William Morris: an Approach to the Poetry
by J. M. S. Tompkins.

CECIL WOOLF · LONDON
Chapter 5

Sigurd the Volsung

'This is the noble power which the great stories of the world have upon us, this their healing and exalting good. They release the soul from its own despotism. They hush the heart into self-forgetfulness. They fill our being with sorrow and with joy which are not our own.' — Stopford A. Brooke, Four Victorian Poets, 1908

I

May Morris says that Sigurd the Volsung was the work her father wished to be remembered by. 'His satisfaction with it did not waver or change to the last'.¹ The poem was deeply considered and weighted with meaning, but today's reader, a hundred years later, may not immediately perceive that this was so, for it is not expressed in verbal intricacies or ironical juxtapositions of action and imagery, but in transparent and often repetitive language, borne forwards on a rushing metre, that can stun thought, by a fair number of those clichés which were the professional resource of generations of narrative poets. Meaning, therefore, is not always salient. The mind, aware that it has a large area to cover, hurries on to the next paragraph, and the unpretentious statement is blurred into vagueness. When, however, through long familiarity with the text, all kinds of meanings, basic and subsidiary, make themselves felt, then the opposite danger begins to loom, and the suspicion arises that some of these insistent harmonies or these faintly ringing overtones may be no more than the buzzing of the blood in the reader's ears. I have tried to keep my path between these two dangers, preferring, if I swerve, that it should be towards overfulness of meaning, rather than towards thinness of it. There is no scientific test that avails in such a case, only the old tests and measurements of the literary scholar, who must accept or reject interpretations according to his knowledge of his author, his work, his material, his language and his period. He dare not put forward the asseveration, sometimes heard now, that such and such a meaning 'is there' (i.e. can be elicited from the bare words, if all other directing circumstances are ignored) for this may recall Theseus's remark on the facility with which a bush becomes a bear.

¹Morris anglicizes the names in the Volsungasaga. His practice has been followed.

Sigurd the Volsung

In this chapter there are probably more omissions than elsewhere of what one might call legitimately expected material. This does not necessarily mean that I have neglected these aspects in the long preparation for this book, but there is no need to set out at length what can be readily found in earlier and recent critical studies, and I need the space. For instance, the relation between Sigurd the Volsung and its sources in the Volsungasaga and the poems in the Elder Edda was dealt with by D.M. Hoare in The Work of Morris and Yeats in relation to early saga literature (1937) and to different purpose by Jessie Kocmanová in The Poetic Maturing of William Morris (1964). These treatments do not exhaust the subject, and I have found some points to make, but no reason to essay another comprehensive comparison. The choice and effect of the verse form were considered by all the older critics, such as George Saintsbury, A. Stopford Brooke, Oliver Elton and others represented in Peter Faulkner's very useful volume on Morris in the 'Critical Heritage' series (1973) and often more fruitfully than in modern studies, since the critics understood and were used to the nature of regular verse, which cannot always be said today. I have said nothing on this subject, nor, as I have explained in my preface, on the general question of Morris's language. In addition, I find myself once more in the somewhat ironic position of scanting what I fully accept as the finest part of the poem—the series of scenes from Sigurd's second riding of the Valkyrie's fire to his death, in which the cosmic issues of the earlier part are plunged, as they must be, into individual human lives—in order to find space for less attractive material, for the barbaric actions of the earlier Volsungs, and Morris's reasons for including them, for the reshaping of the Niblung story, for the nature of Odin and his sorrow, and the function of the Creation myth in the poem. Such subjects are of great importance to the understanding of what the poem meant to Morris, and why it so completely satisfied him.

In News from Nowhere old Hammond quotes a couplet from Sigurd the Volsung to the unrecognized author of it, the Guest, and assigns it casually to 'one of the many translations of the nineteenth century'. This is one of the unobtrusive, intimate touches to be found in that book. Morris learns that his greatest poetical effort, not very warmly received in his own time, is still alive and working in the future world, in the same condition of anonymity in which much of mediaeval art and literature survived. The description 'translation' must be taken as widely as Eustache Deschamps did when he referred to Chaucer as 'grant translateur', or as Dryden took it when he came to translate Chaucer. It is not a metaphor. The old poet is presented to a modern audience in
the confidence that his human truth will be perceived, and, to facilitate this perception, some, but by no means all, of his barbaric rust is brushed off. However, even Dryden’s conception of translation is hardly wide enough to cover Morris’s amplifications and inventions of detail, which make up a flowered, golden robe under which the stark limbs of the old legend move, let alone his modifications of motive and action. Jessie Kocmanová rejects the description of translation; and perhaps there is irony as well as modesty and gratification in the Guest’s silent acceptance of Hammond’s remark.

Morris did not take to the Volsungasaga with the instant response that the saga of Grettir had waked in him. Eirikr Magnússon, with whom he had been reading Icelandic and making translations from the sagas since autumn 1868, sent him his translation of the Volsungasaga in summer 1869, when he was staying at Bad Ems with Janey, and Morris wrote home doubtfully that it seemed ‘rather of the monstrous order’. He had got no further than the early chapters that recount the life of Sigurd’s father, Sigmund. Here the monstrousities lie thick. The ten Volsung brothers are chained to a log in the forest and every night a wolf devours one of them. Sigmund, the last alive, smears his face with honey and, when the wolf licks it, tears out its tongue with its teeth. His sister Signy, wife of King Siggeir, who has betrayed and slaughtered the Volsung kindred, changes her shape and comes to her brother’s bed in the wilderness, in order that an avenger shall be born to help Sigmund. At one time, Sigmund and his son Sinfiotli put on wolfkins, change into wolves, and fight each other almost to the death. Finally they burn Siggeir and his men in his hall, and Signy turns back from the door of escape to die beside the husband she hates and has brought to his end. There are subordinate barbarities as well, such as Sinfiotli’s killing of his half-brothers, and the burial alive of Sigmund and his son in the barrow. This was dense and ancient mythical material, unlike the material in the family sagas. The conviction not only of human reality but of historic truth, which Morris ascribed to these last, with fewer reservations than modern scholars have, was not there to grip him. He could accept the Eybyggisaga and the Grettissaga as records of heroic life in Iceland, untroubled by the supernatural intrusions which belonged to the Icelandic imagination and landscape. In Grettir, the outlaw, he had found a pattern of that manly fortitude he hoped to learn. Grettir was ‘unlucky in all things, yet made strong to bear all ill-luck; scornful of the world, yet capable of enjoyment, and determined to make the most of it; not deceived by men’s specious ways, but disdainful to cry out because he must bear with them; scornful men, yet

helping them when called on, and desirous of fame’. This was a temper to confront the unalterable hostile circumstances which the Icelanders called fate, and his tale, and others of the kind, seemed to Morris the ‘glorious outcome of the worship of courage’. In two sonnets he greeted Grettir as his friend and, like a friend, he brought consolation. His actions and endurance in that hard, remote, little land, whose people ‘count so little in the great world’s game’, raised sharply the question of the futility of effort, which troubled Morris; and the survival of his memory, cherished by generations of his countrymen, never obliterated by material hardship, still acting on their lives by its nobility, and on the life of Morris himself, was the answer to the question. There seemed at first no such brotherly pulse in the doings of Sigmund.

When he came back to England, Magnússon laid the Volsungasaga aside and they turned again to the Laxdælasaga, the basis of ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ in the third part of The Earthly Paradise. There are marked resemblances to be found in the grouping of the chief characters in both tales, and it may have been this that brought Morris back to the Volsungasaga. However it was, Magnússon tells how one day he found him in a state of great excitement, calling the Volsung tale ‘the grandest tale that was ever told’. He had been swept away from the monstrousities by the superb series of passionate human scenes from Sigurd’s second riding of the fire, to win the Valkyrie for Gunnar, to the deaths of Sigurd and Brynhild. This enthusiasm spills over into the fourth part of The Earthly Paradise, into ‘The Forstering of Aslaug’ with the Wanderer’s introductory words about ‘his people’s best beloved man’ and the final dream-vision of Sigurd and Brynhild in bliss, into ‘The Hill of Venus’ where the two lovers cleave the ‘loveless waste’ of the Dark Ages and lead on the springtime of mediæval love poetry, perhaps even into ‘Bellerophon in Lycia’, where the hero’s bearing in danger is described in an unexpected image:

calm, as though the death
He knew so nigh him, on some distant heath
Were sitting flame-bound.

No name is given, but what sits flame-bound on the heath except the Valkyrie, who will bring death to Sigurd? Morris’s imagination is full of their tale. As he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton in December 1869: ‘I believe the Volsunga has rather swallowed me up for some time past’.

The aspects of the saga which roused his enthusiasm are expressed in the Preface to the translation (the first in English) published by Morris and Magnússon in 1870 as The Story of the Volsungas and the
Niblungs, and also in Morris's 'Prologue in Verse'. In the latter we have his personal and poetic reaction and it is well to say briefly here that it shows him concentrating more intensely on the tragic love-theme, at the cost of other narrative interests, than either the original saga suggests or his own Sigurd the Volsung displays. He finds the focus of the tale in the two women of passionate and constant hearts and of courage unflinching in defence of honour, as they conceived it, Brynhild, her 'glorious soul with love distraught', and Gudrun of the northern form of the story. The Sigurd he outlines is primarily the lover; and the doctrine, which the tale seems to him to breathe, is not far from that which informed Love is Enough:

Be wide-eyed, kind, curse not the hand that smites;
Curse not the kindness of a past good day,
Or hope of love; cast by all earth's delights,
For very love; through weary days and nights,
Abide thou, striving howso'er in vain,
The inmost love of one more heart to gain.

But if this is indeed the burden of the tale—and it is hard to fit it to the last days of Sigurd and Brynhild—then it is not embodied in a prolonged and fluctuating anguish, like Bodill's or Pharamond's. Love is defended from the 'death of desire' and crowned by tragic action, before time can debase it. This is a tale

Of utter love defeated utterly
Of Grief too strong to give Love time to die.

It is thus, in its fierce way, a consolation to Morris's specific pain, and the 'Prologue in Verse' indicates a transitional station on the way to his later interpretation of the Volsung tragedy. This bias he conferred on the Wanderer, who told the tale of Sigurd's daughter Aslaug, and regretted that he had no heart to raise her father's

mighty sorrow laid asleep,
That love so sweet, so strong and deep,
That as ye hear the wonder told
In those few strenuous words of old,
The whole world seems to rend apart
When heart is torn away from heart.

He does not forget the dragon or the gold, but this is the focus of the tale for him.

This devouring and ennobling flame of love, fed by and feeding all that is precious, is not, however, all that Morris saw in the Volsungasaga at that time. He saw its human truth. The reader would find in it, he said in the Preface, 'such startling realism, such subtlety, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move himself to-day'. He also recognized in the original author, as he wrote to C.E. Norton, a man who had had 'his old religion taken from him and his new one hardly gained'. This too must have gone home. In the same letter he showed how well he understood the craftsmanship of the pregnant and condensed language.

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 over-stylized; 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 two pages of moderate print.

We catch, too, in the challenging phrase in which he presents the Volsungasaga to the public, the first vibration of that theme which is to fill Sigurd the Volsung with resonance. 'This is the great story of the North', he writes, 'which should be to our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks'. Since the Tale of Troy was (and is) a national possession, a confirmation of national identity, this is to claim a public meaning for the tale of the Volsungs. It is an old treasure of the race, which he has retrieved for them, still rich and powerful. He does not stop there. Its virtue is not confined to the lands and the blood that grew it; for 'afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been—a story too—then should it be to those that come after us no less than the tale of Troy has been to us'. If these words stood at the head of his own poem, they would be equally interpreted, for there he projected the story of Sigurd into the future, as a kindling and shaping agency for his own and other peoples and ages. It is not easy to see how much of this was already latent in these few words, but the Tale of Troy was not mere romance to the Middle Ages, and Sir Peter Harpdon thinks of Hector as he frames his mind for his certain defeat and death.

