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Arthur, Roland, Empedocles, Sigurd, and The Despair of Heroes in Victorian Poetry

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CHANGE—the rapidity, even the violence with which the present exploded into its future—offered to the middle decades of nineteenth-century England a visible threat and an explicit promise. The threat was revolution, change too long suppressed erupting into the tumult of Chartism or the chaos of Europe in 1848 and France in 1789. The promise was progress, change controlled, its turbulence confined as in a steam engine and channelled to useful purposes. The lessons of revolution and progress were clear enough. A society could survive only by accommodating necessary change, and it could prosper only by directing change to desirable ends. But who was to decide what change was necessary and which ends were desirable? Who was to impose on the rapid changes of the nineteenth century the direction of his will and the order of his values?

To these questions Carlyle, speaking for many of his contemporaries, repeatedly gave a single answer. "Find me the true *Könning*, King, or Able-man," he demanded. "Yes, friends: Hero-kings, and a whole world not unheroic,—there lies the port and happy haven, towards which, through all these stormtost seas, French Revolutions, Chartisms, Manchester Insurrections, that make the heart sick in these bad days, the Supreme Powers are driving us."¹ Hero-worship, which Carlyle championed as "the one fixed point in modern revolutionary history,"² was of course not the only solution proposed in his time to the problem of change. But in Carlyle's England the wish for an order fixed by the strong wills of heroes was nearly as pervasive as he claimed it to be. Victorians who might disagree about al-

1. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Centenary Edition (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897-99), v, 199; *Past and Present*, in *Works*, x, 36.

2. Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, in *Works*, v, 15.

most everything else were alike in their admiration of men like the oak-hearted heroes of Froude's histories, or the successful businessmen of self-help tracts, or the model revolutionaries whose biographies blazed in the pages of radical weeklies: alike in their admiration of strong men of action who wrestled change to their own triumphs. More sophisticated imaginations found leaders—Disraeli's Coningsby, or Carlyle's Captains of Industry and his Cromwell—in whom a capacity for decisive action was put in the service of a clearly articulated code to which the hero was determined to convert his time. Even such complex responses to change as Newman's careful journey toward the final authority of an ancient church and Mill's and Arnold's trust in the provisional authority of a political elite were spun from the stuff of which hero-worship was made. For hero-worship was fundamentally an explicit, dramatic, and powerful expression of a hope which ran a full and complicated career through nineteenth-century England—the hope that men, unusual men perhaps, but nonetheless finite, imperfect men, could find the will and intelligence and heart to establish an order on the bewildering flux of change.

The expression of this hope as hero-worship reveals both its power and its vulnerability. A great man can remake the world, for such is the power of man's will. But he must remake it, and in that necessity lies his vulnerability. For by clear implication an age in need of heroes is an unheroic age. The hero will therefore enter alien to its character and values. He will come to destroy the old order whose errors have required his coming. Because all will not recognize him as the hero for whom they have waited, some will resist the change he proposes and dispute his claim to be their savior. Even those who accept him must fit themselves to the new order of his will. And finally, even heroic will itself is mortal, and the hero himself must work within the limitations of being ultimately as susceptible to change as the subjects for whom he builds his order. Destroyer and rebuilder; a man different from other men who must remake them in his alien image; a mortal man in battle with change: the very conditions of the hero's task define not only the urgency of his success but also the possibilities of his failure.

The particular interest of the four heroes upon whom this paper will center is that their careers enact the possibilities of heroic failure. Tennyson's Arthur, Browning's Childe Roland, Arnold's Empedocles, and Morris' Sigurd all attempt to establish in the error and an-

