

*William Morris*

1834-1896

So new, amidst our day of strife,  
With many a matter glad we play,  
When once we see the light of life  
Gleam through the tangle of to-day.

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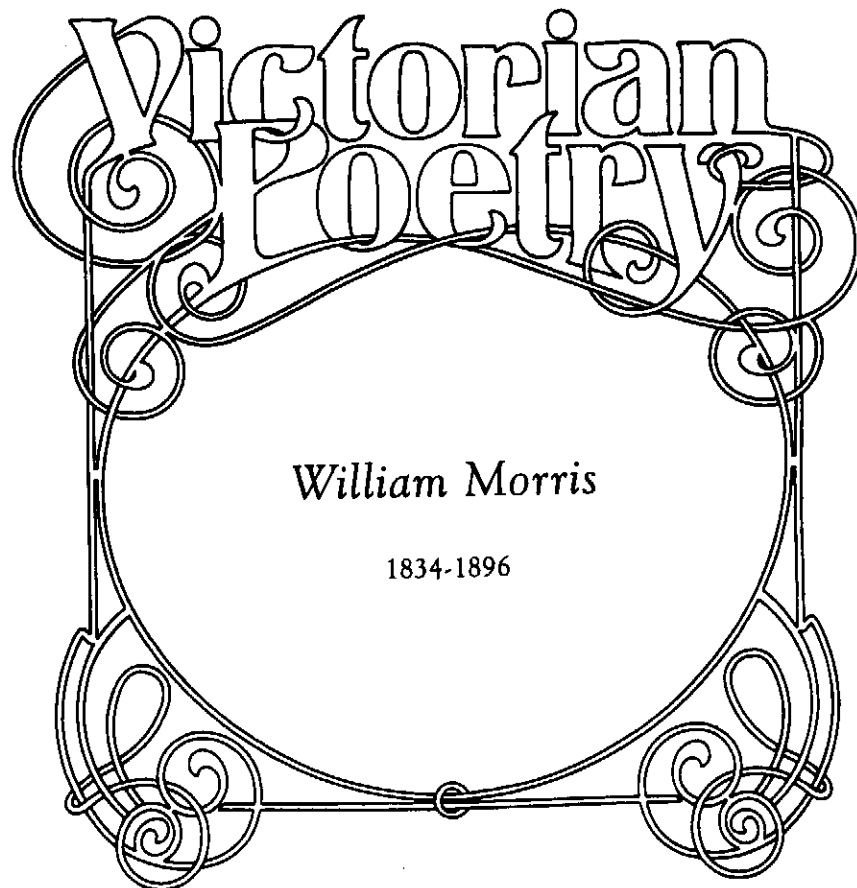
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Frontispiece of Kelmscott Press edition of  
*Sigurd the Volsung* (1898)

## All for the Tale: The Epic Macropoetics of Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung*

HERBERT F. TUCKER

For this the Gods have fashioned man's grief and evil day  
That still for man hereafter might be the tale and the lay.

IN A RECENT BOOK ON WILLIAM MORRIS THE LATE J. M. S. TOMPKINS twice attributed the above couplet to *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876).<sup>1</sup> This attribution was mistaken; but my object here will be to show what a good mistake it was, how true to both the spirit and the technique of the remarkable approach Morris made in *Sigurd* to the challenge of composing a modern epic. It will be helpful first to place Tompkins' misattribution within the tangle of genial error which Morris himself wove around these lines almost as soon as he set them down. For they come from his 1887 translation of the *Odyssey*, or derive from it at least, since lines 8.579-580 of that translation actually read rather differently:

But this thing the Gods have fashioned, and have spun the Deathful Day  
For men, that for men hereafter it might be the tale and the lay.

(CW, 13:117)

The discrepancy between this version and the version we started with is one of Morris' contriving. For the warp in our epigraph forms part of a complex testimonial that Morris planted in chapter 9 of his social science fiction classic *News from Nowhere* (1891). The epigraph is spoken there by old Hammond, a utopian antiquary who recites, from the vantage of the twenty-first century and "roughly from memory," a ripe chestnut out of "one of the many translations of the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup> Hammond produces this traditionary aphorism for the benefit of a time-traveling visitor named Guest, who inasmuch as he stands in for our host—that is, for Morris—proves to be the man who first penned the translation, or something like it, back in 1887. It was in that year, moreover, during a Kelmscott lecture on "The Early Literature of the North," that Morris proposed the same Homeric passage as a gloss for the Northern lays on whose behalf he had by then been beating the drum for nearly two decades:

This story of the Nibelungs has grown, and following it up through all its fragmentary songs and variants I must unhesitatingly call it the noblest and in a sense the completest story yet made by man, embracing the highest range of tragedy; passion, love, duty, valour, honour, in strife with the blind force of fate, vanquished by it, but living again in death in the souls of all the generations according to the words which the Homeric poet puts into the mouth of King Alcinous: "But this thing the Gods have fashioned and have spun the Deathful Day For men; that for men hereafter might be the tale and the lay."<sup>1</sup>

If the lecture notes I am quoting may be minutely trusted, Morris' dropping of the pronoun "it" from the second line of his own translation betrays the letter in a way that is utterly true to form. The result is a microvariant that we should by now be disappointed to find him *not* introducing.

I collect these variorum trivia because they epitomize something far from trivial in Morris' passionate commendation of the great story that by the 1870s had made him its own: namely, the capacity of the epic to cheat death by converting dumb misfortune into a lucid and inclusive plot. Acceptance of a role in this plot constitutes a tragic affirmation that defines and narratizes the hero, as its reception on comparable terms heroizes the listener, and so bonds the generations in the name of the tale all belong to. This definitively epic process charges *Sigurd* through and through. It also emerges in the long sentence quoted just above, with the casual way Morris conflates "man" with "story," evenhandedly treating the two as if they were the same thing—as if the universal solvent of story made hero, poet, poem, and hearer all one.

The transfusive power of epic is resumed, moreover, in the relation Morris asserts between "fragmentary songs and variants" and "the completest story." By 1887 it was more than late enough in the Victorian Homer-hunting season for circumspect talk like Morris' here about, not Homer of Chios, but "the Homeric poet," less a man than an anonymous cultural counterforce to "the blind force of fate." Lost from view though Homer might be in the blinds of prehistory, he was known none the less through his power to put words in our mouth. For what King Alcinous says to Odysseus, when that hero is moved to tears by a bard's song touching on his own bitter experience, is the veriest commonplace, what any of us would want to say or hear at such a moment. That the prince of gentle hosts should offer his guest a verbal handkerchief is the whole point. It may also be the point of Morris' practical refusal ever to translate that good word of Alcinous' quite the same way twice. The translator's multiplication of *distinction without difference* keeps a commonplace in ready circulation as a **commonplace—something both more and less than an authorized quotation—so as to vindicate a commonwealth of story that lives clear of any one version containing it. Or any one nation, or any one epoch: to find the Rhineland Nibelungenlied and its saga cycle glossed a millennium in advance by**

the Aegean *Odyssey*, or the literature of futuristic Nowhere (in Tompkins' lucky error) by the Victorian antique *Sigurd the Volsung*, is to affirm a vision of cultural stamina and consistency so enormous that we should find it incredible—if we did not, at some stratum of faith, believe it ourselves already.

