and its Ancient Literature and History", which he gave in the Hall of Science, Rockingham Street, on Sunday, 14 September 1884.

The Sheffield College of Art has rendered great service not merely to this Society but to the cause of Morris in printing this lecture as a tribute to him. The William Morris Society welcomes this opportunity of recording its gratitude to the College.

February 1962

R. C. H. Briggs
Honorary Secretary

SHEFFIELD COLLEGE OF ART
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THE SAGA WRITERS of Iceland there could be no subject more moving, or more interesting, than the tragic dilemma: the problem of conflicting loyalties. This is the predicament of Ketill Sigfusson in *Njáls Saga*, forced, by his duty to his slain brother, to bring about the death of his wife's father; it is the predicament of Gudrun in the *Völsunga Saga* whose husband was murdered by her own brothers. It is also my predicament this evening, for it is always difficult, in a lecture which claims to deal with two subjects, to be fair to both. My first and oldest love, if I may use the phrase, is Old Norse literature, and perhaps I am over-eager to sing its praises; but as a member of the William Morris Society my first duty is to William Morris himself. Still, there is less conflict between my two loyalties than I once thought there could be. It was through Old Norse literature that I was led to William Morris; first to his saga translations, and then to a wider appreciation of the greatness of Morris as a man and a writer.

You are all familiar with the story of William Morris' encounter with the fireman in Kensington High Street, who came up to him and asked, to Morris' lasting delight: 'Beg pardon, sir, but were you ever captain of the *Sea Swallow*?'¹ That Morris, with his blue jacket, his bushy beard, and his slightly rolling gait, should be taken for a seafaring man is perhaps not surprising; but the incident symbolises an important truth: that Morris, more than any writer of his time, had identified himself with the spirit and the literature of the Vikings.

He made innumerable direct translations from Norse verse and prose, his most impressive original poems are Norse in theme and

¹ J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (1899), vol. i. p. 223 (World's Classics edition).

inspiration, and his later prose romances, the most characteristic and fascinating of his works, probably owe their existence to a close and detailed study of Norse literature extending over twenty-five years. And this feeling for Norse literature is not objective or academic; Morris has made it part of himself. There have been more accurate and scholarly students of the Viking Age than Morris, but not one of them would feel at home, as Morris thought he would, in tenth-century Iceland. He is obsessed by the spirit of the old northern world.

It is not the published works which are most significant in this context, though they are the most obvious evidence, but the casual references and remarks, his own and his friends', which show that Morris is constantly aware of Old Norse literature. We find these references in his conversation, in his letters, in his lectures on art and socialism, and in his addresses to working men; Old Norse is the small change of his conversation, as if he has just come from reading the sagas, and cannot get them out of his thoughts. In an unpublished lecture to a working-class audience,¹ for example, we find a long and reasoned criticism of the spirit of Old Norse literature, running to several pages, to which I shall return later. And again, in his account of the Royal Academy Exhibition written in 1884 for *To-day*,² he has this to say about Peter Graham's picture, 'Dawn':

"There is a sense about it of romance and interest in life amidst poverty and narrow limit of action and maybe of thought, which is characteristic of a poor but historic country side, and reminds me of many a morning's awakening in a country which one may call the northern limit of history as it is certainly one of its richest treasure houses, Iceland to wit."

We find similar casual references in his letters.³ He writes to his wife from Kelmscott on Tuesday, 9th November, 1875, complaining of the shortage of bacon and the cold weather, and mentions that the floods are high. When he took a boat out on the flooded river, he says, 'it was delightful: almost as good as Iceland on a small scale.' In a letter to Mrs. Burne-Jones (January 1877) he tells her he has been reading *Njáls Saga*, and adds some appreciative literary criticism. Writing to his daughter Jenny (21st January, 1889),

¹ May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936), I, p. 449 ff.

² *Ibid.*, I, p. 231.

³ *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, ed. Philip Henderson (1950), pp. 73, 84, 307.

mostly about political matters, he is reminded of the mists and mountains of Iceland.

An amusing example comes in a letter quoted by May Morris.¹ Someone, a political acquaintance presumably, has written to Morris, anxiously raising the question of alcoholic liquor. Morris' reply is a fine example both of the writer's commonsense and of the way in which Iceland springs to his mind, whatever the context:

Dear Sir,

I think the question of the advantage of alcoholic liquors is a matter which each man must find out for himself, having admitted that one may easily drink too much even without getting drunk.

My own experience is that I find my victuals dull without something to drink, and that tea and coffee are not fit liquors to be taken with food: in fact the latter always disagrees with me palpably, and probably tea isn't good for me.

It is a remarkable fact that in Iceland toothache was almost unknown till the introduction of tea and coffee: the latter drink the Icelanders are now much addicted to.

If I were to say what I really think I should say that tobacco seems to me a more dangerous intoxicant than liquors because people can and do smoke to excess without becoming beastly or a nuisance. I am sure Oriental countries have suffered much from the introduction of tobacco. N.B. I am a smoker myself. A great point would be to try to get the liquors free from adulteration.

But that I fear is impossible under a capitalist regime.

