RE-READING WILLIAM MORRIS RE-WRITING THE *VØLSUNGA SAGA*: THE PECULIAR ARDORS OF *SIGURD THE VOLSUNG*

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There are a number of peculiarities, i.e., special things, about the re-working of *The Vølsunga Saga* by the British poet, William Morris, published by him in 1876 as a long poem, *The Story of Sigurd the Vølsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*.[1] The writing of this poem closed out an intense period of translating sagas with the collaboration of his Icelandic friend and colleague, Eiríkr Magnússon, and, indeed, the two of them had published a translation of *Vølsunga Saga* in 1870; but as for poetic re-workings, Morris first turned an Icelandic prose saga into verse with "The Lovers of Gudrun"(based on the *Laxdæla Saga*), published in 1868 within his huge narrative anthology, *The Earthly Paradise*.[2] Between that poem and *Sigurd* lay his two trips to Iceland, in 1871 and 1873, and for a variety of reasons the kind of poem he now wrote was considerably different from his first Norse "treatment." Considering that difference, and focusing on the unique, the "peculiar," qualities of *Sigurd*, has been my project for the last few years; this essay is a report on some of my conclusions.

The first peculiarity to turn to should be the question of what "re-working" the *Vølsunga Saga* means. It cannot be the same thing as translating – there was no need to produce a second translation; nor can it be a re-telling in brighter colors and fuller dimensions the story of the Saga, something like Dryden's definition of "metaphrase," where the story gets told in modern terms, sometimes even made better, and certainly made more available for modern ears. No, in speaking of Morris's "re-writing" the *Vølsunga Saga* I have in mind the creating of a new poem from an old story in prose, following the main outline of events from the Saga, but introducing new material in a variety of categories: speeches, personal descriptions, (re)imagined scenes, new incidents, and also leaving out a remarkable amount of matter, some great, some small.[3] But most of all, it is a work of passion, a work of artistic heats, or what I call ardors, produced at the height of his newly rejuvenated powers.

May Morris speaks of her father's admiration for the Sagaman's style: "In spite of all the wealth of epithets in the Irish annals, in spite of the beauty of the Celtic handling, the terse Norse phrase, bare of poetic decoration is more effective for purposes of dramatic story-

telling. In the plain abrupt dialogue we feel all the subtlety of the word withheld; the dramatic action is put before us almost by suggestion while emotions have to be divined from the curtest mention."[4] While there is no doubt that William Morris felt just this way about Icelandic prose, it does not describe at all the poetic style of his *Sigurd*, some 11,000 lines of anapestic hexameter rimed couplets – in which terseness has no place. Thus, to deal with the "peculiarity" of re-writing the prose saga, one must deal directly with the kind of poem it is, and evaluate it as a bad, good, or great poem. I say it is a poem of fire and ice, a great poem where even the ice is on fire (as in Book IV).

I will begin by summarizing the major reasons I am drawn to such a conclusion:

1. One must begin with the *craftsmanship* of the poem. The tendency in Morris criticism has been to condescend to, or deplore, its poetic form, and yet I do not think the matter has been discussed with sufficient care.[5] Even as he was working on his poetry, Morris was obsessively learning new techniques of cloth-dying to achieve more long-lasting and richer hues than currently available in the trade; and he was also regularly designing and registering for production by his company designs for textiles and wallpaper which are still marvels of complexity, filled with variety and yet cunningly organized. On the face of it, it is unthinkable that he would turn to poetry with no clear awareness of his poetic instrument - what he wanted it to do, and what it was able to do.

2. Following from the category of craftsmanship, should be a consideration of the linguistic structure of the whole, beginning with the feel, the roll, the movement, the *sound* of the verse. It is well documented that Morris regularly read out loud to whoever was in the area, especially his long-suffering friends, and read both what he was writing and selections from other authors he enjoyed. Criticism of Morris's *Sigurd* needs to have a good imagination of the aural texture of the verse, before any other generalities are allowed to come forth. But it is not just texture conceived as something distinctive and “musical”: the verse pitches and yaws over a northern sea of Metric, and the peculiar voicing of the Metric embodies the *argumentum* of the whole work.

3. Readers of *Sigurd* need to be particularly aware of the poetics of the *long poem*, since most of our critical vocabulary and analytical assumptions are based on the (shorter) *lyric* poem. I have to say that all too many of the critical evaluations I have read of the poem appear to be based on just its beginning; and yet the phenomenon of theme-and-variation, of semantic

recurrence, and of development of all kinds are dependent on watching the poetic landscape grow and change as the poem progresses. The last two Books of the poem have an impact that is partly derived from the momentum of the whole work, and partly from a re-adjusted memory of what has already occurred. In particular, Book IV, “Gudrun,” which almost never gets discussed,[6] has great power as a summary of all that has come before.

