



JUNE 1968

DURHAM UNIVERSITY JOURNAL

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Published by the authority of
THE UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

FOUR SHILLINGS



The Durham University Journal

Vol. LXI 1

(New Series Vol. XXX No. 1)

DECEMBER 1968

Manuscripts and books for review should be sent to the editor, M. E. James, 43 North Bailey, Durham.

All correspondence on other matters relating to the Journal should be sent to the Registrar, University Office, Old Shire Hall, Durham. Subscriptions (13s. per annum) should be made payable to 'University of Durham'.

William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*: A Re-appraisal

I

The critical fortunes of William Morris's *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1877)* have undergone considerable variation. The poem was initially received with qualified approval by its reviewers, and it has never been so popular with the general reader as *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70). George Bernard Shaw, however, was much attracted by it; 'that is the stuff for me', he told Morris when the poet recited some of it, 'there is nothing like it': he even went so far as to value it as 'the greatest epic since Homer'.¹ Furthermore, several critics of fifty and sixty years ago gave the poem very high, indeed extravagant praise. Alfred Noyes (1908) designated it 'a great epic story told in magnificent chant which sweeps over and through the whole universe';² John Drinkwater (1912) rated it 'the supreme achievement of a great poet, and one of the very great poems of the modern world';³ while C. H. Herford (1919) wrote of it as 'a great and splendid poem, the one adequate presentment today in English of the story which Wagner has so magnificently clothed for the world in the universal language of music'.⁴ On the other hand, later critics have been more concerned to point out what they take to be the poem's serious shortcomings, than to discuss its merits. Dorothy M. Hoare (1937) sees a fundamental difference between the bias of Morris's mind towards dream and romance, and the realistic spirit of the Norse sagas; this leads him to turn the 'passion and tragedy' of the *Volsunga Saga*, his principal source, into 'sentiment and rhetoric' in *Sigurd*.⁵ Graham Hough (1949) contrasts with *Sigurd* not only the primary epics *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*, which are 'interpretations of the heroic age, not for the age itself, but for a world in which much of the heroic ethos survived', but also the secondary epic, the *Aeneid*, which 'uses old themes, but relates to its time by political purpose'; whereas in his view, Morris in *Sigurd*, 'takes a heroic theme and states it in his own idiom, but only as an example of a world which no longer exists, and values which have passed away'.⁶ E. P. Thompson (1955) believes that the poem never reaches epic stature in its own right, but merely 'suggests heroic values, as it were at second remove—in calling to mind the qualities of other epic literature of other times'.⁷ A very recent critic, however, Paul Thompson (1967) admits 'a special sympathy for *Sigurd*', and declares that 'unless prolonged research has dimmed the drama of the story itself and led to

* For convenience, references to *Sigurd* in the text are given from William Morris, *Collected Works*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London, 1910-15), vol. XII.

May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1936), vol. II, p. 137. Cited hereafter as May Morris.

Alfred Noyes, *William Morris* (London, 1908), p. 115.

John Drinkwater, *William Morris, a Critical Study* (London, 1912), p. 134.

C. H. Herford, 'Norse Myth in English Poetry', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, nos. 1 & 2 (1918-19), p. 85.

Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and Yeats in relation to Early Saga Literature* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 140.

Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London, 1949), p. 132.

E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1959), p. 229.

excessive pre-occupation with hints and details, criticism must yield to admiration. I too believe *Sigurd* to be a fine, and at present unjustly neglected work, which can yield much poetic pleasure, and which deserves to win more readers. This leads me to the following re-examination and re-appraisal.

Morris himself held *Sigurd* to be his central poetic achievement. 'It is', wrote his daughter May Morris, 'the work that, first and last—putting aside the eagerness of the moment which sometimes gives all precedence to the work in hand—he held most highly and wished to be remembered by. All his Icelandic study and travel, all his feeling for the North, led up to this and his satisfaction with it did not waver nor change to the last.' Like many Victorians, Morris regarded the Teutonic past of the English people with the greatest affection and veneration, and the *Volsung* story itself held a special place in his esteem. We read in the 'Translator's Preface' to the English version of the *Volsunga Saga* which he prepared with the aid of the Icelandic Eiríkr Magnússon (1889) that he considered it to be 'the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race first, and afterwards, when the changes of the world have 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'.¹⁰ Morris was fully aware of the manner in which the *Volsung* story is told in the saga, and he had a lively appreciation of the saga-man's art. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton (1869), he wrote of the last interview between Sigurd and Brynhild in the *Volsunga Saga*: '[It] touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature; there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness shown without a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without ornament. However, he believed that to write a living poem based on an ancient saga story, it was necessary, as he told his daughter, to 'shut the book, and write in your own way'. *Sigurd* is his attempt to re-tell the *Volsung* story in verse 'in his own way', using the *Volsunga Saga* as his main source, with minor borrowings from the elder *Edda* and the *Nibelungenlied*. The result is an original work of art which deserves to be considered in its own right, and not merely in relation to its sources—although of course such comparison is bound to be part of a total appreciation, as in the case of Hebbel's dramatic trilogy *Die Nibelungen* (1862) or Wagner's music-drama *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (first performed as a unity at Bayreuth, 1876). I shall, then, discuss Morris' achievement in *Sigurd* from the following points of view: structure, versification and diction, the use of description, imagery, the portrayal of character and the expression of emotion, moral values and philosophy of life. This will lead to a re-appraisal of the poem's stature.

II

The structure which Morris gives to his narrative is firm and well-proportioned. He does not recreate and remould the story in his own manner from diverse sources, as does Wagner: he is content to follow the broad outline of the incidents as recounted in the *Volsunga Saga*, (borrowing the main motivation of the final catastrophe from the *Nibelungenlied*); but by the judicious pruning of episodes and by emphasizing the main divisions in the story, he gives greater symmetry to the action than is found in the saga. The *Volsunga Saga* (compiled in the late thirteenth century) stitches together into a continuous prose narrative the incidents of the *Volsung* story found in earlier poetic lays, some of which have survived in the elder *Edda*, and some of which have been lost, but are presumed to lie behind certain portions of the narrative. As a result the saga lacks

¹⁰ Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (London, 1967), pp. v, 181.

¹¹ William Morris, *Collected Works*, ed. cit., vol. XII, p. xxiii.

¹² 'Translator's Preface to the *Volsunga Saga*', *Works*, ed. cit., vol. VII, p. 286.