## 1

The savior died for your sins. The culture hero suffered, once upon a time, for the sake of us who read and hear now. Alcinous said so: grief, death, and the evil day are the unavoidable, indispensable events of our story, of the tale and the lay which make sense for us by shaping pain into meaning. These ideas are so familiar because we know how many narratives have found occasion to rehearse and enact them, occasion that is the more likely to arise the more nearly a work orbits the core epic issues of cultural foundation and sustenance.<sup>4</sup> The protracted crisis of culture that galvanized nineteenth-century Britain repeatedly exposed these core issues, and it called forth dozens of epicizing works. But none among them clove so singlemindedly to the logic of its great tale as did Morris' *Sigurd*, or with so unshaken a faith that the tale alone might, if sufficiently trusted, sweep into unity those issues of motivation and ethics, format and purpose, that exercised his contemporaries. Tennyson and the Brownings had in preceding decades answered the epic summons with masterpieces that still win praise for their complexity of innovation, their always self-conscious and often brilliantly experimental adaptation of antique forms to modern needs. Something of the same sort, as we shall see in closing, can be claimed on behalf of Morris' own elaborately inlaid design in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70). It remained for him in *Sigurd*, though, to show what might be done by giving all to the tale itself.

Subordinating every aspect of his poem to the execution of the favorite plot he called "the Great Story of the North," Morris found there at once his theme, the motivation for his characters, his moral standard, the key to his sources, and his epic connection with extraliterary history.<sup>5</sup> The result is neither a naive nor a sentimental poem, in Schiller's sense of these terms as marking respectively primitive and advanced stages of civilization, but instead a modern epic of extraordinarily reinforced coherence. This nearly obsessive integrity betokens the peculiar mode of Victorian self-awareness which it fell to the genius of Morris to develop. Less conspicuous than his peers' staging of the divided modern mind, but just as intense in its way, the self-consciousness behind Morris' dedication to the story saturates like dyestuff his diegetic and descriptive practice. In his Icelandic and Teutonic materials Morris found qualities of stark ferocity which he has sometimes been blamed for "romanticizing" by his selection and treatment of given episodes.<sup>6</sup> If this charge is just, it is so only in the sense that he contrived Roman-

tic means of subjectivizing that original power, so as to render maximally conscious his human figures' willed participation in the world's life: a sense of engrained, instinctive reflection that is unrepentant, disenchanted, and reckless of all but what the tale shall sing.

It is not rare, of course, for narrators to endow their characters with an awareness of the narrative they are in; and the effects of this endowment can range from the epiphanic in more realistic fiction to the metatextually comic or gothic in more magical modes. But in *Sigurd* awareness of the tale is the normative habit of the mind; it forms the horizon delineating consciousness itself. When characters merely act—and in this as in other stories they very often do just that—then they act as simple functions of the plot. When Morris has his characters do more, departing from action into the privileged consideration of action, this consideration typically means discerning their role as plot functionaries, only to embrace it wholeheartedly and recommit themselves to its course. Their consistent rule for judgment is how the tale they inhabit is to be retarded or advanced, their rationale what part in its unfolding they will have played.<sup>7</sup>

No sooner has Sigmund, for example, withdrawn Odin's blade from the trunk of the Branstock oak than he has a second-sight vision of his eventual role as the "glory and sole avenger" of the Volsungs, their "after-summer seed" (p. 8).<sup>8</sup> Queen Hiordis makes her choice of husbands, without dropping a stitch in the historical tapestry at which she does not just happen to be working at her hour of crisis, in order that she may become Sigurd's mother and thus speed "the tale that no ending hath" (p. 51). *Sigurd* hath an ending, of course; yet it is entirely characteristic of the poem that, as its ending draws nigh and the imprisoned Hogni learns of his imminent execution, he relishes the prospect for its narrative possibilities: "Take heed now! deeds are doing for the fashioners of tales" (p. 292). Further illustration along these lines would be easy but superfluous. Reflex reference to the plot is the common possession of all Morris' characters in *Sigurd*, and it bears on the narrative texture with a cumulative effect that engenders a nearly constant, deeply epic coordination between the immediate present and the perspective of long time. Like other epic poets Morris claims ample leeway in the tenses of his verbs, and in *Sigurd* he secures an epic presentation whose full presentness is due to a kind of temporal stereoscopy that looks before and after and does not blink. What transpires in front of us exists in remarkable plenitude and clarity, because everything around it conspires to make it at once what was to be and what will have been.<sup>9</sup>

In this sense the unfolding mythos of the poem is its working ethos. Fate is character; and the development of any one character consists in the inexorable removal, within that character's awareness, of whatever might impede the fitting solution of this primal equation. A marked design element in *Sigurd* patterns verbal, symbolic, and episodic structures like elements in a wall-paper—or like threads in the tapestry which Morris notoriously opined any epic

poet worth his salt could weave while composing verses.<sup>10</sup> An apprehension of such "motivic" design consistently doubles as the ethical motive actuating Morris' protagonists. The Volsung princess Signy initiates the pattern when in the poem's first incident she accepts the hand of a king she cannot love, confiding to her father, "Would God it might otherwise be! but wert thou to will it not, / Yet should I will it and wed him, and rue my life and my lot. . . . So work all things together for the fame of thee and thine" (p. 3). One suspects here a rhetorical, subjective irony masking duplicity on Signy's part, yet any such suspicion is something the poem rigorously disconfirms. As Niblung after Volsung after dwarf after god rehearses one form or another of Signy's affirmative acceptance of a lot at odds with desire, *Sigurd* hammers irony into a tragic immensity that transcends the irony of individualist psychology because it transcends choice.

Near the end of the poem Gunnar redeems himself into the fabric of heroic loss on which he has spent his own life and lavished the Niblungs' promise, when he chants the making of humanity not as victims but as creatures of speech and power, hope and joy:

—and I, I, I am of these;

And I know of Them that have fashioned, and the deeds that have blossomed and grow;  
But nought of the Gods' repentance, or the Gods' undoing I know. (p. 298)

"I, I, I": a rare rhetorical insistence on subjectivity installs Gunnar at last, and in his own clarified mind, where he always was: in the tale of the tribe.<sup>11</sup> At the eleventh hour, on the seventh day, he sees the tale, that it is—not that it is *good*, but that it *is*. The difference between Gunnar's song of origins and the one a "sea-king" sang in the Volsung hall at the start of the poem (p. 4) is the weight now conferred by Gunnar's experience, which is to say by the whole second half of the poem. Having lived the plot through to the doom of the world that he knows, from the tyrant's snakepit Gunnar waxes godlike in his annihilation of repentance and his refusal to wish any deed undone. If "the Gods' undoing" looks past moral stance to eschatology, and with other passages in the poem foresees the twilight of the Asgard pantheon at Ragna Rök or doomsday, the parallel we thus grasp between King Gunnar and King Odin only reinforces the authority of a tale whose pattern comprehends the very gods.<sup>12</sup> The advantage gods have over men is a matter of degree rather than kind. It inheres in their mindfulness, a power they exert not to change the tale, but to speed it along, by holding it always in view. If Morris' gods function as epic machinery, it is a machinery nearly frictionless.