I am, Dear Sir,

Yours truly,

William Morris.

His friends and acquaintances bore with this obsession as best they could, but at times their forbearance was sorely tried. Burne-Jones, who in the first years of their friendship seems to have been willing to share Morris' enthusiasm, soon lost his interest in the Northern past; it is perhaps significant that he never finished painting his scene from the *Nibelungenlied* on the famous Red Lion Square settle, and his wife quotes him as saying that if he had his own way he would 'never go further north than Hampstead'.²

In 1873 Burne-Jones wrote to Fairfax Murray to tell him that 'Morris has come back from Iceland more enslaved with passion for ice and snow and raw fish than ever before—I fear I shall never

¹ May Morris, op. cit., I, p. 663.

² GB-J (Lady Burne-Jones), *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904), vol. ii, p. 45.

drag him to Italy again'.¹ Yet Mrs. Burne-Jones, though she admits that she often fell asleep during Morris' readings from the *Earthly Paradise*, was sufficiently well-informed in 1880 to compare the sculptured kings on the West front of Exeter cathedral to 'Gunnar and Hogni'.²

Other friends have commented, wryly or otherwise, on Morris' King Charles's head: Charles Eliot Norton notes in his journal for 26th March, 1873 that 'Leslie Stephen and Morris dined with us . . . His talk was much of old Northern stories and sagas, very vivid, picturesque, and entertaining from its contents and from its character'.³ But Stopford Brook is less charitable: 'If Iceland was once started in conversation, Morris clung to it like ivy to the oak. Nothing else, for hours together, was allowed in the conversation. It was terrible, and he looked like Snorri Sturluson himself'.⁴

Morris, then, to a greater extent than any of his contemporaries, succumbed to the spell of Old Norse, and he devoted a great part of his busy life to the translation and adaptation of the literature which meant so much to him.

All these references are later than 1868, the year in which Morris began studying the Old Norse language, but it is important to remember that his interest in Norse material is very much earlier. It is, in fact, one aspect of what Mr. Furneaux Jordan, in his lecture to the Society last November, calls Morris' 'medieval vision'. His early love of everything medieval, of Scott's novels, of ghost stories and romances, his explorations of Gothic churches and old buildings, had strengthened an inborn passion for the beauty and the mystery of the Middle Ages.

This passion was intensified when he entered Exeter College in 1853. At Oxford he discovered Chaucer and Malory, and applied himself with great enthusiasm to the study of medieval history, archaeology, and art. Most important of all, perhaps, is the fact that Burne-Jones introduced him to Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, which had been published in 1851. It was this work—still very readable—which first revealed to Morris the richness and the

¹ *Ibid.* II, p. 45.

² *Ibid.* II, p. 110.

³ May Morris, *op. cit.*, I, p. 73.

⁴ Quoted in G. T. McDowell, *The Treatment of the Volunga Saga by William Morris* ('Scandinavian Studies and Notes', Vol. VII, 1921-3).

tremendous possibilities of Norse legend and story, and encouraged him to search for other volumes of the same kind. There were, in fact, a number of books and translations available before 1868 which could provide Morris with a reasonable knowledge of Old Norse literature and history;¹ by that year he had read the *Prose Edda* (translated by Dasent in 1842), the *Poetic Edda* (translated by Thorpe in 1866, though Morris also knew Cottle's version of 1797 and Herbert's selections published in 1804-6), *Heimskringla* (in Laing's translation of 1844), *Gisla Saga* (Dasent, 1866), *Njáls Saga* (Dasent, 1861), and, presumably, *Víga Glúms Saga* (Head, 1866); he would have known Scott's abstract of the *Eyrbyggja Saga* in the 1847 edition of Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*. He had also acquired a useful knowledge of Norse history, legendary lore, manners, customs, and religion from Mallet and other works, and a fair amount of geographical information about Iceland from the many travel books which were published during the 50's and 60's.²

By 1868 Morris had published the prose and verse of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the *Defence of Guenevere*, the *Life and Death of Jason*, and the first two parts of the *Earthly Paradise*, and his contemporary reputation as a poet was well established. He had also written several of the stories for the third part of the *Earthly Paradise*. It must be admitted that in spite of Morris' intensive reading of books about Old Norse, and his knowledge of Norse literature in translation, there is very little that is intrinsically Norse about these works. There is clear evidence of his reading, here and there, but the Norse references are no more than ornament or local colour. Characters in some of the early prose romances are given Scandinavian names—Svend, Gertha, Eric, Swanhilda, and the like, but there is no attempt to fit the events into a Norse background. Another prose tale, *Lindenborg Pool*, is taken from a Danish story in Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, but even in Thorpe there is nothing of the saga spirit. Jason has nothing to offer us, as one might expect, but it is interesting to note that in the two versions of the Prologue to the *Earthly Paradise* the principal characters are Norwegians of the fourteenth century, and Morris does make

¹ See Stefán Einarsson, *Eiríkr Magnússon and his Saga Translations* ('Scandinavian Studies and Notes', Vol. XIII, 1933-5); and Karl Litzénberg, *The Victorians and the Vikings* ('University of Michigan Contributions in Modern Philology', No. 3, 1947).