¹³ May Morris, I, p. 472.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

shapeliness. R. G. Finch, its most recent editor (1965) divides it into five sections: (a) chapters 1-12, Sigurd's genealogy in narrative form; (b) chapters 13-25, Sigurd's birth and youthful exploits; (c) chapters 26-33, Sigurd's marriage to Gudrun, his death and Brynhild's suicide; (d) chapters 34-40, the death of Gunnar and Hogni, and Gudrun's vengeance; (e) chapters 41-44, Gudrun, Svanhild and Jormunrek.¹³ Morris omits the beginning of section (a) which deals with the earlier ancestors of Sigurd, and starts with the fortunes of his grandfather, Volsung. He cuts off entirely section (e), which has nothing to do with the main story. Otherwise there is a general correspondence as follows:

Volsunga Saga

Section (a)	<i>Sigurd the Volsung</i> Book I, 'Sigmund'.
Section (b)	Book II, 'Regin'.
Section (c)	Book III, 'Brynhild'.
Section (d)	Book IV, 'Gudrun'.

In Book IV, however, Morris follows the middle-high-German poem, the *Nibelungenlied* composed in the early thirteenth century) in making Gudrun take revenge on her fathers for Sigurd's death, while in the *Volsunga Saga*, in accordance with more primitive manners which placed blood-ties before those of marriage, she tries to help them against Atli's treachery. Otherwise in this book Morris is closer to the *Volsunga Saga* than to the *Nibelungenlied*. The effect of Morris's changes is that the main tragic story of Sigurd and Brynhild is placed firmly, in a strong light, in the centre of the poem; it is preceded by a prologue, dealing with the fortunes of Sigurd's grandfather Volsung, and his father Sigmund, and followed by an epilogue dealing with Gudrun's revenge and the destruction of the Niblungs. Furthermore, in the interests of continuity, in Book I, he reduces to a mere allusion the story of the struggle between Helgi (son of Sigmund and Brynhild) and King Hunding; while in Book II, he omits entirely the episode of Sigurd's revenge on the sons of Hunding for Sigmund's death. It is important to notice, however, that although by this pruning Morris gives shapeliness to his narrative, he does not reduce its scope to that of the true epic, which would be concentrated more narrowly on the central story of Sigurd and Brynhild. His comparative amplitude is romantic rather than epic. Further symmetry of structure is obtained by beginning each book with a description: in Book I, of Volsung's hall (*Works*, XII, p.1); in Book II, of the pleasant land of the Helper (pp. 61-2); in Book III, of the Niblungs and their mountain fastness (pp. 131-2); and in Book IV, of the Niblungs in their glory after Sigurd's death (pp. 244-5). Then again, the divisions of the story are given clear emphasis at the end of each book: Book I ends, after the death of Sigmund, with the rescue of his second wife Hjordis, who bearing Sigurd within her womb, is carried by King Elf to the land of his father, the Helper (pp. 57-61); Book II ends with the plighting of troth between Sigurd and Brynhild on the mountain of Hindfell (p. 130); Book III ends with the death of Brynhild and her burning on Sigurd's funeral pyre (pp. 238-44); while Book IV ends with Gudrun's casting of herself into the sea, after Atli has perished in the flames of his hall, to which she has set fire (p. 306).

III

Although, as we have seen, Morris prunes away some episodes from the *Volsunga Saga* narrative, nevertheless his poem is very much longer than the saga. As G. T. McDowell points out, 'taking the material presented in some 30,000 words of the 35,000, which compose the *Volsunga Saga*, Morris has expanded them into a poem of over 127,000 words'.¹⁴ He amplifies by the use of description, by imagery, by elaborating the feelings of the characters in lengthy speeches, and by moral observations. Thus the metre and diction chosen must be suitable not only for narration, but for these methods of

¹⁵ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. R. G. Finch (London, 1965), pp. xiii-xv.

¹⁶ G. T. McDowell, 'The Treatment of the *Volsunga Saga* by William Morris', *Scandinavian Notes and Studies*, vol. vii, no. 6 (February, 1923), p. 167.

amplification also. Here he is highly successful. The metre, evolved from that of the old ballads and in effect not unlike that of the *Nibelungenlied*, consists of rhymed couplets of basic anapaestic rhythm, having six beats in the line, with a medial pause. Morris himself delighted in this metre; Shaw tells us that he would recite from *Sigurd*, 'marking its swing by rocking from one foot to another like an elephant'.¹⁴ The diction, less mannered than that of his later prose romances, accentuates without pedantry the Anglo-Saxon element in English vocabulary, and employs occasional archaisms. This is appropriate to the remote and noble Northern world which he seeks to create in his poem and it is sufficiently flexible as a means of verbal expression. The excellence of metre and diction can be illustrated initially by the following passage presenting action: the defeat of Sigmund in his last battle, after Odin's intervention:

But lo, through the hedge of the war-shafts a mighty man there came,
One-eyed and seeming ancient, but his visage shone like flame:
Gleaming-grey was his kirtle, and his hood was cloudy blue;
And he bore a mighty twi-bill, as he waded the fight-sheaves through,
And stood face to face with Sigmund, and upheaved the bill to smite.
Once more round the head of the Volsung fierce glittered the Branstock's light,
The Sword that came from Odin; and Sigmund's cry once more
Rang out to the very heavens above the din of war.
Then clashed the meeting edges with Sigmund's latest stroke,
And in shivering shards fell earthward that fear of worldly folk.
But changed were the eyes of Sigmund, and the war-wrath left his face;
For that grey-clad mighty helper was gone, and in his place
Drave on the unbroken spear-wood 'gainst the Volsung's empty hands:
And there they smote down Sigmund, the wonder of all lands,
On the foemen, on the death-heap his deeds had piled that day.

(p. 54)

The aptness of this metre and diction for description, for the expression of emotion and for moral reflection will be illustrated by the quotations in the following section, dealing with these topics.

IV

Morris seeks to create a vividly described poetic world in which the events of the story take place, and from this his poem gains its distinctive aura. The period is not that of a definite historical era, but rather that of an idealized past, which fuses together elements from the heroic Teutonic age and from the middle ages. The natural scenery is that of ideal landscapes, although some of these seem to be suggested by Morris' memories of Iceland, and others by those parts of rural England dearest to him; Oxfordshire, near Kelmscott Manor, and Epping Forest in Essex. He presents this poetic world not merely as a place of imaginative escape from the contemporary Victorian environment, although this is clearly part of his intention; he criticizes by implication the social and mean aspects of that environment, which he so much hated. The *Volsunga Saga* supplies at times a few hints which Morris can expand, but the memorable description in *Sigurd* are almost entirely the product of his own imagination.

The atmosphere of a remote, unspoilt, yet dignified early world is created at the outset by the description of Volsung's hall:

There was a dwelling of Kings ere the world was waxen old;
Dukes were the door-wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold;
Earls were the wrights that wrought it and silver nailed its doors;
Earls' wives were the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors,
And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.