This mythic ethos may be a disturbing one, but it is neither gloomy nor anomalous in an epic from the later Victorian period. John Hollow has valuably called attention to the suicidal aspect of the poem: the glee with which Sinfiotli drains his poisoned cup (p. 47), the eroticized farewell with which Signy, returning into her own blazing house, tropes it as a bed candlelit by earls (p. 41); the

death wish variously expressed and enacted by Brynhild, Hogni, Gunnar, Gudrun. The craving for the end that drives each of these episodes indeed makes humanly plausible Hollow's inference that in *Sigurd* "the only real certainty is that life is so hard that one will finally long for death as rest."<sup>13</sup> But the tragic logic of the tale suggests something other than this inference, and stranger. Heroes of the fiber Morris found in the sagas crave the end not as release but as completion, as the summative justification of a retrospect long anticipated, the repetition within the finite life of the infinite yet sequenced fullness of time. Sinfiotli goes out laughing, Signy's last words brim with exhilaration, because for all its sobriety Morris' epic encompasses a comic fulfillment: pattern wrought, individuality gathered into collective design. The appeal of Matthew 24.13, "He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved," followed Morris through his early rejection of the Christian story and into his ultimate embrace of Marxian historical determinism. "I don't think people really want to die because of mental pain," he once remarked, "that is, if they are imaginative people. They want to live to see the play played out fairly." "Fair" in the world of the tale means both "just" and "beautiful," and fairness in both these senses is what imaginative people like Morris' heroes most gladly imagine.<sup>14</sup>

So self-referential a poetic completeness may, without being actually suicidal in Hollow's sense, still be a dead end. In the most searching thematic analysis the poem has attracted, Hartley Spatt acknowledges that its "close fusion of mythos and ethos . . . brings *Sigurd the Volsung* to the verge of achieving Morris' goal of a self-sustaining myth," a myth "dedicated to the heroism of self-determination." Yet for Spatt this fusion stands at last "revealed as a tautology."<sup>15</sup> The greatly sacrificial leader becomes in legendary tradition heroic, Spatt maintains, then eventually divine, yet with a power that is ultimately pointless; for that leader, being only human, can do no more than inspire and bless the future sacrifices of a posterity who will be bound to execute the tragic cycle over and over again. This euhemerist paradigm for national myth, notably instantiated in Britain through the treatment of Odin in Carlyle's *On Heroes* (1841), was a staple of Victorian ethnographic speculation by the time Morris built it into Book 2 of *Sigurd*.<sup>16</sup> There the primeval dwarf artisan Regin complains how often the work of his own hands has been credited by humankind to a set of puny gods, who are thus in a sense his handiwork too (p. 87).

Regin wants things to go by their true names (original, pristine, unmythified by tradition), while Hartley Spatt wants the "essential mystery" of a supernatural religion to puncture tautology and redeem the human tale from its own momentum. Yet from their opposing flanks these complementary perspectives on the traditions of the tale are so fundamentally hostile to the view Morris takes of epic that they can clarify the extremity of the poet's will to make narrative a law unto itself. For *Sigurd the Volsung* places its story beyond external review. It acknowledges no standard beside what the imagination has made from the ele-

ments of humanity, and no truth outside the accumulating episodes of that making, which is to say outside the tradition it both nourishes and lives by. All for the tale: *Il n'y a pas de hors-conté*. What Kafka said about the truth of parables may be said too about *Sigurd* as epic. By exposing the factitiousness of the tale, Regin or Spatt may overcome it in reality, for there their arguments are strong; but in the epic world they have lost.<sup>17</sup> Just this is what Sigurd learns on the Glittering Heath when he tastes the dragon blood of Fafnir's misanthropic heart, suddenly plumbs Regin's counterplot, and proceeds to slay him, "lest the world run backward," "lest the world forget its tale, / And the Gods sit deedless" (p. 116). This, Sigurd's first independent deed, trumps his former obedience to Regin's plan with a sacrifice made not to any individual's will but to the tale itself. At this hero-making juncture Morris' thought about the ineluctability of the tragic cycle corresponds with the thought his contemporary Nietzsche had trained on Greek instances in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872, rev. 1886) but had honed, thanks to Richard Wagner, on the matter of the North: It is a dream, this beautiful illusion, I will dream on.

Even to speak of "Morris' thought," however, misstates the case from the start. Next to Nietzsche, Morris was a man without ideas; and he himself explained why, the year after publishing *Sigurd*, in a letter declining the Oxford Professorship of Poetry: "It seems to me that the *practice* of any art rather narrows the artist in regard to the *theory* of it."<sup>18</sup> No one with an eye like Morris' can have lacked *theory* in its root sense as a way of seeing. But one vital element in that way of seeing, for Morris as for his ghostly godfather Blake, was an unswerving fidelity to practical instances. This craftsmanlike kind of "theorizing," which unfitted Morris for that abstraction from particulars which is ordinarily meant by aesthetic theory, returned him instead to the tale as the place of vantage. Narrative remained his preferred mode of thinking, and his characters' redoubled awareness of their place in the tale served him as a kind of second-order imaginative epistemology, locally concretized in every case yet edified by structural recurrence into the epic equivalent of a generalization or law.<sup>19</sup>

The mythos that is ethos in *Sigurd*, then, is also its logos, its chief cognitive instrument. Knowledge comes in narrative packages: that for Morris is what epic means. We have seen how in *Sigurd* to understand a personality or realize the bearings of a situation is, with emphatic literalness, to know the story. But Morris extends the dominion of narrative well beyond this familiar sense of personal relations. Information itself—the epic's encyclopedic treasury of knowledge, which the modern mind would habitually quantify or tabulate as *data*—here takes the shape of a tale instead. Thus when Gunnar, bragging of the Niblungs' wealth, taunts Atli's envoy with his incapacity ever to "tell over the tale" of the dragon's hoard (p. 258), he means just that. For him a storehouse inventory and a story involve the same essential act of serial comprehension. The tally and the account serve within the poem as hallmarks of the varieties of

craft (telling how) and lore (telling wherefore) that evolve across the Volsung and Niblung generations. Into this generational evolution Morris inscribes an epic commemoration of the transformation from clan to city society.<sup>20</sup> The world according to *Sigurd* is staunchly nonprogressive, and Morris is if anything pessimistic in assessing the process of social development that makes King Atli's court more hierarchically civilized than King Volsung's hall. Still, the poem apprehends change with great consistency as both the result and the cause of a circumstantiality whose basic sense evolves in story form. *Relation*, the primary art of the ordering mind, proves in this poem to be virtually coextensive with narration (the first meaning for "relation" in English since Gower, says the OED, even if for us now it is the faintest). The genealogical preoccupation of the saga and lay materials Morris worked from ensures, of course, that family relations will have a prominent place in his or any retelling of them. But Morris urges the privilege of relation well beyond narrowly dynastic considerations, far enough beyond them that questions about family lines exemplify a larger concern with story lines. Jamming, short-circuiting, or otherwise usurping narrative transmission is in *Sigurd* the definitive act of a villain. This is obvious with the monstrous miser Fafnir, but it also applies to Grimhild's expansive dynasticism and Regin's radical utopianism. Each of these blocking agents, in seeking to thwart the tale, threatens to supplant *relation* with interventionist *cunning* and to crush epic narrativity into the apocalyptics of the quick fix.<sup>21</sup>

That what counts is what gets recounted sounds perilously like a circular definition of narrative as such, yet Morris makes it tantamount to a metaphysics. (This may explain why Morris criticism breaks down into plot-summary as readily as Blake criticism into system-building.) Where consciousness and its elevation are measured by a narrative standard, the highest pitch of intellect will manifest itself in pure prophecy. Prophecy occurs frequently in *Sigurd*, and it ordinarily feels less magical than scientific. As a present awareness of the past's forward thrust enables extrapolation into the future, commemoration and prediction form complementary readings of the seamless fabric of time. By clustering set pieces around the midpoint of the poem—Gripir's predictions (pp. 99-100), the soothsaying of Brynhild the Wise to Sigurd (pp. 126-130), Brynhild's reading of Gudrun's dream (pp. 137-139)—Morris draws on an engineering as old as Homer to give firmness to a long structure: not suspense, perhaps, but a more lasting suspension. The poem's distribution of omniscience among a series of prophets does not relativize its authority (as happens by contrast in Browning's *The Ring and the Book* [1868-69]), but amplifies it chorally. The foretellings and fulfillments of the poem in effect are its philosophical propositions, its theory of life put to narrative proof. Understanding *Sigurd* as a resolutely untheorized, practical essay in the epistemology of narrative can help us appreciate its historical position as an instance, albeit an outlandishly elemental one, of that Victorian intellectual economy whose

far-flung business it was to process raw spontaneity into predictively trustworthy knowledge, and which was ever compensating the forfeit seizure of free agency with the dividend benefits of enlightened control. Victorian poets generally preferred to rehearse these patterns in elegiac modes sweetened by hope; in *Sigurd the Volsung* Morris showed that the job could be done as well in the rougher register of tragedy.