4. The themes of the poem raise the issue of what is often too easily called "Viking values," a body of behavior and rugged beliefs that are supposed to have refreshed and sustained Morris and many other Victorian readers. Yet the themes of Sigurd depend on a process of interrogation that will draw the careful reader into an ethical critique of the warrior code. The process is extended and un-preachy, and entirely an effect of the overall discourse of the poem.

5. Finally, it seems to me that the case can be made that the "new poem" by Morris has done something other than consume the old Saga and take from it only what was wanted to make a piece of poetic furniture that was "Gothic" or "Early English" by fashion but unmistakably Victorian. In the end, I think he has done little violence to the indigenous peculiarities of the Saga, producing a modern "gloss" to its prose that can be read with pleasure for its own sake, but used also as a *vade mecum* leading back to the original.

I

Although my completed study will follow and comment on the whole poem, from Book I to Book IV, there is not enough space here to do the same thing; instead, I will begin at Book II, “Regin,” with the transition from the killing of Fafnir, when the young hero, Sigurd, receives advice from those animals he can now understand, loads up his horse with the treasure of the dwarves, and starts out on his next adventure.

And so we read, after Sigurd's first triumph – that is, after he has received Regin's instructions, followed them, prevailed and survived; and after he has successfully overseen the forging of a hero's sword for himself, killed Fafnir, tasted of his heart, and, upon the advice of eagles whose speech he now understands (they were but nuthatches in the Saga), has slain Regin – how he then cries:

> Dead are the foes of God-home that would blend the good and the ill,
> And the world shall yet be famous, and the Gods shall have their will.(117)[7]

So then Sigurd purposes to sort out this confounding of "the good and the ill." But it would be more accurate to say he prepares to plunge into its shifting uncertainties, as he rides now to the enchanted mountain, Hindfell.

When in the Saga Sigurd meets Brynhild, he knows of her great wisdom (the birds had told him); she begins with wise words to him, and continues with more at his request. Morris's version of their encounter includes these lines from her wisdom-saying:

> [And she told]...how man shall bear and forbear, and be master of all that is;
>
> And how man shall measure it all, the wrath, and the grief, and the bliss.(128)

The prosodic beats at the end of the second line here mark a rhetorical device often used by Morris, sometimes with great effect, but always at risk for being too anapestically facile. That it seems facile here suggests an interesting possibility – that Morris is staying close enough to this story as to avoid the introduction of dramatic irony, so that expressions of unqualified wisdom – even a hero's optimism, by which I mean saying that one's life will be short or may end badly or be blighted by a curse but nevertheless one must pick up one's cards and play as best, as *gloriously*, as one can – these expressions are not made portentous or disquieting, and do not seem to be undercut, even if they do lack a certain glitter.

As Morris-the-author knows, any possibility of glory in the remainder of the story will be extinguished – through treachery, envy, witchcraft, or human inconstancy. Thus, what irony one might bring to passages like these can only be that of the other-than-first-time reader. The effect is to provide a narrative still fresh as the dawn, matching the account of the youth of Sigurd and his reaching and rising towards greatness – clear-eyed about the sorrow that will accompany that greatness, yet wholly innocent of its personal impact: "I shall seek thee there," said Sigurd, "when the day-spring is begun, / Ere we wend the world together in the season of the sun."(130) It is wide-eyed, blue-eyed Hero-babble, without the slightest possibility of realization – as Morris-the-author knows full well, but his poem (at this point) does not. "I am young, but have learned me wisdom,"(142) says Sigurd, meeting the good folk of Lymdale for the first time. An unwittingly un-wise remark, but not mocked or put in doubt at this time. And he goes on to say: "meseems that the earth is lovely, and each day springeth anew/ And beareth the blossom of hope, and the fruit of deeds to do."(142)

As one would expect, it is that youthful self-confidence and daring that helped him kill the dragon-dwarf, Fafnir, and to reject the baleful prophecies the dying worm pronounced. The

theme of Andvari's curse is sounded: "Thee, thee [says Fafnir] shall the rattling Gold and the red rings bring to the bane." To which Sigurd responds: "Yet mine hand shall cast them abroad, and the earth shall gather again."(111) Neither part of his confident statement is ever accomplished: in the major part of the consequent story he is seen riding here and there on the indefatigable Greyfell, who carries always as his burden the accumulated treasures Sigurd won, yet these are never "cast abroad." There will be, of course, a special working of the gold-curse in the figure of the ring Loki forces from Andvari; Reidmar extracts from Loki; Sigurd gives to Brynhild; Brynhild gives to "Gunnar" (Sigurd); and Sigurd gives to Gudrun:

> ...from the Gold of Andvari, the spark of the waters wan,
> Sprang a flame of bitter trouble, and the death of many a man,
> And the quenching of the kindreds, and the blood of the broken troth,
> And the Grievous Need of the Niblungs and the Sorrow of Odin the Goth.(196)[8]

Nor will the earth ever "gather again" these riches, at least in any hopeful way.