(p. 1)

¹⁴ May Morris, II, p. xxxvii.

Something also of primitive wonder surrounds the 'crowned stem, the Branstock':

... amidst of its midmost hall-floor sprang up a mighty tree,
That reared its blessings roofward, and weathered the roof-tree dear
With the glory of the summer and the garland of the year.
(Ibid.)

Here the atmosphere is predominantly early Teutonic, as also in the description of Gnipir's hall, 'gleaming-green':

As the house of under-ocean where the wealth of the greedy is split;
with its high seat:

Of the tooth of the sea-beast fashioned ere the Dwarf-kind came to nought.

(p. 97)

At other times however, the dwellings in the poem suggest more those of the early middle ages, as Brynhild's 'white walled-house . . . with a golden roof-ridge' in Lyndale, having within, its many-pillared feast hall, and storied tapestries (pp. 144-5). The walled city of the Niblungs, with the house of King Giuki, built on the ridge of a hill protruding from the mountains, reminds us also of the middle ages, although it is surrounded by a venerable and mysterious atmosphere:

But lo, the burg at the ridge-end! Have the Gods been building again
Since they watched the aimless Giants pile up the wall of the plain,
The house for none to dwell in? Or in what days lived the lord
Who 'neath those thunder-forges upreared that battle's ward?
Or was not the Smith at his work, and the blast of his forges awake,
And the world's heart poured from the mountain for that ancient people's sake?
For as waves on the iron river of the days whereof nothing is told
Stood up the many towers, so stark and sharp and cold;
But dark-red and worn and ancient as the midmost mountain-sides
Is the wall that goeth about them; and its mighty compass hides
Full many a dwelling of man whence the reek now goeth aloft,
And the voice of the house-abiders, the sharp sounds blent with the soft:
But one house in the midst is unhidden and high up o'er the wall it goes;
Aloft in the wind of the mountains its golden roof-ridge glows,
And down mid its buttressed feet is the wind's voice never still;
And the day and the night pass o'er it and it changes to their will,
And whiles is it glassy and dark, and whiles is it white and dead,
And whiles is it grey as the sea-mead, and whiles is it angry red;
And it shimmers under the sunshine and grows black to the threat of the storm
And dusk its gold roof glimmers when the rain-clouds over it swarm,
And bright in the first of the morning its flame does it uplift,
When the light clouds rend before it and along its furrows drift.

(p. 152)

Within this city is the garden, as from an illuminated Book of Hours, with its 'rose-hung fence' in which Gudrun walks, 'betwixt the rose and the lily' on the morning after her prophetic dream of the falcon (p. 132).

Throughout the poem Morris gives, in passing, small details of interior setting, which do much to create a sense of reality in his imaginative world. The Volsungs and the Goths retire to 'gold-hung beds' during Siggeir's wooing of Signy (p. 4); Gudrun and Brynhild handle 'Dwarf-wrought treasures with their fingers fair and fine' as they sit in Brynhild's house in Lyndale (p. 135); Sigurd finds Brynhild in her house seated on 'dark-blue cloths' (p. 145); he notices the horn in which Grimhild gives him the fatal draught of forgetfulness—

... how fair it was scored
With the cunning of the Dwarf-kind and the masters of the sword

(p. 166)

at his wedding feast Giuki's hall is richly decorated:

... the bench-cloths beaten with gold;
 And the walls are strange and wondrous with the noble stories told
 For new-hung is the ancient dwelling with the golden spoils of the south
 while after his death, Brynhild stands long gazing at his body, by a 'carven pillar'
 the hall (p. 237). (p. 177)

The descriptions of natural scenery are of key importance in the creation of the imaginative ambience of the poem. They range from the rich peacefulness of the land of the Helper:

... fair-fruited, many-peopled, it lies a goodly strip,
 Twixt the mountains cloudy-headed and the sea-flood's surging lip.

(p. 61)

and the many-rivered pastoral land of Lyndale, with its game-filled forests (perhaps suggested by Epping):

Where the level sun comes dancing down the oaks in the early morn:

to the awesome grandeur of landscapes inspired by Morris's recollection of Iceland's waterfalls of Andvari:

(p. 140)

... where the glittering foam-bow glows,
 And the huge flood leaps the rock-wall and a green arch over it throws.

(p. 81)

the pass leading to the Glittering Heath:

By the blackness of the mountains, and barred aback and in face
 By the empty night of the shadow; a windless silent place:

(p. 107)

or the mountain of Hindfell, seen through Sigurd's eyes as he approaches it:

So he rideth higher and higher, and the light grows great and strange,
 And forth from the clouds it flickers, till at noon they gather and change,
 And settle thick on the mountain, and hide its head from sight;
 But the winds in a while are awakened, and day bettereth ere the night,
 And, lifted a measureless mass o'er the desert crag-walls high,
 Cloudless the mountain riseth against the sunset sky,
 The sea of the sun grown golden, as it ebbs from the day's desire;
 And the light that afar was a torch is grown a river of fire,
 And the mountain is black above it, and below is it dark and dun;
 And there is the head of Hindfell as an island in the sun.

(p. 120)

Further richness is given to Morris's poetic world by his habit of referring to the seasons, sometimes simply to indicate the passage of time, but at other times to harmonize with the mood of the action. The early hope attached to Sigurd is associated with Spring; his birth occurs in April, and he parts from Regin on an April evening, after having asked him to forge a sword anew from the broken shards of Sigmund's blade:

... the tide was an even of gold,
 And sweet in the April even were the fowl-kind singing their best;
 And the light of life smote Sigurd, and the joy that knows no rest,
 And the fond unnamed desire, and the hope of hidden things,
 And he wended fair and lovely to the house of the feasting Kings.

(p. 95)

He comes to the city of the Niblungs in summer (p. 156-7), and in the 'stark mid-winter' joins them in their wars (p. 157). It is in the autumn that he declares his ill-fated love for Gudrun, seeking her in the garden:

... mid the yellowing leafage, and the golden blossoms spent.

(p. 174)

and it is in this sad season that he weds her (p. 177).

There are too scattered throughout the poem many references to the passage of day and night, to the sun and the moon. Usually these merely mark the smaller divisions in the narrative, but at times they too blend with the mood of a particular moment in the story. For example, Sigurd awakens Brynhild on Hindfell at the dawn, and their new love and hope spring up in the new day:

But therewith the sun rose upward and lightened all the earth,
 And the light flashed up to the heavens from the rims of the glorious girth;
 But they twain arose together, and with both her palms outspread,
 And bathed in the light returning, she cried aloud and said:
 "All hail, O Day and thy Sons, and thy kin of the coloured things!
 Hail, following Night, and thy Daughter that leaeth thy wavering wings!
 Look down with unangry eyes on us today alive,
 And give us the hearts victorious, and the gain for which we strive!"