## 2

Criticism has largely neglected *Sigurd* during the two decades since its centenary, but the foregoing considerations may help link the poem to vital work recently devoted to other portions of the Morris oeuvre. In pursuit of a materialist argument about the development of twentieth-century poetics, Jerome McGann has nominated Morris as an overlooked precursor to the modernist proponents of a thoroughgoing inherency of poetic meaning within poetic form.<sup>22</sup> Examining lyric instances from *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) to the *Kelmscott Poems by the Way* (1891), McGann reads deeply into Morris by staying right on the aesthetic surface. He shows how the poet's manipulation of typographic and bibliographic codes evinces a casual wit that quizzes modern conditions of mechanized reproduction, in the name of a crafts-based model of artifactual creation and reception. Now it was *Sigurd*, Morris' personal favorite among his works, that he put first in the production line when reprinting poems in the new Kelmscott artbook format; and we can find in *Sigurd*, especially if we go beyond the visible to ponder other registers of verbal embodiment, formal effects comparable to those McGann has sighted in the lyrics. As a booked object, the poem is not visually unprepossessing, of course, not even in the 1911 *Collected Works* volume that most readers will now consult. The spread of Morris' hexameters crowds each page toward the margin; this feature, like the placement of new chapters and epic Books flush up against those they follow, encodes an ocular equivalent for that bulked seamlessness which we have seen to be characteristic of the whole narrative design. To hazard a specific poetic "viewing": during the forging of the Wrath of Sigurd (the hero's sword), Morris contrives a veritable Anvil Chorus of anagrams and slant homonyms for the word "sword." "Hast thou warded"; "my fathers, and the word"; "shall hear the war-wind"; "walls of war /And"; "the world is darkening o'er" (p. 92)—all this and more, within a dozen lines, adds up to a runic rebus in the midst of things. *Sigurd*'s saber-toothed phrases make the ears ring, as a whole is forged of sound-shards, and words become sword before our riddling eyes.<sup>23</sup>

Still, visuals like these can count for little in a narrative of such sustained accumulations as *Sigurd the Volsung*. The macropoetics of epic require effects of verbal design that take place on another order altogether. This order is less sheerly material than can be read from paper, typeface, and binding, where

McGann reads the lyrics; yet it does not entail a flight, either, into the textual abstraction that McGann (like Morris) decries. It is instead an order of aesthetic enactment that takes up epic conventions and bends them self-referentially toward the internal reinforcement of the tale. Our best contemporary guide to the effects of "totalization" and "immersion" that accompany the enlargement of scope in Morris is Jeffrey Skoblow's work on *The Earthly Paradise*. Skoblow takes as his critical object "the body of the totality" and understands that the macropoetics of Morris entail "an experience of notable volume," which engulfs the whole sensorium with "a blinding effect" that "makes the poem all but invisible to the modern eye."<sup>24</sup> In the homogeneity and structural gridlock of *The Earthly Paradise* Skoblow reads signs of a culturally representative stalemate: Morris' attempt to circumvent the Victorian administration of desire and commodification of pleasure brought him, in spite of himself, to collude with the enemy, enlisting the ministrations of the publishing system and producing that most conspicuous literary commodity, a bestseller. Having in *The Earthly Paradise* wrestled this contradiction to a draw—a speculative standoff in which the proliferation of interchangeable stories invites their passive and noncommittal reception—in *Sigurd* Morris committed himself instead to the single story, the greatest one he knew, and one that he believed had power to summon and grip his reader. The aim remained to write paradise, and the macropoetic strategy was still absorption in a totalizing experience. But paradise now meant the bliss of the one tale, and the aim was now not to detain but to contain the reader, and not with a plural heterocosm but with the one world the tale made real.

This is an epic aim, and it informs the use Morris makes of several conventional devices of the genre. The epic simile, for example, which in Homer or Virgil typically serves a purpose intrinsic to the tale (rest and recreation for the war-numbered mind, naturalization of exotica for the audience at home), in Morris typically reflects on the tale itself. In a first instance, when Signy declares against affection and for glory, she sets into motion a destructive dynamic that Morris anticipates by simile:

She spake, and the feast sped on, and 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)

Morris' simile does not detour from the episode, in classical fashion, but rivets the episode into the plot as a portent.<sup>25</sup> Near the end of the poem a comparable simile, again concerning ominously unheeded speech, works to comparable effect; but this time the simile strikes harder because the full weight of the story lies behind it. Gunnar having announced that the Niblungs will accept Atli's treacherous invitation,

his words passed over the wise,

As oft o'er the garden lilies goes the rising thunder-wind,  
And they know no other summer, and no spring that was they mind. (p. 262)

By this late point in the story, such a simile amounts to a metapoetic reflection upon the Niblungs' tragic, joyous commitment. Consider heroes as lilies: they toil not, neither do they spin yarns, being entailed by the yarn they are in. The reflective irony here is situational rather than attitudinal. It does not judge the Niblungs' blind joy as morally discrepant with some ideal order, but fastens it neutrally within a mythos to which there is no alternative and from which there is no swerving, even in tropes.

The boost Morris always gave narrative over rhetoric emerges in *Sigurd* through the homage that the trope pays to the tale. Book 1 rises to a magnificent, catastrophic climax with the death of Sigmund and the demolition of the Volsung hall built around the living Branstock tree, events marking the extinction of the "house" of the Volsungs respectively as lineage and as architecture. This double loss is qualified by two survivals: one the unborn son Sigurd in Queen Hiordis' womb, the other the tale that Morris has yet to deliver in the remaining epic Books. This twinning of loss and survival forms the subject of the most ambitious and resonant epic simile in all the poem. Morris compares the fate of the ruined Volsung house to that of a "noble oak of the forest," felled by men but by their strokes transformed to a lordly ship. "An exceeding glorious thing" while it lived, the oak-turned-ship yet exceeds its former glory once it is fashioned to human use. The final form of this human use, as Morris' long simile concludes, is narrative speech, converting the cycle of nature as it were into the cycle of sagas:

And bare and shorn of its blossoms is the house of the deer of the wood.  
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. (p. 58)

The fall of the Volsungs, like the fall of the Niblungs which it presages and brings about, is the origin of their story, a dragon-shaped craft that "beareth the kings and the earl-folk" as it "floats on the flood" of years. A fallen king, the simile declares, is like a tree that is made into a ship that acquires a name that is like a king: the circularity of this pattern is crowned by the simile-within-the-simile of the "name it hath got like a king." To ask which "name"—Sigurd the Volsung or *Sigurd the Volsung?*—is to recognize that both the hero and the poem are survivals, and that they have survived by the same means. Both are alike the tenor of which the entire simile is, with apt literality, the vehicle. Both will die and live again, through a craft that at moments like this bears itself out in the world.<sup>26</sup>

If Morris' inspired grasp of the tale is what puts the wind into his epic fabric, its steady-stroked conveyance, line by line, is a matter of versecraft. George Saintsbury observed early what a prosodic anthology and summa the narrative verse of Morris comprises, and he especially cited the heroic meter first worked out in *Sigurd* for its unflagging flexibility.<sup>27</sup> The lineage of the poem's line constitutes an epic allusion in itself: its hexameter volume resumes the Mediterranean tradition, its alliterative habit the Gothic. In addition, the strongly worked medial caesura and rhyming line-end pause make the poem beat time in four (three stresses plus a rest in each hemistich). Curiously, this feature gives *Sigurd* a healthier affiliation with the British ballad-measure than Morris was able to achieve with the clumpy fourteeners of his Virgil translation a year before (*The Aeneids* of 1875).<sup>28</sup> The purpose behind both works—the rapprochement Morris consistently sought between a popular and a noble style, between the classical epic heritage and the vernacular forms of his own land—was one the poet went on to prosecute with *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1885-86), the *Odyssey* translation, and numerous verse interludes in the later prose romances. All, significantly, were done in the heroic measure first worked out in *Sigurd the Volsung*.

