

Dewey

THEORY AND
PRACTICE OF
ENGLISH NARRATIVE VERSE
SINCE 1833
AN ENQUIRY

AMSTERDAM 1932
N.V. DE ARBEIDERSPERS

DOOR WILLEM
VAN DOORN
GEDOREN TE ARNHEM

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ENGLISH NARRATIVE VERSE
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**ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT TER VER-
KRIJGING VAN DEN GRAAD VAN DOCTOR
IN DE LETTEREN EN WIJSBEGEERTE AAN
DE UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM OP
GEZAG VAN DEN RECTOR-MAGNIFICUS
MR. P. SCHOLTEN, HOOGLEERAAR IN DE
FACULTEIT DER RECHTSGELEERDHEID,
IN HET OPENBAAR TE VERDEDIGEN IN
DE AULA DER UNIVERSITEIT, OP VRIJDAG
26 FEBR. 1932, DES NAMIDDAGS TE 3½ URE**

DOOR

WILLEM VAN DOORN
GEBOREN TE ARNHEM

**AMSTERDAM
N.V. DE ARBEIDERSPERS**

For ominous talk of death. No more: their shields,
 Plumed helms, and swords, two chieftains lay aside,
 Then stoop, and softly creep tow'rds him who sleeps;
 While o'er their heads the long protecting spears
 Are held by seven, who noiselessly and slow
 Follow their stealthy progress. Step by step
 The deadly crescent moves behind the train,
 Who, flat as reptiles, and with face thrust out,
 Breathless, all senses sharpen....

(Book II Canto III ll. 364—374.)

It is realism which, here and repeatedly, rises to epic heights, without succeeding in making the whole poem an epic. Nevertheless, it is a splendid achievement, written throughout with the author's eye on the object, which was the story as such; a thoroughly original work which, practically, never flags, and which — epic heights apart — never falls below a very high general level. For upwards of thirty years no English poem appeared which could fairly claim to be its legitimate successor. Then, however, the year 1876 saw the publication of *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*.

§ 3. *William Morris*, its author, was, like *Horne*, much more than a mere literary man, but we are no more concerned here with his career as a decorator and a printer than with *Horne's* exploits on the Spanish Main and in Australia. Nor is our attention engaged by the reception 'Sigurd' met with on being brought out. It would be easy to cull a certain number of laudatory critiques, but this does not alter the fact that the public remained lukewarm. As late as 1892 — four years before *Morris's* death — it was even possible for *Mrs. Oliphant*, who (in the first volume of her *Victorian Age in English Literature*) had dismissed *Horne* as a 'graceful and delightful minor poet', to sneer at *Morris's* preoccupation with Northern sagas without ever mentioning the title of his *magnum opus*. For his *magnum opus* it is, more than *Jason* with its smoothly versified romanticism, and far more than *The Earthly Paradise*, with its numerous languors.

Whereas *Horne* had elaborated a meagre handful of data furnished by a guardian of Greek mythological lore, filling as he did so his scanty material with a symbolical content that it had originally lacked, *Morris* found, ready to his hand, a Teutonic tradition which, though somewhat garbled

in places, was as full as a poet could but wish, and which, as a story, — or rather as a concatenation of four stories — needed but little arrangement. We will distinguish the four — with *Heusler* in *Hoops's Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, III p. 314 — as: *the career of Sigmund the Volsung; the adventures of young Sigfrid or Sigurd; the Brynhild saga; and the destruction of the Burgunds by Attila*.²¹⁾ In *Morris's* epic they appear as four 'Books', called *Sigmund, Regin, Brynhild, and Gudrun*, each of them subdivided into sections bearing special headings, the whole poem running to upwards of three hundred and fifty pages of fairly close print.

Seldom has a poet laid his students under a heavier obligation than *Morris* has done in this case, by enabling them to compare his raw material with his achievement. In 1870 — having studied Old Norse for about ten years with an Icelandic scholar — he published, in collaboration with his teacher, *Eiríkr Magnússon*, a translation of a somewhat composite character, entitled 'Völsunga Saga', of which a popular reprint, edited by *H. Halliday Sparling*, was issued by the *Walter Scott Publishing Company* in 1888. The book opened with a preface, in which the translators, 'in offering to the reader (their version) of the most complete and dramatic form of the great Epic of the North', disclaimed any 'special critical insight', being content to abide by existing authorities and leaving vexed questions alone. But

²¹⁾ 'Diese Reihe als Ganzes hat nur die isl. Völsunga saga verwirklicht; in der Thidhreks saga finden wir II—IV, aber nach ungleichen Quellen und nicht als fortlaufende Geschichte; im Nibelungenlied III und IV (auf II nur Rückblicke). I und II hingen ursprünglich nur durch den Stammbaum, kein episches Band zusammen: dass Sigfrid des Vaters Schwert erbt und den Vater rächt, ist erst nordische Dichtung. II wirkt in III nach, sofern Sigfrid mit dem Horte... und dem Ruhme seiner Jugendtaten ausgestattet ist: ein festeres Band knüpfte erst die spätere isl. Dichtung... Aber noch in der alten eddischen Schicht sind III and IV fast nur durch die Personen und den Hort verbunden, die können eines ohne das andre schliessen und anfangen; von einer 'Verschmelzung' der Sigfriddichtung mit der Burgundensage kann man erst reden, nachdem diese letzte zur Gattenrache gewandelt wurde... das Nibelungenlied zeigt III und IV in der Tat als Hälften einer Fabel, die nun an Reichtum des Grundrisses alle übrigen germanischen Heldensagen weit übertrifft... Als Heimat dieser Sagen hat nach Privatnamen und den Sagenquellen selbst... das niederrheinische Franken zu gelten. IV wird nicht allzulange nach 453 entstanden sein, die Walthersage übernimmt schon das Paar Gunther-Hagen.' (op. cit. 314, 315).

they claimed to have done their utmost to make the first English rendering of this great work 'close and accurate, and, if it might be so, at the same time not over-prosaic', their appeal being rather 'to the lover of poetry and nature than to the student'. And they were confident that such a reader would break through 'whatever entanglement of strange manners' might at first trouble him, and that he would be 'intensely touched by finding, amidst all its wildness and remoteness, such startling realism, such subtilty, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move himself to-day. . . . *For this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks*'. (our italics).