archy and waste of their times a code which will regenerate men and direct their actions toward good. Whatever their personal triumphs, each fails to accomplish his purpose. Arthur is defeated in battle and carried, wounded, to Avilion, leaving his people leaderless before the chaos which follows the collapse of his Order. Roland ends waiting for almost certain destruction in a desert his personal courage cannot bring to bloom. Empedocles dismisses his disciples with the grim injunction neither to hope nor to despair, divests himself of the symbols of his heroic power, and annihilates himself. Sigurd wins the treasure which enriches the land, but he is tricked, sins, and is murdered, leaving his treasure and his people to be wasted by the treacherous and mean who flourish in the catastrophe of his defeat. These failures are not, it is true, typical of the fates of heroes in Victorian poetry. Some heroes do succeed in their heroic tasks. David in Browning's *Saul*, for example, cures his king and redeems a desolate land, and in his funeral ode for the Duke of Wellington, Tennyson preserved for his countrymen a set of private and public virtues which had in the past and can in the future master the dangerous possibilities of violent change. Other heroes, though they are defeated—as Tennyson's Sir John Grenville and Arnold's chastened Rustum are defeated—do not involve their entire societies in their defeats and leave to their survivors a memory of courage, self-knowledge, or some other usable legacy of heroic character on which to build. But if the failures of Arthur, Roland, Empedocles, and Sigurd are not typical, they do fairly represent the development through the Victorian period of the idea expressed in hero-worship. The dimensions of their failures differ, and after their failures their creators consider different alternatives to the hope invested in them. Tennyson and Browning salvage enough from defeat to sponsor an uncertain trust that men can still meet change if they cannot master it—their heroes are not successful but neither are they entirely destroyed. Arnold's Empedocles and Morris' Sigurd are entirely destroyed, and while Arnold backs away from this annihilation to manufacture in later poems a reconstituted hope for heroes, Morris chooses to interpret Sigurd's destruction as evidence of his participation in a kind of success very different from that conventionally proposed by mid-Victorian hero-worship. If, then, these progressively more complete failures mark the stages by which a time which placed its hope in heroes learned to despair of their promise, the different alternatives offered to meet the conse-

quences of heroic failure suggest the stages by which Victorians moved toward their last answer to the failure of heroes, an answer which accepted failure as an inevitable condition and worked from there to redefine the role of human will in the uncontrollable process of change.

Tennyson said that *The Idylls of the King* dramatizes "the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin."³ The dream is Arthur, man at his most perfect. By establishing his Order on the chaos left by the Roman withdrawal from Britain, Arthur hopes to lead men to the perfection of their own flesh. The sin which ruins his dream is adultery, a mark of the beast which Arthur is unable finally to exorcise from man. His effort, then, is to make the ideal actual, the dream flesh. His failure is forecast from the very beginning. His origins are uncertain: he may have been born not of flesh but of the sea. Even after he vanquishes the petty kings who dispute his kingship and unites himself in friendship to Lancelot and in marriage to Guinevere—even after, in other words, he has bound himself to mortality, men doubt his existence. When Gareth sees Arthur's capital, it seems a fairy dream, "who some there be that hold," a seer tells him, "The King a shadow, and the city real" ("Gareth and Lynette," 261-262). In the springtime of Arthur's Order such doubts are easily resolved, and Gareth proves to dubious Lynette that Arthur can make a knight from a kitchen-boy. But then Guinevere and Lancelot sin. Arthur has been betrayed by the very flesh to which he has committed his dream. Hearing of the sin, men begin to doubt their own ability to hold to the dream. Geraint is told of the sin, and is shocked into an ungallant test of Enid's faithfulness. Balin and Balan are told of the sin, and are surprised into the loss of their precarious hold over their self-destructive passion. Mark, learning of the sin, is encouraged to send Vivien to seduce Merlin; Lancelot, knowing of the sin, is helpless to prevent the destruction of innocent Elaine; Percivale's sister, striving to counter the force of the sin, is inspired to pray for that vision of the Holy Grail which, despite Arthur's warning, sends the Order on its desperate, disastrous quest to prove itself worthy of the dream of flesh consecrated to perfection. Defection follows when Pelleas hears of the sin and cynically renounces his vows. Then rebellion breaks open when the Red Knight

3. Quoted in Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), II, 127.

sets up a parody of Arthur's Order, with a tower "full of harlots, like his court," and knights who "are all adulterers like his own" ("The East Tournament," 81, 84). With savagery Arthur can no longer control, the Red Knight's order is crushed. But in the King's absence the adulterer Lancelot presides over the Tournament of Dead Innocence, won by the adulterer Tristram. The beast has triumphed, and the King returns in the dead winter of his failure to ponder its cause and to face its consequences.