² See Stefán Einarsson, *op. cit.* A most useful and interesting article.

some attempt to emphasize the fact.¹ There are references to Odin, to Harold Fairhair and King Tryggvi, and to Vineland, and it is clear that Morris has read his *Heimskringla* with some care, but again the general effect is medieval and romantic, rather than heroic. Only two poems of this period, in fact, justify a more extended examination: the *Wooing of Swanhild*, which was not published during Morris' lifetime, and the *Fostering of Aslaug*, published in Part IV of the *Earthly Paradise* in 1870, but certainly written before the Autumn of 1868. They are both inspired by well-known Norse stories, and the substance of both of them Morris took from Thorpe.

Swanhilda is the daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun of the *Volsunga Saga*. King Hermanaric of the Goths wishes to marry her, and sends his son Randver to woo her for him; the wicked counsellor, Bikki, makes Hermanaric believe that his son has betrayed his trust, and Randver is hanged and Swanhilda is trodden to death by horses. In the Icelandic it is a brief, tragic tale, most effectively told; but the atmosphere of Morris' version is entirely different in style and atmosphere; it is a leisurely, ornate story, heavy with impending doom, but romantic in tone, introspective and colourful. Morris himself seems to have been dissatisfied with it, and left it unfinished. He takes the story as far as Randver's meeting with Swanhilda, and no further, though even this fragment is well over a thousand lines long.

Aslaug was completed, and it is perhaps worth looking more closely at this last attempt of William Morris to recreate a Norse atmosphere from secondary sources. The story forms a link, in the Icelandic, between two famous heroic legends, for Aslaug is the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, and becomes the wife of the great viking, Ragnar Lothbrok. The incident forms part of *Ragnars Saga*, and it would be fair to say, I think, that it is far from characteristic of Norse saga; it is a romantic tale, set in a saga which is itself a curious mixture of history and fiction. Morris' version is successful enough, as a poem; it has delicacy and lightness and it is compellingly readable; but its qualities are those of the earlier tales of the *Earthly Paradise*, not of the sagas. We could change the names

¹ See Karl Lützenberg, *William Morris and the Heimskringla* (Scandinavian Studies and Notes, Vol. XIV, 1936).

of the characters from Norse to Celtic or Old French without any sense of incongruity, and the careful touches of local colour—the references to Baldur and Freyja, to trolls and the 'grey-necked raven', and to the death of Ragnar—could be removed without real loss. *Aslaug* is very much the sort of poem Morris' readers would expect; nature is kind, and Tennysonian:

The wild things well might gaze their fill,
As through the wind-flowers brushed her feet,
As her lips smiled when those did meet
The lush cold blue-bells, or were set
Light on the pale dog-violet
Late April bears.

A gentle melancholy pervades the poem:

... her play
Amid the flowers grew slower now,
And sadder did the music grow,
And yet still sweeter

All is sweetly cloying, with an occasional touch of genteel voluptuousness. Here is Aslaug bathing:

While she spake
Her hands were busy with her gown,
And at the end it slipped adown
And left her naked there and white
In the unshadowed noontide light.
Like Freyja in her house of gold,
Awhile her limbs she did behold
Clear mirrored in the lake beneath.

The conscientious comparison with Freyja does not recall the reader from the land of Faerie. What, again, could be less reminiscent of a saga heroine than this passage?

Then mouth to mouth long time they stood
And when they sundered the red blood
Burnt in her cheek, and tenderly
Trembled her lips and drew amigh
His lips again.

The wicked Grima and her husband are no more frightening, and no more convincing as human beings, than the Ogre and his wife in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. There are not many Norse stories

which would slip almost unnoticed into the *Earthly Paradise*, as *Aslang* does.

After *Aslang* Morris is no longer dependent on authorities like Thorpe for his Norse material, for in 1868 he was introduced to the Icelandic Eiríkr Magnússon, whose literary life, for the next twenty-seven years, blends, as it were, with that of William Morris.

Magnússon is a somewhat shadowy figure. Morris is like Dr. Johnson or Samuel Pepys; we *know* him, even if we never read a word of him; he has personality enough for a host of authors. Yet Magnússon, who seems to hover in the back-ground, was a forceful personality, and certainly an enormously important influence on the literary development of William Morris.¹

He was a year older than Morris, the son of a poor parson in East Iceland. In 1862, after finishing his studies at the Reykjavik College of Theology, he came to England to supervise the printing of the Icelandic New Testament for the British and Foreign Bible Society. Magnússon, though, was a missionary for another cause: that of old Norse literature. On the boat coming to England he met George Powell, the wealthy young traveller, art connoisseur, and lover of literature. Magnússon and Powell made ambitious plans for translating from the Icelandic and for the compiling of a Norse dictionary; Magnússon was to provide the scholarship and the industry, Powell was to supply the money and help with the English. All that appeared in print, however, were two volumes of Icelandic legends (translated from Jón Arnason). But Powell, for various reasons, gradually withdrew from the partnership, and in 1866 Magnússon began an edition of *Thómas saga erkibiskups* for the Rolls society. This he did alone. Magnússon, a man of energy and enormous industry, was an admirable collaborator; but Powell was not in the same class. However, towards the end of 1868 Magnússon was to meet the one man in England whose enthusiasm for Old Norse was equal to his own.² It was a wonderful moment, says May Morris, 'a poet's entering into possession of a new world, only partly his till now'.