Of all Morris' formal devices in *Sigurd*, prosody may be the one most intimately responsible for the macropoetic experience of engulfment discussed above. Divided hexameter is a verse form that soaks into the bones during the protracted sittings the poem calls for. The very firmness of its metered stress permits liberal variation in the rhythm, always a boon to the footsore in long-distance poetry. Yet the existence of so many variations demands, if not reading aloud, then reading at oral-delivery pace; scanned by the eye alone—as blank verse may be, or the several narrative measures of *The Earthly Paradise*—the rhythm vanishes and the lines doggerelize or disintegrate into unjustified prose. Remembering the oral roots of epic, Morris elicits a prosodically working faith in the tale spoken: set down in print so as to be taken up in voice, a measured yet pervasive surround.<sup>29</sup> Once well into the chant, a reader may even find its swing invading so purely bibliographical a code as the book's title page:

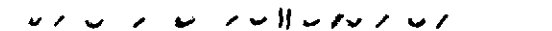

  
 The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs

To hear the poem's title resound with the pulse of its verses is to detect in little, and to help carry out, the poem's epic will to enter the world.

The internal three-plus-three symmetry of the poetic line in *Sigurd* corresponds to much larger symmetries, of which scholarship has taken careful note. Book 1 on the Volsungs and Book 4 on the Niblungs flank, as in a triptych, the story of Sigurd in Books 2 and 3, which take up in turn the rising and then the falling action of the central hero's career. The discovery of Andvari's golden

hoard and its ultimate drowning at the hands of the Niblungs, the early and late holocausts in Siggeir's hall and then Atli's palace—these and other narrative motifs are set in place less to point a moral (*sic transit gloria mundi*) than to adorn the tale (*sic transit historia mundi*, where the *transit* is all). Again, the symmetrical interdependence of rise and fall, which the tale implicates at so many structural levels, and on which the two-step prosody of every line insists, is the moral that *Sigurd* propounds. The wisdom of epic thus conceived foretells, at its outermost bound, the obsolescence and decay that lie in store for all its textual versions.

This same dark wisdom produces, at the closest possible quarters, the shockingly focussed intimacy of the shortest line in the poem:


  
 "I will not wed thee, Sigurd, nor any man alive." (p. 224)

Thus Brynhild, answering Sigurd's amazing offer of a fresh start: "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" (p. 223). Sigurd's offer is amazing because, after the contretemps of four lives cornered in love's quadrangle, it amounts to a proposal to cancel the story by writing off the bulk of Book 3 as some kind of corrigible error, so much dead wood and wasted breath. With this proposal to sacrifice destiny to happiness Morris brings his hero as close as can be to a sin against the light. It is Brynhild's part to fend off this sin, and it is the part of the verse to sharpen her great refusal to a prophetic acuteness. For the caesura after "Sigurd" isolates her last four words, retards them to accommodate three full stresses, and so highlights their relation to the corresponding hemistich—nearly, like this one, a verse-filling afterthought—in which Sigurd has just offered to deaden himself to his own wife Gudrun: "and all those shall be as the dead." A beau geste, perhaps, from the standpoint of chivalric romance, but too airily romantic for the epic values Brynhild stands and speaks for. The romance hero's capacity to forget (like Jason's in the 1867 handling of his myth by Morris) must not correct the accruing tale. Instead the tale must call him to account, by bringing him to his narrative senses.<sup>30</sup>

And the exacted reckoning is death. That is the law Brynhild's four words lay down: much as no man of woman born can kill Macbeth, not "any man alive" can wed Brynhild. Once, in Book 2, it was enough for Sigurd to go through fire for her sake; now, in Book 4, he must go to death. Circumstances have been straitened under the weight of events, and it is the pressure of narrative that chisels Brynhild's line to the pith. Sigurd is the one protagonist to whom Morris never attributes the least trace of a death wish; yet what he now hears from his beloved in four words is that loving her means wanting to die. The only true, the only epic rejoinder to Sigurd's plea to "live, live" proves to be a death made authentic through witting embrace. This is at once the ethical ground of the poem as regards its protagonists and the ontological ground of the poem as

at once the ethical ground of the poem as regards its protagonists and the ontological ground of the poem as regards its readers. Only after "all these shall be as the dead"—shall all be dead in fact, narrative contingency supervening on metaphorical perspectivism—only then will the breath of legend work its perdurable revival. In Victorian England it will breathe, for a space, Brynhild's quick hexameter.

## 3

Recently a leading newspaper reviewer promoting the latest Morris biography baited a hook with *Sigurd* and cast it out, in a patronizing parenthesis, as one of those funny Victorian curios: "(we no longer read a lot of narrative verse about Volsungs and Niblungs)." <sup>31</sup> How true it is. And yet how false in its assumptions. To imply that there was a time (thankfully "no longer" with us) when booksellers drove a brisk trade in epic both mistakes the fortunes of Morris' poem and misses a crucial irony that is built into its very conception. Epic, by definition, interpellates its auditory on the ground of membership or belonging: "This is your story," it declares, where "your" is a plural aimed at each reader's affiliation or group identity. The poem including history, as Pound called epic, includes the reader by implication within that history. Flourishing not a novelistic mirror but a pedigree, the tale of the tribe presupposes its hearers' stake in the traditions it bears, and posits a continuity that correlates the fixed wisdom of past lore with the changing occasions of the present.

What is truly curious about *Sigurd the Volsung*—and not in the Victorian curios sense—is how naked, even foolhardy a gesture it makes in this epic direction. I have tried to show how Morris, like his heroes, kept faith with epic's great commandment by betting everything he had on the afterlife of narrative reception. And yet, in practical fact, he can scarcely be said to have lifted a finger to secure such a reception among any substantial modern readership that he, or we, could imagine. *Sigurd* is the least forthcoming of the many nineteenth-century epics, the most remote in its presentation and least accommodated to contemporary interests; at the same time, its own internal all-for-the-tale logic makes it the reader-neediest poem of them all. Scattered effects of this radically split signal may be detected among the poem's first reviewers, who were not (like our pundit above) at liberty to reject a William Morris opus out of hand, but who hardly knew where to take hold of it either. With striking uniformity they responded to the epic craving for connectedness by seizing, in a maneuver ominously apt for the last quarter of their century, on matters of race and race's chief denominator language. Reviewers, that is, pronounced the poem fit for Victoria, or unfit, by almost exclusively ethnological and philological standards: "This is" (or "is not") "your Nordic story," they told England, but by criteria that ignored the story itself, its symbolic and causal links, the titanic doings and sufferings of its protagonists. It was as if the reviewers, in their rush to assess

Gunnar's harping voice, could not make out his words.<sup>32</sup>

This first round of willing but baffled reception underscores the degree to which *Sigurd* flouted the obligation that nineteenth-century literary production had laid on itself: to meet a large and uncertain audience halfway, or better, with books that taught their readers what to do with them. Taking the point as granted where books of prose fiction and history are concerned, recall the circumspection of the poets: how Tennyson in 1842 bent over backwards to equip his "Morte d'Arthur" with that friendly calling card "The Epic"; or how Robert Browning, at about the same time but with much unhappier results, twisted *Sordello* (1840) into a fiasco of knots all designed to ensure that the reader keep up. During the decade before *Sigurd* was published, both these major Victorians had resumed the arts of epic accommodation: Tennyson's "Holy Grail" installment of *Idylls of the King* (1869) had been a study in the transmission and reception of cultural capital, which topic Browning in *The Ring and the Book* had pulled wrong side out and stretched into an epic on the recycling of cultural rubbish. These very different achievements shared with each other, and shared with their audience in a kind of running paideia, a concern with the momentum of a tradition that impelled antique force into modern circumstance.