In what Tennyson called "the (spiritually) central lines of the Idylls"⁴ Arthur had warned that the Grail vision was delusive because men were not ready for the Grail. First imperfect man must prepare himself by hard, practical work, and then moments would come when flesh seems spirit, when earth, light, air, "yea, his very hand and foot" seem visions,

"moments when he feels he cannot die,
And knows himself no vision to himself,
Nor the high God a vision. . . ."

("The Holy Grail," 911-914)

Such moments do not come to Arthur's subjects. Hand and foot, Guinevere and physical love, are more real to Lancelot than the King to whom he has sworn allegiance. Even Guinevere, although she admits his power, cannot love her husband: "But who can gaze upon the sun in heaven? . . . The low sun makes the color" ("Lancelot and Elaine," 123, 134). Arthur himself, before he fights his last battle in mists that obscure his vision of the ideal and on sands which undermine his footing in actuality, recognizes that his failure to establish his existence firmly in the world has made it difficult for all men, including himself, to believe in the possibility of perfecting practical life.

" . . . why is all around us here
As if some lesser god had made the world,
But had not force to shape it as he would. . . .
Or else as if the world were wholly fair,
But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
And have not power to see it as it is— . . ."

("The Passing of Arthur," 13-20)

His last act is to destroy the remnants of his Order, and then he de-

4. Hallam Tennyson, II, 90.

parts, wounded, for Avilion. Arthur, like the Grail, can enter only into a world ready to believe in him. But the world will not be ready to believe in him until a hero like Arthur succeeds in exorcising its doubts and lesser gods through the undoubtable power of his unmistakable presence.

The implications of this impasse are bleak, and although *The Idylls* ends in a sunrise vaguely symbolic of the wounded Arthur's return, that uncertain hope too is ultimately cheerless. For the poem is built around the annual cycle of birth, maturation, and death. If Arthur is restored, he will but begin another cycle which will end in another defeat, and in the interregnum affairs will be not so much governed as endured with a kind of mundane quietism: "Poor men," says the humble monk Ambrosius when he learns of the Order's failure to achieve the Grail, "Must be content to sit by little fires" ("The Holy Grail," 612-613). Even the resounding patriotism of its epilogue does not shake the poem wholly free of the inglorious passivity to which its theme and structure commit it. In the epilogue Tennyson celebrates the "tide of joy" with which the Empire has received the news of the Prince of Wales' recovery from a serious illness. Here is a healthy spasm of hero-worship, and here is a restored hero to be worshipped. Yet Tennyson places his trust neither in hero-worship nor in a prince recovered from the wounds of mortality. Tennyson rather trusts to the "crown'd Republic's crowning common-sense" (61) to guide it through the dark days which have fallen over a hero's defeat. If it is considerably less grand than the spacious hope trusted to Arthur, Tennyson's resolution is at any rate honest. He could build nothing more heroic on a poem which at bottom despairs of its hero. Although Arthur's wound reveals his own mortality and thus his limitations, the wound is the effect and not the cause of his failure. He does not defeat himself; others betray him to his defeat. So too Tennyson's Tritonus is trapped in his mortality because his immortal love neglected to endow him with eternal youth, and so Lucretius is annihilated in the crash of ungoverned change because his wife has unwittingly subverted his control over body and mind. These fond treacheries say what the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot says, what Tennyson says in different ways when he sends the aged Ulysses off on a doomed adventure and when he sends Enoch Arden off on a journey in which he almost loses the dignity of manhood and does lose the power of husband and father: flesh betrays the dreams of