With the publication of the translation of the Volsungasaga the first
stage of Morris's dealings with the ancient material is completed. He did not see his way, he told C.E. Norton, to any reworking of the subject which would not be 'a flatter and tamer version' of the old masterpiece, though at times he hankered after the attempt. The obstacles to the re-handling were not cleared away until October 1875 when he started on his long poem. Some of these obstacles were doubtless practical ones, such as the move to Turnham Green, the conversion of the Queen Square house, the financial and personal strains that led to the reorganization of the firm in 1874-75. But if we can roughly assess some of the obstructions in his way, we are much in the dark as to the fertilization of the old saga, that made the new poem a possibility. There are fostering agencies at various levels. The most obvious are the two journeys to Iceland in 1871 and 1873, and the Icelandic readings and translations he did with Magnusson; but these did not by themselves prompt him to take up the task, as the relative dates establish. His translation of the Aeneid during 1874 and 1875 must have both delayed and stimulated his return to the Sigurd theme. Translation never gave him the pleasure of original composition, but, as he reeled in the thousands of lines and cast them behind him, he was moving in an epical world and on a grand scale. It had been his great joy for months, he told Louise Baldwin, Georgie Macdonald's sister. It is, however, the inner changes in Morris that are cardinal for the resumption of the Volsungasaga. These have been described by Mackail and, recently, by Jack Lindsay from different angles; the accounts, however, supplement each other and interlock. Mackail, who had to keep so much back and yet convey so much, describes Morris's emergence from years of restlessness, emotional tension and brooding over death into a more equable temper, 'not without the courage of hope', in terms of a traveller issuing 'from some mountain gorge to a shining and fertile table-land'. Sometimes Morris saw it rather like this himself. He wrote to Louise Baldwin in 1875 that he was now in the second half of his life, looking forward to a busy time, 'not lacking content too I fancy: I must needs call myself a happy man on the whole' he concludes modestly. Such comments testify to the self-healing power of a healthy nature, such as is exemplified in the young people of the later Romances. He has come, rather late, to terms with his personal life, and is no longer obsessed by its unavoidable pains, not even by that most penetrating grief of his daughter Jenny's epilepsy, which declared itself in summer 1876, when he was in the middle of Sigurd the Volsung. Jack Lindsay calls the change a new birth. The troubles of 1869-72 had deepened Morris's mind. 'He had been forced to draw back from life and measure with a new depth and fullness what he felt about his place in the world; he had achieved a new detachment and a new intensity of sympathy'. He had begun 'to turn outward and to feel responsibility for the whole human scene'. He dates this outward-turning in 1874; yet it is possible - it is not susceptible of proof - that the fertilization of the Volsung tale had taken place as early as his first voyage to Iceland in 1871.

Morris went to Iceland just after the Siege of Paris and the defeat of the Commune. E.P. Thompson says that he cannot find in any of his published or unpublished writings any contemporary allusion to it. This is not quite true. There are two. One, also noted by Jack Lindsay, is in the letter to Janey of 11th August, written hurriedly when the party came down to Stykkisholm on Broadfirth and found a Danish brigantine there, with a merchant on board willing to take letters. The other was written on 27th August at Thingvellir. In the first he remarks that the loose stones on the edge of a lava-field is [sic] like my idea of a half-ruined Paris barricade'. At Thingvellir Morris's companion, W.H. Evans, went off shooting with one of the Cambridge men belonging to the party they found there. In that region of rock and cliff the reports of their shots rebounded and multiplied. Morris wrote: 'Presently uprose a noise like the bombardment of a town'. This was in the fair copy. May Morris adds '...of Paris' the note-book says'. These spontaneous juxtapositions of Iceland and the Commune seem to me of great significance. If they do not record the moments when the heroic past, clear everywhere in Iceland and specially so at its solemn heart, the place of the Althing, was impregnated by a hope for the future, at least they indicate that that is what will come to pass. When it does, neither the monstrousities of Sigmund's story, nor the fear of weakening the old saga in retelling it will obstruct Morris any more. It is plain from the readiness of the comparisons that he had not put Paris out of his mind, while following in the tracks of Gunnar and Njal and Grettir. They crop up in a hurried letter to his wife, and in an utterance of contemptuous irritation at two respectable young Englishmen who go out shooting on the Sabbath, manoeuvring to conceal their guns and their intention from an Anglican clergyman who happens to be camping - most inappropriately, Morris feels - at Thingvellir. It is true, but not relevant, that the Volsungasaga does not play in Iceland. Iceland was the casket that preserved the Eddic poems and the later prose saga. Nor need we try to establish -material is lacking - how close his thoughts of the Commune were in 1871 to those expressed half a generation later in The Pilgrims of Hope. At least, past and future were laid in the same rocky bed, even if they did not yet mate. The remembered life of the
ancient land ceases to be only a consolation and becomes a positive, though tragic, hope. The old tale gains a new dimension and a living meaning.

II

The *Volsungasaga* begins with the shadowy figures of the ancestors of the Volsungs, and son of Odin; passes on to the lives and deaths of King Volsung and his son and daughter, Sigurd and Sigvelf; spends most of its time on the deeds of the surviving Volsung, Sigurd, his dragon-queen, his finding of his love Brynhild, his alliance with the Niblung princes, his brouhaha, and his death at their hands; and finishes with the fate of the Niblings, of Gudrun, their sister and Sigurd’s wife, and of the last Niblung children. Morris omits the dim forefathers of the Volsungs (though King Rerir and Sigi, the very ancient, are named in a festal song) and the deaths of the royal children (though he cannot quite suppress what he knows, and Grimbald speaks to her daughter of a Sigmund who can only be her son and Sigurd’s killed by his Niblung kin, but not a figure in Morris’s poem). He also, as is well-known, diverges at the end from the narrative line of the *Volsungasaga* and accepts the variant found in the thirteenth century Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, where Gudrun (Kriemhilde) revenges her husband’s death on her brother. 2 More of this later. Except for these and a few small but not insignificant changes, Morris preserved the outline of the old tale. His poem is in four books, named after Sigurd, Regin, Brynhild and Gudrun, of which the second and third, which contain the tale of Sigurd, take up nearly two-thirds of the length. This was the heart of the matter for Morris and the source of his response.

Much of the original material was myth, as he recognized. There are traces of his acquaintance with mythological theories, as in the derivation of gods from men, especially from cultural innovators. Regin’s fame as craftsman sloughs off into four divine figures. More important, there is the elemental and seasonal imagery of sun and summer, overcoming the cold, the dark and the barrenness of the northern winter; the hero slaying the dragon. This runs all through the poem and carries with it the presentation of the Niblings, who become Sigurd’s foes, as the Cloudy People. This imagery he extends and uses for his own purpose. The new day, the rising sun, are not just the symbols of a recurrent season, but of mankind’s hope, linked in the northern imagination with the destruction of the old world and the return of Baldur to Valhalla with the new young powers, after the Dusk of the old Gods.

Morris’s interest in myth, it may be noted, was directed quite differently from that of the modern reshapers of such material. These, using the rich accretions of archaeological investigation, excavate along the lines of the surviving tales with tools sharpened for them by primitive historians, ethnologists and students of comparative religion, to recover something like the shape of the human and historical truth, in which, in remote ages, the legend was rooted. What is supernatural in the story is resolved, with more or less sympathy, along psychological lines. This is, roughly, the approach that we find in such books as Henry Treece’s *Electra*, Alfred Duggan’s *Founding Fathers*, A.W. Canaway’s *The Ring-Givers*, Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Sword at Sunset* and Mary Renault’s *The King Must Die*. It is fascinating work, parallel to the general outlook and tendencies of its time. It is not—or is seldom—reductive in intention, but certainly its heroes are no more than life-size, and the pressure of the cultures which produced them is felt very strongly. Grendel suffers from protein-deficiency, and Iphigenia, free-thinking girl, has her head hacked off in a cave by an ancient stone axe. Morris, however, is not inspired as a poet by the nugget of historical truth behind Sigurd, Atli and the Niblings, but by what the religious and poetic imagination of men has made of the story, by its flexibility to their changing ideals, their needs and their hopes. The scholarly part of his mind might well have been interested in the proposed identification of Sigurd—one of the Sigurds—with a Frankish warrior of the fifth century in the service of the Burgundian Gundahar, killed by the Huns, and by that of an earlier Sigurd with Arminius. But the Sigurd of the *Volsungasaga* had become the ideal warior of the Northern ethical imagination. ‘Never die he lose heart and never was he afraed’, says the saga-man. He liked to take treasure from his enemies and give it to his friends. He was true to his word, and children loved him. Morris, whom the Icelanders called ‘scald’, took the same freedom as his predecessors, further on in time. He cut out Sigurd’s revenge for his father’s death. To the saga-man this was the hero’s prime duty, accomplished before he undertook the splendidly prestigious dragon-hunt. To Morris, it would have been an interruption to the suspended climax of Páfnir’s death and the winning of the gold; moreover for the sun-hero, the hope of man, it was by the nineteenth century morally inappropriate. There are so few important alterations of action in the ancient revered text that this is noteworthy. Morris’s conception of the story of Sigurd as a developing myth, valid for his own age and those to come, probably accounts for his mapping the twisted and eroded links which still hold the *Volsungasaga* to
the history and topography of the North. They are slender enough; but we are told that Volsung was King in the land of the Huns, Siggeir King of Gothland, and Elf son of the Helper, King of Denmark. Brynhild has fought in Garthariki (the Scandinavian settlements in Russia) and Sigurd rides south to the land of the Franks and to Guki's realm south of the Rhine. At Thora's in Denmark, Gudrun sees Langobards, Saxons and Franks. Almost nothing of this survives in Morris. The only tribal name he uses is Goth. All his characters, except Atli and his Easterners, are Goths, and worship Odin the Goth. His only place-name is Lyndale, the little idyllic land lying at the forest's end, where a river runs into the sea and a road runs south to the land of Kings. We may plausibly suppose that Lyndale lies somewhere east of the mouths of the Rhine, and Volsung's hall near the Baltic shore, but these suppositions draw no support from Morris. There is no Rhine in his poem, only the Niblung river which runs under frost- and fire-cloven mountains, with an Icelandic profile, to the unnamed Niblung burg on its towering ness, where returning warriors feast through the 'undark night'; and though the names of King Elf and his father, the Helper, are taken from the list of early Danish kings, the country where Sigurd is reared is not Denmark. With its strip of fertile land between the sea and the mountains it suggests Norway (sometimes part of the Danish realm), except that ships seldom visit it, and that Sigurd, riding up from the sea to the bleak heaths and mountains, goes continuously westward. In fact, these places shimmer with fable. Lyndale is only a few hours' distance from the Niblung burg for Gudrun's slow-stepping oxen, but a whole day's riding for Sigurd on his divinely-bred steed. In the Nibelungenlied the journey of the Niblung is clear enough: from Worms over the Rhine, then across to the Main and down the Danube to Vienna, Hungary and Etzel's court; but Atli's court is by the shore of the Inland Sea (the Black Sea?) and the Niblung reach it after three days riding through the forest, twelve days sailing on the sea (also called the ocean) and three days through a land of cities.

This blurring of a specific context of place and time in the interest of an extended symbolism may well be borne in mind when we consider the rather different question of the phases of cultural history which Sigurd the Volsung has been held to reflect. Morris's deep interest in history, and increasingly in the economic and social history of the people, is not in question. He said that the development of historical study had given what amounted almost to a new sense to his generation. What is in question is his attitude to his poem. Poetry is a selective art. It does not embody the poet's entire range of intellectual interests and convictions, any more than it reflects his entire character. Is a historical approach to the poetic construct Sigurd the Volsung signaled as important in that construct? or does the poet, however aware of the complex historical bearings of the saga, relegate them to the edge of his vision, to concentrate on the unity and ideality of his hero? It is not an easy question to answer.

Jessie Kocmanová quotes, at the beginning of her chapter on Sigurd the Volsung, a letter that Morris wrote eighteen years after he finished the poem, in which he supposes that the figure of Sigurd results from the fusion of three successive heroes, the incestuously begotten Sinfjotli; the dragon-slayer and releaser of the Valkyrie; and the ally of the Niblungs and husband of Gudrun.3 He would on no account wish, he says, that 'the curious entanglement of the ages' had not taken place, since it has produced 'something of wonderful imagination and clearness of outline'. There is no external evidence that Morris had met this theory before he designed his epic; but Jessie Kocmanová considers that the divisions of the action correspond to successive stages of human society and behaviour by which the three-fold epiphany of the hero is conditioned. The barbaric age of the elder Volsungs, in which Sinfjotli emerges, is followed by the early Nordic civilization in the land of the Helper, where Sigurd is bred, and that by the early feudal society of the Niblung, a warlike people with an ambitious dynasty. 'Unity of conception is preserved by the unity of moral theme—which is the courage of man in his struggle against nature, and the frustration of that courage when the bonds of kindred and community are rent asunder by the demands and intrigues of class society'. She argues her case ingeniously, though with some omission of points that make against it, and it cannot be lightly dismissed. Especially, her characterization of the Niblung setting—much more convincing than her distinctions between the first and second phases of the saga—corresponds to the reader's spontaneous reactions. It is hardly possible to pass from the timber halls of Volsung, Siggeir, Elf and Heimir to the dark stone castle of the Niblung, with the woads on the walls, without feeling that the long, vaulted entry, where the winds distort all human words, filling it with the clash of weapons, is a passage from one age to another. The architectural picture works on the visual imagination, and I have caught myself 'seeing' the Niblung troops riding out from their burg, clad in a much later armour than King Volsung or King Sigmund wore. But we are not told so, and Sigurd wears his golden byrnir throughout. Indeed, though the tale has moved southwards and the Niblung host is within reach of the cities of the plain, with their waged armies, their 'bell-
swayed steeples' and the 'fond imaginings' of their 'uncouth praying', their own usages remain entirely Nordic. We hear of judgments in the doom-ring, of oaths on the sacred boar at high feasts, and of the passing under the earth-yoke of sworn brothers. One notable change is that the troops are mounted; we hear no more of the ancient wedge-array in which King Volsung fell. Another, stressed by Jessie Kocmanová, is the castle garden in the wall-nook, where Gudrun walks with her damsels or her nurse. This certainly has a mediaeval air, and the word 'damsel' has a strong romantic flavour. If Morris had written 'bower-women', Gudrun would have been served no otherwise than Sigyn or Hördis; but he liked the word 'damsel', and had already used it for the women who carry the new-born Sigurd to King Elf and his earls—that is, in the second, early Nordic cultural phase. It cannot therefore serve as an indication of the third, though, like the 'truncheon torn from the wood' with which Sigmund, in the first period, buries his brother's bones, it gives a chivalric echo and sounds a little out of context.