A third epicizing work that overlapped with these poems in concern as well as date was Morris' own *Earthly Paradise*. Here was the same (if not greater) care to frame and cushion the major narrative with paratextual matter; the same (if less analytically foregrounded) fascination with the mediated transfer of stories among minds and across groups. Above all, Morris' vast poem resembled his contemporaries' in the pains it took to put readers in possession of their heritage, in this case their heritage as Europeans, beneficiaries alike of a Mediterranean and a Northern mythological legacy.<sup>33</sup> One epic ware that booksellers really did have trouble keeping in stock, *The Earthly Paradise* became a common reader's treasure, by virtue not just of smooth and happy versecraft, but more deeply of a carefully contrived and solicitously maintained effect of cultural familiarization. For our purposes here, the chief aspect of this comfort poetry was the unconflicted historicism whereby it gave readers nostalgic yet recuperative access to a narrative ancestry remarkable for its benevolence. Individual stories in *The Earthly Paradise* are as often bizarre as serene, but even the strangest is rendered gently natural by the cultural-historical company it keeps. Each tale is diplomatically relativized by its place in a pattern of narrative checks and balances; none can claim rank as more than one ingredient in a diffusive genealogy for Europe since the Middle Ages. To deride this poem as escapist misses the mark, since what it offers modern readers is less an escape than a menu: its plausible, flattering, and still far from outmoded historicism makes an optionalized cultural past available at readers' convenience. The mul-

tivalence of the poem casts its reader as an indifferent consumer of narrative goods, not an engaged participant in narrative values that lodge a decisive claim. So when *The Earthly Paradise* says, "This is your story," its epic warranty comes with a concession: "But then so is that your story too, and that, and that." Not for nothing does Morris head his monument to such consumerist historicism with the litany "Forget . . . Forget . . . Forget."<sup>34</sup>

It was this slack spectatorial pluralism that Morris repudiated in *Sigurd*. If the easy-access historicism of his earlier modular epic in effect freed readers to customize the past, then his mature monolithic epic would be as uncompromisingly, unforsakably stern as he could make it. Given a tale in which all was said and done for that tale's sake, a reader seeking sympathetic connection with grandeur of passion and choice would have to take the story on the story's set terms or not at all. Yet those terms were such as no reader could accept, in Morris' day or ours, without betraying the sovereign, compulsory mobility of the modern condition. The peculiar macropoetics of *Sigurd* mean that to receive the story in a temper of critical detachment, no matter how sympathetic or discerning, is to reject its deepest premise. To grasp Gudrun's final plight as a choice that is simultaneously free and entailed by indomitable narrative logic—to do this, while reserving exemption for oneself from an equivalent logic—is to have failed to read the poem as the poem demands to be read. This failure is strategic to the poem's intentional structure. For it is entailed on the modern reader as strictly as Gudrun's is on her. Apprehending this parallel, we apprehend our exile from a tale whose ancient strangeness exposes modernity to itself.<sup>35</sup>

*Sigurd* thus takes the measure of liberal sympathy poetics as well as of the tendency of Victorian historicism to imagine the past as a broad sampler of options. Reading the poem through involves regular and protracted confrontation with an integrity that is both unimpeachable and profoundly foreign to the modern mind, that is indeed most foreign in the very ardor of its conception of what it might mean to belong to a line and have a stake in a plot. Call the result "storicism": a cross of stoicism on historicism that valorizes the bounds of the tale as a way of respecting the radical alterity of the past, while forswearing the luxury of supposing the present to be any different from that radically other past in the severity of its fundamental, and therefore ordinarily invisible, crises and costs. (It is among the effects of *Sigurd* to manifest and assay just that luxury, which is the luxury of modern historicist or culturally relativist understanding.) The recklessness of this epic's commitment to a fated order thus passes judgment on its reader, by throwing into grim contrast the commodified rootlessness of modern experience. The alienation of modernity from the capacity to honor commitment on anything like the scale which norms *Sigurd*—and which dwarfs the tawdry racial and national allegiances it elicited in its first reviewers by way of compensa-

tion—thus emerges as the grounding condition, and ultimate theme, of Morris' macropoetic refusal to accommodate his contemporaries.

*Sigurd* is the more remarkable as the testament of a man who in 1876 was still addressing readers not as a committed comrade, but as a fellow victim of the occult system of privations that constituted modern life as he knew it. Marx was about to fall into Morris' lap, and he into that love of the socialist tale which would crown the career of one of the most appealing figures in literary history. Marxism would give back to Morris, with all the reality he vested in participatory narrative, the world he had long thought recoverable only as a fiction of loss. In dialectical materialism he would find a historicist vision that, far from neutralizing commitment, required it: a master narrative with power like fate's to assimilate the oppressions of the present as things real yet ultimately episodic, and to promise a place of honor in a hereafter of epic scope. All this was soon to be, but not yet; and Morris' epic may be the stronger for the disenchanting and preliminary poise that let him make of it that precious thing, the unbeholden testament of a believer without a creed. *Sigurd the Volsung* renders the human scene with a merciless kind of generosity—spare, dry-eyed, swift, capacious—that was rare indeed in the literature of its era, and probably impossible to the convert it must have helped its author to become.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

- 1 J.M.S. Tompkins, *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry* (London: Cecil Wolf, 1988), pp. 229, 317.
- 2 *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 92.
- 3 *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1969), p. 192.
- 4 These ideas about culture heroism are applied to Morris' work in poetic narrative by Charlotte H. Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1978), pp. 42-43, 177-179.
- 5 CW, 7: xiv, where Morris' entire vindication of the "Volsung Tale" is germane: "For this is the Great Story of the North which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks—to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been—a story too—then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us."
- 6 Such various detractions have marched as critique of Morris' romanticism that a history of the critique itself would be instructive. Mingled scholarly, aesthetic, and ethical motives may be glimpsed in the charges laid against *Sigurd* by George T. McDowell, "The Treatment of the Volsunga Saga by William Morris," *Scandinavian Studies* 7 (1923): 151-168; and by Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and of Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1937), pp. 68-75; J. W. Blench, "William Morris' *Sigurd*: A Re-appraisal," *DUJ* n.s. 30, no. 1 (December 1968): 3. Hoare's indictment may deserve some of the credit for eliciting, from an unexpected