mortal man. Much of Browning's poetry considers the same condition. But Browning, unlike Tennyson in the poems mentioned above, often traces their betrayal to the heroes themselves, to Paracelsus and Sordello learning too late of the inadequate premises from which they launch their grand attempts to know and to master the world of men's actions, to Andrea del Sarto depicting a perfection he knows to be false in order to sustain a love he blindly refuses to acknowledge is not true, to Saul hanging paralyzed in his tent while his people and his land wither in drought, to Protus and Cleon puzzled and helpless before the paralyzing fact of their mortality, to Blougram choosing faith in the living presence of his doubt, to Roland choosing action in the lying face of his mistrust in the efficacy of action. Behind these flawed heroes, it is true, stand possibilities which will resolve their imperfections in the perfection they seek: a poetry and an art which will move men to recognize the infinite significance of finite creation; a love in which the union of souls as well as bodies tokens a triumphant passage through flesh to the unlimited joys of spirit; even, in some poems, a hero as perfect as Arthur and victorious besides—the heroic Christ whose incarnation perfects flesh and whose resurrection vanquishes mortality. Sometimes Browning translates these possibilities into achievements. In *Saul*, for example, David does cure his king and redeem his dead land by bursting into a vision of how love will perfect humanity and realize its desires for infinite fulfillment.

"Would I suffer for him that I love! So wouldst thou—so wilt thou! . . ."

O Saul, it shall be

A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,

Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a Hand like this hand

Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!"

(*Saul*, 300, 309-312)

But more often Browning dramatizes not achievement like David's but failure like that of Protus and Cleon, who are prevented by ignorance and vanity from recognizing in Christ the answer they seek to mortality.

I cannot tell thy messenger aright

Where to deliver what he bears of thine

To one called Paulus; we have heard his fame

Indeed, if Christus be not one with him—

I know not, nor am troubled much to know. . . .

Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.

(*Cleon*, 338-341, 353)

Art, love, and Christ can perfect men and so order change toward ends and values which transcend it. But men are not perfect artists, lovers, or Christians. The champions of possibilities too great for their mortal capacities, Browning's heroes most often betray their own dreams by their own inadequacies.

One of Browning's resolutions of this betrayal is to promise in another world the realization for which men vainly reach in this. But like Tennyson's removal of Arthur to Avilion, this resolution opens the question of how in the absence of heroes men are to protect themselves from the destructive confusions of uncontrolled change. The best Tennyson can offer his time is the dim solace of Arthur's return and the modest trust that common sense will muddle through. More flamboyant if no more certain, Browning offers the gesture of heroism without its vaulting hope. "My first thought was, he lied in every word," Roland says of the cripple who directs him to the Dark Tower. Nevertheless, he accepts the chance and turns into the wasteland, feeling

neither pride

Nor hope rekindling at the end despoiled,

So much as gladness that some end might be.

("Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," 16-18)

The end he seeks is simple. He has no hope of success, and he can only with an effort restrain his tired heart from welcoming failure on any terms. He manages, however, to hope to fail as a hero, as the peer of the lost knights who have preceded him to the Tower: "And all the doubt was now—should I be fr?" (42). His adventure tests this last hope. The blighted present mocks his inability to redeem it: "T is the Last Judgment's fire must cure this place" (65). He turns for comfort to the past, there to meet memories of disgrace and treachery, memories of Cuthbert his friend destroying friendship in a night, of Giles "the soul of honor" (97) hanged and defiled as a traitor. He returns to the present ("Better this present than a past like that": 103), threads his way across a stream which kills rather than regenerates ("It may have been a water-rat I speared, | But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek": 125-126), rides past the trampled evidence that man's physical bravery can be reduced to the insane, animal savagery of "Toads in a poisoned tank, | Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage" (131-132), and then past the rusted waste of man's intelligence ("What bad use

was that engine for, | . . . that harrow fit to reel | Men's bodies out like silk": 140-142). From his very first mistrust of the cripple to this final image of man's self-betrayal, the omens have forecast the impossibility of human heroism. But just as he is about to resign himself to another inglorious failure, the trap closes and he stands before the Tower, ringed by hills like giants and watched by dead heroes waiting his defeat. He accepts this test too.