II

Now this youthful masculine and warrior optimism/assurance is brought to a head by a broadening out, through Morris's craft, in a sequence of extraordinary romance. "Romance" is only part of that collection of disparate parts that comprise the prose Saga of the Volsungs. But Morris, through a stretch of audacious invention, takes it to new heights as he fashions, what might be called "the wooing of Brynhild by Childe Sigurd."

> And the light of life smote Sigurd, and the joy that knows no rest,
> And the fond unnamed desire, and the hope of hidden things....(95)

Such a desire – in lacking focus, foolish ("fond"); in riding the primal urge of Life itself, portentous – is then compacted into a phrase so efficient that one could enter "the fond unnamed desire" into a textbook on "The Romantic Quest."

The "hidden things" are now Sigurd's destination: "The mountain waits and the fire."(100) Inside its flames a glimmering gray figure lies asleep at Hindfell. In spite of the flesh-tight hauberk, the sex of the figure is not recognized until Sigurd peels back its helm and sees the head: "the brow snow-white, / And the smooth unfurrowed cheeks."(123)

The passage is a beautifully crafted verse-paragraph in its blending of the steady movement to divest the warrior-maiden of her enchanted armor – the erotic tension lightly but steadily

maintained, mixed in with an imagery of light whose origin is the rising of the sun "on the eyeless desert on the tower-top of the world"(122):

> Then he deems her breath comes quicker and her breast begins to heave,
> So he turns about the War-Flame and rends down either sleeve,
> Till her arms lie white in her raiment, and a river of sun-bright hair
> Flows free o'er bosom and shoulder and floods the desert bare. (123)

Everything is delicate but strong: the easy rimes have the ring of fulfilled necessity, the function-words "Then...So...Till" carry our viewing forward, the alliteration is at hand to assist the mimesis of release and copia in the final enjambment – "floods" being highlighted as at once material and metaphor.[9]

Yet it is not the peak of this sequence. The poesis is addressed to the dream and the destiny of the known and the knower: Brynhild knows Sigurd immediately, and Sigurd knows he has met the future he desired: "for their longing had met and mingled"(124). She now offers an invocation that defines their concerted vision:

> But therwith the sun rose upward and lightened all the earth,
> And the light flashed up to the heavens from the rims of the glorious girth;
> But they twain arose together, and with both her palms outspread,
> And bathed in the light returning, she cried aloud and said:
> "All hail, O Day and thy Sons, and Thy kin of the coloured things!
> Hail following Night, and Thy Daughter that leadeth thy wavering wings!
> Look down with unangry eyes on us today alive,
> And give us the hearts victorious, and the gain for which we strive!
> All hail, ye Lords of God-home, and ye Queens of the house of Gold!
> Hail, thou dear Earth that bearest, and thou Wealth of field and fold!
> Give us, your noble children, the glory of wisdom and speech,
> And the hearts and the hands of healing, and the mouths and hands that
> teach!"(124)

This is a prayer from one formerly serving Odin in the midst of the battlefield ("and I chose the slain for his war-host") who is now committing herself to be a wife, a queen, and the mother of a line of perfected Volsungs. The enormity of her commitment is that it is at once a commitment and a renunciation: for the glory sought is in "wisdom and speech," and the living will be as a healer and a teacher. The erotic compact is to create – to engender new lives for a new future, proposing to live by no Viking or Valkyrie rules. The "victory" will be in hearts,

and not in the blending of wrong with right, or amending one wrong with another. There is no rune-lore to be explained. Everything is News From Nowhere.

Indeed, the politics of all this are peculiar. We must deal with the disturbing fact that Sigurd, the Prince of Promise, has had no father, though loving fosterers, and hence has no kingdom. He carries with him a huge burden of dwarfish gold, admired by all he meets, but charged with a profoundly dangerous curse. He is thus (ambiguously) gold-rich, but land-poor. He needs to overcome some rich king and achieve, like a good Viking, a new patrimony through conquest.[10] One logical prospect would be the Gjukungs, but these resolve to be his friends, not his foes. He will be "adopted" by them, though the Saga leaves unexplored what his share of the patrimony might be; and then Queen Grimhild will take full charge of his destiny by initiating through her sorcery a sequence of horrors that fatally destroy every one of his heroic prospects.