(p. 124)

After Brynhild has taught Sigurd her wisdom, and they have pledged troth, evening and night come, rich too with joy and life:

So the day grew old about them and the joy of their desire,
 And eve and sunset came, and faint grew the sunset fire,
 And the shadowless death of the day was sweet in the golden tide;
 But the stars shone forth on the world, and the twilight changed and died:
 And sure if the first of man-folk had been born to that starry night,
 And heard no tales of the sunrise, he had never longed for the light;
 But Earth longed amidst her slumber, as 'neath the night she lay,
 And fresh and all abundant abode the deeds of Day.

(p. 130)

Then again, the description of the passage of a day and a night heightens the emotional tension of the scene where Sigurd sits armed in the house of the Niblungs, awaiting back, before he goes to make his last plea to Brynhild:

But the morn to the noon hath fallen, and the afternoon to the eve,
 And the beams of the westering sun the Niblung wall-stones leave,
 And yet sitteth Sigurd alone; then the sun sinketh down into night,
 And the moon ariseth in heaven, and the earth is pale with her light.
 And there sitteth Sigurd the Volsung in the gold and the harness of war
 That was won from the heart-wise Fafnir and the guarded Treasure of yore,
 But pale is the Helm of Aweing, and wan are the ruddy rings:

* * * * *

... so sat Sigurd the Volsung till the night waxed moonless and grey,
 Till the chill dawn spread o'er the lowland, and the purple fells grew clear.
 In the cloudless summer dawn-dusk, and the Sun was drawing near:
 Then reddened the Burg of the Niblungs, and the walls of the ancient folk,
 And a wind came down from the mountains and the living things awoke
 And cried out for need and rejoicing; till, lo the rim of the sun
 Showed over the eastern ridges, and the new day was begun;
 And the beams rose higher and higher, and white grew the Niblung wall,
 And the sunlit flooded the courts, and throughout the chambers streamed;
 Then bright as the flames of the heaven the Helm of Aweing gleamed,
 Then clashed the red rings of the Treasure, as Sigurd stood on his feet,
 And went through the echoing chambers, as the winds in the wall-nook beat

(p. 221)

Similarly the emotional power of the events preceding Sigurd's death is enhanced by the description of the moonlight in his bed-chamber lighting up his staring eyes during Gufform's first two unsuccessful visits to kill him, and by that of the dawn which heralds his slaying:

Now dieth moon and candle, and though the day be nigh
The roof of the hall fair-built seems far aloof as the sky
But a glimmer glows on the pavement and the ernes on the roof-ridge stir

(p. 229)

V

There is little imagery in *Sigurd*, but Morris occasionally uses apt similes, drawn from nature or from the life of that ideal past in which the poem is set. These not only illustrate the matter in hand, but serve to give further richness to the 'world' of the poem. Sigurd is often compared to a tree; when he draws Odin's sword from Branstock:

A little while he stood there mid the glory of the hall,
Like the best of the trees of the garden, when the April sunbeams fall
On its blossomed boughs in the morning, and tell of its days to be.

(p. 8)

In the fight in Siggeir's hall to avenge the death of Volsung:

... firm in the midst of the onset Sigurd the Volsung stood,
And stirred no more for the sword-strokes than the oldest oak of the wood
Shall shake to the herd-boys' whiffles . . .

(p. 37)

After his death the Volsung house seems overthrown:

Lo, the noble oak of the forest with its feet in the flowers and grass,
How the winds that bear the summer o'er its topmost branches pass,
And the wood-deer dwell beneath it, and the fowl in its fair twigs sing,
And there it stands in the forest, an exceeding glorious thing:
Then come the axes of men, and low it lies on the ground,
And the crane comes out of the southland, and its nest is nowhere found,
And bare and shorn of its blossoms is the house of the deer of the wood.

(p. 58)

However the house will live again in Sigurd:

But the tree is a golden dragon; and fair it floats on the flood,
And beareth the kings and the earl-folk, and is shield-hung all without:
And it seeth the blaze of the beacons, and heareth the war-God's shout.
There are tidings wherever it cometh, and the tale of its time shall be told.
A dear name it hath got like a king, and a fame that groweth not old.

(Ibid.)

Following the generally agreed opinion that Sigurd was originally a sun-god, Morris frequently compares him to the sun. King Elf cannot hope to keep the young Sigurd with him for ever:

"Forsooth no more may we hold thee than the hazel corpse may hold
The sun of the early dawning, that turneth it all into gold."

(p. 70)

When Sigurd visits Gripri, before going out into the world:

... there stood the mighty Volsung, and leaned on the hidden Wrath;
As the earliest sun's uprising o'er the sea-plain draws a path
Whereby men sail to the Eastward and the dawn of another day,
So the image of King Sigurd on the gleaming pavement lay.

(p. 98)

In the house of the Niblungs, 'the cloudy people' his brightness is dimmed; Grimhild comes between him and Brynhild:

... e'en as a rainless cloud
Ere the first of the tempest ariseth the latter sun doth shroud,
And men look round and shudder

(p. 200)

Images from nature are used further, to illustrate how the glee of the feast submerges Siggy's warning that her marriage to Siggeir will bring disaster:

... the speech and the song and the laughter
Went over the words of boding as the tide of the norland main
Sweeps over the hidden skerry, the home of the shipman's bane.

(p. 3)

to express the beauty of Gudrun at her wedding:

... her face is a rose of the morning by the night tide framed about.

(p. 175)

to show how the Huns fall before Hogni in the last battle in Atli's hall:

... but lo, have ye seen the corn,
While yet men grind the sickle, by the windstreak overborne
When the sudden rain sweeps downward, and summer growth black,
And the smitten wood-side roareth 'neath the driving thunder-wrack?

(p. 281)

The group of similes drawn from human life and pursuits is smaller than that drawn from nature, but it contains some equally felicitous images. For example, the councillors and warriors of the Huns wait with apprehension for Atli to speak, after the defeat of the Niblungs:

As they of the merchant-city behold the shield-hung ships
Sweep slow through the windless haven with their gaping heads of gold,
And they know not their nation and names, nor hath aught of their errand been told.