Other points might be made on both sides of the argument. Thus, the Nibelung men wear their helms at the plough, and this suggests a condition of war more continuous than the warfaring of King Volsung or King Elf, and a disciplined response of experienced troops, who do, indeed, fight three campaigns between midwinter and late summer in the year in which Sigurd joins them. Yet Sigurd, the spear-point of this levy, is no vassal of the Nibelung Kings, but an equal and ally, held to his proxy wooing for Gunnar by the ancient ritual bond of blood-brotherhood, not by feudal allegiance. The Nibelung martial culture differs from that shown earlier in Volsung's genial household, where the yellow-headed shepherds and huntsmen, bond and free, compete with the Volsung sons and the Goth earls to draw the sword from the Branstock. This scene suggests a primal kindred society, far back in legendary time, long previous to the Niblung. Yet Volsung and Siggeir cross the sea in their golden dragons, and Sigurd leads the Niblungs against legendary time, the Vikings' dragon-ships; and the likeness of the two societies extends beyond their artefacts to their motives and ambitions. Sigyn's marriage is as much a matter of dynastic aggrandisement to her father as Gudrun's to her kin. He sees himself and his sons, with Sigeir his son-in-law, as masters of all the north, as Grimhild is to see her sons as Attil's heirs and lords of the east. In short, the stress on different cultural phases and the gaps between them strengthens and diminishes according to the material Morris is handling. It is strongest in the early scenes of the vengeance on Sigeir and in those of Nibelung warfare, but never strong enough to provide a consistent framework to the epic, since its historical aspects are continually crossed by myth and legend, making their ancient, rooted demands on the poet's imagination. Parallels, contrasts and inconsistencies may not be significant of anything but the artist's response to the particulars of his tale. When songs are sung at Sigyn's wedding-feast in the Volsung hall, men are so young on earth that there are no ancient, famous deeds to sing of, so they sing instead of the creation of the world and the entering in of time, 'so near they knew the door'; but when Sigurd, Volsung's grandson, ransacks Fafnir's hoard, he finds

Gold gear of hosts unburied, and the coin of cities dead,

and this is what is expected in a dragon's hoard; it can hardly be meant to signalize the lapse of ages between grandsire and grandson. When, however, Sigurd asks Gjuki for his daughter Gudrun in marriage, it is not so easy to dismiss the temporal implications. He stands in his splendour in the sunlit Niblung hall,

And the ancient deeds of Sigmund seem fallen far aloof;
And dead are the fierce days fallen.

This is an irony and an illusion. Sigurd is under the spell of Grimhild's cup of oblivion, and forgets what he should remember. He has begun to diverge from his right course as the chosen of Odin and the hope of men. This is the bearing of the words in their narrative context; but surely they also confirm an impression of a cultural advance in the Niblung burg?

Morris was a poet before he was a revolutionary, and however closely his poetry comes to twine itself round his socialist beliefs, there are always times when he functions primarily as a romantic poet. It is best neither to force the historical references nor to dismiss them wholly. They are seldom precise. When Jessie Kocmanová writes that the hall of the Volsungs 'accurately reconstruct[s] the hall of the kindred', what is her criterion? What century are we in, the fifth, when the Burgundians were overthrown by the Huns, or much earlier, in legendary times? The hall is a glorification of a Germanic prototype, but the unique Branstock rises between its towers (gables? but the word is odd) and we hear of its wealth of wrought gold and silver, its woven hangings and its 'many-pictured floor' (mosaic?). There are no details of its beds or boards, except for the blue bolsters and the carved golden high-seat. In what sense is such description accurate? Morris is moving throughout his poem in the ample land of his imagination, rich with all
sorts of things, familiar and strange, real and fantastic, typical and extraordinary, daily tools and wonders of supernatural craftsmanship, the hunt, the feast and the fight, as they may have been, but also the dragon's hoard, the divinely-bred horse that carries the gold which it takes Hogni and his foster-brothers all night to remove in wains, and the wavering fires on Hindfell. These interpenetrate and cannot be divided into successive periods; nor is it very profitable to distinguish between actuality and myth, since the narrative and the passion run through both. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that contemporary critics, as much as modern ones, noted the change in social climate and colour as the tale passed from the forest and the wild to the roads and the builfed fortress. The anonymous reviewer in the International Review of the American edition of the poem ascribed the subtle change—'an anachronism of sentiment'—to the attraction of the material Morris began to draw at this point from the Nibelungenlied. This is likely enough in a writer so deeply addicted to mediaeval things. Moreover, a poet who has dealt in varying degrees of picturesqueness with four Nordic timber halls will want a change. The change, too, was at hand, not only in the courtly scenes of the Middle High German poem, but even more urgently in the Icelandic landscapes which had so deeply impressed him a few years before, and on which he had already based Sigurd's ride to the Glittering Heath. In his two Journals of Travel in Iceland he notes, more than once, rocks and distant crags whose shape recalled castles, especially one on his second journey, where his tent 'looked right on Eyjafell, where the great glacier comes lowest into the valley, split by a ridge of black rock on whose flank was a rock just like a real castle to look at'. This is similar to the situation of the Nibelungburg; and above it, as in Iceland, are the striped green pastures of the shaly mountain-side, the dusky-red scars of old fires, and the trailing flecks of cloud. The castle gate, described as 'long and dark as a cave Bored out in the isles of the northland', recalls the pierced rocks of the Faeroes and, perhaps, Surshellir in Iceland. Both within and without is 'the wind's voice never still'. This, more than thirteenth-century Worms, is the background to set off the splendour of courage and the menace of cruelty, the symbol for the temper of the Niblung and the world they confront. Yet the balance must not be tipped too far. Many lines of creative thought were juxtaposed in Morris's mind. If we detect the pull of the Nibelungenlied in the third and fourth books, we are also made aware of his resistance to it, and of the strengthening of the Nordic qualities in the poem to preserve its consistency. Yet the heroic imagination, the stark sublimities of this bleak and ancient world, do not obscure but illumine the path of men on the later earth, their strivings and joyous achievements, their blind and destructive emotions—all, in fact, that makes history.

One thing is clear. Whatever theory of origin Morris encountered or evolved before or after he wrote Sigurd the Volsung, in that poem Sigurd is an integral character through the two books which recount his life and death. The hero of 'the grandest tale that was ever told' could not be fragmented; nor would Morris have exclaimed in indignation at the thought of a 'German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd', in Wagner's work, unless he conceived these woes as belonging to one man. He does so conceive them. They are planted in the princely purposes foretold in Gripir's hall and in the rapture and vision on Hindfell, and it is only in respect of these promises that the woes in the Niblung burh are unspeakable. This continuity is stressed by repeated descriptive phrases and by prophecies accepted and fulfilled. The brilliant eyes of the Volsung babe that none can meet are those that hold back the slayer until Sigurd sleeps, and those the gods see closed in peace on his pyre. The reiterated moral imperatives that shape his course do indeed, as Jessie Kocmanović says, preserve unity of conception, but they have less to do with man's struggle against nature than with the disentangling of right and wrong, the making straight of the crooked way, the casting down of the mighty and justice done to those who till. There is nothing in the Sinfiotli of the first book to suggest that Morris saw him as a primitive Sigurd, though he may well be seen as a necessary forerunner. The proto-Sigurd, if there is one, is Sigmund, not his savage son. Morris probably knew that Sigmund was the earlier dragon-killer before Sigurd usurped his place in story, but he lets this fall. He does, however, make him describe himself as 'lord of the golden harness', the 'flame of the Glittering Heath', while Sinfiotli calls him 'Lord of the Helm of Terror', and this is strange, for Sigurd's golden byrnie and his Helm of Aweing (terror) are found by him in Fafnir's hoard; they are not heirlooms bequeathed by his dying father, like his sword. Morris means, perhaps, that some anticipatory Volsung radiance should glimmer through the dusk of his tale. He assigns other Sigurd motifs to Sigmund. When Siggeir dies in his burning hall, 'the bright sun brought the day', and this is the first appearance of Sigurd's sun-symbol, and a sign that his way is clear; and when Sigmund sails back to the Volsung's land, his coming betokens that 'they shall reap what sow'. Finally, when he is old and has lost his sons, he yet 'hearkened and doomed and portioned, and did all the deeds of a King'. The rising sun, the promise of justice, and the fulfilment of duty in grief are
notes repeated again and again in Sigurd's life, in which the Volsung stock culminates. These are hints and overtones which Morris's richly-burdened imagination did not develop or pause to explain, but could not quite let go. However they are interpreted, they seem to establish that the triple Sigurd of the 1894 letter had not yet taken shape.

III

The best starting-point for the consideration of Sigurd the Volsung is the life and death of the hero, as it is set out in the second and third book of the poem. After that, the prologue of the Volsungs and the epilogue of the Niblung will fall into place. This seems to have been Morris's starting-point, too, the point at which the monstrousities ceased to be a barrier to sympathy, and he saw the Volsungasaga as 'the grandest tale that was ever told'. He saw it as a tale of tragic love, 'the best tale pity ever wrought', as he wrote in the 'Prologue in Verse' to the translation of the Volsungasaga. When, half a dozen years later, he began to write his epic, Sigurd had acquired another dimension. He had become the embodiment of the Hope of Men, the herald of a better world on earth. It is remarkable how the old legend lends itself to both phases and binds them together. The new development—of intense interest to Morris—does not obliterate or weaken the love-tale. On the contrary, it dignifies and elevates it, by means of the stature and importance of the lovers. These are they from whose union the new world is meant to spring, and the breaking of their troth and their succeeding deaths involve no less than the deferment of human destiny, the prolongation of human pain.

The elevation makes the chief difference between Sigurd the Volsung and 'The Lovers of Gudrun', and results in much greater objectivity of treatment. It is hardly possible to read the earlier poem without feeling the drag of the poet's own plight. The tale of Sigurd, Brynhild and the Niblung is presented with greater detachment. It has a noble authority of its own, a high note of courage, stoicism and acceptance of fate, and to these is added a continual remembrance of larger issues, transcending personal happiness. Sigurd's anguish is hidden; no man notes it. 'His glory his heart restraineth', and he casts no gloom on the Niblung house. He can look on Brynhild and hear her words.

And no hope and no beseeching in his inmost heart shall stir.
husband and his supplanter are held in close contact with each other by their social frame. The old friendship between the households at Herðil and Batstead and their traditional festivities; Sigurd's marriage into the Niblung family and his blood-brotherhood with its kings—these circumstances ensure a constant confrontation and make the tragedy inevitable. Something of this constricting could be found in Morris's London life in the late sixties, and later in the shared tenancy of Kelmscott. A third likeness between the poems is that both turn on a man who involuntarily gives away the woman he loves to his friend. This derives from the sources; but in the novel which came between them, where there is no source to account for it, the same action is taken in full consciousness by John, when he urges his brother Arthur to marry the girl they both love, who loves him. Kiartan lets Gudrun slip into Bodil's hands through a mixture of carelessness, trustfulness, love of present pleasure, and taking too much for granted. Sigurd, 'spell-drenched' by Grimhild's drink and held by his oath to Gunnar, rides Brynhild's fire a second time, in Gunnar's shape and thereby gives her to him as bride and queen. This last scene has a weird intensity beyond anything else in the poem. It is a moment of fate and irretrievable loss, incurred in blindness. The imaginative power is such that it seems to forbid any probing for the 'biographical underpinning' which supports so many languorous passages. The situation in the novel, however—there is no sequel, for the fragment ends with John's letter—recalls that piece of pre-Raphaelite gossip, according to which Rossetti and Janeý were attracted to each other during the painting of the Oxford Union in 1857, but Rossetti, feeling himself pledged to Lizzie Siddal, held back and urged the diffident Morris to press his suit, and perhaps the reluctant Janeý to accept it. There is no external evidence, but Morris's recent biographers do not summarily dismiss the story. If something like this took place, it was repaid, perhaps with irony, some dozen years later, when Morris left Janeý and Rossetti together at Kelmscott. But the 'giving away' of a wife is a more complex and prolonged action in life than in fable, and the motives probably more mixed; and it may well be that the strongest link between biography and fiction, as well as the most poignant images, are Sigurd's clouded bewilderment, his obscure sense of loss and of changed personality, after he has drunk Grimhild's potion, and later the yielding to sudden enlightenment, to the bleak vision of achieved disaster, led on darkling by his own hand, when Brynhild enters the Niblung hall. Sigurd is blameless, and so at this point of the action is Gunnar. This is different from the situation in 'The Lovers of Gudrun', where both men are at fault, and also from the source in the Volsungasaga, where the Niblungs are. The point will be taken up later. It does not seem possible to dispose wholly of the love-theme with its personal vibrations before turning to the public theme of the Hope of Men, as one would wish to do; they are intertwined throughout.