What Morris and Magnússon proceed to give then is, headed by a very complete list of 'dramatis personae', first, the Old Norse prose story, 'composed probably some time in the twelfth century, from floating traditions no doubt; from songs which, now lost, were then known, at least in fragments, to the Sagaman; and finally from songs, which, written down about his time, are still existing'; and secondly, in addition to the poems and poetical fragments which the Icelandic author had already inserted in his saga — such as Brynhild's 'wise redes to Sigurd', taken from the Lay of Sigdrifa — several Eddaic poems, partly inserted in the text — such as the Lays of Regin and Fafnir, and the first Lay of Gudrun, 'the most lyrical, the most complete and the most beautiful of all', — partly placed in a bunch at the end, among which we find such important productions as the latter part of the second Lay of Helgi Hunding's Bane and the Hell-ride of Brynhild.

Behold Morris now in ecstasy before a famous Northern story, the general drift of which — thanks, partly, to his own labours — is as well-known to the average cultured reader of to-day as it was unfamiliar to his early-Victorian predecessor. It was the great story of the Teutonic race, and he had given it to the English-speaking world in the completest form available. Why was he not satisfied to leave it at that? Why must he needs proceed to rehandle it after his own fashion and heart?

In 1871 he first visited Iceland, fully prepared, thanks to his previous studies, to fall in love with this austere and forbidding-looking spot of ground, this Brynhild among

countries. And fall in love with it he did. And, — unlike his own Sigurd, and unlike so many Northern adventurers from Alaric down to Tancred — when, two years afterwards, he went to Italy, he found, in the much vaunted South, little to please him and no glamour at all. On the contrary, hating and detesting both Roman Empire and Renascence, he turned to the North again, back to Iceland. And the book he had helped to compile about Volsungs and Niblungs became to him a kind of obscure or misty medium, which, lifting and brightening in places, allowed him occasional glimpses at first, visions by and by, of the tale as it might, or must, or should, have been; of its ideal version, self-consistent and integral, which, accordingly, he would endeavour to give to the world. We may feel convinced nowadays that no such version ever existed; that the tale, a tradition of the Southern Teutons, had wandered Northward in a very imperfect form, before the story of Sigfrid and that of the Niblungs had been welded together, with historical loss but poetical gain, into the consistent unity of the German Nibelungenlied, in which the Ostrogothic bias in favour of Attila is so conspicuous; that dozens of skalds must have added to it, tinkered at it, or even spoilt it. But we may feel equally convinced that Morris was unacquainted with most of this 'higher criticism', and that a knowledge of it would have been unable to dissuade him from his opinion or to deter him from his undertaking.

Yet the imperfections of the version he had made accessible to the British public were patent to him, too. Or, rather, deeply as he might have steeped himself in Northern feeling and *Odinism*, there were certain things in the story against which the Victorian in him, or rather the nursling of civilization and Christianity, could not help rebelling; things, therefore, which, being incompatible with his ideal vision of it all, had to go by the board. Such is, first of all, the treatment meted out to the bairns. Surely that is a barbarous, a monstrous world in which a mother — let her be as much of a Volsung as she pleases — in avenging her father and brothers sacrifices her own children, nay, compasses their deaths, or even murders them out of hand, instead of doing what historical Ildicho did to historical Attila. And we are simply astounded to see that the same Gudrun, who has not only a glorious husband, Sigurd, but also an innocent son,

Sigmund, to avenge — and never does — becomes a loathsome personification of inhuman vindictiveness after Atli's murder of her brothers Gunnar and Hogni.²²⁾ The nineteenth century German poet who has rehandled the same matter of the Niblungs in his own fashion — Wilhelm Jordan — exclaims against all the cheap horrors with which his sources abound, attributing them to the unscrupulous inventiveness of atrocity-mongers pandering to the perverted taste of a degenerate age and audience.²³⁾ And it does not matter whether, as is most likely, the question is not quite as simple as Jordan represents it, and whether mythic *motifs* that were no longer understood — some of them Greek, perhaps — may have been responsible for a number of crudities that fill us, moderns, less with horror than with disgust. What matters is that both the modern German poet and his English contemporary cut out all this sanguinary stuff as worthless, not out of regard for their prospective

²²⁾ Compare: 'But Gudrun forgat not her woe, but brooded over it, how she might work some mighty shame against the king; and at nightfall she took to her the sons of King Atli and her as they played about the floor; the younglings waxed heavy of cheer, and asked what she would with them.

"Ask me not," she said; "ye shall die, the twain of you!"

Then they answered, "Thou mayest do with thy children even as thou wilt, nor shall any hinder thee, but shame there is to thee in the doing of his deed."

Yet for all that she cut the throats of them.