(p. 287)

Then again, human activity and nature are combined in a memorable extended simile to illustrate the change in Sigurd's face, when under the influence of Grimhild's magic draught, he forgets Brynhild:

As folk of the summer feasters, who have fallen to feast in the morn,
And have wreathed their brows with roses ere the first of the clouds was born;
Beneath the boughs were they sitting, and the long leaves twinkled about,
And the wind with their laughter was mingled, nor held a back from their shout;
Amidst of their harp it lingered, from the mouth of their horn went up,
Round the reek of their roast was it breathing, o'er the flickering face of their cup—
—Lo now, why sit they so heavy, and why is their joy-speech dead,
Why are the long leaves drooping, and the fair wind hushed o'erhead?—
Look out from the sunless boughs to the yellow-murky east.
How the clouds are woven together o'er that afternoon of feast;
There are heavier clouds above them, and the sun is a hidden wonder,
It rains in the nether heaven, and the world is afraid with the thunder;
E'en so in the hall of the Niblungs, and the holy joyous place,
Sat the earls on the marvel gazing, and the sorrow of Sigurd's face.

(p. 167)

VI

To tell a tale well, to delight the sensibility by descriptions and imagery, and to do still more, may have satisfied Morris in *The Life and Death of Jason* and in some of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, but this fails to content him in *Sigurd*. H. H. Sparling tells us that Morris particularly prized the Volsung story 'because it seemed to him to focus and confront all the dominant passions and forces of life'.¹⁶ In his retelling of the story in *Sigurd*, he wishes to involve the reader in the thoughts and feelings of his characters and to stir profoundly his emotions. The characters are recognizably based on their originals in the *Volsunga Saga*, but they are made conformable to the ideal poetic world which they inhabit. Some primitive and savage behaviour is omitted or toned down. In the saga Sigurd bites out the tongue of the she-wolf which comes to

¹⁶ H. H. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris, Master Craftsman* (London, 1924), p. 100.

devour him as he sits in the stocks where Siggeir has placed him; in *Sigurd* he bursts from his bonds and kills the wolf by smiting her with his fetters and then strangles her (p. 21). Then again, in the saga he kills Sigry's two sons by Siggeir when they pass cowardly and thus useless to aid him in his revenge; in *Sigurd* he spares the one son sent to him, and returns him home unharmed (pp. 25-6). In the saga Gudrun gives Atli the children's hearts to eat, as part of her revenge for her brothers; in *Sigurd* Morris omits this entirely. In the saga Gunnar plays his harp with his toes in the snake-pit into which Atli has cast him, his hands being tied behind his back, but in *Sigurd* his hands are free and he uses them to play in the usual more dignified way (pp. 296-9). As has been noticed, Morris makes Gudrun revenge Sigurd's death on her brothers, whereas in the saga in accordance with earlier manners, she tries to help them. Some critics have regretted what they take to be Morris's surrender to Victorian prudishness by reducing the number of nights which Sigry spends with Sigmund in his forest retreat from that to one, and for omitting any reference to Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild. However these changes too are consonant with his aim of presenting an idealized and dignified part. Related to this is the way in which, as Andrew Lang points out, Morris makes human and intelligible the story of Regni, Otter, Fafnir and Andvari's hoard. Something of primitive magic has gone, but once more the characters have been made to harmonize with the predominant atmosphere of the poem.

Morris introduces a delicate symbolism into the contrasted descriptions of Sigurd and the Niblungs. Sigurd is fair-haired (e.g. p. 97), his armour is golden (e.g. p. 131) he is associated, as noticed above, with the sun; he is compared also to Baldur, the god of the summer sun and the most beloved of the Aesir; as he enters Lyndale:

All eyes are turned to beholding the eastward-lying glade,
For thereby comes something glorious, as though an earthly sun
Were lit by the orb departing, lest the day should be wholly done;
Lo now, as they stand astonished, a wonder they behold,
For a warrior cometh riding, and his gear is all of gold:
And grey is the steed and mighty beneath that lord of war,
And a treasure of gold he beareth, and the gems of the ocean floor:
Now they deem the war-steed wondrous and the treasure strange they deem,
But so exceeding glorious doth the harness'd rider seem,
That men's hearts are all exalted as he draweth nigh and nigher,
And there are they abiding in fear and great desire:
For they look on the might of his limbs, and his waving locks they see,
And his glad eyes clear as the heavens, and the wreath of the summer tree
That girdeth the dread of his war-helm, and they wonder at his sword,
And the tinkling rings of his hauberk, and the rings of the ancient Hoard:
And they say: Are the Gods on the earth? did the world change yesternight?
Are the sons of Odin coming, and the days of Baldur the bright?

(p. 141)

On the other hand the Niblungs are 'swart-haired' (e.g. p. 157), their armour is 'coal-black' (p. 219), they are associated with the clouds which surround their mountain-hall (e.g. p. 131). The killing of Sigurd at their hands is like the overshadowing of the sun by the clouds, and something of the brightness of life seems gone after Sigurd is dead. It should also be noticed here briefly that some changes in character are made in accordance with Morris's moral aims. One of these is to stress the evil of greed; in the saga Gunnar's main reason for wanting Sigurd killed is that he wishes to retain Brynhild's love; in *Sigurd* Morris makes it that he covets the treasure (p. 219) and again, while in the saga Atli's animus against the Niblungs is partly because of Brynhild's brother and wishes to avenge her, in *Sigurd* he is not her brother and Morris motivates his actions against the Niblungs by desire to possess the gold (pp. 246, 256, 277, 288, etc.). Furthermore, Sigurd is made something of a social reformer with a concern

"As quoted by A. Vallance, *William Morris: his Art, his Writings and his Public Life* (London, 1909), p. 215.

for the downtrodden—but a fuller discussion of these matters is more appropriately deferred until the next section.

Morris makes his characters in *Sigurd* much more copiously articulate than their originals in the saga. However, in Books I, II and IV the emotions which they experience (though powerful, are uncomplicated. The grief of Sigry over the death of her brothers (pp. 18-19), the sorrow of Hlorids over Sigmund (pp. 54-6), the joy at Sigurd's birth (p. 63) and in Brynhild's greeting to the sun (p. 124), the greed of Atli (pp. 277-9, 288, 30-1), the bitter vengeance of Gudrun (pp. 251-6, 276-7, 280) and the defiance in adversity of Gunnar (pp. 284-5, 290-1, 296-8), are finely but simply rendered. The emotions which spring naturally from the situations in these books are equally simple. The excitement which the reader feels in the battles (e.g. pp. 15-16, 53-4, 110-11, 79-80), the awe when Sigry returns to die in the flames of Siggeir's hall (pp. 140-1), or at Gudrun's slaying of Atli (pp. 304-6), are vivid, but certainly not complex. However, in Book III (probably because the situation has some parallel to Morris's own private experience of a tri-angular situation between himself, Janey and Rossetti) the emotional tension which builds up between Sigurd, Gudrun, Gunnar and Brynhild and the presentation of their states of mind, is of a more complicated order, and is closer to the mentality of the nineteenth century than to that of the Teutonic heroic age. While it may be true that the feelings of the characters are not rendered with the same kind of 'warmth' which Morris had given to some of the poems in his early *Defence of Gædewere* (1858), nevertheless the reader does become deeply involved with the characters, and I think that the unprejudiced will agree that Morris has given a worthy emotional 'centre' to his poem. Enthusiasm for the passionate brevity of the *Volsunga Saga* should not necessarily prevent appreciation of Morris's different but powerful movement. It will not be possible for reasons of space to trace this build-up of emotion in detail, but some of the important stages in its development can be indicated briefly. In the midst of his success and acclamation in his earlier days with the Niblungs, Sigurd's thoughts turn naturally to Brynhild:

... he sits by the Kings on the high-seat, and wise of men he seems,
And of many a hidden marvel past thought of man he dreams:
On the Head of Hindfell he thinketh, and how fair the woman was,
And how that his love hath blossomed, and the fruit shall come to pass . . .