The single line devoted to Sigurd in the Verse Prologue to the translation of the Volsungasaga recalls 'bow from dark to dark bright Sigurd broke'. This is the typical heroic trajectory, as true of Achilles as of Sigurd. As he appears in the saga, he is the pre-eminent hero of the North, the last scion of a great family, descended from Odin and favoured by him. The saga-man says that when 'all the noblest men and greatest kings are named in the olden tales, Sigurd is ever put before them all'. He has moral dignity, according to the Icelandic conception, and touches of moral grace. It is the mediaeval icelander, not the Victorian Englishman, who first says that children loved him. It is not possible to trace the stages by which this figure came to stand for Morris as a light- bringer in the long and costly process of human history, whose task, as Gripir prophesied, was to cherish and quicken the world and waken and make the Day—a far-off, coming Day of justice and brotherhood. Nor is it possible to trace in any detail the intensifying of Morris's social concern in his early forties, so that he came to require a hero for his poem who was a proponent of positive social values. One advantage of his choice was that he could adopt the Nordic cosmology for his background, the creation of the world, the gods and men, and especially the final great battle of gods and heroes against monsters, for which Odin is gathering warriors in Valhalla from the battlefields of earth, to end in the mutual destruction of both powers and the dawn of a new world. This suited well with his growing belief in a social revolution accompanied by violence, ushering in a just society. The importance to Morris of the fateful gloom, as he rendered Ragnarok, is acknowledged. That his Sigurd stands in this vast historic context is underlined by the songs of Creation that sound through the poem with their burden of growth, hope and change. The song is first heard at Signy's wedding, at the beginning of the poem. Hémir sings it to his harp as Sigurd, his guest, rides south to the land of kings. Sigurd's song, in the Niblung hall, of Odin and his Niblung children belongs to the series, since the Niblung stock are the fated leaders of men towards a just world; and so does the song with which Gunnar cheers the weary Niblungs in Atli's bloodied hall,

Of the days before the Niblungs and the days that shall be yet.
The fullest account comes at the end of the poem, and the end of the heroic age it reflects. It is the theme of Gunnar's song in the snake-pit, a myth of Creation and Evolution in Nordic terms. He begins with the unshaped World of Aforetime which worked unconsciously to produce the shaped world of sea and wind, sun, moon and stars, and Mid-Earth the Noble. Then the nameless Powers, the Framers that order the universe, give to the two weak and speechless mankind speech and hope and power for deeds:

Yea, hope as the hope of the Framers, yea, might as the Fashioners had,
Till they wrought, and rejoiced in their bodies, and saw their sons and were glad.

At this point, when the life of men has become instinct with purpose and direction, the song swerves to Gunnar's celebration of his own life on the earth, and then ceases with his death. The long future of growth, fluctuation and change, which these songs assert or imply, is necessarily obscure. The foresighted Sigrí, however, exhorting her brother Sigmund after the slaughter of the Volsung kindred, looks far ahead to the last of earthly days. Then, she tells him, as he draws his sword with the host of the gods and sees opposed to them 'the face of all earthly ill', he will understand the injustices of earth and see his own arduous life as 'a picture all of gold', since now

'Thou shalt drink of the cup of awakening that thine hand hath holpen to fill';

and the tale of his final warfare shall be told to the new young gods 'in the hall of the happy Baldir', after the great change. This is a Nordic vision of the ultimate goal of earthly life, and it applies to a primitive tribal warrior, who has taken Odin's sword from the Branstock and names himself, 'the hired of Odin, his workday will to speed'; but the symbols are readily applicable on a wider scale.

As Sigurd moves against this vast background, his significance is further defined by repeated phrases of promise, prophecy and ritual description, which attend him. To some of these I shall have to return from another angle; meanwhile their content can be briefly indicated here. He is the blossom of his race, 'the best sprung forth from the best'. He is the 'hope of the people' and the 'straightener of the crooked'. Brynhild calls him 'King of the Earthly Age' on Hindfell, whence they both look down on his heritage, the world, the 'field of the people's praise', and he is still 'Earth's best Helper', when he lies on his pyre, and the heritage is lost. His uniqueness is symbolized by the uniqueness of his golden byrne. Whenever it is mentioned, the poet adds, with slight variations, 'that hath not its like in the heavens nor has earth of its fellow told'. His task is to bring justice and fellowship to men, to war against spoilers, traitors, intriguers and evil kings, to hearken the prayer of the thrall and do right by the poor in the doom-ring, to raise the lowly and bring down the proud, and to ensure that those who have laboured and harvested the grain shall eat the bread. These are the 'deeds of men', to which Sigurd dedicates himself, as he rides with Regin to his first feat of arms. Beyond this, he claims to be one 'who would utterly light the fare of all good and ill'. This illumination with its opposite, the 'eyeless tangle', the moral confusion in which wrong can only be amended by wrong, is an important theme, running through the whole epic, and it sets Sigurd's aim above that of a folk-hero, as he is sometimes called. The state towards which he strives is not Utopia, far less the Land of Youth. It is a great change in human life on earth. This aim is deflected by Grimhild's dynastic ambition and by the natural human passions of the Giukings, his kin by marriage, passions such as have obstructed all idealists. None the less, he has sowed seeds for the future; his deeds are done, and none can undo them, as Gnipir prophesied; he has filled the working-day, which he knew and accepted would be short.

Morris noted in Iceland the streams welling up through the new lava which had choked their old beds. In some such way the story of Sigurd wells up, unexhausted, from the old mythical layers, through the later deposits, and offers its life-giving waters to modern lips. The meanings, which are partly elicited from, and partly grafted on the old saga, never obscured Morris's response to the story per se, but they made it easier for him to give himself to it, and account for the imaginative force of the retelling. The reader is always aware of his respect for a tale drawn from so deep a source. He would have had no sympathy with attempts to divide his poem into symbol and 'mere narrative'. He takes nearly all that the Volsungasaga and the associated Eddic poems offer him, supplementing, modifying, casting new light on it, but keeping the lines of structure and most of the episodes, even where they are grotesque or appear confused. The shape-changing, the man-dragon, the roasting of the heart, the twofold finding of Brynhild, which, like the Volsungasaga, he tries to harmonize, the charmed drink—all these are accepted in their original nature and narrative force. They are agents and incidents in a tale. They have resonances that are not confined within
an archaic reconstruction, but their primal values are not lost to mind. The dragon is a dragon to Morris, as it was to the saga-man, whether he believed in its existence outside his tale or no. It is, indeed, a very individual dragon. It is not, while we read the poem, chaos or winter or the industrial revolution. It is what Fafnir has made of himself. This, however, is already an expanding concept; and the dragon, which Rossetti found so impossible to take seriously, exemplifies very well the sort of meanings inherent in the ancient tale. Morris had often only to develop them on their own lines to suggest their wide applicability.

The dragon in Nordic mythology lies on the gold, which he has won by plunder and manslaughter. Fafnir has killed his own father to be master of the hoard. One of the Old English kennings for gold is ‘dragon’s bed’. But gold should not be thus impounded and cut off from its function in the life of man. Gold is the sign of the prince or chieftain, and he gives the rings—the bracelets and collars in which much of primitive currency consisted—to his warriors and counsellors, to wage them and confirm their loyalty. An avaricious chieftain is contemptible. The dragon, however, crouched on the hoard, grows year by year huger, more terrible, and also more lonely. He has devastated the country round his dwelling, and men avoid it.

Like to a lonely dragon that his fen
Makes fear’d and talk’d of more than seen . . .

says Shakespeare in Coriolanus, with a sudden, unexpected, powerfully primitive note. Being long-lived, the dragon has wisdom, drawn from earlier days. Fafnir, who was one of the dwarf-kind, older on earth than men or gods, has memory and prophecy, but his cold wisdom is locked in his cold heart, and not imparted. In his solitude and his ferocity and his greed, Fafnir puts aside his human shape for that of a dragon, and even his wisdom is laid asleep in his vast bestial form. Hence it is the function of the hero to fight the dragon and to ‘scatter the rings’, to restore wealth to circulation and the royal appanage to the light of day. One presumes the other, in the simple economics of this primitive world. Beowulf showed himself the true guardian of his people, when, in his old age, he fought the dragon in the mound, and his dying eyes were delighted with the spoils. He was not an old pot-hunter.

These simple meanings were inherent in the story when it came to Morris. They are not confined to a primitive society, to which he looked back with nostalgia. They are basic, and therefore capable of dilation and application to his own infinitely more complicated world. At all times, a gross disproportion of wealth makes a waste-land round it, like that round Fafnir’s lair. At all times, the creature who broods over useless wealth suffers alienation and may be said to be dehumanized. These dilations of meaning need not trouble the perspective for the reader, whose pleasure lies in fantasy and remoteness. Morris, too, knew this pleasure. But Sigurd the Volsung is his greatest poetical effort, undertaken at the time when he was growing into his full and delayed maturity and clarifying his political philosophy, and it is much more than an imaginative pastime. The human truth that he had acclaimed in the Volsungasaga is not to be found only in the lives of individuals, the drama of mismeasured loves and the betrayal of kings and kinsmen, but also in the dragon and the werewolves, types of social experience through history, readily related by him to the capitalist civilization he loathed and the revolutionary activity in which he had begun to put his hope. I postpone the werewolves to a later section, since they have nothing to do with Sigurd. Meanwhile I approach an aspect of the presentation of Sigurd which seems not to have been observed for some fifty years, though it must be supposed to have been evident to many Victorian readers.

When King Eyliımı, in the Volsungasaga, asks his daughter, the wise young Hjordis, which of two royal wooers she will accept,

‘A hard and troublous matter’, says she; ‘yet will I choose him who is of greatest fame, King Sigmund to wit, albeit he is well stricken in years’.

This is an aristocratic answer, suited to a heroic saga. Morris, Magnússon tells us, ascribed ‘the Homeric dignity of the saga style’ to the fact that ‘the tale is told of the aristocracy of the sword to their aristocratic descendants’. When, however, Morris’s Hjordis is given her choice, her answer is different. Her wisdom is prophetic. Like Morris’s Signy—and, again, unlike the Signy of the Volsungasaga—she sees the Volsungs as a chosen stock, from which will spring a life of great import to the world. Both women have prophetic foresight. When Signy offers her grief and her shame for the perpetuation of the Volsung stock, and bears a son to her brother Sigmund, it is not chiefly to give him an all-Volusng partner in the task of required and honourable vengeance; it is that the world shall not ‘run backward’—a frequently repeated phrase in the poem—as it will if the chosen stock of Odin dies out before it has borne its blossom. Yet Sinfjötli, born of this self-giving of his mother, does not carry the Volsungs into the future. He is killed by his step-mother, and
Sigmund is childless until Hiordis becomes his bride. She too sees the Volsung stock as reaching into and shaping the future. She will prefer 'the praise of the people, and the tale that no ending hath' to transient happiness with a smooth young lover:

... 'and indeed full well I know
That forth from the loins of Sigmund shall such a stem
outgrow
That all folk of the earth shall be praising the womb
where once he lay
And the paps that his lips have cherished and shall bless
my happy day.'