Then the king asked where his sons were, and Gudrun answered, "I will tell thee, and gladden thine heart by the telling; lo now, thou didst make a great woe spring up for me in the slaying of my brethren; now hearken and hear my rede and my deed; thou hast lost thy sons, and their heads are become beakers on the board here, and thou thyself hast drunken the blood of them blended with wine; and their hearts I took and roasted them on a spit, and thou hast eaten thereof.' (*op. cit.* p. 147).

²³⁾ Compare his Hildebrand's words to the King of Norway:

Gelüftet es euch, in breitem Liede
 Das alles auf's Haar mit Henkerwollust,
 Weit scheusslicher noch als es wirklich geschehen
 Durch Zuthat verzerrt erzählen zu hören,
 So wimmelt's ja schon von wandernden Sängern
 In Schwämmels Manier im benachbarten Schweden
 Die der Niblung Noth für geneigte Lauscher
 Zu Mordgeschichten zurechtgemetzgert.
 Von deren einem lasst euch bedienen
 Wenn ihr anders denket als Ich....

(Hildebrants Heimkehr, XVIII ll. 46-55).

audiences, but from a genuine feeling of solidarity with them. The following point to be considered is Morris's treatment and use of the marvellous, which looms so large in the original story of Sigurd and Regin, and only a little less so in that of Sigmund and Sinfiotli. It seems advisable to draw at once a rough line of division between the marvellous properly so called, the marvellous felt as such from the outset, and certain well-known superstitions proper to definite stages of human development, such as the wide-spread belief in lycanthropy. Whereas the latter kind may be retained without any qualms on the part of a modern rehandler, the former must be either discarded, or — if organically inherent in and indispensable to the story — toned down. And this is, in fact, what Morris has done.

While retaining the apparitions of Odin, the temporary change of Sigmund and Sinfiotli into wolves, and the shape-shifting of Signy and the 'witchwife', likewise certain time-honoured romantic requisites, such as love-philtres and dreams, besides Brynhild's enchantment, Andvari's fateful hoard, and, of course, the dragon and the prophesying birds, — he recognised that there are limits not only to the 'willing suspension of unbelief' but also to the assurance which an epic poet can summon to himself in relating such impossibilities. In a poem like Horne's *Orion* the marvellous, being symbolical, is acceptable. But in a non-allegorical epic poem even a slight overdose of the marvellous is apt — the *Odyssey* is a case in point — to spoil or destroy what epic qualities it may possess. And Morris must have experienced a feeling of great relief when, after doing his duty by the marvels of the *Volsunga* saga, not in any half-hearted way, but yet with discretion, he could turn his attention to the almost exclusively human and far more tragic entanglement of the *Niblung* story.

The capture of the three gods, Odin, Hænir and Loki, by Reidmar the Eoten (to adopt a convenient Old-English spelling for Jotunn) and his sons Fafnir and Regin, may have offered less difficulty of treatment than most of the rest. Gods will be Gods and Eotens Eotens, doing after their kind, and who shall presume to circumscribe their powers or scope? Morris had a free hand here by all literary laws whether ancient or modern, and he had a quick eye for suitable stuff — outside the *Volsunga* saga — to be appro-

priated for his purpose; witness the way in which he depicts Odin, whom he endows with every feature and quality that is likely to impress a modern reader, up to the climax of the mystical verses of the *Hávamál* (str. 137) telling how 'Odin hung on the windy tree for nine whole nights, stabbed with a spear, dedicated to Odin, myself to myself'....

'Who hath learned the names of the Wise-one or measured out his will?
Who hath gone before to teach him, and the doom of days fulfil?...
For myself to myself I offered, that all wisdom I might know,
And fruitful I waxed of works, and good and fair did they grow,
And I knew, and I wrought and fore-ordered; and evil sat by my side,
And myself by myself has been doomed....'

But it is with the subsequent vicissitudes of Regin especially that Morris deals in a fashion that may be pronounced masterly. Regin, the least regarded of Reidmar's three sons, unwarlike Regin, the smith, the artificer who, his father having been murdered by Fafnir, the eldest son, suffered himself to be driven away — or, rather, scared away — by his brother from the splendid hall he had built with his own hands, had to find refuge in the world of men, and the poet represents him as having become all but humanized in their society. But something uncanny still attaches to him, something reminiscent of his descent from the 'Dwarf-folk'; and we may observe here that Morris uses the term 'Dwarf' throughout instead of Eoten, obviously for the sinister suggestiveness of the word, which seems to make the shape-shifting of those awesome beings a thing to be unquestioningly accepted. And Morris knows well how to bring out those sinister, uncanny features, when he shows us Regin in the function of Sigurd's tutor, and especially so when 'the Master of Sleight, beardless and low of stature, of visage pinched and wan', tells the golden-haired, guileless youth, who is eagerly listening, of his expulsion by his terrible brother, Fafnir, before whom he trembled, 'for he wore the Helm of Dread, and his sword was bare in his hand':

'More awful grew his visage as he spake the word of dread,
And no more durst I behold him, but with heart as cold I fled;
I fled from the glorious house my hands had made so fair,
As poor as the new-born baby with nought of raiment or gear:
I fled from the heaps of gold, and my goods were the eager will,
And the heart that remembereth all, and the hand that may never be still.