These horrors were always, at some level, known to Brynhild, for her "wisdom," as the Saga made clear, included the gift of Sight. Her capacity to look into the future will come close to destroying Gudrun's soul. For Brynhild tells her, "To you will come Sigurd, the man I have chosen for my husband. Grimhild will give him bewitched mead, which will bring us all to grief. You will marry him and quickly lose him." And Gudrun says: "The grief of knowing such things overwhelms me."(Saga, 78) This is the future as comfortless and helpless consternation; it is pretty much the dominant mode of the rest of the Saga.

So the politics of the moment are as of yet apprehended but not comprehended. In this interlude of awakening romance, it must be assumed that Brynhild's intention is of a protective equivocation, with an epithalamic sheen to her words, meant to offer courage and fellowship in light of trials more desperate than her lover can yet perceive. One may feel ironic about her statements, but there is no particular sign that Morris was underscoring the passage with low-frequency tones of doom. In fact, I think it more likely that he was writing wholly under the impulse of a great theme we are in the process of discovering – the skald scalded by strong and conflicting feelings. Some, but not all of those feelings were named by Morris elsewhere, but never sharply enough to be identified as a substitute for the poem itself – where conflicted feelings and uncomprehended desires are the very stuff of its writhing movement and development. Indeed, we absolutely must trust the poem to put us in touch with its resonant poesis, so that we can be properly frightened, gripped, and chastened by its power.

III

It is the progress of the poem that now re-discovers and re-inhabits the stead of Brynhild's youth, "Lymdale" – mentioned only once in the Saga (as Hlymdalir) – now presented with such Arcadian appeal that the subsequent account of Sigurd's journey to the land of the Niblungs suggests stylistically the contrast between Tolkien's Shire and the realm of Mordor. There is nothing like it in the Saga (including the name, Niblungs, for the Gjukungs).

Brynhild invites Sigurd to climb higher on Hindfell, "that we may see men's dwellings and the house where we shall dwell, / And the place of our life's beginning, where the tale shall be to tell."(129) His next stop, then, will be at Lymdale, "the little land of Lymdale by the swirling river's side"(129), but its promise is never fulfilled – Sigurd visits it briefly in joy, but Brynhild leaves it a little later in stunned apathy, having been fetched, not by her promised lover, but by an unexpected interloper, Gunnar – and sets out with dread down her bridal path to the land of Grimhild. Lymdale fades as something lost, something never to be retrieved. Yet it has been foregrounded so as to stick in the memory as a dream of a better tomorrow.

That last phrase, jejune as it may sound, is based on the last phrase which appears below, from what is further developed and rapturously proclaimed during the lovers' second meeting when Brynhild has been (re)discovered in Lymdale. It is important to make a distinction here: contradictory as it may seem, what she says now is not a product of her Sight; it is, rather, a further statement of their vision of hope – a mutual *dream*, which is part prayer, part betrothal-vow, and part definition of their new being:

> [Brynhild:] "There is none shall thrust between us till our earthly lives shall change.... O deathless fame of Sigurd! O glory of my lord!
> O birth of the happy Brynhild to the measureless reward!"
> So they sat as the day grew dimmer, and they looked on days to come,
> And the fair tale speeding onward, and the glories of their home;
> And they saw their crownèd children and the kindred of the kings,
> And deeds in the world arising and the day of better things....(148)

If one only thinks of Brynhild the Seeress, it will be hard to imagine how she could say these things without choking. Is it not a totally illusory vision of a happy future? But it is not a "vision," it is a *dream* – and what is "seen" and what is imagined as a design for hope now co-exist in separate, but contradictory dimensions. The dream is placed here by Morris for one central reason – to leave its vivid record as a document in the text, as both a false hope and a

true dream, left in the rubble of the narrative to be re-discovered at some future time. There is no future for Sigurd and Brynhild, but there is for the children of their dream.