(p. 164)

After he has drunk the fatal potion of Grimhild, all this is changed:

... the heart was changed in Sigurd; as though it ne'er had been
His love of Brynhild perished as he gazed on the Niblung Queen;
Brynhild's beloved body was e'en as a wasted hearth,
No more for bale or blessing, for plenty or for dearth.

(p. 167)

As the feast falls on the feasters because of Sigurd's silence and sorrow:

Late groweth the night o'er the people, but no word hath Sigurd said,
Since he laughed o'er the glittering Dwarf-gold and raised the cup to his head:
No wrath in his eyes is arisen, no hope, nor wonder, nor fear;
Yet is Sigurd's face as boding to folk that behold him afar.
As the mountain that broodeth the fire o'er the town of man's delights,
As the sky that is cursed nor thunders, as the God that is smitten nor smiles.

(p. 168)

He rides off into the night, in mental turmoil, but on returning thrusts by 'the grief of forgetting' (pp. 168-71). The beauty of Gudrun, unopposed by memories of Brynhild, now arouse love in his heart; he declares his love, and Gudrun's response is rendered with sympathetic insight:

Then he taketh the cup and her hands, and she boweth meekly adown,
Till she feels the arms of Sigurd round her trembling body thrown:
A little while she doubteth in the mighty slayer's arms
As Sigurd's love unhop'd-for her barren bosom warms.

A little while she struggleth with the fear of his mighty fame,
That grows with her hope's fulfilment; rith rises with wonder and shame;
For the kindness grows in her soul, as forgotten anguish dies,
And her heart feels Sigurd's sorrow in the breast whereon she lies;
Then the fierce love overwhelms her, and as wax in the fervent fire
All dies and is forgotten in the sweetness of desire.
And close she clingeth to Sigurd, as one that hath gotten the best
And fair things of the world she deemeth, as a place of infinite rest.

(p. 173)

A brief period of wedded joy ensues, to be shattered by Brynhild's arrival as Gunnar betrouth. When she hears that Sigurd is under the Niblung's roof, Brynhild betrays her emotion, but as soon as Sigurd sees her, his memory returns, and he recognizes the sadness in her voice:

All grief, sharp scorn, sore longing, stark death in her voice he knew,
But gone forth is the doom of the Norns, and what shall he answer thereto,
While the death that amendeth lingers? . . .

(p. 201)

Brynhild's grief and her wanderings abroad are finely presented (pp. 202-3), as Gunnar's unhappiness:

But of Gunnar the Niblung they say it, that the bloom of his youth is o'er,
And many are manhood's troubles, and they burden him oft and sore.
He dwells with Brynhild his wife, with Grimhild his mother he dwells,
And noble things of his greatness, of his joy, the rumour tells;
Yet oft and oft of an even he thinks of that tale of the night,
And the shame springs fresh in his heart at his brother Sigurd's might;
And the wonder riseth within him, what deed did Sigurd there,
What gift to the King hath he given: and he looks on Brynhild the fair,
The fair face never smiling, and the eyes that know no change,
And he deems in the bed of the Niblungs she is but cold and strange:
And the Lie is laid between them, as the Sword lay while ago.

(p. 204)

Sigurd now understands all, and sees into the hearts of Hogni, of Gunnar and of Brynhild; but he is helpless:

And the shadowy wings of the Lie, that with hand unwiting he led
To the Burg of the ancient people, brood over-board and bed;
And the hand of the hero falleth, and seared is the sight of the wise,
And good is at one with evil till the new-born death shall arise.

(p. 205)

The quarrel between Gudrun and Brynhild forms one of the most powerful scenes in the poem. On a fine summer morning Brynhild goes to the river to bathe, and sees Gudrun already there. Immediate hostility is aroused; Gudrun turns round:

. . . with her face yet dreamy with the love of yesternight,
Till the flush of anger changed it: but Brynhild's face grew white . . .

(p. 206)

Gudrun accepts Brynhild's invitation to enter first, but taunts her with her own possession of Sigurd as husband:

" . . . I linger not, since thou biddest, for the courteous of women thou art;
And the love of the night and the morning is heavy at my heart;
For the best of the world was beside me, while thou layest with Gunnar the King"

(p. 207)

Brynhild wades upstream, and when Gudrun asks why she leaves her below, she replies that the better place is for her, as it shall ultimately be in Odin's hall, for her husband is the best of men, and rode the fire to win her. This goads Gudrun into showing the ring of Andvari on her finger, and revealing that it was Sigurd who rode through the flames, in the shape of Gunnar. Brynhild, overcome by shame, flees over the meadow:

As though flames were burning beneath it, and red gleeds the daisies were:
But fair with face triumphant from the water Gudrun goes,
And with many a thought of Sigurd the heart within her glows.

(p. 208)

A fine human touch is added when Gudrun, quickly regretting her folly in revealing the secret which Sigurd had charged her never to tell, seeks Brynhild to ask forgiveness, and can receive it only on terms impossible for her—that she should say that Gunnar, not Sigurd, gave her the ring (pp. 209-10). Brynhild's grief at her betrayal is powerfully rendered:

"O Sigurd, O my Sigurd, what now shall give me back
One word of thy loving kindness from the tangle and the wrack?
O Norns, fast bound from helping, O Gods that never weep,
Ye have left stark death to help us, and the semblance of our sleep.
Yet I sleep and remember Sigurd; and I wake and nought is there,
Save the golden bed of the Niblungs, and the hangings fashioned fair:"

(p. 213)

The last great scene between Sigurd and Brynhild is particularly moving; Sigurd makes his final appeal, only to receive Brynhild's crushing refusal:

"O live, live, Brynhild beloved! and thee on the earth will I wed,
And put away Gudrun the Niblung—and all those shall be as the dead!"
But so swelled the heart within him as he cast the speech abroad,
That the golden wall of the battle, and fence unrent by the sword,
The red rings of the uttermost ocean on the breast of Sigurd broke:
And he saw the eyes of Brynhild, and turned from the word she spake:
"I will not wed thee Sigurd, nor any man alive."