'Then unto this land I came, and that was long ago
As men-folk count the years; and I taught them to reap and to sow,
And a famous man I became: but that generation died,
And they said that Frey had taught them, and a God my name did hide.
Then I taught them the craft of metals, and the sailing of the sea,
And the taming of the horse-kind, and the yoke-beasts' husbandry,
And the building up of houses; and that race of men went by,
And they said that Thor had taught them; and a smithy-ing-carle was I.
Then I gave their maidens the needle and bade them hold the rock,
And the shuttle-race gaped for them as they sat at the weaving-stock.
But by then these were waxen crones to sit dim-eyed by the door,
It was Freyia had come among them to teach the weaving-lore.
Then I taught them the tales of old, and fair songs fashioned and true,
And their speech grew into music of measured time and due,
And they smote the harp to my bidding, and the land grew soft and sweet:
But ere the grass of their grave-mounds rose up above my feet,
It was Bragi had made them sweet-mouthed, and I was the
wandering scald....'

Defrauded of his rights, of the fame that is his due, and hungry for recognition and power, he falls to the dreaming of dreams, in which he makes himself master of Fafnir's hoard; and here Morris shows subtle psychological insight in representing Regin as idealizing and justifying his purpose:

'...some day I shall have it all, his gold and his craft and his heart...
And then when my hand is upon it, my hand shall be as the spring
To thaw his winter away and the fruitful tide to bring.
It shall grow; it shall grow into summer, and I shall be he that wrought,
And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name that once was nought;
Yea, I shall be Frey, and Thor, and Freyia, and Bragi in one:
Yea the God of all that is, — and no deed in the wide world done,
But the deed that my heart would fashion: and the songs of the
freed from the yoke
Shall bear to my house in the heavens the love and the longing of folk.
And there shall be no more dying, and the sea shall be as the land,
And the world for ever and ever shall be young beneath my hand.'

Even covetous and cowardly Regin must needs vindicate his aspirations to himself and his one auditor; he can be an idealist on occasion. And for this profounder content, this *psychologische Vertiefung*, Morris was not indebted at all either to the *Reginmál* or to the *Volsunga saga*. It is all his own. Was it contrary to Old Norse sentiment, as contrary as Morris's omission of the vengeance Sigurd takes on Sigurd's slayers? 'So much the worse for Old Norse sentiment,' would most probably have been our Victorian poet's rejoinder. The modern artist in him could not put up with a

revenge that he felt to be an anti-climax: after Sigurd's mind has been prepared for a great enterprise and the best of swords has been put into his hand, the story must proceed to business, to the fight with the dragon. There must be no interruption for the sake of a mere blood-feud of some eighteen years' standing.

But an adequate handling of such a combat would tax any modern poet's powers to the utmost. Morris, being a Victorian, cannot take a mere dragon seriously, and he dearly wishes to avoid ridicule. So he provides a scene and background where anything might happen, a suitable framework to hold a dragon, and that background with its appropriate atmosphere is furnished by Iceland:

Day-long they fared through the mountains, and that high-way's fashioner
Forsooth was a fearful craftsman, and his hands the waters were,
And the heaped-up ice was his mattock, and the fire-blast was his man,
And never a whit he heeded though his walls were waste and wan,
And the guest-halls of that wayside great heaps of the ashes spent.
But, each as a man alone, through the sun-bright day they went....

Day-long they rode the mountains by the crags exceeding old,
And the ash that the first of the Dwarf-kind found dull and
quenched and cold.

Then the moon in the mid-sky swam, and the stars were fair and pale,
And beneath the naked heaven they slept in an ash-grey dale;

So up and up they journeyed, and ever as they went
About the cold-slaked forges, o'er many a cloud-swept bent,
Betwixt the walls of blackness, by shores of the fishless meres,
And the fathomless desert waters, did Regin cast his fears,
And wrap him in desire; and all alone he seemed
As a God to his heirship wending....

So on they ride to the westward, and huge were the mountains grown
And the floor of heaven was mingled with that tossing world of stone:
And they rode till the moon was forgotten and the sun was waxen low,
And they tarried not, though he perished, and the world grew dark below.
Then they rode a mighty desert, a glimmering place and wide,
And into a narrow pass high-walled on either side
By the blackness of the mountains, and barred aback and in face
By the empty night of the shadow; a windless silent place:
But the white moon shone o'erhead mid the small sharp stars and pale,
And each as a man alone they rode on the highway of bale.

So ever they wended upward, and the midnight hour was o'er,
And the stars grew pale and paler, and failed from the heaven's floor,
And the moon was a long while dead, but where was the promise of day?
No change came over the darkness, no streak of the dawning grey:

No sound of the wind's uprising adown the night there ran:
It was blind as the Gaping Gulf ere the first of the worlds began.

But lo, at the last a glimmer, and a light from the west there came,
And another and another, like points of far-off flame;
And they grew and brightened and gathered; and whiles together they ran
Like the moonwake over the waters; and whiles they were scant and wan,
Some greater and some lesser, like the boats of fishers laid
About the sea of midnight; and a dusky dawn they made,
A faint and glimmering twilight: So Sigurd strains his eyes,
And he sees how a land deserted all round about him lies
More changeless than mid-ocean, as fruitless as its floor:
Then the heart leaps up within him, for he knows that his journey is o'er,
And there he draweth bridle on the first of the Glittering Heath....