- quarter, one of the gems of Morris criticism, C. S. Lewis' chapter in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 37-55. Animus against the poet's "romanticizing" interventions in *Sigurd* is likeliest to take now the political form generally expounded by E. P. Thompson in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955; rev. ed. New York: Pantheon, 1977), esp. pp. 189-190, 807-808; and focused by John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Lucas (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 221-278.
- 7 As Ruth C. Ellison points out in "The Undying Glory of Dreams': William Morris and the 'Northland of Old,'" in *Victorian Poetry*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Arnold, 1972), pp. 173-174, when Morris bestowed on his protagonists "precise foreknowledge of events," he was elaborating on a feature already present in the sagas. This elaboration may be further figured, at a metanarrative level, by the strategic interventions on Odin's part which the manuscripts of *Sigurd* show Morris inserting at a late stage of composition: see May Morris' discussion in *CW*, 12:xxv-xxvi.
  - 8 I cite throughout, with parenthetical page references, Jane Ennis' reprint of *Sigurd the Volsung* from *CW*, vol. 12 (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994).
  - 9 This stereoscopic roundedness, which Lewis praises for being "as windy, as tangible, as resonant and three dimensional, as that of Scott and Homer" (p. 40), distinguishes the handling of *Sigurd* from the "sharp, flat" quality which Margaret Lourie finds in *The Defence of Guenevere* ([1858; New York: Garland, 1981], p. 16), and which dominates even the large canvasses of *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70). It is a fullness peculiarly epic, where a narrative prospect gives measure to the dimension of time; and it entails what W. B. Yeats called "self-surrender that would lose more than half its sweetness if it lost the savour of coming days" ("The Happiest of the Poets" [1902], in *Essays and Introductions* [New York: Macmillan, 1961], p. 57). In this connection it is worth noting Morris' shortcomings as a draftsman: "he gave up figures," he confessed, "because he could not make his figures move" (Sir Sidney Cockerell, quoted in Tompkins, p. 130); upon Morris' arrival in Iceland, J. W. Mackail reports, "the sketch-book was soon put up again and the scene photographed in words instead" (*The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. [1899; rpt. London: Longmans, 1920], 1:254).
  - 10 On epic and tapestry, see Mackail, 1:186. The design analogy to Morris wallpaper is pursued by Robert Harbison, *Deliberate Regression* (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 105 "flat repeating patterns to cover large interior spaces" convey like Morris' narratives a "gloomy sense of inevitability"; and by Florence Boos, *The Design of William Morris' The Earthly Paradise* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1990), p. 366: "in every lattice-work or rect angular confinement, there is a path of escape; for every escape, a new confinement."
  - 11 May Morris' review of the manuscript suggests that the unusual introspective eloquence of this passage cost the poet unusual pains in composition: see *CW*, 12:xxv.
  - 12 Harbison proposes that for Morris, unlike Richard Wagner, the northern sagas offered "escape from enthrallment to the supernatural into the purely human," which is a realm "where power and virtue are not quite joined because virtue in our sense cannot exist" (pp. 108, 105)—our sense being presumably that of general propositions or rules, as opposed to the elemental morality that cannot be thought outside the ethics of the tale. Regin's retrospective chronicle of dwarves and gods actually includes the invention of morality as one of its episodes (*Sigurd*, pp. 75, 80). See in this connection Frederick Kirchoff's analysis of the literally de-moralizing revisions Morris made in his long "Wanderers" prologue to *The Earthly Paradise*, to rid the narrative of "providential order" and the abstracted ethic it implies ("The Aesthetic Discipline of *The Earthly Paradise*," *VP* 18 [1980]:238).
  - 13 "An Introduction: Sinfliotli," in *The After-Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris's The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, ed. John Hollow (New York: William Morris Society, 1978), p. 7.
  - 14 It was on terms like these that Yeats sought to reconcile Morris' aesthetic and political commitments: "His mind was illuminated from within and lifted into prophecy . . . and having that faith which is alone worth having, for it includes all others, a sure knowledge established in the constitution of his mind that perfect things are final things, he announced that all he had seen would come to pass" (pp. 62-63). The quotations in my paragraph—given respectively in Tompkins, p. 254, and Mackail, 1:217—return us to the consolation of Alcinous with which we began, and to Morris' regular coupling of that consolation with the ethos of epic. On the Norse legends: "Think of the joy we have in praising great men, and how we turn their stories over and over, and fashion their lives for our joy: and this also we ourselves may give to the world. This seems to me pretty much the religion of the Northmen. I think one would be a happy man if one could hold it" (Mackail, 1:334). And again on *Beowulf*, the translation project of his last years: "To live is good and to die is good if you are valiant and faithful and if you reckon great deeds and the fair fame that comes of them of more account than a few more short years of a trembler's life upon the earth. This is the simple ethic of our forefathers, and in these poems it is so set forth that it is clear they really believed it, and in consequence life amidst all its sufferings and hardships was a continuous poem to them" (May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1936], 1:493).
  - 15 Hartley S. Spatt, "Morrissaga: *Sigurd the Volsung*," *ELH* 44 (1977): 371-373.
  - 16 On these Victorian contexts see Carole Silver, "Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris," in *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris*, ed. Frederick Kirchoff (New York: William Morris Society, 1976), pp. 117-136. One contemporary who picked up the myth-and-ritual resonances of *Sigurd* at once was Henry Hewlett in his *Fraser's* review: *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Peter Faulkner (Boston: Routledge, 1973), p. 260.
  - 17 "On Parables," in *The Basic Kafka*, ed. Erich Heller (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 158.
  - 18 Mackail, 1:337. For Morris even so elementary an abstraction from practical sequence as the grammar of a language seems to have been abhorrent. His colleague and coach in Icelandic, Eiríkr Magnússon, recalls their first lessons: "I suggested we'd better start with some grammar. 'No, I can't be bothered with grammar; have no time for it. You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature, I must have the story'" ("William Morris," *Cambridge Review*, November 26, 1896, p. 9).
  - 19 Frederick Kirchoff, "William Morris's 'Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon': The Narrative as Place," *Pre-Raphaelite Review* 3, no. 2 (1980), adduces the capacity of story to generalize and validate: for Morris "literary narrative . . . far from representing an alternative to 'real experience,' is in fact the means by which it is included in reality" (p. 22). Mark Cumming, "The Structure of *Sigurd the Volsung*," *VP* 21 (1983), reads the multiple structural reinforcements of the poem in terms of "figurative or typological relation" within a system of "proleptic and retrospective reference" (pp. 405-406).
  - 20 The fullest treatment of this social-historical allegory is Jessie Kocmanová's in *The Poetic Maturing of William Morris* (Prague: Statni Pedagogicke Nakladeatelstvi, 1964), pp. 139-177; an alternative reading stressing the sociosexual dimensions of *Sigurd*—the

romance, as it were, within the epic—is offered by Goode, in *Literature and Politics*, ed. Lucas, pp. 240ff. For Morris' later, Marxian grasp of the development from clan to city to empire see his 1884 lecture "Art and Labour," in *Unpublished Lectures*, ed. Lemire, pp. 94-118.