(p. 223-4)

Morris wrote some very beautiful lines for this scene, full of reminiscences of the early life of Sigurd and Brynhild,¹ but he rejected them (rightly one feels) for the harsher, more heroic confrontation which he has given us. After Brynhild has secured Sigurd's death and thus assuaged her wounded honour, Morris allows her to reaffirm her love for him just before her suicide when she asks that her body be placed beside his on the funeral pyre:

"There lay me adown by Sigurd and my head beside his head:
But ere ye leave us sleeping, draw his Wrath from out the sheath,
And lay that Light of the Branstock, and the blade that fringed death,
Betwixt my side and Sigurd's, as it lay that while ago,
When once in one bed together we twain were laid alone:
How then when the flames flare upward may I be left behind?
How then may the road he wendeth be hard for my feet to find?
How then in the gates of Valhall may the door of the gleaming ring
Clash to on the heel of Sigurd, as I follow on my King?"

(p. 242)

VII.

Morris gives added depth to *Sigurd* by expressing in it a philosophy of life, which is a kind of ancient Norse attitudes, and the fruits of his own thinking. This philosophy grows naturally out of the story as he tells it, and while not obtrusive, it plays an important part in the reader's total response to the poem, lingering long in the memory after details of the narrative have faded. Morris admitted the desire of the ancient Norseman to leave behind a good name, to prefer a short and glorious life to an existence long and unrenowned.² Signy returning to die in the flames of Siggeir's hall recommends the outlook to Sigmund (p. 140); while Gripit forecasts for Sigurd:

"Short day and long remembrance, fair summer of the North!"

(p. 99)

¹ Morris, *Works*, vol. XII, pp. xxvi-xxix.

² J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. (London, 1899), vol. I, p. 333.

Morris admired also the Norse courage in the face of danger and adversity, and the stoical acceptance of the decrees of fate.²⁰ He stresses the courage of Sigurd, before the hero sets out in his adventures, Gripri asks him what sighs he would see:

"As the Gods would I see", said Sigurd, "though death light up the land."
(p. 98)

what hopes he would have:
"Thy hope and the Gods'", said Sigurd, "though the grief lie hard on my heart."
(Ibid.)

The young warrior exults in his combat with Fafnir:

Then was Sigurd stirred by his glory, and he strove with the swaddling of Death;
He turned in the pit on the highway, and the grave of the Glittering Heath,
He laughed and smote with the laughter and thrust up over his head,
Then he leapt from the pit and the grave, and the rushing river of blood,
And fulfilled with the joy of the War-God on the face of the earth he stood
With red sword high uplifted, with wrathful glittering eyes;
And he laughed at the heavens above him for he saw the sun arise,
And Sigurd gleamed on the desert, and shone in the newborn light
And the wind in his raiment wavered, and all the world was bright.

(p. 110)

He inspires the Niblungs to warlike deeds (e.g. pp. 157-61) and although mortally wounded, he slays his killer Guttorm before he can escape (p. 230). Great courage is shown too by Gunnar as he sings defiantly in Atli's hall, although he knows that he is doomed (pp. 290-1); and by Hogni who laughs at Atli's sword-men come to cut out his heart (pp. 292-3).

Instances of refusal to avoid the stern decrees of fate are found throughout the poem. Sigurd has foreknowledge of the disaster which her marriage to Sigger will bring on the family, but she will not avoid the marriage (p. 3). Volsung will not give up his visit to Sigger, although warned of his intended treachery:

"In peace will I go to his bidding let the spae-wrights ban or bless;
And no man now or hereafter of Volsung's blenching shall tell."

(p. 12)

Sinfioti twice refuses a poisoned drink offered by Borghild who wishes to avenge her brother, but when at the third offering, Sigmund, drowsy with wine, recommends his son to 'let the lip then strain it out':

Then Sinfioti laughed and answered: "I drink unto Odin then,
And the dwellers up in God-home, the lords of the lives of men."

(p. 47)

Regin recognizes that he cannot withstand his fate to be slain by a beardless youth (p. 68), while Fafnir at his death speaks of the Norms and their power which none can overcome (p. 111). Sigurd accepts the power of the Norms over the future before he comes to Fafnir's lair (p. 106), and he refuses to fight fate after Brynhild has been married to Gunnar, until his last fore-doomed appeal to her. Hogni and Gunnar will not heed the pleadings of their wives not to go to Atli's city where danger threatens them (pp. 365-8). Significantly the one character to reproach fate and the gods is Grimhild, 'the over-wise' (pp. 271-2), who by her scheming and magic has hubristically sought to build up beyond measure the fortunes of the Niblung house, only to contribute in the end its utter ruin.

The attitude of the warriors to death and fate will be paralleled by that of the goddesses themselves in their last great but hopeless fight against their enemies—the giants, monsters, and even fire itself, at the time of *Ragnarök*—'the doom of the gods' (described in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*). In *Sigurd* Morris refers quite frequently to *Ragnarök* and the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 335. May Morris, I, pp. 447, 453, 450, *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends*, ed. Phillip Henderson (London, 1950), p. 186.

he makes his characters recollect it more than was usual with the Norsemen themselves. At the very outset of the poem there is reference to the coming disaster:

... even in that world's beginning rose a murmur now and again
Of the midward time and the falling and the last of the latter days,
And the entering in of the terror and the death of the People's Praise.

(i.e. Baldr, p. 1)

Volsung is not disconcerted when he cannot pull out Odin's sword from the Branstock. He is content with his old blade, which will serve him at *Ragnarök* when he fights in the ranks of the heroes of Valhalla:

"... this, my hand's first fellow, will I bear to the grave-mound's rest,
Nor wield meanwhile another: Yea this shall I have in hand
When mid the host of Odin in the Day of Doom I stand."

(p. 7)

In a passing mood of bitterness after the deaths of Volsung and his sons, Sigmund had thought of denying to the gods his help at *Ragnarök*, but at his death Odin claims him for his own (p. 54). Regin taunts Sigurd for his confidence before his fight with Fafnir, asking him if he will even hope:

"... when the day at last comes round
For the dread and the Dusk of the Gods, and the kin of the Wolf is unbound;
When thy sword shall hew the fire, and the wildfire heath thy shield . . . ?"

(p. 105)

Sigurd asks the dying Fafnir the name of the island, where in the last battle the gods will fight with Surt and the Sons of the Flame'. In his reply Fafnir indicates that there is yet to be another battle between himself and Sigurd, which will be their final contest:

"Unshapen is it hight;
There the fallow blades shall be shaken and the Dark and the Day shall smite
When the Bridge of the Gods is broken, and their white steeds swim the sea,
And the uttermost field is stricken, last strife of thee and me."