And yet

Damless the sling-horn to my lips I set,

And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

(202-204)

Against almost certain defeat, against the waste of intelligence and courage and love, against his own doubt in his success, Roland places his identity as a hero and whatever possibilities it may yet contain. He has accomplished his end. The land remains blighted, the present unredeemed, the past unvindicated, the future uncertain. His heroism is inconclusive, and the hopes placed in it unfulfilled. But he is a hero, and he has not despaired. He came to the Tower, and whatever may happen to him there, that act of faith and courage represents Browning's final but firm trust that even ringed by the ruins of their dreams men will yet pit their names and wills against the mysterious forces which surround and threaten to overwhelm them.

In *The Idylls of the King* and *Childe Roland* Tennyson and Browning despair of heroes, but they do not despair. Celebrating the memory of his father in *Rugby Chapel, November, 1857*, Matthew Arnold refused even to despair of heroes. Although "men of the crowd" now make life "Hideous, and arid, and vile" (155; 158), Arnold insists that heroes will appear to

Strengthen the wavering line,

Stabish, continue our march,

On, to the bound of the waste,

On, to the City of God.

(205-208)

This ringing affirmation, however, does not accurately suggest Arnold's own wavering in the waste on the way to *Rugby Chapel*. The hero of *Mycerinus*, first published in 1849, is told that an untimely death will frustrate his attempts to establish a just order in his kingdom. Bitterly concluding that the gods are "Not Gods but ghosts, in

frozen apathy" (36), he abdicates his kingly responsibilities and gives the remainder of his short life to the easy satisfactions of physical desire. Mycerinus is perhaps (the qualifier is Arnold's) promised personal salvation. But his people are nonetheless left godless and kingless as beneath the sounds of their king's revel they hear the murmur of change in the moving Nile. The hero of *Balder Dead* (1855), purposelessly taken from the heavens to which only he brings joy, foresees social as well as personal regeneration.

"I attend the course

Of ages, and my late return to light,

In times less alien to a spirit mill,

In new-recover'd seats, the happier day."

(*Balder Dead*, III, 510-513)

Again, however, this resolution offers nothing, not Tennyson's common sense nor Browning's bravado, to the doomed gods who must sit in joyless heavens knowing that they must be destroyed before Balder will return. And in *Empedocles on Etna*, published after *Mycerinus* and before *Balder Dead* and then suppressed until its republication in 1867, Arnold withheld from hero and subject alike the possibility of ultimate success. Empedocles' failure is more final than that of Mycerinus or Balder, more entire than that of Arthur. When Empedocles fails, he carries with him to his annihilation not only the hope men placed in the success of heroes, but also the alternatives men salvaged from their failures.

Empedocles' situation and character summarize the conditions in which mid-nineteenth-century heroes fought for control over change. Like Arthur, Roland, Mycerinus, and Balder, he is born into an uncongenial time: "Great qualities are trodden down," he says, "And littleless united | Is become invincible" (II, I, 92-94). As it touches Saul, Protus, and Cleon, this aridity touches Empedocles: "I read | In all things my own deadness" (II, II, 321-322). His melancholy has broken his power, and the poem is a dialogue between fragments of his greatness: Pausanias, a disciple who retains faith in gods and miracles; Callicles, a poet who rejoices in physical nature but is skeptical about the supernatural; and Empedocles himself, now a severe intelligence without Pausanias' faith and Callicles' joy. In Act I Pausanias and Callicles, met by accident, unite to cure their master, and thus their time, even though they disagree about the source of health

and joy. Pausanias begins by asking Empedocles to explain the spell by which he cures sickness. Empedocles denies supernatural power ("Mind is the spell": I, II, 27), and Callicles, hidden in the groves below the peak of Etna, follows this denial with a song contrasting "the hot noon, without a shade" (I, II, 54) of Empedocles' present rationalism to the cool shadows of the grove and the simple natural knowledge of myth. Speaking to Pausanias, Empedocles disputes Callicles' celebration of nature and rejects Pausanias' entire position. To ask that nature satisfy man's thirst for joy, he says, is to falsify nature, which has purposes distinct from man's; and to invent gods "who perfect what man vainly tries" (I, II, 316) is to remove the possibility of joy from earthly life. Having refused to encourage Pausanias' hope in the supernatural, Empedocles sends his disciple away with a text to live by, but not to rejoice in.

I say: Fear not! Life still

Leaves human effort scope.