This is perhaps the point at which the Christian allusions which Morris introduces into the birth of Sigurd and his first feat, with such strength of resonance, first become unmistakable. Here is the rod from the stem of Jesse, and Elizabeth's blessing on the fruit of Mary's womb. Here is the girl's acceptance of her high and sorrowful lot. Here, too, though Morris does not underline it, is the marriage of the young girl to the old man of the noblest stock. In recounting the birth of Sigurd, the poet draws not only on the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament and the Gospel narratives of the Nativity in the New, but on the accretions to these themes in mediaeval art and letters. Here belongs the peace of King Elf's realm, where Sigurd is born,\(^{10}\) comparable to the peace of Augustus, which prepared for Christ's birth, and is celebrated in Milton's *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. Here, too, belong the maidens that carry the new-born child to King Elf and his father, the Helper, and recall the midwives in mediaeval art. I shall return to what they say. The 'man most ancient' who hails the babe in prophetic ecstasy fulfils the function of Simeon, and, later, when the child Sigurd listens to the talk of wise men, he recalls the child Jesus, 'sitting in the midst of the doctors'. The grown Sigurd, riding to his first heroic action, is tempted in the wilderness by Regin. Regin is little and dark, a sliding shadow on the young man's growing glory. He tempts him with 'the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them', as well as the old discouragement of the futility of effort, the certainty of final failure and non-being. There is no other such cluster of near-parallels in the poem, but there are Biblical and liturgical phrases, some clear, some faint, that accompany Sigurd to his achievements and his death. He is the hope of the people—'once come, and it comes not again', the 'straightener of the crooked' who brings peace and a sword.

Sigurd the Volsung

The cry goes out to make straight the ways before him. He bears the woes of the people. The verse in the Magnificat, 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek', repeated with various modifications of tense and language, defines his promise and his action. A significant reversal is heard on the morning of his marriage to Gudrun, when his mission begins to be aborted, for the Niblung men praise the name of Sigurd, 'who exalteth the high this morning and blesseth the masters of gain'. At his death, Morris briefly touches the Christian analogies once more—not that they are exclusively Christian, for, as Jan de Vries\(^{11}\) says, the Greek heroes, Theseus, Heracles and others, were worshipped as soteres (saviours), and Morris who, according to Mackail, had more classical knowledge than might have been expected, may have had some hint of this. It is here that he calls Sigurd a redeemer, in a couplet that sums up the fate of redeemers in a world that requires so many, and is as close as the tale of Sigurd allows to the passage on the suffering servant in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah ('He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him'). Morris writes:

For he the redeemer, the helper, the crown of all their
worth
They looked upon him and wondered, they loved, and
they thrust him forth.

Slighter echoes, more deeply submerged in the narrative, would probably escape notice but that they ring in response to the stronger notes. As Sigurd leaves Lyndall for the Niblung burg, 'the acres whiten...
... and the harvest-field is wide'. When he rides with the Niblings to overthrow tyrants and free the oppressed,

He laughs to scorn the treasure where thieves break through
and steal
And the moth and the rust are corrupting.

This does not exhaust the list. Other memories, or possible memories, filter through the Nordic myth. They can be verbally surprising. At the end of Book III, the poet looks forward to the coming world, after the destruction, when 'the new sun beams on Baldr and the happy sealess shore'. 'Sealess' is a strong link with *Revelations*, Chapter XXI, where St John saw a 'new heaven and a new earth... and there was no more
sea’. In Lymdale we hear that ‘the bitter days of whoredom, and the hardened lust of gain’ are past. We find the same unexpected term in *The Roots of the Mountains*, and it must certainly be carried over from the prophetic books of the Old Testament, where the disloyalty of Judah to the Lord, and her courting of foreign princes, is expressed as the harlotry of a chosen bride. The individual significance of these last allusions is not great, but they help to confirm the existence of those attached to Sigurd.

What does this run of Christian language and imagery tell us about the way in which Morris conceived his poem and its hero? Not that Sigurd is an allegory of Christ, and not that Morris still retained some fragmentary belief in Christian doctrine. We know he did not. His sensibility and imagination, however, which are here under consideration, had been nourished and were still nourished on Christian art.

A. Compton Rickett remarks of him that ‘the religious side of Medieaval Art always appealed to him, and towards it he preserved, throughout his life, an intense seriousness and whole-heartedness that surprised acquaintances, who had only seen the lighter and more buoyant aspects of his temperament’. What he had learned in youth remained knowledge, though he regarded it now as a transient phase in the history of human thought. There is nowhere in Morris contempt, embarrassment, or ignorance of Christianity. When he was most deeply moved, most strongly conscious of the rock on which he stood, he used, again and again, says Mackail, the words of Christ to his disciples: ‘He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved’. (Matthew XXIV, 13) He had lasting pleasure in the beautiful forms evolved by the Christian Church, and freedom from such ideological hostility as would put him out of touch with a great expression of human desire and imagination.

What is interesting in a human life is the distance it travels, and what it carries for the whole journey, loses, exchanges, puts to new uses, or throws away. We do not add to the interest of Morris’s life by depreciating the Christian standpoint of his youth, or by regarding it simply as veiled aestheticism, and thus putting the starting-point nearer to the end; and even less, of course, by pushing the end nearer the starting-point. Naturally, his Christianity had taken aesthetic forms, rather than doctrinal or controversial ones. This is true of nearly all artists, and Morris was an artist in grain. The verses, beginning ‘Twas in Church on Palm Sunday’, which he sent to Cornell Price in Holy Week, 1855, certainly begin by evoking a scene and an atmosphere—the olives in Gethsemane, ‘the lantern’s steady flame’ and the robe cast down in the foreground. They pass from the kiss of betrayal to recall the kisses of human love, given by young lovers and at deathbeds, and the innocent and joyous meetings, in the ‘quiet light’ of Fra Angelico’s Paradise, of reunited lovers separated on earth. They return to the treacherous kiss, and the Cross against the blue sky of evening. Morris writes in the verses: ‘I cannot say the things I would’, and the development from the sacrificial kiss, through human love to love in heaven is not explicit; but we cannot therefore assume that Morris at twenty-one did not, as he says he did, listen to ‘what the priest did say’. He must have done so, very carefully, at some time, or we should not have those bitter moments of disillusion before the King of the Undying in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* or Atra’s passionate lament in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* over the ‘Fra Angelico’ fresco in the Church of the Minorites at Greenford. The moral beauty, the imaginative nourishment remain. What is gone is the particular promise. There is now for Morris a new and secular promise; but especially in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* he looks back to a good deal to his youth and to a progress that was not without pain. He can afford to do so. He is leading Atra by some of the paths he himself trod. Her prayers are no good to her. She cannot believe in the painted Paradise. Comfort will come to her from the renewal of comradeship and the wisdom of Habundia, the lady of the woodland.

In *Sigurd the Volsung* he is looking forward. If the new redeemer and the new promise are presented in words and images that recall and redirect those in which the old had been presented, it is because Morris saw the new as a development from as well as a replacement of the old. In no better way can he convey the holiness of the new promise than by re-applying the holy words that conveyed the old. He thought, by now, of Christianity as an important phase of history, whose achievements had been caught into perversions and doctrinal tangles, but had continued to bear fruit. For him this phase was over, though he recognized that that was not the case with all men. He brought to his use of parts of the Christian legacy not only the calm of the historian and the knowledge of a man who had once been a member of the Church, but the *pietas* which imaginative minds feel for figures and symbols which have been the foci of human devotion and desire. Had he not had this *pietas*, I do not see how he could have gone on designing for Christian churches, or even decorated the chapel in his sister Isabella Gilmore’s house of deaconesses. It is not enough to suppose that he thought that, if people continued to need churches, they might as well have beautiful ones, though something of that thought may have
been there. Something similar was in his mind in Iceland, when he stood outside the church at Borg, noting through the door the candles on the altar and the priest's chasuble, and listening critically to the 'doleful key' of his intoning:

Altogether it seemed a dry reminiscence of the Catholic mass and rather depressed me, though I am glad they have kept so much ceremony for their amusement too.16

He liked ceremony, with beautiful settings and adjuncts, as the later Romances testify. Yet neither this taste, nor the more compulsive need to make his firm profitable, accounts fully for his behaviour. He showed himself well able to discard profit when he became convinced that new windows ought not to be fitted into old buildings at the expense of the old stone-work, and again when he risked and experienced the loss of customers in publicly declaring himself a socialist. His pietas is comparable to George Elliot's, though expressed in a different mode. In his twenties, he had refused to by-pass the Thirty-Nine Articles by declaring himself extra ecclesiam Anglicanam. The time came soon after when it seemed natural and necessary to walk out; but he carried with him much that did not wholly lose its value when it left the Ark.

I now turn to another aspect of the presentation of Sigurd. When the damsels bring the new-born child to the Kings and their ears, before they unwrap the gold and purple and show what they carry, a dialogue takes place in which the surmises of the men as to what great thing has befallen in King Elf's house are qualified or negated by the maidens. They deny that the high Gods stand at the gate, that death approaches or, as one young man hopes, has been abolished. Then King Elf asks if they tell of a new-born King,

"By a God of the Heavens begotten in our fathers' house to dwell?"

To this they reply: 'By a God of the Earth', and make it clear that in these words they designate Sigmund, Sigurd's earthly father. This is a clear denial of a supernatural origin for the child. One is not led, therefore, to refer their words: 'A joy of all joys... once come and it comes not again' to the intersection of time with the timeless. Rather they convey the uniqueness of this and every redeemer and his occasion. He can have successors, but is not himself renewed or reborn, when his specific occasion is past. This makes the tragedy of betrayals and aborted missions.

There is some ambiguity, possibly, about the many occasions on which the Volsung heroes, especially Sigurd, are described as gods or god-like. Sigmund has 'eyes of God' as he fights in Siggeir's hall, and Sigyn tells him that, as he draws his sword in the last great battle, he will know that he was a God on earth in all his deeds and endurance. Brynhild calls Sigurd 'King of the Earthly Age' on Hindfell, and in the next line compares him to a God, rejoicing in his heritage. As his pyre is lit, the people throw up their hands in wordless prayer:

As they that have seen God's visage, and the face [sic; sc. voice] of the Father have heard.

At times, certainly, the story moves in the thought-forms of Nordic mythology. The Volsungs are the sons of Odin, and Odin exists as Allfather, a mighty and enduring power, though not almighty or finally immortal. At times the meaning seems to be that the hero acts as men imagine a God would do. But the basic significance of calling a hero 'god-like' is much the same as that conveyed in Swinburne's 'Hertha', published half-a-dozen years before Sigurd the Volsung, namely the emergence from human stock, and under wholly natural pressures, of the developed and exalted human type who can take on him the work hitherto ascribed by men to the Gods:

... This thing is God,
To be man with thy might,
To grow straight in the strength of thy spirit, and live out thy life as the light.

"Art thou other than I, Allfather", asks the dying Sigurd, holding to the persisting value of his deeds; 'wilt thou gather my glory in vain?' There is at least one other point at which 'Hertha' and Sigurd the Volsung touch. Early in Morris's poem, Odin, striking the sword into the Branstock, says that there was never better steel 'since first the burg of heaven uprose for man-folk's weal'. The belief in Valhalla (the burg of heaven) or in any sort of heaven was as alien to Morris as to Swinburne, but the acknowledgement that the delusion had been, for a time, 'for man-folk's weal' is found in both. Hertha tells men, her children, that, seeing them treading 'dim paths of the night', she

Set the shadow called God
In your skies to give light,
until the morning of manhood rose. 'For man-folk's weal' is an unassertive adverbial phrase, easily passed over; Swinburne's paradox of the light-giving shadow is an inescapable gesture of challenge; but they say the same thing.

The child Sigurd grows in love and freedom. He learns his function and fate from Gripir, and his keen eyes look through the wiles of Regin. He rides out, over the slag and ash of former fires and through the abnormal darkness, to his contest with Fafnir. As he lies in the trench he has dug—the grave, Morris calls it, letting the root of the word (to dig) carry all the meanings it will—the huge and stifling darkness of the world's misery, the bulk of the cold and solitary man-monster, rolls over him and shuts out light and life, till Sigurd strikes him to the heart from below, as the tale says, and a revolutionary hero must, and leaps from the grave. The old tale plays, again and again, so directly into Morris's hand that he has no need of invention or explication. Sigurd eats the heart of Fafnir and learns his ancient wisdom; he slays Regin, who will try to turn the world backward, and finds and takes the red rings of the dragon's hoard, which he has been told to scatter. After this, he rides the fire encircling the Valkyrie, wakes her and hears her prayer to the natural and supernatural powers on behalf of them both, to give them 'the glory of wisdom and speech / And the hearts and hands of healing'. They love and exchange truth, and he hears from her lips what he already knows in his heart, the new wisdom of love and fellowship.

So far, the hero has accomplished his task. In slaying Fafnir and Regin, in waking and loving Brynhild, he has, as he promised, 'utterly light[ed] the face of all good and ill'. These words belong to the theme of moral confusion and disentanglement which, with significant variations and reversals, runs all through the poem, from Sinfjotl's readiness to amend wrong with wrong by killing his own father, as he believes, to avenge his foster-father, to the blowing of the Niblung trumpet in Atli's hall, bringing to the death-doomed men a foretaste of the day.