(p. 112)

However, according to the myth, regeneration follows, Baldr returns to the earth, and a new era of peace and joy ensues. Morris compares the young Sigurd riding to see Grettir to Baldr, in the early days of the world:

Lo, lo, the horse and the rider! So once maybe it was,
When over the Earth unpeopled the youngest God would pass;
And he adds:

But never again meseemeth shall such a sight behide,
Till over a world unwroughtful new-born shall Baldr ride.

(p. 97)

There is an anticipation of the regenerate world in the deeds of Sigurd after Brynhild has taught him her wisdom. Here Morris, going beyond the ethos of the saga, and the outlook of the Norsemen, recommends to the reader some of his own hopes for the regeneration of society. When Sigurd first comes to the court of King Giuki, he declares his errand:

"For peace I bear unto thee, and to all the kings of the earth,
Who bear the sword aright, and are crowned with the crown of worth;
But unpace to the lords of evil, and the battle and the death;
And the edge of the sword to the traitor, and the flame to the slanderous breath:
And I would that the loving were loved, and I would that the weary should sleep,
And that man should hearken to man, and that he that soweth should reap."

(pp. 154-5)

After his return from his winter campaign with the Niblungs, the minstrels praise him for deeds dear to the heart of Morris, the Victorian reformer:
And they sing of the golden Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And the lowly man exalted and the mighty brought alow:

And they say when the sun of summer shall come aback to the land,
It shall shine on the fields of the tiller that fears no heavy hand;
That the sheaf shall be for the plougher, and the loaf for him that sowed,
Through every furrowed acre where the Son of Sigmund rode.

(p. 158)

The campaigns continue in the spring, as do the praises of Sigurd:

Yes, they sing the song of Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And they sing of the prison's rending and the tyrant laid a low,
And the golden thieves' abasement, and the stiling of the churl,
And the mocking of the dastard where the chasing edges whirled;
And they sing of the outland maidens that thronged round Sigurd's hand,
And they sing 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 the 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 the lowly people-seen.

(p. 161)

When Sigurd and Brynhild are dead, the hope of better days on earth is over:

Till the new sun beams on Baldur, and the happy sealess shore . . .

(p. 244)

One of Sigurd's finest traits is that he is not greedy for treasure or for power (e.g. p. 161), and Morris goes beyond the *Volunga Saga* to show how most of the men in the tale springs from desire of these things. Volung and his sons welcome Sigurd to their own undoing. Reidmar covets the gold of Andvari, and having obtained it killed by his son Fafnir (pp. 75-87). Fafnir, having become a great serpent, guards the treasure, but loses both it and his life to Sigurd (pp. 110-12), who has been urged to seek him by the greedy Regin who covets the treasure for himself. Regin in turn killed by Sigurd when the eagles reveal to him the smith's intended treachery (pp. 115-17) while Sigurd himself, although not greedy, falls victim to Grimhild's hubristic desire to exalt her family (pp. 165-6, 184-5), seconded by Gunnar's coveting of the gold (p. 206). In her desire for revenge, Gudrun tempts Atli's greed for the gold (pp. 254-7), and the false Knefrud entices Gunnar to Atli's court by tempting him with Atli's treasures (pp. 260-1).

VIII

What then is the stature of *Sigurd*? It is not a true epic in the amplitude of its story and in its descriptive elaboration. Rather it is a romantic narrative, founded indeed on an ancient story, but presenting an idealized world nobler and more dignified if more fierce than that of its original. It is deeply moving, and has an emotional and psychological range beyond that of the *Volunga Saga*. It works by cumulative effects rather than by concentration, and although at times it may be too diffuse (one recalls Morris's admission, 'I am an inveterate word-spinner'²¹), nevertheless its great scenes have very considerable dramatic power. It presents heroic values, but successfully links with them Morris's social ideals, which are those of a later age. It deserves neither the excessive praise of the group of older critics quoted at the outset, nor all of the strictures of more recent critics. Its emotional quality is, I think, finer than Dorothy Hoare, with her predilection for the saga will allow, and I cannot agree with Graham Hough that it merely enshrines 'values which have passed away'.

A final touch to the 'placing' of *Sigurd* is given by making the comparison with Morris himself invites—that with Wagner's *Ring*. In a letter of 1873 Morris invited

²¹ See Geoffrey Miltonson, *Essays in Criticism and Research* (Cambridge, 1942), p. 141.

against Wagner's making operas on the Siegfried story, declaring that it is: 'nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gas-lights of an opera: the most rocco and degraded of all forms of art—the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express!'²² On another occasion he writes at the stage Fafnir, and at Wagner's handling of the moment of Siegfried's awakening of Brunnhilde ('Das ist kein Mann!').²³ He believes that Wagner is mistaken in his idea of a 'musical-drama', as in the hands of a musical composer the dramatic poem is bound to be subordinated to the music. Furthermore, in his view, in opera 'the theme could be all lightness, gay romance, satire, and thus a fairy story or a libretto such as that of *Don Giovanni* is more suitable for operatic treatment than 'the great story of the North', which is 'too tremendous to be used so.'²⁴ Nevertheless, there are points of comparison between *Sigurd* and the *Ring*. First, as R. W. Gutman has noticed, there is a parallel between Morris's descriptive passages and Wagner's descriptive effects in the music.²⁵ However, there is more than mere descriptiveness in Wagner: in passages such as the entry of the gods into Valhalla in *Das Rheingold*, Siegfried's Rhine Journey and Wagner's Funeral March in *Götterdämmerung*, there is, by the use of *leitmotiven*, a large measure of moral symbolism also, which carries Wagner's art well beyond Morris's total significance. Secondly, both Morris and Wagner stress the evil of greed and of lust for power. However, there is nothing in Morris to equal Wagner's central conception of a struggle between desire for power, and love, which causes him to renounce the story in accordance with his purpose to express this conception. The enormous dramatic vitality of the great scenes, the extraordinary range and emotional power of the music, which in spite of Morris's strictures, has a remarkable aptness to the subject, and the profundity of the symbolism, make the *Ring* endlessly fascinating and in a class of its own beyond *Sigurd*. Nothing like the avid enthusiasm of the Wagnerians is likely to be evoked by *Sigurd*, nor indeed does it deserve it. However it does merit sympathetic reading, and given this, I believe it will be recognized as a poem of major interest.

I. W. BLENCH

²² Morris, *Works*, vol. XII, p. viii.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁵ *Volunga Saga*, translated by William Morris, introd. by Robert W. Gutman (New York, 1962), pp. 65-6.

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