But, since life teems with ill,

Nurse no extravagant hope;

Because thou must not dream, thou need'st not then despair!

(I, II, 422-426)

Callicles unwittingly underlines the drab implications of this charge to little men of faith when he closes Act I by singing of the unthinkable placidity of Cadmus and Harmonia. Empedocles has built for Pausanias a fence against despair, but at the same time he has closed the way to heroic action, even to heroic dreams.

In Act II Empedocles approaches the crater. Callicles offers now not a joyous nature but a poetry apart from nature; he sings of how poetry soothes the angry gods and masks the groans of Typho, the defeated rebel chained within Etna. Empedocles, refusing to blink Typho's fate, is reminded by Callicles' song of how men and gods alike ignore greatness, and he discards his circlet and robe, symbols of his eminence as seer and philosopher. Callicles again offers poetry to blow away "The clouds which wrap the soul" (II, I, 124). Empedocles again refuses to accept a palliative in place of a cure, and he lays down his laurel bough. Irretrievably reduced now to naked mind, he recalls the wholeness of the past: "We had not lost our balance then" (II, I, 248). That wholeness can never be regained. As long as he possesses individual mind and will, he will be separate from the

mysterious unity of nature. Even if he disperses his identity among the atoms of nature and is born again, he will fail again, for "each succeeding age in which we are born | Will have more peril for us than the last" (II, i, 377-378). For one moment, as he remembers the courage with which he refused the inadequate remedies of Pausanias and Callicles, the cloud of melancholy lifts. Empedocles uses that moment, the scope he assured Pausanias was yet left to human will, to destroy himself. Callicles has the last word. But having failed to prevent Empedocles' suicide, the poet can now do no more than to ask Apollo to hide the hot noon and fiery scars of Etna in tranquil night and the cold fire of distant stars.

The beauty of nature and art, an eternity to perfect mortality, the promises of past and future, the courage not to compromise with uncertainty, even the identity of the hero himself—all dissolve with Empedocles. Fragments remain: Pausanias, fighting not for hope but against despair in the cramped corner left to human will; Callicles, singing of an art which is at best a refuge from a failure it cannot cure. As Arnold put it when in the preface to the 1853 edition of his poems he explained why he suppressed *Empedocles on Etna*, in Empedocles' situation "there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done."⁵ Defined by the sole possibility open to Empedocles, the hero has no meaning but failure; human action cannot redeem the charred and melancholy waste of Etna. Unwilling to accept this meaning, Arnold chose to suppress it, at least until he had worked out an alternative, and to retrace his steps, back to the tenuous promise of *Balder Dead*, forward again to the insistent hope of *Ragby Chapel*. Despite its suppression, however, the moment of entire despair discovered in *Empedocles on Etna* imports into the assertion of *Ragby Chapel* a shrill urgency absent from Tennyson's deliberate survey of England's chances in the epilogue to *The Idylls of the King* and Browning's quickening excitement as he moves Roland toward his confrontation with failure. The moment was suppressed and the assertion made. But if the latter testifies to the persistence of the mid-nineteenth-century hope for heroes, the former suggests the increasing difficulty and cost with which the hope was sustained.

It was possible, however, at a cost in its way greater even than its suppression, to regard the kind of failure suffered by Empedocles as

5. Quoted in *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), p. xviii.

an occasion for hope rather than as a reason for despair. The hero of William Morris' *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* falls as entirely as Empedocles. Morris moves from this failure to hope not, as Arnold did, by redefining the meaning of the hero, but by redefining the meaning of his failure. Like Arthur, Sigurd, the last of the Volsungs, enters alien to his world: his father has been killed before his birth, and his mother bears him under the protection of a good but lesser king. Like Roland and the knights of Arthur's Order, Sigurd undertakes his great quest encouraged by a doubtful guide: he rides through the wasteland to win Fafnir's treasure accompanied by the deceptive and selfish Regin, who wants the treasure to serve his purposes and not mankind's. Yet despite limitations which handicapped Roland and Arthur and his knights, Sigurd begins in success. Although he is an alien, he is recognized at his birth as a great king who will bring hope to the people: "Lo, how hath the dark tide perished and the dawn of day begun!"⁶ On his first quest he kills Fafnir, wins the treasure, and solves the baffling confusion of good and evil when he recognizes Regin as a deceiver and kills him as well. Then he brings love to the world when he rides the circle of fire and wins Brynhild. His success is now complete, and he goes into the land of the Niblungs to exercise his triumphant power.