There is no doubt that the two men were on the best of terms from the start. Magnússon was amazed at Morris' intuitive

¹ Stefán Einarsson, *op. cit.*

² *Works*, ed. May Morris, Vol. VII, p. xv.

appreciation of Icelandic literature. 'The thing that struck me most,' he says, 'was this, that he entered into the spirit of it not with the pre-occupied mind of a foreigner, but with the intuition of an uncommonly wide-awakenative'. After some 'animated conversation . . . on Icelandic matters, especially literature' they agreed to read Icelandic together three times a week, and these lessons, says May Morris, were well established by October. Morris, for his part, was delighted to meet 'a real Icclander', especially one who held the key to so many literary secrets.

Dame Bertha Phillpotts, who was one of Magnússon's pupils at Cambridge, tells us that he was an unforgettable teacher. 'A saga read with him remains in the memory as a living thing, and must always recall the enthusiasm for knowledge, the idealism, and the love of country which were characteristic of a unique personality.' Certainly no teacher could have hoped for a more enthusiastic pupil than William Morris. It is worth quoting part of the letter written by May Morris to Stefán Einarsson in 1925, in which the picture of Magnússon might almost be a portrait of her own father:!

'I remember him well at Cambridge, a short stocky man with a full face, light hair and bushy moustache . . . He used to sing Northern folk songs with a big voice that nearly blew the roof off their little sitting room in Cambridge. I remember he walked up and down the room, Icelandic fashion, as he sang. His enthusiasm over the literary matter of Iceland knew no bounds of space or time: only the other day I met someone who knew him in Cambridge who said, if one met him in the street, one had only to mention something about the literature of the North, and there Magnússon would stand talking, regardless of time or weather.'

The partnership was extremely happy from the start, though the method of instruction makes amusing reading. Morris steadfastly refused to be bothered with the technicalities of Icelandic grammar. 'You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature, I must have the story'. Almost immediately, Magnússon tells us, the impatient Morris was taking another short cut: 'But look here, I see through it all, let me try and translate'. Off he started, translated, blundered, laughed; but still, he saw through it all with an intuition that fairly took me aback . . . In this way the best of the sagas

¹ Stefán Einarsson, *op. cit.*

were run through at daily sittings, generally covering three hours, already before I left London for Cambridge in 1871. Magnússon makes it clear that they went over the day's task as carefully as Morris' impatience would allow; then Magnússon wrote out a literal translation at home and handed it to Morris, who from it wrote his own version for the press.

Even so, the speed at which they worked is amazing. They worked through *Gumlaugs Saga* in two weeks; it was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in January 1869, by which time the translation of the much longer *Grettis Saga* was in the press; and during the early part of 1869 they also made a translation of the *Laxdæla Saga*, which was not published. The translation of the *Laxdæla Saga*, however, inspired what is the least typical of the *Earthy Paradise* poems, the *Lovers of Gudrun*, which—apparently at Magnússon's suggestion—Morris finished by June 1869, so that it could be published with the third part of the *Earthy Paradise* in December of the same year.

The *Lovers of Gudrun*, the first of Morris's original poems based on first-hand knowledge of Old Norse, will repay investigation. It corresponds to part—a sizeable part—of the *Laxdæla Saga*; more specifically, it tells the love story of Gudrun, Kiartan, and Bodli. Gudrun of Bathstead and Kiartan of Herdholt, in Iceland, are betrothed. Kiartan sails to Norway, where exciting times are expected now that Olaf Tryggvason is establishing himself as King of Norway, and Kiartan's friend Bodli sails with him. Bodli, however, returns to Iceland before Kiartan, and by lies wins Gudrun for himself. They marry and settle down at Bathstead. Kiartan eventually returns, and marries Refna out of pique. After an uneasy calm there are quarrels between the two couples, and Bodli, against his will, is persuaded by his wife and her brothers to join an ambush which results in Kiartan's death. Bodli is left a broken, repentant man. In the last section Morris briefly ties up the loose ends: the killing of Bodli in revenge for Kiartan, the early death of Refna, and the old age and death of Gudrun.