Odin appears. Instructed by him Sigurd attacks Fafnir from a deep hole, dug by him in the slot the dragon has made for himself in his regular goings to his drinking-place. A weird element introduced by Morris is the apparition of an unknown face, grinning and blear-eyed, — Reidmar's face presumably — to Sigurd lurking in his ambush. But it does not say a word, 'and departeth leaving nothing save the dark', and we feel somewhat defrauded, since such an incident surely should have proved more pregnant, more productive of results. The description of the fight, if fight it can be called, is rather hurried. Evidently Morris's heart was not in the business. Nor was it in the colloquy between the dying Fafnir and his slayer, for which his originals had furnished the refractory materials. The poet treats us to a *stichomyth*²⁴⁾ that is ineffective and at places absurd or, to modern minds, incomprehensible. He can write good gnomic verse enough, and Brynhild's discourses to Sigurd furnish some notable examples, but the wisdom of which Fafnir delivers himself yields at best a few Swinburnian paradoxes:

'I have seen the Gods of heaven, and their Norns withal I know:
They love and withhold their helping, they hate and refrain the blow;
They curse and they may not sunder, they bless and they shall not blend;
They have fashioned the good and the evil; they abide the change
and the end.'

Regin's eulogies had prepared us for something better than this, and the heart of such a platitudinous dragon

²⁴⁾ Why *stichomuthia*, when we also have *metonymy*?

seems hardly worth cooking and eating. But nobody can deny that Regin's subsequent fate is told with spirit and elevation, and that it was a bold and successful stroke of Morris to transform the original woodpeckers — or titmice — singing their warnings to Sigurd the cookboy into seven eagles, whose chants will persuade any unsophisticated reader that it is Sigurd the epic hero, Odin's darling, that ought to have the treasure, and not the uncanny wight who has met with his just deserts, Regin the artificer, slain by the youngster he trained and the invincible weapon he forged.

And now the story takes us to the 'Shield-burg' where mail-clad Brynhild lies in deep sleep, punished by Odin for disobedience. She is delivered by Sigurd as was foretold, and they betroth themselves to each other. Brynhild, for all her previous disobedience, is represented by the saga as the wisest of women, likewise by the Sigdrifumál, and each story-teller has felt it incumbent on him to corroborate his statement by subjoining wise sayings alleged to have been uttered by Brynhild. From a modern point of view these 'redes' are all disappointing, the 'poetical' ones of the Lay even more so than those given by the prose saga. What was Morris the Victorian to do with practical hints (or tips) like

Runes of war know thou,
If great thou wilt be!
Cut them on hilt of hardened sword,
Some on the brand's back,
Some on its shining side,
Twice name Tyr therein.

Sea-runes good at need,
Learnt for ship's saving,
For the good health of the swimming horse;
On the stern cut them,
Cut them on the rudder-blade....?

(Op. cit. 71)

It is obvious that our poet could have no use for this sort of thing. But the prose stuff, although hardly inferior to many of the Biblical proverbs attributed to King Solomon, is little better:

'Be kindly to friend and kin, and reward not their trespasses against thee; bear and forbear, and win for thee thereby long enduring praise of men.

'Take good heed of evil things: a may's love, and a man's wife; full oft thereof doth ill befall!

'Let not thy mind be overmuch crossed by unwise men at thronged meetings of folk; for oft these speak worse than they wot of; lest thou be called a dastard, and art minded to think that thou art even as is said; slay such an one on another day, and so reward his ugly talk....'

(op. cit. p. 76)

'If thou hearest the fool's word of a drunken man, strive not with him being drunk with drink and witless; many a grief, yea, and the very death groweth from out such things.

'Fight thy foes in the field, nor be burnt in thine house....'

'Give kind heed to dead men, — sick-dead, sea-dead, or sword-dead; deal heedfully with their dead corpses.

'Trow never in him for whom thou hast slain father, brother, or whatso near kin; yea, though young he be; for oft waxes wolf in youngling....'

(op. cit. p. 77)

Sancho Panza, being a connoisseur, might have been impressed by this kind of proverbial lore, which, no doubt, was familiar to any granny in ancient Norway. But no Sigurd Fafnir's Bane worthy of a modern's esteem would, on the strength of the above saws, have proposed to Brynhild, declaring that none among the sons of men could be found wiser than she was. And again Morris does not force this stuff down his readers' throats claiming admiration for genuine old Norse sentiment accurately rendered. He makes his heroine discourse as follows:

"Strive not with the fools of man-folk: for belike thou shalt overcome; And what then is the gain of thine hunting when thou bearest the quarry home?

Or else shall the fool overcome thee, and what deed thereof shall grow? Nay, strive with the wise man rather, and increase thy woe and his woe; Yet thereof a gain hast thou gotten; and the half of thine heart hast thou won

If thou may'st prevail against him, and his deeds are the deeds thou hast done;

Yea, and if thou fall before him, in him shalt thou live again, And thy deeds in his hand shall blossom, and his heart of thine heart shall be fain.

"When thou hearest the fool rejoicing, and he saith, 'It is over and past, And the wrong was better than right, and hate turns into love at the last, And we strove for nothing at all, and the Gods are fallen asleep; For so good is the world a-growing that the evil good shall reap.' Then loosen thy sword in the scabbard and settle the helm on thine head, For men betrayed are mighty, and great are the wrongfully dead.

"Wilt thou do the deed and repent it? thou hadst better never been born; wilt thou do the deed and exalt it? then thy fame shall be outworn: Thou shalt do the deed and abide it, and sit on thy throne on high, And look on today and tomorrow as those that never die.

"Love thou the Gods — and withstand them, lest thy fame should fail in the end,
And thou be but their thrall and their bondsman, who wert born for their very friend:
For few things from the Gods are hidden, and the hearts of men they know.
And how that none rejoiceth to quail and crouch a low....