And more than a God he seemeth, and so steadfast and so great,

That the sea of chance wide-weltering 'neath his will must needs abate. (p. 165)

But at this peak Sigurd is given a potion which obliterates the memory of Brynhild. He who once controlled chance now flounders "as one in the sphere-stream's drift" (p. 188); he who once illuminated the difference between real and apparent good now puts on the armor of Gunnar to win Brynhild for him. He is still a hero to the people, who see him as "The eye-bright seer of all things. . . | The straightener of the crooked, the hammer of the strong" (pp. 205-206). But he himself now knows himself to be a lie, and as Brynhild dies slowly, Sigurd passively submits to be the almost helpless victim of a cowardly plot. Unlike Arthur, he will not return; unlike Roland, he dies meanly; unlike Empedocles, he is not permitted to choose even the moment or manner of his death.

6. William Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910-15), XII, 65. Page references to Sigurd in the text are to volume XII of this edition.

Sigurd's end prefigures the mean and chaotic end of his attempt to order the world by truth and love. After his death his Niblung wife Gudrun marries the old, parched Atli, king of the Cloudy People. Challenged by Atli, the Niblungs again bury Sigurd's treasure from men's sight and walk knowingly into a trap in which they are destroyed by thralls and churls. Gudrun then completes the saga by setting fire to Atli's hall and throwing herself into the sea. Nothing is left of Sigurd or Sigurd's. The world which accepted him as its hero ends by betraying him, and the power he once had in the world ends by being the sham he once defeated. But Gudrun's last act also prefigures an end beyond the complete failure of Sigurd's career. That end is *ragna rok*, the destruction of the old gods and imperfect earth in preparation for the creation of a new heaven and earth. "And what shall be our share in it?" Morris once asked in an approving paraphrase of the significance of *ragna rok* to the Norse. "Well, sometimes we must needs think that we shall live again: yet if that were not, would it not be enough that we helped to make this unnameable glory, and lived not altogether deedless?" In Morris's telling of Sigurd's saga that share is enough profoundly to change the meaning of Sigurd's failure. His saga begins before his birth, as it continues after his death. When he wins Brynhild, she tells him:

"Know thou, most mighty of men, that the Norms shall order all,
And yet without thine helping shall no whit of their will befall;
Be wise, and cherish thine hope in the freshness of the days,
And scatter its seed from thine hand in the field of the people's praise;
Then fair shall it fall in the furrow, and some the earth shall speed, . . .
But some the earth shall speed not; nay rather, the wind of heaven
Shall waft it away from thy longing—and a gift to the Gods hast thou given, . . .
Though it seemeth our very sorrow, and the grief of thee and me." (pp. 126-127)

When he has sown his seed and reaped the sorrow and grief of his betrayal, the Norms "leave the mighty Sigurd to deal with the latter days" (p. 200); when he dies, the sorrowing world looks beyond him to "the day that Sigurd hath sped" (p. 244), the day symbolically enacted by Gudrun who completes the doom begun before Sigurd's birth ("For the ways of the Norms she wended": p. 306) by destroying all she can of the imperfect world. However it may seem to him,

7. Quoted in J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), I, 334.

then, Sigurd's heroism has not failed. Although he will not live in it, and although he is not directly responsible for bringing it about, he has sped the day of *ragna rok* and regeneration. His failure, therefore, is not really a failure. It is rather a necessary episode in a preordained doom whose end is success.