When bare-faced, all unmingled, shall the evil stand in the light  
And men's deeds shall be nothing doubtful, nor the foe that they shall smite.

All through the first part of the poem the situations are so harsh that wrong can be amended only with fresh wrong. But Sigurd is free of these tangles; the world is his field, and the sun has risen on it. From

Hindfell he and Brynhild look down on the lands that await the 'striver, [the] deliverer, [the] hope of things to be'. This is the peak of the hero's career; but the period of hope and unfettered action is extended as long as the tale will allow it, through the visit to Lyndale and its healthful, friendly people, and through the first stage of his life with the Niblung. In becoming the heart of the Niblung warfaring, Sigurd is still fulfilling his task; he is the golden spear-point of their attack on the tyranny of kings and the disorder of the lawless Viking raiders. But the gold of the dragon's hoard has been cursed long since, and Sigurd has accepted the curse and the short span of his glory.

Sigurd falls into the net through the old Queen Grimhild's dynastic ambition and her plans for the splendour and happiness of her daughter Gudrun, who loves him. She brews for him the 'evil drink' which obliterates his past, confuses his purpose, and blots out of his mind all memory of Brynhild. This is a little more than half-way through the poem, and about a year of fictional time since Sigurd rode to the Niblung burg. During that interval, the narrative perspective has altered. The primeval forests and barren mountains, thinly sown with legendary figures and mythical wonders, have given way to a more populated scene, and to a group of interrelated characters with mixed motives and changing purposes. The tale has become strong, complex and human. There are still wonders—Grimhild's witchcraft, the Valkyrie's flames, Sigurd's singing sword—but the Gods are farther off, and Odin has withdrawn his guidance. Men are left to themselves. The change can be seen in the family of Giuki, King of the Niblings. The three Giuki brothers, Gunnar, Hogni and Gutthorm, differ to an important degree, which was not the case with the ten Volsung brothers. Gunnar changes under the pressure of events, his mother's egging and his own passions, but Siggeir is the same throughout. The emotions of Brynhild and Gudrun are more richly varied than those of Signy and Hiordis. Before this strong, individual interest the types and symbols pale. They do not wholly disappear. Sigurd is always 'the hope of men', and the gold of the hoard is still 'the grain from the needy won'. The function of the gold in the betrayal of Sigurd, however, is secondary, and it does not resume its baneful force until Gudrun uses it to incite Atli against her brothers. Andvari's ring, the treasure-bred, 'the Seed of Gold and of Grief', extorted by Loki from the Elf and by Reidmar, the Dwarf-King, from Loki, remains prominent in the action. Sigurd betroths Brynhild with it, and receives it back from her as a morning-gift, after he has ridden her flames and lain by her in the shape of Gunnar. Still oblivious of his former bond with her, he gives the ring to his wife, Gudrun,
telling her the tale of the night’s doings, and thus ‘drew forth the sword for his slaying’, for it is the ring on Gudrun’s finger that brings to light the deception of Brynhild, and leads to Sigurd’s death and hers. But the characters do not seem aware of its special nature, and it appears that any betrothal ring, without benefit of curse, would have served to incite and focus the human passions that bring on the catastrophe. There is, however, no clear lapse in consistency here. Natural processes and general conditions shape the lives of men and women who do not recognize the pressures to which they are exposed. The guilt of winning the grain from the needy does not attach to the Volsungs; nor is it ever made a reproach to Sigurd that he has not, as Gripir bade him, scattered the rings. These things slip from view as the poet, following the Volsunga-saga, moves from the mythical level of the Glittering Heath to the dramatic confrontations in the Niblung burg. Moreover, as Brynhild told Sigurd on Hindfell, it is only through the actions of men that the will of the Norns is accomplished or frustrated.

When Sigurd drinks Brynhild’s cup, weds Gudrun and rides the Wavering Flame in Gunnar’s shape, he is still blameless, and the Niblung brothers and their sister are as little blameworthy as Morris can contrive, and much less so than in the Volsunga-saga. The cup is not to be taken as a symbol of Sigurd’s hidden love for Gudrun, nor of his intoxication with the desire of power. He thinks with longing of Brynhild before he lifts the cup. He turns to Brynhild, in his enspelled forgetfulness, first to give comfort to her in her trouble, and then to receive it in his. He rides the flames to fulfill his oath of brotherhood to Gunnar, and still under the power of Brynhild. He is not debased in nature or will, but in his blindness he swerves from his course. He asks the Niblung Kings to tell him what deeds to do:

“To which of the Gods shall I give,
and from which of the Kings shall I take?”

When the bewilderment passes from him at the arrival of Brynhild in the Niblung burg, and he sees that it is his own hand that had unwittingly led the lie into all their lives, he does not seek to amend wrong with wrong. He remembers all and understands all. He is bound by the ties of marriage and blood-brotherhood to the Niblungs, and he honours them all. He lives in the sight and speech of Brynhild, and does not know if it is the keenest pain or the dearest comfort. He knows he has been brought to betray them both, and the promise for men that lay in their hands, and he knows that death alone can release him. Meanwhile he

bears himself like a king in the house of doom, kindly to Guðrun, brotherly to Brynhild and Gunnar, silently towards Grimhild. His natural action is not wholly inhibited though it is straitened. He is still superb in battle, just in the doom-ring, and beloved of the people, and it was at this time, we are told, that his fame went most widely abroad. What is finally lost, however, is indicated in the structural ironies which, at this stage of the poem, thicken the linear narrative. The dialogue of Sigurd and Brynhild in Lyndale is full of ironies. Brynhild looks forward to ‘the best of all earthly days / When we sit, we twain, in the high seat.’ When the day comes, however, in the Niblung Hall, they are divided and wedded to others, and there will be no ‘day of better things’. Twice Sigurd wakes Brynhild, once on Hindfell to a partnership of love and hope, and once in the Niblung burg to a partnership in death, from which he cannot save her and will not save himself. These are the most significant occasions, but the third book is seamed with ironic repetitions and reversals.

It is, at first sight, surprising that Morris should have gone so far as to exonerate the Niblung brothers from blame. In his source, the kings of the dark-haired people, who are to bring the golden Sigurd to death, are well aware of what they do. Sigurd has spoken freely of Brynhild, and they cheat the great war-captain by witchcraft, first to bind to them a matchless ally, and then to use him to win the famous Queen Brynhild as bride for Gunnar. In Sigurd the Volsung, however, no word of Brynhild, his lover, passes Sigurd’s lips. None of the Guiling children know of it, though perhaps their mother, Grimhild, the sorceress, knows—Brynhild thinks so later, though it is not stated. At the riding of the fire ‘no guile of heart they know’. The guilt of the deception, of cruelty and overwhelming pride lies squarely on their mother, the overwise Grimhild. She trusts herself to amend and complete the work of the Gods and to drive the Norns. Four times she brews her evil drink, to bewitch and bewilder Sigurd, to fill Gunnar with desire for the unseen Brynhild, to inflame Guttorm for the kill, and, in the last book, to quench Gudrun’s grief for Sigurd and prepare her to marry Atli. In each case the draught brings calamity. It is Grimhild’s egging, the pressure of her insinuations about the ‘supplanter’ of the King in the minstrels’ praises and the ‘supplanter’ in the bride-bed, that finally induces her sons to join her in plotting Sigurd’s death. What was Morris’s motive in postponing and even attenuating their responsibility? No doubt, he bore in mind the fourth book, where the Niblungs alone support the high mode of Odin’s warriors and the splendour of the dying age. There lay ahead of him the grand and beautiful gestures
of their last fight, Gunnar's song to hearten his men in Athi's hall, Hogni's compassion for the cowardly thrall, and Gunnar's blessing of the coming rain as he goes to his death in the sun-baked pit of serpents. The cloudy Niblungs are not embodiments of evil, for all their dark hair and their coal-blue war-gear. When we first see them, they are like the Volsungs 'full of hope'. They are wrought on by passion and mistaking to break a sacred oath. They 'do the deed and abide it', and confront its outcome. As the saga-man says at the end of his tale:

How the Volsungs and the Gjukings, as folk tell in tale, have been the greatest-hearted and the mightiest of all men, as ye may well behold written in the songs of all time.

Morris's modifications of the last stages of the story of Sigurd have come in for criticism. D.M. Hoare considered that he had confused a plain tragedy of love and jealousy by importing motives of ambition, and Jack Lindsay has recently supposed that he shrank on personal grounds from the sexual passion of the original tale and substituted greed for the gold. Jessie Kocmanová, on the other hand, thinks that the motives and attitudes of the characters are clearer in Morris than in the source. As a matter of taste, it is very possible to prefer the harsh directness of the saga, and to find Brynhild's curt: 'I will not have two kings in one house' more moving in its desperation than anything Morris makes her say. The careful reader, however, will acquit him of confusion and evasion of passion. What there is, is complexity. It is as if Morris had found it difficult to convince himself and us that the Brynhild of Hindfell and the merry and generous Gunnar of earlier days could become the grim and terrible figures of the killing, and had added reason to reason, something like Meredith explaining why Richard Feverel stayed away from Lucy or why Edward Blanceove treated Dahlia Fleming as he did. Brynhild's anguish is the result of the Niblung deception, which beguiles her to break both her vow to wed only the rider of her flames, and her vow to her lover Sigurd, who has ridden them. She can bear her bitter jealousy and heartbreak, while she believes that she has kept her first oath and that her husband Gunnar is the flame-rider and the greatest of warriors, but when Gudrun taunts her with the truth, her dishonour, as she esteems it, is public and intolerable. Once more, wrong can only be amended by wrong, and she urges Sigurd's death and resolves on her own. The basis of Gunnar's treachery is his suppressed shame that Sigurd has ridden the flames as his proxy. To this is added his disappointment in his marriage, the strangeness of

Brynhild and her coldness in the Niblung bed. Suppressed movements of envy of his sworn blood-brother, half-conscious desire of the gold, quicken, and are nourished by Grimhild. He mistakes Brynhild's meaning when she begs him to save his honour and hers, and it confirms his suspicion that Sigurd has betrayed him with her on the night of shape-changing. Once more right and wrong are inextricably entangled. He is still bound by his oath under the earth-yoke, and does not know what to do or leave undone. Grimhild finds the answer in the sword of Guttorm, the third brother, who never took the oath, and Hogni laughs: 'Hoodwinked are the Gods in heaven'. This is intricate and probing work, but it cannot be called confused, nor is the sexual passion that motivates the four chief characters at all obscured. 17

The easy strength of imagination, however, lies in the bearing of Sigurd. It was said earlier that the immobilization of the hero as to his private griefs, while he fulfills all his kingly duties, becomes the fullest expression of fortitude. It can now be added that in Sigurd, held by ties of kinship and alliance in the service of the 'masters of gain' may be seen, but must not be pressed, the sublimation of the position of William Morris, serving the wealthy patrons which, he came to believe, should not exist. Neither man is degraded; neither is wholly frustrated; but their action is straitened and their aim deferred.

The third book ends with the flaming bale of Sigurd and Brynhild, 'the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth', and the lamentations of the people. The hope is aborted in death and sunk in apparent failure. Yet, as Brynhild said on Hindfell,

'Men betrayed are mighty, and great are the wrongfully dead.'

Earth, though it labours and groans as before they were born, will not forget them 'in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped / And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened'. Their deeds exist in the world's memory and cannot be undone, as Gripir said. This is a fruitful death, the typical fate of the redeemer. Morris's great effort in verse was to fuse this type with the brief brilliance of the hero, the heroic non-chalance with the compassionate 'heeding', to add the clear vision, the open-eyed choice, and the refusal to compromise, which belong to both, and then to show how the forces of the world as we know it, and the passions of men as they are, bring down the noble and selfless man to death. On the sun of the pagan nature-myth (as he accepted it) he imposed the new light of Isaiah, and on that the sun that would bring the Day of revolution, justice and brotherhood. It is a poem of tragic
hope; the hope is not nullified by its cost, but its cost is tragedy. This great conception has blemishes in its working out. Perhaps no old legend accepts new meanings without the new wine cracking the old bottle here and there, and the patches are sometimes laboriously stitched. Yet nothing tarnishes the sublimity of the conception.