I saw the body of Wisdom, and of shifting guise was she wrought,
And I stretched out my hand to hold her, and a mote of the dust they caught;
And I prayed her to come for my teaching, and she came in the midnight dream —
And I woke and might not remember...."

If, judged by a modern mind, Brynhild's wisdom appears improved here, the same thing may be said of her morals. Morris's sources tell of a daughter, Aslaug, whom she bore to Sigurd before her marriage with Gunnar. Morris has no use for this daughter, who for the rest plays no part whatever in the original story, and he is as careful of Brynhild's prenuptial virginity as the writer of the German *Nibelungenlied*. In his poem her prophetic powers, too, show to greater advantage than here, where everything is so hard and exact as to leave the reader unmoved, unless, indeed, he should feel inclined to smile:

'This I dreamed,' said Gudrun, 'that we went, a many of us in company, from the bower, and we saw an exceeding great hart, that far excelled all other deer ever seen, and the hair of him was golden; and this deer we were all fain to take, but I alone got him; and he seemed to me better than all things else; but sithence thou, Brynhild, didst shoot and slay my deer even at my very knees, and such grief was that to me that scarce might I bear it; and then afterwards thou gavest me a wolf-cub, which besprinkled me with the blood of my brethren.'

Brynhild answers, 'I will arede thy dream, even as things shall come to pass hereafter; for Sigurd shall come to thee, even he whom I have chosen for my well-beloved; and Grimhild shall give him mead mingled with hurtful things, which

shall cast us all into mighty strife. Him shalt thou have, and him shalt thou quickly miss; and Atli the king shalt thou wed; and thy brethren shalt thou lose, and slay Atli withal in the end.' (*op. cit.* p. 89)

A threat to be effective should be veiled and vague; and prophetic utterances to impress us should sound aloof and oracular. Morris's Gudrun speaks to Brynhild the wise woman as follows:

I slept, and again as aforetime were the gates of the dreamhall moved,
And I went in the land of shadows; and lo I was crowned as a queen,
And I sat in the summer-season amidst my garden green;
And there came a hart from the forest, and in noble wise he went,
And bold he was to look on, and of fashion excellent
Before all beasts of the wild-wood; and fair gleamed that glorious-one,
And upreared his shining antlers against the very sun.
So he came unto me and I loved him, and his head lay kind on my knees,
And fair methought the summer, and a time of utter peace.
Then darkened all the heavens and dreary grew the tide,
And medreamed that a queen I knew not was sitting by my side,
And from out of the din and the darkness, a hand and an arm there came,
And a golden sleeve was upon it, and red rings of the Queenfolk's fame:
And the hand was the hand of a woman: and there came a sword
and a thrust
And the blood of the lovely wood-deer went wide about the dust.
Then I cried aloud in my sorrow, and lo, in the wood I was,
And all around and about me did the kin of the wild-wolves pass,
And I called them friends and kindred, and upreared a battle-brand,
And cried out in a tongue that I knew not, and red and wet was my hand.

'A queen I knew not' has replaced 'thou, Brynhild', the sword-thrust is dealt by the hand of an unknown woman, and the sanguinary wolf-cub has given place to a pack of wolves led by sword-wielding Gudrun herself. The poetical gain is evident, here and in Brynhild's interpretations:

"Thou shalt wed a King and be merry, and then shall come the sword,
And the edges of hate shall be whetted and shall slay thy love and thy lord,
And dead on thy breast shall he fall: and where then is the measureless moan?
From the first to the last shalt thou have him, and scarce shall he die alone.
Rejoice, o daughter of Giukil there is worse in the world than this....

Is it strange, O child of the Niblungs, that thy glory and thy pain
Must be bleat with the battle's darkness and the unseen hurrying bane?

But hearts with thine heart shall be tangled: but the queen and the
hand thou shalt know,
When we twain are wise together; thou shalt know of the sword
and the wood,

Thou shalt know of the wild-wolves' howling and thy right hand
wet with blood,
When the day of the smith is ended, and the stithy's fire dies out,
And the work of the master of masters through the feast-hall goeth about.'

This, surely, differs from the other thing as an Old-Testament prophet from a Gypsy fortune-teller. And now that the Bible has been referred to in this connection, we may observe that Biblical echoes are as numerous in the poem as might have been expected. To a Victorian Englishman sublimity was inextricably bound up with the English Bible, and not only did Morris's Biblical cadences and allusions come 'of themselves,' unbidden, but they came naked and unashamed; as where Sigurd, the renowned companion of the Niblung Kings, is represented as laughing to scorn 'the treasure where thieves break through and steal, and the moth and the rust are corrupting' (*op. cit.* p. 181).

We may even go further, and point out that in recreating Sigurd Morris relegated his hero's Berserker uncle Sinfiotli and his hardly less terrible father Sigmund to a very remote past indeed; that he virtually made Sigurd a Christian hero and own brother to Wordsworth's *Happy Warrior*,

....the generous Spirit, who, when brought
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought
Upon the plan that pleased his boyish thought:
Whose high endeavours are an inward light
That makes the path before him always bright....
Who, doomed to go in company with Pain,
And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!
Turns his necessity to glorious gain....

Morris's Sigurd seems to other people

....so steadfast and so great.
That the sea of chance wide-weltering 'neath his will must needs abate.