History, Carlyle said repeatedly, is the biography of great men. The development of the idea implied in this statement—that men can control events—is documented in the careers of Arthur, Roland, Empedocles, and Sigurd. Arthur, Roland, and Empedocles are defeated in their attempts to order change. The price of their failure is that ordinary men who once placed their hope in heroes must now place it elsewhere. Ordinary men may choose with Roland to thrust their individuality against the direction and momentum of events beyond their control, or choose with Empedocles to disperse their identities rather than to surrender them. They may choose to trust with Tennyson in their own common sense or with Arnold in a desperate faith or with Ambrosius and Pausanias in their quiet, stubborn refusal to be overwhelmed by the change they cannot master. Whatever recourse they recommend when heroes fail, in these poems Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold direct men to place their hopes, however diminished, in their own wills, no matter how restricted the field of their effective action has proved to be. Sigurd also attempts to redeem his imperfect world. Eventually, his attempt will succeed. Sigurd triumphs, however, not as the maker but as the agent of a history which contains him. And the price of his success is that men can no longer place their hopes in the trust of their own wills. Even heroes will triumph only when they relinquish their wills to the service of purposes they did not initiate, and direct their action toward the realization of ends they neither define nor clearly foresee.

Morris was not the only late-Victorian poet to abandon hope in heroic will by dramatizing its surrender to forces outside itself. In *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life*, most of which were first published in the 1880's, George Meredith wrote of King Harald rising from tranced paralysis to slay his treacherous wife, only to collapse and die before he can kill the weak schemer who has taken his throne; of Attila dead in his tent while his army shuffles uncertainly and his empire begins to dissolve; of Bellerophon, maimed and crazed by a fall from Pegasus, unable to convince his people that he is the hero who

once rode the winged horse to a triumph. In the same decade Meredith also proposed the counsel which will resolve such failures. Only when men submit to the forces of a Nature which moves independently of human desires, Meredith wrote in *The Woods of Westernmain*, will men share in the triumph which change is preparing for them.

Change is on the wing to bud

Rose in brain from rose in blood.

(*The Woods of Westernmain*, 202-203)

In the first decade of the twentieth century John Davidson promised the hero of *The Testament of John Davidson* a similar success. Lost like Roland among the broken ruins of past failures, this hero identifies himself with the "automatic fate" of a mindless evolution and is swept through the destruction of gods and demigods and delusions of his own difference from nature to the supremacy of an entirely new consciousness:

in me

Matter fulfils itself; before me none

Beheld or heard, imagined, thought or felt.⁸

The heroes of Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts* buy a kind of tragedy with the same coin with which Sigurd and Davidson's hero buy their kind of triumph. But the conditions of their heroism are the same, and the differences from mid-Victorian heroes as sharp.

"So the Will heaves through Space, and moulds the times,

With mortals for its fingers" (*The Dynasts*, Part 2, II, iii).

the Spirit of the Years says as Wellington and Napoleon alike are rushed by events towards a tragedy which begins with their conceit that they determine history and ends with their recognition, not merely that they have lost the control of change which Tennyson gave to Wellington and Tennyson's generation asked of heroes, but that change has always been beyond their control.

Nor are Morris, Meredith, Davidson, and Hardy the only late-Victorians to abandon hope in the efficacy of individual will. As the nineteenth century spun into the twentieth, Carlyle's idea that men make their history was challenged by other ideas which despaired of the possibility of significant action, or identified race, nationality,

8. John Davidson, *The Testament of John Davidson* (London: Grant Richards, 1908), p. 141.

destiny; or the dialectic of history as the decisive force in human events, or argued that the community, the corporation, and the state have a purpose and an identity distinct from that of the human wills which serve them. These ideas have of course been amplified in our century, just as the images some twentieth-century poets have chosen to depict our possibilities—Yeats' falcon whirling from the falconer's control and his beast slouching toward Bethlehem; the screaming bomber-dove descending to the flaming London of "Little Gidding"—suggest, as Sigurd's triumph suggests, that salvation lies the other side of a catastrophe whose onset no man can prevent and whose consequences no man can control. The passage of the Victorian hope for heroes from Arthur through Sigurd and into our time is therefore a partial chronicle of the adventures of our hope in ourselves, and the beaten ground where mid-Victorian heroes tried and failed is a station on the road we have traveled from the nineteenth-century hope that men could make a world to their wills.