That last phrase may sound like Romantic Rotarianism if it is not elucidated further. It is not easily brought forth, being so intricately entwined around the under-carriage of the narrative. That is to say, we must look to the subsequent inclinations of the story's outcome. For example, "the consolation of the Niblungs": now we can see the result of the Saga having been kidnapped from Volsung to Niblung territory. Brynhild's mighty sulk, her rage, are understandable, if not pleasant to watch: estranged, lovelorn, she reverts to Valkyrie and can only consider revenge and death, killing at once her greatest hope and her deepest despair. But Gudrun, whom Morris has softened somewhat in the beginning, is a Niblung woman, and must listen while disconsolate Niblung women convey cold Niblung-warrior comforts concerning the death of Sigurd. And because the poem stays so resolutely in the warrior mode (once off the mountain-top), the feeling becomes very Greek, not unlike Sophocles, as the two Queens face each other over Sigurd's corpse, and every passion subsides to stone:

> ...the moon is white therein,
> And no sound in the house may ye hearken save the ernes that stir o'erhead,
> And the far-off wail o'er Guttorm and the wakeners o'er the dead:
> But still by the carven pillar doth the all-wise Brynhild stand
> A-gaze on the wound of Sigurd, nor moveth foot nor hand,
> Nor speaketh word to any, of them that come or go
> Round the evil deed of the Niblungs and the corner-stone of woe. (237)

The apparent un-ironic technique of the poem now begins to show strong results: without any shouting, the almost casual epithet, "all-wise Brynhild" (more Greek) draws blood in passing. The Niblung burg swallows consolation like a mausoleum, in chill marmoreal bleakness.

This is how Morris rounds off Book III, of Brynhild and the end of the Volsung story:

> They are gone – the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:
> It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth:
> It shall groan in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped,
> And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead: It
> shall yearn, and be oft-times holpen, and forget their deeds no more,
> Till the new sun beams on Baldur, and the happy sealess shore. (244)

Some of these lines are obscure (what is a happy *sealess* shore?), while others do not match the literal facts of the narrative (what are the memorable "deeds" of Brynhild?); but the shift into Biblical "shall" – future determinative – indicates a prophetic voice being lifted. Of

special significance is "the dream of [about] Baldur," a name absent from the Saga. Following Snorri, Morris is mindful of the myth of Ragnarok, and of the belief (not universally held) that the sublime Baldur will rise after the conflagration and lead forth a new world of fellowship and peace. The characters within the poem allude to such ideas frequently, if not at length, but every time that aspect of Norse mythology is mentioned, the source is Morris, not the Saga.

IV

The invocation of a bright peace beyond the horrors of earthly life is consonant with a major convulsion in Morris's soul – in which his poet's soul not only was included, but in the years 1875–6 "solved" the question of hope with a major work of art. For in *Sigurd the Volsung* one finds the same intellectual themes that were being debated in England and Europe, and the experience of reading the poem is to find oneself in an arena allegorized into a landscape of Norse faërie, where the themes are embodied and given voice and clash beautifully and terribly. And they reveal the horrors of life, even as they adumbrate a way, not to conquer but to withstand those horrors with what E.P. Thompson in his biography of Morris has called "the rebirth of hope."[11]

On this matter I have profited mightily from Thompson's wisdom. In his extraordinary biography of William Morris (I cannot think of a better one), he argues that "It is possible to feel the pressure of Morris's feelings about his own society, the imminence of his own participation in political life, straining the fabric of the epic....the poem marks a complete break with *The Earthly Paradise*."(189,190) His discussion here flows out of a conviction his whole book will argue and explain: "The transformation of the eccentric artist and romantic literary man into the Socialist agitator may be counted among the great conversions of the world."(243)

The example at hand centers on the symbolic/allegorical meaning of Baldur, and begins to be illuminated when we study the following passage by Morris, from "some manuscript notes on the northern mythologies which he made in the 1870's":

> It may be that the world shall worsen, that men shall grow afraid to 'change their life,' that the world shall be weary itself, and sicken, and none but faint-hearts be left – who knows? So at any rate comes the end at last, and the Evil, bound for a while, is loose, and all nameless merciless horrors that on earth we figure by fire and earthquake and venom and ravine....till at last the great destruction breaks out over all things, and the red earth and heavens are gone, and then, a new heavens and

> earth. What goes on there? Who shall say, of us who know only of rest and peace by toil and strife? And what shall be our share in it? 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? 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, in spite of the wild dreams and dreadful imaginings that hung about it here and there.[12]

Thompson suggests, "it was perhaps the influence of these myths which coloured his view of 'the Revolution' as one sharp swift, climactic encounter, sombre and dramatic."(186) The passage could well be put at the head of an edition of the poem, for it lays out an aspect of the mythology centering on Ragnarok and "the problem of hope" that the reader finds repeated by most of the major characters in the story, not to mention the narrator himself.