He is Alfred the Great, William the Silent, and Simon Bolivar in one. Listen how he is hailed by the Niblung maidens on returning from a campaign:

Yea, they sing the song of Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And they sing of the prison's rending and the tyrant laid alow,
And the golden thieves' abatement, and the stilling of the churl,
And the mocking of the dastard where the chasing edges whirl;
And they sing of the outland maidens that thronged round Sigurd's hand,
And sung in the streets of the foemen of the war-delivered land;

And they tell how the ships of the merchants come free and go at their-will,
And how wives in peace and safety may crop the vine-clad hill;
How the maiden sits in her bower, and the weaver sings at his loom,
And forget the kings of grasping and the greedy days of gloom;
For by sea and hill and township hath the Son of Sigmund been,
And looked on the folk unheeded....

And again, if Wordsworth's *Happy Warrior* is the man
Who, if he rise to station of command
Rises by open means; and there will stand
On honourable terms, or else retire....

we must again exclaim: 'Here is Sigurd!' when recollecting the way in which the slayer of Fafnir introduces himself to the Niblungs, after riding, smiling and unhindered,in under the gate that was long and dark as a cave Bored out in the isles of the northland by the beat of the restless wave. And the noise of the wind was within it, and the sound of swords unseen,

and after challenging the inmates:

'Ho, men of this mighty burg, to what folk of the world am I come?
And who is the King of battles who dwells in this lordly home?
Or perchance are ye of the Elf-kin? are ye guest-fain, kind at the board,
Or murder-churls and destroyers....?'

By the side of a passage like this, Morris's 'original' appears very unoriginal and *cliché*-like:

....'he was by far above other men in courtesy and goodly manners, and well-nigh in all things else; and whenas folk tell of the mightiest champions, and the noblest chiefs, then ever is he named the foremost, and his name goes wide about on all tongues north of the sea of the Greek-lands, and even so shall it be while the world endures....'

Surely there is no trace here of any Old Norse, nay, of any really *epic*, sentiment. This is pure Malory. But we shall in vain look in all Malory for a description to match this of the splendid pair Gudrun and Sigurd, after the latter has drunk the fateful cup that Grimhild had mixed him:

And all doubt in love is swallowed, and lovelier now is she
Than a picture deftly painted by the craftsmen over sea;
And her face is a rose of the morning by the night-tide framed about,
And the long-stored love of her bosom from her eyes is leaping out.
But how fair is Sigurd the King that beside her beauty goes!
How lovely is he shapen, how great his stature shows!
How kind is the clasping right-hand, that has smitten the battle acold!
How kind are the awful eyes that no foeman durst behold!
How sweet are the lips unsmiling, and the brow as the open day!
What man can behold and believe it that his life shall pass away?

✓ This ideal vision — personal and Victorian at the same time — is Morris's own; and the warning tone that he cannot help sounding at the end is one of those seemingly insignificant touches that, pointing from a bright present to a vaguely disastrous future, make for unity where, in spite of circumstantial presages, the mere chronicling found in the original presents us with no unity at all. And thus the poetical process of closer narrative knitting, more colourful presentation of occurrences as well as objects, and 'psychological deepening' in accordance with the poet's Victorian mentality, goes on, and it is as needless as it is tempting to point out more instances. Everything is raised to a higher plane, everything is made to assume grander proportions. In Hamilton Thompson's words (Cambr. Hist. of E.L. XIII p. 126) 'we are carried away upon the tide of Sigurd's heroic youth. The episodes follow one another with unflinching vigour and freshness, and, in the climax of the story, the slaying of the Niblung kings in the hall of Atli, the death-song of Gunnar among the serpents and the vengeance and death of Gudrun, Morris pursued his theme triumphantly to the end.' He never theorized in print about narrative art in general or epic in particular. His aesthetic preoccupation was restricted to the field of architectural, pictorial or decorative art, and ignored poetry. But he was a great 'Sagaman', and in the practice of his *magnum opus* we constantly find him verifying Lascelles Abercrombie's words: 'The epic poet collaborates with the spirit of his time in the composition of his work' ('The Epic' p. 71). Morris was an epic poet, not a scientific investigator of Old Norse sentiment. And though he could no more make bricks without straw than any other builder; though he did not invent his raw material, he was not an archaeological re-creator; he was a creator.

✓ In the case of 'Sigurd' Morris's countrymen were slow to recognise this, and it was only very gradually that the poem found its way to the reading public. It is true it was well received by such critics as Saintsbury and Andrew Lang, but it was not a success. It took ten years to sell 2500 copies, and this failure to catch the public's ears might, of course, be held to prove the poet's sturdy independence of mind and character, which prevented him from 'writing down' to the level of his prospective readers. But the matter is not quite so simple. Any one setting out to tell a story must be

conscious of an imaginary audience he is going to address. But why should he want to tell this story? Because he feels the need to communicate to others such things as have interested him and should *therefore* interest his audience. Morris had been so hugely interested in his 'Volsungs and Niblungs' as to present the British public with two versions of the grand Teutonic tale. What if the first of them had not succeeded in commending itself to wide circles of readers? There were extenuating circumstances to be found in the remoteness of the story and its 'entanglement of strange manners'. But that the public did not immediately respond, with shouts and rejoicing, to the swing and the amplitude of the second, was something the poet could never have foreseen. Had he failed to do justice to his glorious matter? His heart assured him he had not, and the critics that had understanding did the same. Vague he had been occasionally, even slipshod in places, — but in the field of poetry it is only short lyrics that can come within measurable distance of perfection. In any work planned and executed to a large scale there are bound to be blemishes.²⁵⁾ It is common knowledge that Homer himself is not always wide awake, and that even the sun has spots.