Morris' version will not entirely satisfy the Norse purist, but for all that it is a much closer approximation to the true Norse spirit than he has ever managed before. His alterations to the plot are not

too distracting, and the tragedy develops inexorably and dramatically. Morris was certainly pleased with it. We sometimes forget that he was well aware of the weaknesses of many of his smooth-flowing *Earthy Paradise* stories: 'I am rather painfully conscious myself' he says in a letter to Swinburne in December 1869, '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. . . . Acontius I know is a spoony, nothing less.' And again in a letter to Professor Charles Eliot Norton, of the same date: 'I don't know if you have my book by this time, or have begun to deal with its somewhat elephantine bulk, which 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.'¹

Morris is probably right. *Gudrun* does stand out like a rock in the smooth plain of the *Earthy Paradise*. The atmosphere is more convincing, more assured, compared with that of *Aslaug*. Morris, we feel, is speaking with more authority about life in the farmsteads and halls of Iceland. The action seems to belong to the setting, whereas in *Aslaug* the events take place in a kind of fairy vacuum. Very effective, for example, is the scene at the Yule feast at Herdholt, where the allotting of the high seat, the place of honour, is in dispute between Gudrun and Refna. Equally effective are the moments of tension between the guilt-wracked Bodli and his sneering, malicious brother-in-law, Ospak; in the ambush scene, when Ospak, Bodli and the others are waiting to attack Kiartan, Bodli is reluctant to fight against the friend he has wronged, but whom he still loves:

But as there he stood

Ospak raised up his hand, all red with blood
And smote him on the face and cried: 'Go home,
Half-hearted traitor, e'en as thou hast come,
And bear my blood to Gudrun.'

Better, perhaps, is Ospak's rough verbal exchange with the 'wandering churls' who are reluctant to reveal bad news. Ospak asks one of them to speak:

¹ *Letters*, pp. 30-32.

The other, drunker, and a thought more wise
 May be for that, said, screwing up his eyes,
 'Say-all-you-know shall go with clouted head.'
 'Say-nought-at-at-all is beaten', Ospak said,
 'If, with his belly full of great men's meat,
 He has no care to make his speeches sweet.'

Very convincing, too, are the scenes in Norway between King Olaf Tryggvason and the Icelanders who defiantly refuse to accept Christianity. Morris does catch something of the courage and magnanimity, as well as the quick temper, of Olaf.

I have laboured these points in which I think Morris has succeeded because I feel that much criticism of *Guðrun* needs to be qualified. But *Guðrun* has its faults. Most of the narrative is too limp and easy; the sharpness of individual scenes, like the ambush for example, is blurred; there is too much description; it would be pleasant if we were allowed to take something for granted, as we are in the saga. Only too often Morris slips back into the languorous haze which shrouds so much of the *Earthly Paradise*. Consider this description of Guðrun, which owes nothing at all to the *Laxdæla Saga*:

That spring was she just come to her full height;
 Low-bosomed yet she was, and slim and light,
 Yet scarce might she grow fairer from that day;
 Gold were the locks wherewith the wind did play
 Finer than silk . . .

. . . and a smile began
 To cross her delicate mouth, the snare of man;
 For some thought rose within the heart of her
 That made her eyes bright, her cheeks ruddier
 Than was their wont, yet were they delicate
 As are the changing steps of high heaven's gate,
 Bluer than grey her eyes were; somewhat thin
 Her marvellous red lips; round was her chin,
 Cloven and clear-wrought; like an ivory tower
 Rose up her neck from love's white-veiled bowler.

This is not a Norse heroine. A Pre-Raphaelite lady, if ever there was one!

Worse still are the love scenes and the emotional partings between Guðrun and Kiartan, where the atmosphere suggests a romance of courtly love. She weeps bitterly when Kiartan leaves

her for his voyage to Norway, 'and midst her tears she smiled'; Kiartan weeps too, and then smiling through her tears she went away. Yet in the saga Guðrun is a strong-willed woman of iron self-control—she is, after all, twice-widowed, and not a trembling girl; when Kiartan decides to go to Norway she is not pleased, and says so, briefly. Everyone in *Guðrun*—it is a common fault of Morris—talks far too much. An appalling example is Kiartan's outburst when he hears that Bodli has married Guðrun; he turns and staggers away, and then follows twenty lines of self-pity and lamentation:

O blind, O blind, O blind,
 Where is the world I used to deem so kind,
 So loving to me. O Guðrun, Guðrun . . .

And so on. All we find in the saga is this: 'He now heard of the marriage of Guðrun, but did not trouble himself at all over it.'

Dr. Hoare, in her book on Morris and Yeats,² makes two telling points against *Guðrun* as a work purporting to reproduce the atmosphere of an Icelandic saga, and though Dr. Hoare is rather too unkind to Morris, she is certainly right here. In the *Laxdæla Saga*, as indeed in all the classical sagas, nothing is condoned or vilified (except by implication); the narrator does not take sides or moralise. The same cannot be said of *Guðrun*. Her second point is in connection with Bodli's speech after the death of Kiartan:

Where was thy noble sword I looked to take
 Here in my breast, and die for Guðrun's sake,
 And for thy sake!

There is no hint of this in the saga, and as Dr. Hoare says, 'the intrusion of such an element of the *chevaleresque* into the crisis of a tale which deals with feelings at the root of human nature is unpardonable.'

Now why does Morris spoil his narrative in this way? To say that he misunderstood the implications of his material, as so many critics do, will surely not meet the difficulty. Morris knew perfectly well what the saga writers were doing, and how they got their effects. His prefaces to *Grettir* and to the first volume of the *Saga Library*—quite apart from Magnússon's tributes to his instinctive understanding of Norse life—show that Morris knew what his

¹ Muriel Press's translation (The Temple Classics, 1899).

² Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and Yeats in relation to Early Saga Literature* (1937).

originals had in mind. I have already mentioned the sensitive appreciation of Old Norse literature which is to be found in a lecture to a socialist audience. 'Self restraint', he says there, 'was a virtue sure to be thought much of among a people whose religion was practically courage'; yet its lack of restraint is one of the strongest objections to *Gudrun*. In the same lecture Morris makes the point that 'tears are not common in Northern stories'; yet *Gudrun* and *Kiartan* weep bitterly. Later he quotes with approval the fortitude of a Norse hero who 'coming home from abroad learns as soon as he sets foot on shore that his father is dead, his eldest brother slain, and he himself outlawed—and changes countenance in no wise.' Compare this with *Kiartan's* eloquent sorrow. It has also been claimed that Morris, in his ignorance, has over-idealised his characters; but no-one knew better than the author of the *Defence of Guenevere* that the Middle Ages could be brutal as well as beautiful, and he admits, in this same lecture, that 'a hard and grasping side to the character of the saga heroes is not uncommon'. This last comment, I may remark in passing, reminds us of the entry in the Firm's account book for January 1884, describing a design for a window: 'Norse heroes on the sea, making for other people's property.'¹

In other words it was not ignorance. Morris deliberately departs from what he knows to be the authentic Norse atmosphere. We may regret his decision, but we cannot accuse him of lack of understanding or lack of sympathy. He had, after all, perfected a particular style of story-telling in verse which had brought him enormous contemporary popularity, and he may have felt that it was possible for romance and saga to come to terms, as it were, in the familiar setting of the *Earthly Paradise*; too sudden a break with his earlier manner would in any case be inappropriate in the circumstances. Of course the answer may be, more simply, that he could not resist his own weaknesses. Morris, we should remember, was no slavish imitator. 'When you are using an old story,' he writes in a letter to his daughter, 'read it through, then shut the book and write it in your own way.'² It is perhaps unfortunate that at this period his 'own way' was the narrative method of *Jason* and the *Earthly Paradise*.

¹ Lady Burne-Jones, op. cit. ii, p. 139.

² Quoted in Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris, Medievalist and Revolutionary* (1945).

Imperfect though it may be, *Gudrun* is a tremendous advance on *Aslaug*; first-hand knowledge of Old Norse has confirmed and strengthened Morris's intuitive understanding of the world of the sagas, and it is fair to point out that no other English poet has achieved so much.

In 1871 came the supreme and final experience; his first visit to Iceland, with Magnússon and two other friends. It is difficult to over-estimate the effect on Morris of this visit to the country which, in a certain sense, he already knew so well. There is a solemnity, a sense of dedication, in the descriptions and comments in the journals he kept during this visit and his second visit two years later. (There is also, I hasten to add, a great deal of amusing narrative). His exaggerated abuse of the Great Geysir¹—'the place which has made Iceland famous to Mangnall's Questions and the rest, who have never heard the names of Sigurd and Brynhild, of Njal or Gunnar or Grettir or Gisl or Gudrun'—shows his awareness, lightly expressed though it is, that Iceland had something vital and significant to offer him. In a letter to Mrs. Coronio,² after his second visit, he writes: 'The glorious simplicity of the terrible and tragic, but beautiful land with its well-remembered stories of brave men, killed all querulous feeling in me . . . 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.'

I must return now to the saga translations which Morris and Magnússon were producing at such a stupefying rate. Before their first visit to Iceland they had completed translations of *Gunnlaug Saga*, *Grettis Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, and of a number of poems from the *Poetic Edda*; and in 1870 came the saga which to Morris was almost a sacred text: the *Volunga Saga*, the prose version of the heroic lays of the *Poetic Edda*. When Magnússon first introduced him to the *Volunga Saga*, Morris did not seem very impressed, but when he looked into it more carefully he was excited and moved. 'There is nothing wanting in it,' he wrote to Professor Charles Eliot Norton³ in December, 1869, '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

¹ *Works* Vol. VIII, p. 66.

² *Letters*, pp. 58-59.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

raving, complete beauty without an ornament . . . in short it is to the full meaning of the word inspired.' In the translators' words 'This is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks.'¹ It is of course, the chief source book of Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung* (published in 1876), into which he poured almost all he knew about the *Volsung Saga*, the *Edda* poems, and the *Nibelungenlied*.

It must be admitted that *Sigurd* is a tremendous work, though I doubt if many people read it nowadays. There is nothing quite like it in English literature; it was a labour of love, a glowing tribute to the great legends of the North, which to Morris were the true heritage of the English race. Not that he escapes entirely into the heroic past; it is still Norse literature seen through the eyes of a nineteenth-century poet; but no-one can read *Sigurd the Volsung* without feeling something of that sense of personal implication in great events of long ago which Morris himself so obviously felt. Much could be said about *Sigurd*, but I must postpone a fuller discussion until some other occasion.