But what can it mean, to "solve the problem of hope" in a poem? Thompson does not argue that Morris does this, at least not poetically, for he is concerned to explain how the discovery of the values of the Viking sagas helped invigorate Morris's spirits and direct him to enter the world of politics. *Sigurd* is evidence of this quickening of spirit and consolidation of beliefs, even though it is not, he thinks, without aesthetic limitations. In other words, Thompson will not argue that the "solution" is found in the literary achievement of the poem. Instead, he starts with a conception of a Romantic poet, with a Romantic poesis, but also within a Romanticism which developed a "moral critique of capitalist process...pressing forward to conclusions consonant with Marxist critique, and it was Morris's particular genius to think through this transformation, effect this juncture, and seal it with action."(Thompson, 779) But the sealing with action does not, for him, include the poem, which he takes as a brilliant signpost of Morris's new direction, but not his new destination, not a "deed" that can move a Marxist's heart.

It is here that I must part company with Thompson. Dwarf that I am, standing on his shoulders, I can see something he did not: that the "question of hope" is, indeed, "solved" in *Sigurd the Volsung* through the themes, structures, prosody, and linguistic splendor of the work, viewed not as a collection of ideas, but as a *poem*.

To appreciate how this could be, one needs to live with the poem more totally, and read it more carefully than even the best intentioned of critics appear to have done. It has generally been the case (even with Thompson, who is a fine reader of all kinds of texts), that analysis leads to discussing *what* Morris has said, not *how* he has said it. Even if New Criticism is dead (as has been widely reported), the "heresy of paraphrase" is alive and well. Likewise, Morris's poetic register and his poetic language have been persistently disparaged or misunderstood.

I list here five assumptions in need of correction:

1. *Sigurd the Volsung is an epic.*

It is nothing of the sort. In effect – and the poetry is consistent on this matter – it is an anti-epic.

2. *Sigurd the Volsung is a "heroic poem."*

Not in the usual sense. In the figures of Sigurd, Brynhild, Gunnar, and Gudrun, not to mention Volsung, Sigmund, Grimhild, and Atli, Morris reveals the failure of (Viking) heroism. To be sure, the details of the failure are already there in the Saga, but as discrete items, while Morris has set details into themes, and anatomized their human and social causes and foundations. Upon interrogation, Heroism turns out to be mostly a complex of horrors, the bloody thrall of Vengeance.

3. *Sigurd the Volsung is set within the medieval world of the Vikings*.

Yes and no. The framework of the poem is that of the Völsunga Saga, a 13th-century recollection of oral tales and poems ranging from the pre-Christian Germanic era, stretching back at least to the Age of Migrations, and probably beyond that into the shadowy realms of the proto-Indo-Europeans. The world of Sigurd is mythically historical, a construct essentially placed in the world of Faërie.[13]

4. *The central theme of Sigurd the Volsung is the cursèd lust for "gold."*

That was what one of the central themes from the *Edda* was about; but in *Sigurd* this theme is part of a cluster of images within the larger theme of *desire*. In one direction, desire leads to depravity and loss, the ravishing of others and the deceiving of self; in another direction, desire leads to hope, and out of hope are born dreams.

5. *The deepest commitment of the poem is to wisdom.*

Yes and no; the semantics of the frequently used word, "wisdom," are complex. Predominantly the poem is about folly, the misapprehension of wisdom. Most of the poem's energies are directed to the destruction of traditional ("heroic") wisdom, from religious beliefs to cultural assumptions (idols of the tribe). The wisdom that remains is a function of the re-centering of Hope (systematically de-feathered throughout) within the politics of Dreaming. With that last phrase, I bring back into literature a notion from Thompson's political analysis.

In his discussion, "dreaming" is recuperated as part of Marxist thinking associated with Utopias. Thompson goes on to discuss how this kind of writing is meant to affect the reader:

> Assent may be better than dissent, but more important than either is the challenge to the imagination to become immersed in the same open exploration. And in such an adventure two things happen: our habitual values (the "commonsense" of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*. This is not the same as "a moral education" towards a given end: it is, rather, to open a way to aspiration, to "teach desire to desire," to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way. (791)

I have made that phrase, "the education of desire," a central part of my interpretation of the poem.[14]

V

Additional demonstration of the themes and craftsmanship of the poem may be found in Book IV, called "Gudrun," which deals with the final fate of the Niblungs – of Gudrun, and of her brothers Gunnar and Hogni, as they travel to the dark kingdom of Atli: "Herein is told of the days of the Niblungs after they slew Sigurd, and of their woeful need and fall in the house of king Atli"(244) Some might see this as little more than a tedious winding-down of a story already made dismal, an extended ordeal of bloodshed and cruelty, the final triumph of greed and despair. What I would argue instead is that it is a superbly sustained emptying-out of "warrior values" and a demonstration of harsh warrior fates that are nothing other than the perfected logic of warrior *hopes* carried to their extremes, at once elevated into operatic gestures and reduced to tragic absurdity. With a proper understanding and concentration, this makes for absorbing and rewarding reading as an "education of desire."