- 21 Jane Ennis, "The Role of Grimhild in *Sigurd the Volsung*," *JWMS* 20 (1989): 13-23, correlates the queen's "craft" with her instrumentalist plotting, which subordinates heroic endurance to shortsighted dynastic ambition. Significantly, each of Grimhild's major coups d'état involves an induced amnesia: when Sigurd and Gunnar in Book 3, and then Gudrun in Book 4, drink of her tangled cup, they assimilate a lethal, counterfeit draft of the epic they are in, a hollow or pseudo history with power to cur-tale the heroic (pp. 166, 188, 252). See also Kocmanová, pp. 7-58, and Oberg, p. 90; on Regin, Frederick Kirchoff, *William Morris* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 104; on Fafnir, Tompkins, p. 271.
- 22 Jerome J. McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 45-75.
- 23 May Morris reports that this, fittingly, was a passage reformed in some heat, "rewritten and inserted here in a couple of pages much scored about" (*William Morris*, 1:482).
- 24 Jeffrey Skoblow, *Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, Art* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 3, 43, 49.
- 25 Although Morris ordinarily had little use for Milton (see Kirchoff, "Aesthetic," p. 235n.), it is hard not to compare this first epic simile from *Sigurd* with the first epic simile from *Paradise Lost*, where lines 1.196-208 liken Satan to a whale hidden from shipmen's view beneath, of all things, "the Norway foam." To make the comparison is to appreciate the difference between epic ironies that pivot, respectively, on the ethos of deluded choice and on the pathos of hapless inadvertence.
- 26 See Cumming on the structural ekphrasis Morris performs with "the building as ethnic symbol" (p. 407). A hall like Volsung's, or a storied chamber like Brynhild's (p. 193), can stand for the narrative whole; conversely, Morris can figure the temporal units of the tale as a building with passages architecturally constructed: "And the morn and the noon and the even built up another day" (p. 23). The royal house becomes most fully symbolic—Volsung's, Siggeir's, and Atli's halls constellating into versions of the one dynastic topos—at the point of its conflagration. (The quintessence of this symbol in a romance mode is Brynhild's fire-ring in Book 2, in a tragic mode the funeral pyre her corpse shares with Sigurd's in Book 3.) The combustion of an event into a symbol forms a narratological parallel to the tropological conversion of incidents into similes of the sort I discuss above.
- 27 George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 3:329-332.
- 28 In an *Academy* review of *The Aeneids*, the Oxford classicist Henry Nettleship identified the meter of Morris' translation as "the long ballad verse," whose "national and popular music" bears out to the English reader Virgil's folk roots among "the people of Rome" (November 1875, quoted in *Critical Heritage*, p. 222). The learned reviewer evidently shares Morris' enthusiasm for Niebuhr's hypotheses, to which Thomas Arnold and T. B. Macaulay had given Victorian currency, concerning a Virgil who wrote of and for a Roman people—and thus became ideologically available as the exponent of an organic, therefore noncoercive imperium. (On Morris' deliberately "barbaric" Virgil see Geoffrey B. Riddehough, "William Morris's Translation of the *Aeneid*," *JEGP* 36 [1937]: 338-346.) It is hard to believe, however, that Professor Nettleship lent more than half an ear to the actual verse of the *Aeneids*, which read like Chapman minus the charm. Sounder judgment awaited the publication a year later of *Sigurd*, whose iambic-anapestic hexameter an unsigned review in the *Atlantic Monthly* hailed as "the most appropriate form of rhymed verse for an English epic" (April 1877, quoted in *Critical Heritage*, p. 253). Saintsbury's assertion that management of the caesura was the key whereby Morris tuned a sustainable folk-epic line is borne out by Stuart Bliersch's research into the manuscripts: "Morris has punctuated each line not so that it would follow rules but so that it would read well" ("The Craft of Revision: Morris and *Sigurd the Volsung*," in *After-Summer Seed*, ed. Hollow, p. 19).
- 29 Attesting the corporeal, absorptive integrity of the verse medium, G. B. Shaw recalls the poet's recitations of the poem, "marking its swing by rocking from one foot to the other like an elephant" ("Morris as I Knew Him," in May Morris, *William Morris*, 2:xxxvii). In contrast, and quite oddly, Anthony Ugolnik derives the poem's rhyme not from vocal traditions of medieval verse but from "a Romantic, and written, literature" that spoils the effect of orality ("The Victorian Skald: Old Icelandic and the Evolution of William Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung*," in *After-Summer Seed*, ed. Hollow, p. 62).
- 30 Oberg, p. 86, distinguishes between the "past- or birth-oriented" characters in *Jason* and the "future- or death-oriented" characters in *Sigurd*. This distinction helps in appreciating these two works' respective affiliations with romance (where the present rides the crest of a perennially oblivious satisfaction) and with tragedy (where the present is a bequest from the past and a challenge to posterity). Condensing the tragic challenge of *Sigurd* into the crux of a single line took much revision, as John Robert Wahl shows in *No Idle Singer* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1964), pp. 14-15. The result conforms to the thrift Morris prized in his source, where as he told Charles Eliot Norton in a letter of December 21, 1869 "all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in two pages of moderate print" (May Morris, *William Morris*, 1:472).
- 31 Michael Dirda, "Master of Arts" (rev. of Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*), *Washington Post World*, September 20, 1995.
- 32 Among the several notices excerpted in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 231-267, *Sigurd* received a national hero's welcome in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Fraser's*, and *International Review*, but failed the test of Englishness in the *Athenaeum* and *Saturday Review*. Morris' vernacularized idiolect—a basic English that never was yet might have been—has continued to provoke dissension among readers. The scholarly exoneration performed in Karl Litzenberg's "The Diction of William Morris," *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi* 53 (1937): 327-363, did not deter Geoffrey Riddehough's attack soon afterward in "William Morris's Translation of the *Odyssey*," *JEGP* 40 (1941): 558-561. More recently Ugolnik has underscored the continuity between Morris' lexical eclecticism and the sagamen's (*After-Summer Seed*, ed. Hollow, pp. 37-50), while Goode finds the diction, which he despises, significant nevertheless as "passively the product of the very alienation the story is about" (*Literature and Politics*, ed. Lucas, p. 239). It is well to remember what Morris himself wrote to Fred Henderson in 1885: "Now literature is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself" (E. P. Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 879).
- 33 Boos sees how the evolving narrative of reception that frames *The Earthly Paradise* suggests the poet's concern with "processes of cultural memory" (p. 368), and Tompkins stresses Morris' valuation of "what human experience and imagination have done" to

history, Frei shows, "in a modern substitute for the unitary meaning" wherein an interpreter like Calvin had once had "to range himself into the same real sequence" of which scripture told (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974], pp. 199, 36). The extraordinary thing about *Sigurd* is that it refuses this new epic hermeneutic, eschewing the substitutive economy of modern historicism and going back after the premodern "unitary meaning" of "real sequence."

34 *The Earthly Paradise* (London: Longmans, 1905), 1:3.

35 In a discussion based on Mickiewicz's Polish epic *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Sławek observe that "the bardic voice," belated but intransigent, "arises from the acute awareness of the distinction between two radically different spheres of reality, but the bard does not speak from the gap, from the rupture between the two, but always from inside the sphere which he considers home. Hence the bardic voice cannot be exiled" (*Literary Voice: The Calling of Jonah* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1995], p. 124).

36 Morris' 1869 letter to Norton (cited in note 30 above) extols the Volsunga Saga and speculates on "the probable author; some 12 century Icelander, living the hardest and rudest of lives, seeing few people and pretty much the same day after day, with his old religion taken from him and his new one hardly gained."

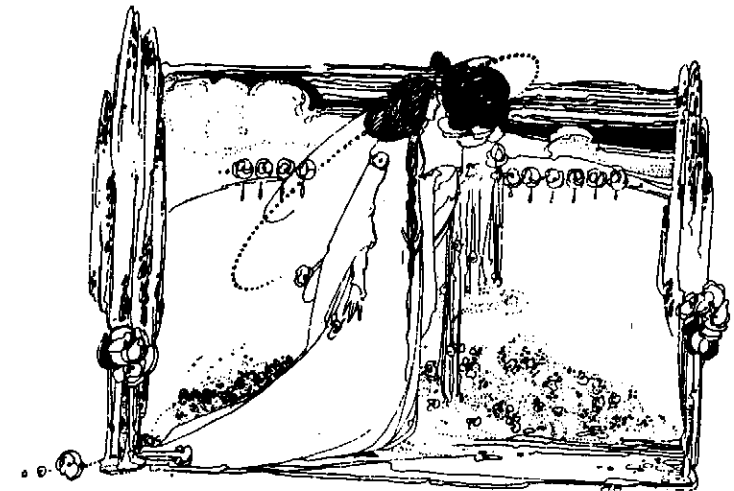
THE  
DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE,

AND OTHER POEMS.

BY WILLIAM MORRIS.



LONDON:  
BELL AND DALDY, 186, FLEET STREET.  
1858.



But, knowing now that they would have her speak