IV

The tale of Sigurd is preceded by the tale of his father, Sigmund, son of Volsung, and followed by the tale of the revenge of Gudrun, his wife, and the end of the Niblung. This arrangement has been much criticized, both on grounds of the barbarity of the material and of the disruption of epic unity. The criticism falls most hardly on the Volsung prologue, of which Mackail, well aware of Morris’s skilful transitions, nevertheless writes: 'The fact remains that what he tried to do was wrong’. For once, he applies the formal criticism of the classical scholar. Defences have usually been based on the needs of the subject. Thus May Morris insists that the inclusive theme of Sigurd the Volsung is the sorrow of Odin the Goth, emphasized in the poem’s last line, and this involves the efforts and endurance of the earlier generations. John Drinkwater prefers to define the theme as the survival of the Volsung strain, the plucking of its last scion from destruction, as a brand from the burning, and for this, too, the slaughter of the first book is necessary. Neither theory, however, quite covers the ground. We are left asking why Morris accepted the ‘monstrosities’ of his source, and how they came to seem essential to his poem. I suggest another consideration.

The whole poem moves along a great arc, both ends of which are embedded in confusion and disorder, where evil and good are so entangled that wrong can be amended only by wrong, and the action of love and loyalty necessitates treachery and ruthlessness. In the middle the arc rises briefly to the clear air of Sigurd’s heroic youth and the promise of a new life for men on earth; then, after he drinks Grimhild’s cup, it descends steeply through all the consequences to ‘the latter days’ confusion’, when Sigurd is gone, and Gudrun, entering Atli’s burg, thinks to herself: ‘How swift doth the world grow worse’.

There are correspondences between the rising and the sinking sides of the arc. Siggeir lures his wife’s kindred to destruction under the show of hospitality, and so does Atli, and both men perish when the avengers fire their halls. Sigmund, enraged with the Gods who have ‘made the Volsungs for nought’, threatens to become a wolf of the forest and
characters that correspond are not much like each other, and for some—Riidiger, Dietrich of Bern, Hildebrand—there are no correspondences. No doubt, he was well within his rights as scald, to borrow from the southern form of the tale, which, moreover, had travelled, in part, as far north as the Faeroe Islands. Yet we may still ask why he diverged from the Volsungasaga. The answer may be that, in the running backward of the world, the confusion of values is to be emphasized. Gudrun finds in Atli’s court that ‘venom and guile, and the knife / Oft lie twixt brother and brother’. The court perishes in blind and furious attacks of kin on kin, when she sets the hall afame. The ‘wise-heart Hogni’ is eager for death, ‘for my soul is sick with confusion’, and Gunnar’s last words, as the cold reaches his heart, carry an astonished dereliction. The world is entering on an axe-age, a spear-age...a wind-age, a wolf-age, and in this ‘great whoredom’ of treachery and bloodshed and the destruction of kin, it is fitting that Gudrun should go implacably against the deepest instincts and values of her race.

The figure of the Niblung Queen, sitting white and unmoved on the high-seat through the day-long massacre of her own people, is Morris’s invention. It strengthens the construction of the last book of the poem by recalling Sigyn’s long vigil on Siggeir’s high-seat, as she ‘nursed the flame of her heart’, and waited for the last tidings of her brothers. It also recalls, and inverts, Gudrun’s pleadings with her brothers, when they have made up their minds to Sigurd’s death, and she finds them sitting alone and armed, with their swords across their knees, moving no more ‘than the stone / In the jaws of the barren valley’. Gunnar recalls this as his death approaches, and the Niblung brothers make no plea to their sister. This is one of the passages in the last book which it is easier to explain than enjoy. So are the mysterious ‘sons of the wise’, who sit by Hogni in prison and accompany Gunnar to the snake-pit. They are needed, because someone must give Gunnar the harp for his death-song, which this Gudrun would not do, and someone must be able to transmit to later generations the tale of the heroes’ deaths, and to plant the heroic seed to mature through the dark days—but it is not a happy device.

Morris’s poetic imagination is most strongly stimulated by Gunnar and Hogni, the Niblung brothers. They have the fortitude of men who can live past their griefs and their crimes, who can ‘wear down lamentation, and make all sorrow nought’. After Sigurd’s death they are still great kings, thirsty for power and fame, and wedded to princely consorts. They ‘wear their life-days well’, and the names of Sigurd and Brynhild are not spoken. Yet each brother, as death comes into view, speaks of Sigurd and accepts the guilt of his death, though the blow was struck by the unworn brother Gutorm, Grimhild’s ‘sword’. The Gods, however, were not hoodwinked. The foresighted Hogni wonders to Atli’s envoy: ‘With what eyes I shall look on Sigurd, what words his mouth shall say’; and Gunnar, rolled under Atli’s throne with his foot on his neck, thinks of his ‘brother Sigurd’s hand’, and how he sat night-long in his armour, and at dawn slaughtered him. The silent guilt breaks out defiantly, an insult to the shrunken conqueror, Atli, and a means of accepting the doom of the Niblungs. The modern reader may well suppose that their journey to the Eastland court expresses a death-wish; and he may be right. The term is anachronistic, but such states existed and were recognized before they received technical names. Gunnar’s determined acceptance of Atli’s invitation, in spite of his wise brother’s discouragement and his own vision of the ruined Niblung hall, and Hogni’s proud resolve to follow his brother at all costs, give their journey this appearance, and it is reinforced by their urgent rush ashore in Atli’s realm, and their omission to secure their ships for return. There will be no return. Yet we have also to remember the Icelandic aesthetic attitude to conduct. This nonchalance, this stubbornness belong to the expected bearing of a Nordic hero. He does the deed and abides it, as Brynhild taught Sigurd, and does not ask for ‘a little longer to live’. They, no less, than Sigurd, are tragic characters, and much more might be said about them. Their mother, Grimhild, the source of all debate, is hardly that. There is no division in her mind, no pity, and no doubt of her own wisdom and power until, in the moment before her death, she sees the emptiness of her vast hopes and the destruction she has brought on her children.

The most savage and myth-encrusted episode of the first book has nothing corresponding to it in the last, which might assist in its interpretation. This is the shape-changing of Sigmund and Sinfjotli into werewolves. They find two men sleeping in a house in the remote woodland, with wolveskins hanging over their heads. They put the skins on, and are transformed into wolves. In this shape they attack and kill merchants and other wayfarers, and then turn on each other. Sigmund-wolf kills Sinfjotli-wolf; but something human remains in his ‘tangled wolvish wit’, and he learns from a pair of quarrelling waspels to find the herb which will heal hisosterling. They cease their slaughter, go home, and wait till the time has come when they can resume their human shapes. Then they go and take vengeance for the Volsungs on Siggeir and his men.

Why did Morris retain this ‘monstrosity’, which he could so easily
have omitted? It is a considered inclusion; the episode is linked with Sigmund's earlier threat to be a wolf when the Gods need a man. Is it enough to say that he respected even the wilder elements of the ancient tale he inherited, that he shows elsewhere his interest in werewolves, and that the episode certainly helps to illustrate the primal confusion on which Sigurd's day is to rise? Perhaps it is enough; yet he adds a significant fragment of dialogue to his source when the dedicated avengers slough their wolfskins, and look in each other's faces, 'and belike a change was there'. Sinfjötli speaks to his fosterer:

'Thou hast taught me many things
But the Gods have taught me more, and at last have abased us both,
That of nought that lieth before us our hearts and our hands may be loth.'

He asks for his task, and does not shrink when he hears that it is to amend wrong with wrong, and kill the man he supposes his father to save the Volsung seed. These lines are the ground for supposing that the savage episode had acquired for Morris a meaning in relation to his underlying theme, that he saw in the werewolves an adumbration of what may happen when oppressed men rise, at last, against their oppressors, what had been happening in Paris in the year of his first journey to Iceland, a necessary abasement of humanity, the only way, he might surmise, in which men can be hardened for what they must undertake. To attack and abolish wrong they need a wolfish violence; and it is out of such abasement that they win forward. Then, as always in Morris, it is put behind them, outgrown, trodden underfoot, as a forgotten foundation sacrifice. The interpretation could be carried further. There are here two generations, Sigmund and his son, and strife between them, the elder retaining something of his original breeding, of moderation, and angry regret at waste and destruction, the younger all wolf, remorseless and bred to the business. The difference is again seen when, restored to manhood, they lurk in Siggeir's wine-store, Sigmund calm, with clear eyes, but Sinfinjötli pale and haggard, gnawing his shieldrim. It falls in well that Sinfinjötli dies young, and Sigmund is left to transmit the Volung virtues to a son whom the Gods have not abased in preparation for his work.

Something must be said of the Gods, especially of Odin, who alone mixes in the action, though other Gods are named. Their purpose is to fill Valhalla, the Hall of the Dead, with proven warriors against the last battle,

Lest the hosts of the Gods be scanty when their day hath begun to darken,
When the bonds of the Wolf wax thin, and Loki frettest his chain.

This purpose frames the tale of the Volsungs. Odin fathers the Volsung line; and his first appearance, in Morris's poem, is at Sigyn's wedding, to strike the sword into the Branstock, which only Sigmund can pull out, and thus rouse Siggeir's envy and promote those extreme conditions in which the Volsung courage and endurance are fully displayed. He appears again, as the mysterious boatman who takes Sinfinjötli's body aboard, and vanishes, and later to confront King Sigmund in his last fight and—to quote Morris's note on the saga—'to change the ownership of the sword'. He helps the new hero, the boy Sigurd, choose his war-horse, and, when the sword is reforged, safeguards him with advice in his first feat of arms. This corresponds to his part in the saga, except that Morris omits Sigurd's voyage of vengeance, on which Odin accompanies him. He does not appear again in the poem, but in the extension of the saga he ensures the death of the Niblung children and the end of the heroic generation. He ends the tale as he begins it, noted Morris. He did not use these chapters, but he did close his poem on the name of the God. Now we know, he writes,

All the death of kings and kindreds and the sorrow of Odin the Goth.

Not much need be said of this figure of power that moves in the main action. He is Allfather, 'friendly and glorious', as he seems to Sigurd, when he meets him on the Glittering Heath. He is one-eyed, and his children know, though Morris does not remind his readers, that this was the cost of the draught of wisdom from Mimir's fountain. He is clad like the ancestors, in cloak and hood, cloud-blue and gleaming grey, and he carries a great twi-bill, a double-bladed axe. He loves and fosters his children, and uses them for his purpose. They are bidden to love and withstand him, as Brynhild tells Sigurd, so that they may be friends and not threats of the Gods. He is not eternal nor yet almighty. The Norns—the ultimate fates that govern the world—are stronger, yet it is only through the thoughts and actions of men that their will comes about. We see here how Morris selects and develops, from Nordic myth, those characteristics which conform with his own outlook. Gods and men approximate with fellowly gestures in a world that is recognizably
stark for each.

These Gods have been called conventional. They are certainly concepts of power, agreed within related cultures, if that is what the word intends. Yet, putting his heart and convictions into his poem, Morris is not content to let them stalk through it as lofty conventions. Even in straightforward narrative his words vibrate faintly at times with overtones from beyond the Nordic world, as we have heard before. The sorrow of Odin the Goth can hardly be for the proven hero, feasting in Valhalla with his fathers and awaiting the last great battle. That is the convention. What weights the last line is the miscarried hope and the corruption of the age, and these are outside the convention.

More light is shed in Regin's tale to Sigurd of the winning of the gold, in the early days of the world, when the Gods, the arch-planners, were framing it after their desire. This is not a transparent parable, and it is possible to approach it from various angles. My interpretation does not put its main stress where Jessie Kocmanová does, though it pleases me to think that parts of our versions can be harmonized. Fresh possibilities rise in Morris's imagination, as it plays on his subject, and lead him, as always, from schemes to particulars. If, for instance, as she ingeniously supposes, he conceived the three sons of Reidmar as administrator, explorer and scientist ("all three types which in Morris's own day were still obviously in the service of the "gold of the dwarfs")

he let the equivalence slip from mind as he described Otter's careless water-life. There is a choice for the reader, which of many interwoven threads he will follow. To Jessie Kocmanová the gold is paramount, and the dwarfs are the 'protagonists of change in the world', the founders of a 'new and evil society', based on capitalism. But this is only part of the tale, which begins farther back. In Regin's narrative the protagonists of change are the Gods. Morris treats their actions as a myth of moral evolution, and the thread which can be followed from there is the tangle of good and ill, which is so much in Morris's mind all through his poem. It is speedily implicated with the gold, but does not spring from it.