Book IV could only be as stirring, as harshly beautiful, and as devastating as it is because the poem's narration has, with craft and guile, carried the story to this point mixed with such

grandeur and such guilt, with such nobility and such abasement. Because at the end the poem does not flag, its concluding language in the midst of so much dying comes vibrantly alive.

The process will reward the careful reader. But I will have to leave a closer examination of this final part of the poem for another time and place. I hope I have laid the groundwork for such an examination.

The part of the Saga that follows Sigurd's death could be titled, "The Misfortunes of Gudrun," and has no very obvious moral to it, whereas Morris's version now would have to be called, "The Wrath of Gudrun." And the moral is not something preached, but rather is developed through the exposition of that wrath, as it rebounds and gives back from the daughter what the mother had imposed, and as it sows salt in the last seedbed, the last hope of the royal Niblung line. The designated vessel of Niblung continuation and expansion destroys every germ of new life, new growth, that has begun to flower from her body, and along the way destroys those who planted or would nourish those seeds. Another title for Book IV, then, could be "Gudrun and the Death of Hope." It is important to realize that Gudrun has never had a dream, or rather, that all her "dreams" have been nightmares.

Passing by, then, the descriptions of Gudrun's wrath, with its brilliant horrors that recapitulate and parody the deeds of Medea and Brynhild, I turn at last to the close of the Book, the dying fall of the poem.

Morris does not follow the final adventures of Gudrun that, in numbing anti-climax, the Saga relates. Instead, he takes her away from Atli's flaming castle, from the corpses of her dead brothers and wicked husband, out to the edge of the sea; and there:

> …on the edge of the steep she stood,
> She looked o'er the shoreless water, and cried out o'er the measureless flood:
> "O Sea, I stand before thee; and I who was Sigurd's wife!
> By his brightness unforgotten I bid thee deliver my life
> From the deeds and the longing of days, and the lack I have won of the earth,
> And the wrong amended by wrong, and the bitter wrong of my birth!" (306)

There it is, what our post-Modern cyber-age might call the Default-mode of warrior ethics: for all strivings with sword and slaughter come to this – a victory for one, a loss for the other – a "wrong" that must then be "amended" with yet another. Although *The Saga of the Volsungs* is contemporary with *Njal's Saga*, which portrays a fearsome struggle to break out of the cycle of vendetta with measured compensations, with community negotiations and the workings of

law, *The Saga of the Volsungs* looks deeper into the pre-Icelandic past, and is thus markedly more "primitive" with only one logic to pursue, that of blood.

The extra-literary evidence we have concerning Morris's reason for writing this poem is either inadequate or has been wrongly applied; that is, this is no celebration of sheer "courage," a quality Morris at one point praised as being the true religion of the Icelanders, both present and past.[15] We have seen how complexly developed is the sub-theme of courage, tangled in the greater tale of Viking desires and dreams. Nearer to the mark, I am arguing, is Thompson's connecting the poem to a crisis in Morris's political life, though my concern is not to use the poem as an index to those more closely reasoned works, mostly in prose, that Morris would produce as "deeds" in his Utopian Communism (as defined and emphasized by Thompson, especially in his revised biography's "Postscript 1976"). For in responding to the poem and its narration of motives and deeds, one can use the discourse of Utopian Communism as Morris would develop it to the end of his life as a means of understanding the profoundly serious, deeply felt, and carefully crafted construct of thought and language that is *Sigurd the Volsung*.

I have said, adapting Thompson, that the poem "solves the question of hope," linking that to the re-centering of Hope within the politics of Dreaming. Here is what I mean: in his subsequent career as a revolutionary activist, Morris made peace with the apparent insignificance of his contributions and what seemed the almost certain failure of "Socialism" against entrenched privilege and capitalist social and economic power: no man could be sure of his own success or failure within the present moment. But in order to be in significant touch with the future one must have an active *dream* – not a narcotic of wistfulness, but a fiction of possibilities based on continuing analysis and planning.