The translation of the sagas continued steadily after the *Volsung Saga* had been completed. *Three Northern Love Stories* (containing *Gunnlaug*, *Friðhiof*, *Vígland*, and a number of short tales) appeared in 1875, and, to crown the work, the great enterprise of the *Saga Library* was planned in 1890 with Bernard Quaritch. In that year Morris writes: 'I have undertaken to get out some of the Sagas I have lying about. Quaritch is exceedingly anxious to get hold of me, and received with enthusiasm a proposal to publish a Saga Library.'² Fifteen volumes were projected, but in actual fact only six volumes appeared: Volume I (*Howard the Halt*, *The Banded Men*, and *Hen-Thorir*) in 1891, Volume II (*The Eredwellers*) in 1892, Volumes III-V (*The Heimsringla*) in 1893, and Volume VI (notes and indexes by Magnússon, a remarkable monument to his learning and industry) in 1905, after Morris' death. These translations represent twenty years of happy collaboration between the two men; and the six handsome volumes, with their prefaces, maps, explanatory notes and indexes (mostly by Magnússon) were intended to be a work of education as well as a translation. They contain a great deal of information which is still useful, though what is most

¹ *The Story of the Volsungs* (Translators' Preface).

² J. W. Mackail, *op. cit.* vol. II p. 260 (World's Classics edition).

engaging about them is the warmth of enthusiasm, the 'joyaunce', to use one of Morris' favourite words, which informs the whole. Only in the occasional reference to their rivals Vigfusson and Powell do we detect a note of tartness or of heavy irony. The *Saga Library* should be read—or dipped into—by all members of the William Morris Society.

I should like to conclude with a few rather inconclusive words on a difficult problem; the prose style of the Morris and Magnússon translations. Many hard things have been said and written about it, and the insulting reference to 'Wardour Street English' has been handed on from critic to critic, to the great detriment of Morris' literary reputation over the last fifty years. Now Morris, like most romantic poets, was attracted to archaic words; we find them slipping in, quite casually, in his earliest works. But with very few exceptions these are the usual, conventional archaisms; they are not Morris' private vocabulary. What people really mean, I think, when they complain of William Morris' archaic English, is the language of the later prose romances, from the *House of the Wolfings* in 1889 to the posthumous *Swinding Flood*. Here we do find a special language, a vocabulary and syntax peculiar to Morris. You may not enjoy it, but it is indissolubly bound up with this narrative form which Morris evolved for his own pleasure in the last years of his life. And how did he acquire this highly individual prose style? There is no doubt at all: it is the language of Morris and Magnússon's translations from Old Norse. We find it, fully grown, in the first translation, *The Story of Gunnlaug*, and in all the sagas which followed. We do not find it in *Aslaug* or in *Gudrun*, or even in *Sigurd the Volsung*; in these poems we have only what I have called the usual, conventional archaisms: betide, brand, clave, dight, eld, erewhile, even, weal, whiles, wot, and the like; but in the saga translations we are at once confronted by curious words and turns of phrase, almost all of them disguised Norse words and idioms, which we find elsewhere only in the later prose romances. Here are a few examples, all from *Gunnlaug*:

The best-eyed of men; mere-men; of all bonder folk; fetches of men; and claimed boot therefore; I will not play at man-mating; go on holm with me; for lay-reward; to bid Helga; about winter nights; a shut-bed; that must betide that drew towards; great scathe; I had to give selfdoom; carry thy cowing away to the fellows up yonder; his faring goods.

In addition, of course, there are the usual archaic words from Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser, romantic words which have always been the common property of all poets.

The beginnings of it all, then, are in the Morris and Magnússon translations and in their method of translating. May Morris and Magnússon have left us fairly clear accounts of the system followed.¹ Magnússon would first prepare a translation, which Morris would then take in hand, amending the style as he thought fit. I have been looking at Magnússon's manuscript² of the *Saga of St. Olaf* (the second part of the *Heimskringla*, published as Volume IV of the *Saga Library*), which exemplifies the method they used. The left-hand pages of the manuscript book are left blank, and the right-hand pages contain the translation in Magnússon's neat, flowing handwriting. Morris' corrections and emendations are between the lines, or wherever there is room for them, in a rather bolder, more flamboyant script—usually pretty readable. Sometimes whole sentences are rewritten; sometimes an individual word is altered. In fact Morris' emendations form a continuous commentary on Magnússon's version, turning Magnússon's 'unconsidered journalise', as May Morris unsympathetically calls it,³ into 'a language more worthy of the subject.' Sometimes Morris' alterations are merely slight grammatical corrections—Magnússon's English, good though it is, is not faultless: but more often they are definitely designed to bring everything into conformity with the highly individual style Morris thought appropriate to saga translation. Some are quite minor alterations, but all to the same end. I can quote only a few examples here: in each case the original Magnússon version is on the left, and is followed by Morris' emendation:

and for the vikings an onset there was awkward (*it was unhandily to lay them aboard*); that many places be flooded (*that wide about be floods*); to the spot (*thither*); it was an awkward matter (*it was unhandy*); he lost many (*he lost a many*); fields (*aereland*); it happened (*it betid*) King Ethelred was sorely bewildered in his mind (*King Ethelred was mickle mind-sick*); Then King Olaf parted from them (*King Olaf sundered him from them*).

¹ *Works*, introduction to Vol. VII; May Morris, op. cit., chapter V; Preface to Vol. VI of the *Saga Library*.