Was there anything repellent in Morris's manner?

His verse — which has been charged with clumsy vehemence by Lascelles Abercrombie (*op. cit.* p. 41) — was a new departure in English, and what is novel may repel as well as attract, especially when, as is too often the case, it is not quite impeccable. Clutton-Brock (*op. cit.* p. 130) — who errs in identifying it with what he calls the 'Saturnian' metre of 'The Queen was in her parlour eating bread and honey' — acknowledges that 'it has a wider range than any other English metre that has been applied to epic', but pronounces it, unlike the Greek hexameter, unsuited to 'passages of noble calm or to matter-of-fact statement'. Saintsbury, however, — who errs in tracing a connection between it and the metre of the *Tale of Gamelyn* — considers it a 'really splendid metre for narrative purposes' (Cambr. H. of E. L. XIII p. 252). And whoever should think this an exaggerated

²⁵⁾ Compare what Morris says about Gripir, his *Akinetos* (Bk II p. 110):
.... all his desire was dead, and he lived as a God shall live,
Whom the prayers of the world hath forgotten.... (our italics).

view will at any rate find it easy to be in substantial agreement with Hamilton Thompson (*ibid.* p. 126), according to whom it is an anapaestic couplet of Morris's own invention, with six beats to each line, and — though somewhat inferior to the Homeric hexameter — 'thoroughly adequate' to the occasion which called it forth. A passage like the following, of unimpeachable serenity, is enough to refute Clutton-Brock's reservation:

So the hall-dusk deepens upon them till the candles come arow,
And they drink the wine of departing and gird themselves to go;
And they dight the dark-blue raiment and climb to the wains aloft
While the horned moon hangs in the heaven and the summer wind
blows soft.

Then the yoke-beasts strained at the collar, and the dust in the moon
arose,

And they brushed the side of the acre and the blooming dewy close;
Till at last, when the moon was sinking and the night was waxen late,
The warders of the earl-folk looked forth from the Niblung gate,
And saw the gold pale-gleaming, and heard the wain-wheels crush
The weary dust of the summer amidst the midnight hush.

(Bk II. pp. 157/8).

So much for Morris's verse. Next, as regards his language, we may observe at once that, while containing a certain number of archaisms, it is not excessively archaic. Forms like 'thou' and 'leadeth' hardly invite any comment in an epic dealing with remote events, and there are passages upon passages, and most effective and poetical ones, with no archaisms at all:

Then all sank into silence, and the Son of Sigmund stood
On the torn and furrowed desert by the pool of Fafnir's blood,
And the Serpent lay before him, dead, chilly, dull, and grey;
And over the Glittering Heath fair shone the sun and the day,
And a light wind followed the sun and breathed o'er the fateful place,
As fresh as it furrows the sea-plain or bows the acres' face.

(Bk. II p. 126).

The numerous Biblical turns and cadences already referred to should, if anything, have helped to ingratiate 'Sigurd' with the reading public, and there cannot have been anything very repellent in the far less numerous kennings, mostly translations of Old Teutonic word-coining by skalds who were unwilling to call a spade a spade. Appellations like *swan-bath* for 'sea', *war-flame* for 'sword', *shield-garth* for 'fighting body', *rain of Odin* for 'shower of arrows', *tiles*

of *Odin* for 'shields', impart a distinct flavour to the poem, a flavour of which Morris must have been very glad to avail himself, seeing the kenning-like names he bestows upon the snakes that are charmed by Gunnar's harping as he sits, 'bare of his kingly weed', in Atli's 'worm-close':

Still hot was that close with the sun, and thronged with the coiling folk,
And about the feet of Gunnar their hissing mouths awoke:

But he heeded them not nor beheld them, and his hands in the harp-
strings ran,

And he sat him down in the midmost on a sun-scorched rock and wan...
Then uprose the Song of Gunnar, and sang o'er his crafty hands.

And the crests of the worms have fallen, and their flickering tongues
are still,

The Roller and the Coiler, and Greyback, lord of ill,
Grave-groper and Death-swaddler, the Slumberer of the Heath,
Gold-wallower, Venom-smiter, lie still, forgetting death,
And loose are the coils of Long-back; yea, all as soft are laid
As the kine in midmost summer about the elmy glade....

(Bk. IV. p. 336).

As 'Nordic' feeling, predominant in Morris, was by no means an alien thing to his English contemporaries, most of whom had been influenced, not, indeed, by Count Gobineau, but by writers like Carlyle, Froude,²⁰ Freeman, Kingsley, and others, the only cause that for a relatively long time could delay the ultimate success of this stirring poem, this undoubted epic, appears to have been the great vogue of Tennyson's Idylls. The bulk of the poetry-loving public found it impossible to worship at two shrines.

§ 3. *Charles Doughty's* huge poem 'The Dawn in Britain', which was brought out in 1906, and has never been reprinted yet, is generally referred to as an epic. W. H. Hudson (p. 97 of 'The Land's End') calls it a noble epic. It certainly is an ambitious attempt, its six volumes making an imposing show on any bookshelf. But it is not an epic in the sense that *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and *Sigurd the Volsung* are epics. It rather invites comparison with Firdausi's *Sháhnáma*, not as regards its style, but its structure.

A mere dip into, just a first acquaintance with, the book, might easily lead a superficial reader — if he had not been

²⁰ Compare: 'it seems as if Teutonic tradition, Teutonic feeling, and Teutonic thought had the first claim on English and German poets'. (In a critique on Arnold's poems, *Westminster Review*, 1854).