Within the fictive world, "planning" usually has tragic outcomes consonant with the ethical framework of the story; but the ethical conflicts, the movements into exalted awareness as the noblest vows are taken, are a "solution" in exposing the framework in which hopes are lifted up and cast down, and dreams are identified as enduring or nebulous and self-deceiving artifacts of desire. There is no more surprising or tender moment in the poem than Sigurd and Brynhild's enraptured discovery of each other – tragic, in that their hopes for a new creation (a kind of return of Baldur without a Ragnarok) are ruined by external events beyond their control, not to mention sheer entropic loss of force and focus; yet the power and novelty of the dream they begin to adumbrate is not destroyed or tarnished by any subsequent event. And the

politics of that dream, the rest of the narrative makes clear, has in it a devastating ethical critique of every point held precious in the warrior code.

In evoking their impossible dream, Sigurd and Brynhild are no longer characters bound within the cultural world that imagined them first. In this sense, then, the two heroes become "comrades" in "A Dream of William Morris," and give him consolation and new breath and strength, and surely a new wisdom, as he keeps on writing and working and speaking with no success in sight.

NOTES

[1] All quotations from *Sigurd*... in this essay are from a reprint of the 1911 edition, with an introduction by Jane Ennis (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1994).

[2] Most recently edited by Florence S. Boos (Boos, 2002): II, 274–422 ("The Medieval Tale for November").

[3] J[oyce] M.S. Tompkins' aim (Tompkins, 1988, posthumous) was to make his "imaginative life" her subject, "studied rather in the narrative content and handling of his tales than in their meditative and lyrical passages," and also directed "at what seemed to me to be the chief omissions in contemporary understanding and evaluation" (11, 12). Her review of the making of *Sigurd* is very fine; I regret, however, that because she feels she need not cover issues adequately covered by others elsewhere, "the choice and effect of the verse form" (229) are passed over. From my point of view, then, her discussion is a rich but nonetheless incomplete "approach" to the poetic achievement of *Sigurd*.

[4] May Morris, 1936-7: 447.

[5] A point first maintained by May Morris - everyone who undertakes to discuss the *Sigurd* needs to be sure to encounter her precise if wishful eye: "…I can imagine a student of Morris's method writing on this, turning over the pages of manuscript drafts in days to come…, etc." (492). Tomkins writes very well of a central problem for modern readers and critics: "It is no longer at all easy to read Morris's poetry….Morris should be read at about the

same pace as Spenser. This is like the steady, leisurely gait with which one walks all day, enjoying both the landscape and the rhythmical progress, and mastering the scene by living in it. The critical techniques of today are not well adapted to narrative poetry" (10–11). There are rather few "all-day walkers" approaching Morris's poetry in the present time.

[6] And can only be mentioned briefly here! The treatment it deserves will have to wait for a later occasion.

[7] With quotations from the poem only the page number will be indicated, there being no line numbers in the 1911 edition.

[8] Morris attributes "sorrow" to Odin, presumably (following Snorri) because Odin is figured as progenitor of the Volsung line; yet the poem on a number of occasions makes it clear that Odin as a god feels no sorrow for the sorrows of mankind. And if the Volsungs as his "children" are a favored line, as seems to be the case when the story begins, Odin certainly goes on to botch the job!

[9] There is considerable evidence that Morris worked very hard at this sequence in the poem. May Morris, in discussing the evidence of revisions, writes: "The tale then goes on without difficulties until we come to the Burg on Hindfell, and here is a good deal of work that we have to follow. We are dealing now with a sheaf of loose foolscap sheets (three drafts) coming between note-books four and five." (p. 483)

[10] Curiously, when in the Saga he goes to revenge the death of his father, Sigurd invades the lands of the sons of Hunding, and kills Lyngvi in his kingdom, also his brother Hjorvard, and all the other sons, "along with the larger part of their army"(62). There would have been a kingdom for the taking, but Sigurd simply "returned home with a fine victory and the great wealth and glory he had obtained in this venture."(62) At this point, the Saga has other fish to fry.

[11] Morris, 1976: 240.

[12] (Thompson, 185–6; he is citing J.W. Mackail [*The Life of William Morris*; I.333], who found these notes in a MS. now at the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.)

[13] Tompkins describes very well "this blurring of a specific context of place and time in the interest of an extended symbolism," 237–8.

[14] It is important here to acknowledge that the basis of Thompson's discussion quoted above was a 1973 Paris *thèse* by M–H. Abensour,"Les Formes de L'UtopieSocialiste–Communiste," which Thompson paraphrased or quoted in his own translation, indicating his strong agreement with the points here included.

[15] "... the northern peoples whose real religion was the worship of Courage," "The Early Literature of the North—Iceland," unpublished lecture, dated as probably delivered at Kelmscott House, 1887 (Lemire, 1969: 190).

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