Regin and his father Reidmar and his brothers, Fafnir and Otter, are dwarfs. They are older than men, 'the short-lived thralls of the Gods'. They belong to a life still immersed in nature. They create and enjoy, but have no sense of good or evil, of pity or regret. They are shape-changers, and Otter lives most of his life in the shape of an otter, delighting in the world of the waters. They die, but are not troubled by death. Into this pre-moral world come the Gods, teaching good and evil and imposing toil and sorrow. In this they represent the developing human intellect. They make oaths and are bound by them, and they have a purpose for life on earth and the men they have made. Under this pressure the amorality of the dwarfs becomes evil and destructive. Reidmar tells the Gods that they have created his greed for gold, and Andvari, the elf, grubbing gold together behind his waterfall, becomes blind and witless. But the Gods themselves are not free from the duality they have created. Odin, when he goes to look on the refashioned world, is accompanied by Hoenir, 'the Utter-Blameless' and Loki, 'the World's Begrudge, who maketh all labour vain'. It is Loki who recognises in the sleeping otter 'a chief of his foes / A King of the free and the careless'—the life immersed in nature which is the enemy of the intellect—and by killing him brings the Gods, who are not all-knowing, into the power of Reidmar. They are caught in Regin's net and menaced by Fafnir's violence. They are guilty, and the dwarfs and the earth—the primal power—are strong. Reidmar sets Otter's ransom at gold enough to fill up the gulf of his greedy heart, and Odin, for fear that his plans should perish and 'the web of the world run backward', sends Loki to plunder the gold of the elf Andvari. Both sides have sought to amend wrong with wrong, Reidmar because the gods have changed the world and destroyed his pleasure in life, Odin because he is bound by the wrong and right he has made, and cannot remain a God unless the due ransom is paid. Thus the pattern is set, and the gold Andvari curses is loosed on the world. The powers that create and order are involved with evil, and must judge themselves. Meanwhile, the gold works according to its nature. Fafnir kills his father, drives his brother away, and takes his dragon-shape to guard the gold. In his loneliness he will 'do no deed to repent of and leave no tale to tell'. This refusal to 'leave a tale' is the measure of his willed alienation. Morris, to whom the tale was the bond between lands and ages and the vessel of experience and delight, could hardly put the denial of fellowship more strongly.

Regin, the master-craftsman, moves among men, benefiting them, in their generations, by his inventions. This comes from the restlessness of his mind; his heart is cold and grim. He waits for a hero, whom he can use as his tool, to kill Fafnir and retrieve the gold. In speech and gesture he is keenly imagined, and Morris sees him momentarily in different contexts. Thus he is the toiler, who builds Reidmar's glorious palace with hands that are 'withen and foul'. He is the always unsatisfied artist, whose 'craft createth a semblance, and fails of the heart's desire'. He is as alienated in the dwellings of men as his brother in the wilderness. In the oppression of toil or the absorption of creation, he loses the love of women and the love of nature. He knows the future, but it does not enlarge him. He feels himself a fragment, a 'tempest-
driven straw' on the great currents of time. Also he is a dwarf, who would reverse the schemes of the Gods for the painful progress of the world. He dreams of ruling a world that is eternally young, with no frustration in it, and no dying. It would be, says the poet, an eyeless realm, a road that leads nowhere, a ship without a helm. For this Regin will destroy the Volsung who stands in his way; and when Sigurd knows this, he kills him without ruth.

The ancient grudged wisdom of Fafnir, which Sigurd absorbs when he roasts and eats the dragon's heart, is not sorcery. It can best be described as the stored experience of man as a creature of nature, not yet severed from the other creatures, but knowing their speech and their ways. The scene of the roasting and the spurting fat that scalds Sigurd's finger, so that he puts it in his mouth and forthwith understands what the eagles are crying to him, is primitive and grotesque. Yet the concept of the wisdom of nature had great attractions for Morris. He was to embody its healthful beauty and strength, as well as its limitations, in Habundia in The Water of the Wondrous Isles. He found place in his epic for a nobler presentation than Fafnir of ancient wisdom, extended by memory and foresight, in the figure of Gripir. In the Volsungasaga he is Sigurd's maternal uncle, and 'knew things to come', as do many in the sagas. The saga-man says briefly that he 'told him all his life and the fate thereof', thus condensing the Eddic poem of the Prophecy of Gripir, in which it is detailed. In Sigurd the Volsung he is akin not to Fliol to the Helper; but he is also of the stock of the Giants, of an older world than the busy world of Gods and men. He lives alone in his strange house under the mountains, where the great, empty chambers are wealthy and the floor green and gleaming like the sea. The eagles cry round it, and wild creatures pasture in the meadows. He sees the whole earth in his crystal ball, and knows the past and the future, and rejoices in them with 'guileless heart'; but his day is over, and he takes no part in the new age.

So once hath a man been fashioned and shall not be again.

The old power welcomes the manchild—the new power—as his equal, and they sit side by side on thrones, and drink the wine of Kings, and rejoice in each other. Sigurd learns his fate in dark images, and hears of the old world in which he is to do his new deeds.

The Sigurd theme, like the Sigurd music, went on working in Morris's mind. Thus the Hallow Sun, the sacred lamp of poetry and civilization, hanging in the House of the Wolfings, is 'all done with figures and knots in gold, and strange beasts, and a warrior slaying a dragon, and the sun rising on the earth'. This, the first of Morris's later Romances, takes place some two hundred years or more before the fall of the Burgundian princes, in which the 'historical' Sigurd was perhaps implicated; and the lamp is older still, an ancient treasure of the folk. We have here, then, the mythical dragon-slayer and sun-god, the proto-Sigurd, the oldest part of the Volsung hero. The type is repeated, some centuries later, in the wide-faced, terrible, smiling warrior, with the bent bow, carved within and without the House of the Face in The Roots of the Mountains; and about the head of him was a ring of rays, like the beams of the sun, and at his feet was a dragon'. Among the unfinished Romances of these later years is the barely begun Folk of the Mountain Door, full of charm, a mingling of the homely with the noble. To the small land among the mountains and its bold people come, by snow and moonlight, the ancestors of the folk, an ancient, sturdy man and woman, clad in undyed lambswool, like the men of old; also there comes a one-eyed man, who must be Odin. They come to celebrate with warnings and prophecies the name-day of the babe Host-Jord, who is borne in among them. One song speaks of the Rhine-maidens, the gold, and the tree that is to bloom again in winter, and this tree seems to be a poetical cutting from the Branstock, whose blossom was Sigurd. These are Volsung echoes, slight and diminished, leading, from what faint hints there are, to a fairy-tale, not an epic. But this is sometimes the fate of an epic subject.

Nearer in pitch to the epic and chronologically closer in composition is The House of the Wolfings. Its verse insets are continuous in metre, language and imagery with Sigurd the Volsung. Thidolf approximates to a Sigurd figure, reduced in scale, confined in space and time, saving his small clan within the limits of history. He is beguiled, and his task imperilled, but he frees himself, as Sigurd could not do, completes his work, and foresees its fruit.

The Sigurd music is also heard in The Pilgrims of Hope, the tale of a socialist working man and his wife in London, printed in thirteen monologues in Commonweal, between April 1885 and July 1886. The Sigurd metre is used in all but the first two monologues, and there are scraps of the Sigurd language — 'the deadless dark', 'the ancient fathers', and 'bale', looking rather odd in the next line to 'bourgeois'. Morris can hardly have used these words without intention; but, if he did, the significance is the same. They attest the strong survival, in a wholly different setting, of the Sigurd strain. This is confirmed by unemphasized parallels of situation. The wife's beautiful address to her new-born son
recalls, as Jessie Kocmanová notes, that of Hiordis to the new-born Sigurd. The reflection is doubled when Richard remembers his own mother and thinks that, had she known what the child in her lap would do and experience,

As some woman of old hadst thou wondered, who hath brought forth a god of the earth.

Sigurd is hailed in King Elf’s hall as the son of a god of the earth. Richard’s quiet bearing, when he knows that his wife and his friend are in love, without ‘reproaching, or the chill of love-born hate’, shadows that of Sigurd in the hall of the Niblungs. The Commune, for which all three fight and two are killed, is called ‘the first fight of the uttermost battle’, a transparent allusion to Ragnarok. Richard, however, is hemmed in by circumstances, which do not allow him to grow into a Sigurd. He does what he can, gives what he has, and endures to the limit of his strength. He keeps unbroken the line of humble champions, who can only fight an inch forward or only spill their blood where they stand; and so will his son, the lad who plays in the hay, and is already in his father’s sight another ‘man for the Cause’.

There are also to be found in this modern narrative touches that look forward to The House of the Wolfings. Thiodolf comes a stranger among the Wolfings, and Richard—and Morris—a stranger among the London populace. Like both, he has a safeguard—in his case a little income left by his father, which gets him the nick-name of Gentleman Dick from his mates. Richard, however, loses it, and learns the full equality of suffering. The significance of this will be apparent in the section on The House of the Wolfings in the next chapter.

Much more might be said of this interesting and imperfect poem, with its linguistic oddities—not only romantic; there is also the ‘well-dressed reptile’—its moving passages and passages of power, and its insights into Morris’s own feelings. His daughter says that it was ‘written in sorrow and anger’, after her father’s return, in the evenings, from ‘poor quarters full of sights and stories which wrung his heart’. It is now, with ‘The Haystack in the Floods’, the most accessible to the modern reader of Morris’s narrative poems. It has been dealt with sympathetically by recent critics, such as E.P. Thompson, Jack Lindsay, Paul Thompson and Jessie Kocmanová. It seldom gives complete satisfaction, and it is sometimes valued rather for its existence—a modern, realistic and committed poem, intended for working-class readers—than for its achievement. E.P. Thompson objects to Morris’s reliance on language ‘coined

in the romantic movement’. Much of it was minted earlier and farther north, and its use sprang naturally from the association of Richard with Sigurd in Morris’s imagination. But to account for a literary trait is not to justify it. Few of his readers can have perceived the association. It is questionable how many do so now. G.D.H. Cole wrote in the introduction to the Nonesuch William Morris that he doubted ‘if Morris could have written The Pilgrims of Hope unless he had written Sigurd the Volsung’, but had no room for development. It seems to me that nothing could more strongly confirm the profound passion of Sigurd the Volsung and the noble seriousness of the first Romance than the fact that their themes, their images, their music, and what G.D.H. Cole calls the ‘sense of heroic struggle’ run unbroken through the poem which, for all its imperfections, no one has any difficulty in recognizing as based on reality, history, aspiration, and the ‘foredoomed, fruitful ending’ of dedicated lives.

NOTES

2. This variant is also found in ‘The Ballad of Högnum’, part of a Faroese ballad-cyclus, translated as Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, by E.M. Smith-Dampier (1934).

5. cf. Journal of Travel in Iceland, 26 August 1873.
8. See p. 179.
10. It is Morris who emphasizes the peace of King Elf’s realm. The Sigurd of the Volsunga saga gathers his fighting men there for vengeance for Sigmund.
12. e.g., Jesenik, III, vs. 1-2.
13. Mackail, in his Address to the Hammersmith Socialist Society (1900) repeated the whole passage to make plain the force of the words in their context of the signs and afflictions before Christ’s second coming.
15. cf. also The Wood beyond the World, chap. XXX, where the meadow, where he presently meets the Mald after their separation in the storm, reminds Walter of the ‘great painted paradise in the choir of the big Church at Langton on Holm’.
17. Sigurd and Brynhild would seem to be lovers on Hindfell and certainly in
Chaprer 6
The Later Romances

'These romances do not aim at the greatest things. Yet we
do not feel the want of the greatest things in them.'—
A. Clutton-Brock, William Morris: His Work and Influence,
1914
'... the most purely happy books in modern English liter-
ature.'—T. Earle Welby, The Victorian Romantics, 1929

In October 1876 Morris finished Sigurd the Volsung. It was ten years
before A Dream of John Ball, the bridge to the Romances, began to
appear, in November 1886 in Commonweal. By spring 1888 he had
crossed this bridge, started The House of the Wolfings, and thereby
entered on his last period of poetic fertility. The break and slow resum-
ption repeat the established tidal pattern of his creative imagination. On
this occasion, it was strongly reinforced by external causes. Jack
Lindsay calls the chapter of his biography of Morris which covers the
five years after the publication of Sigurd the Volsung 'Action on Many
Fronts'. In little more than a year after he completed his epic, Morris
was occupied with founding the Society for the Protection of Ancient
Buildings, with the anti-Turk, anti-war agitation of the Eastern Question
Association, and with the preparation of his first public lecture on the
Decorative Arts; and all the while the work for the firm went on, and
also the less easily traceable search for an embodied hope, a fellowship,
a cause, a body of doctrine, and an organized means of social action. In
January 1883 he became a member of the Democratic Federation
(from January 1884 the Social Democratic Federation) and passed, to
borrow the title of Jack Lindsay's following chapter, 'into full social
action'. He had to learn new skills, and there were heavy claims on his
time and energy, generously honoured. The effort, at times the strife
and disappointment, of this work were the accompaniment to all his
other activities for the next eight years. After his serious illness in Feb-
uary 1891—gout and kidney disease—there had to be a remission. He
drew bridle and slackened his pace, but he continued his journey. The
socialist did not cease to work for the beliefs which he did not cease to
hold, but there were more and longer intervals when the poet and tale-