² I am very grateful to Professor Garmonsway, of King's College, London University, for telling me about this manuscript which is in the Brotherton Library of the University of Leeds. By kindness of the Librarian I have been able to study microfilms of the whole manuscript.

³ May Morris, op. cit. I p. 455.

Sometimes there are second thoughts. For instance, in one place Magnússon has 'He died of loss of blood (perhaps over-bleeding?)'. This Morris alters to 'of a bloody flux'; but in the printed text we find 'He died of a blood letting'.

And so it goes on, every sentence carefully considered and, where necessary, amended or rewritten. This is not a casual business; Morris taking it all very seriously, and it is clear that Magnússon is in wholehearted agreement with Morris' views on the fit style for translating Old Norse. Magnússon's own style is slightly archaic, but not consistently distorted, if that is not too strong a word, to the Morris-Magnússon dialect (even as late as this saga Morris is changing Magnússon's 'money' to 'fee', 'happened' to 'betid', etc.), and it is quite pleasant to read; a little characterless, perhaps, but for a foreigner remarkably idiomatic.

But how did it all begin? I suspect that it grew out of the first attempts at verbal translation which Magnússon describes in the Preface to Volume VI of the *Saga Library*. He is telling us how Morris was impatient to get at the story:

Henceforth no time must be wasted on reading out the original. He must have the story as quickly as possible. The dialect of our translation was not the Queen's English, but it was helpful towards penetrating into the thought of the old language. Thus, to give an example, *leiðtogi*, a guide, became *load-tugger* (*load way*, in *load-star*, *load-stone*; *togi* from *toga* to *tug* (*on*), one who leads on with a rope); *kvæna sik* from *kván* (*queen*, *woman*) to be *queen one's self*, to *take a wife*, etc. That such a method of acquiring the language should be a constant source of merriment, goes without saying . . .

It is dangerous to speculate about what people probably thought, but when you remember Morris' love for old words, and his passion for the Germanic elements in history and language, it is easy to imagine that once the merriment had died down he would see the serious possibilities of this rough-and-tumble translating. As I have said, most of the peculiarities of language in these versions of the sagas (and in the later prose romances) are the result of translation or imitation of Norse vocabulary (especially compound words) and syntax. In other words, this close verbal translation was not only a joke, as he had thought at first, but the solution to the problem of rendering the language of his beloved sagas—too noble and

precious to endure the contaminating touch of common speech. Magnússon has some interesting remarks, elsewhere,¹ on this very problem:

From the beginning Morris was strongly impressed by the simple dignity of style of the Icelandic sagas. There must be living many of his friends who heard him frequently denounce it as something intolerable to have read the Icelandic saga rendered into the dominant literary dialect of the day—the English newspaper language. . . . This dignity of style cannot be reached—the Romance element in English. If it is to be reached at all—and then only approximately—it must be by means of the Teutonic element in our speech—the nearest akin to the Icelandic . . . [Morris' saga style] is, in his own, the result of an endeavour by a scholar and a man of genius to bring about such harmony between the Teutonic element in English and the language of the Icelandic saga as the not very abundant means at his command would allow.

It is not easy, though, to agree with these views of Morris. The sagas do not need this protection; they are woven of the stuff of reality and to wrap them up in a remote, contrived language—as if they would shrivel up in the cold light of day—is to rob them of their vivid actuality which is their greatest virtue. Theories about Teutonic elements will do more harm than good when a language like English is compared with Icelandic, in which the non-German elements are entirely negligible. English, of course, is basically Germanic, but vast numbers of our most evocative words are foreign borrowings, and theories of style based on etymological selection are bound to result in artificiality: the one fatal error rendering the prose literature of Old Norse.

It is curiously ironic. This style was Morris' particular pride and joy—his most treasured offering at the shrine of Norse literature yet his translations, in spite of their vigour and their loving preservation of Norse idiom, are a hindrance, rather than a help, to the modern reader who tries to use them as a substitute for the original. Nevertheless, the labour of translation, with all that it entailed, was not wasted. Morris steeped himself in the literature and language of Old Norse, and was able to transmute it into the strange and wonderful prose romances of his later years, where the style—so much a part of Morris, yet so utterly at variance with the spirit of the sagas—finds its true home. Here, in Morris' own words, we find that 'interpenetration of matter and manner which is the essence of poetry'.¹

¹ *Works*, Vol. VII, pp. xvii-xviii.

Old Norse Literature, then, was Morris' greatest single inspiration; the source of his finest verse and his most characteristic prose. It changed him, as Bernard Shaw has said,² from 'the facile troubadour of love and beauty into the minstrel of strife and guile, of battle, murder and death'; for after his discovery of this most vital and human of great literatures there was no danger of his withdrawing for ever into a nebulous world of dreams. Yet it is more than a literary influence. In the northern past he found a courage which strengthened him during those dark hours when his hopes for mankind seemed impossible of fulfilment, a courage and hope which in his own age he had sought in vain.

¹ In a review of Rossetti's poems, printed by May Morris, *op. cit.*

² May Morris, *op. cit.*, II, p. xxxiii.

