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NORSE MYTH  
IN  
ENGLISH POETRY

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NORSE MYTH IN ENGLISH POETRY.\*

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I.

Tale teller, who twixt fire and snow  
Had heart to turn about and show  
With faint half smile things great and small  
That in thy fearful land did fall,  
Thou and thy brethren sure did gain  
That thing for which I long in vain,  
The spell, whereby the mist of fear  
Was melted, and your ears might hear  
Earth's voices as they are indeed.

W. MORRIS, Prefixed to his Translation of the *Eyrbyggja Saga*.

SO wrote William Morris, in the preface to his English version of one of the finest sagas of the "fearful land". And his words may serve as a clue to guide us to the heart of our present theme. For no other English poet has felt so keenly the power of Norse myth; none has done so much to restore its terrible beauty, its heroism, its earth-shaking humour, and its heights of tragic passion and pathos, to a place in our memories, and a home in our hearts.

I say to *restore*; for it will not be in truth a new gift, but in some sort the recovery of a vanished and forgotten possession. The mythic stories which we call Norse were in great part a common heritage of the Germanic peoples; and the tale of the Volsungs, which Morris told the other day, had been sung twelve or thirteen hundred years before in the old English epic of *Beowulf*.<sup>1</sup> But between the day

\* Based upon a lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on 13 March, 1918.

when these tales were last chanted at English feasts, perhaps on the eve of the Conquest, and that on which they were first deciphered again by English antiquaries, lie fully six centuries during most of which they were utterly unknown. We are like kindred parted in infancy to meet again, as perfect strangers, in advanced age. The whole Scandinavian world passed, during those centuries, for almost all literary and even cultural purposes, beyond our ken. Our faces were turned the other way, to France, to Italy; and the vast arc of northern lands sweeping from Denmark to Iceland, beyond the broad spaces of estranging sea, lay in every sense beyond our horizon. No one dreamed that a poetry and a prose, unsurpassed in their kind in Europe, had grown up in the lonely fastness of the great Atlantic island. A single northern legend did, indeed, towards the end of the period, find its way into our literature, and with such effect that Denmark and Elsinore became points of dazzling brilliance and import in the permanent culture of the world.<sup>2</sup> But the triumphant intrusion of the Hamlet story stands absolutely alone; and even this solitary though glorious waif of Scandinavia came to us with its Scandinavian character overlaid, if not obliterated, by alien romance elements which certainly helped to commend it to European taste. It is a far cry from the Norse sea-giant Amloth to the mediæval emulator of Livy's Brutus who spoke to the Elizabethans through the ambitious Latinity of Saxo, or the polished French of Belleforest.

But before the beginning of these centuries of complete literary and cultural estrangement, there was at least a lively intercourse between the Northern and the English stems. Some of it was disastrously intimate. The Vikings who swept away the lettered and devout culture of Northumbria in the ninth century were not persuasive heralds of the richer and stronger but still unshaped cosmos of the poetry of the North. But from the time of Alfred onwards, with the permanent settlement of a large tract of England by Scandinavians, more humane relations diversify their encounters. The Old English found that the Norsemen could make a song as well as fight, and that those formidable galleys of theirs were sometimes launched, like the bark of the aged Ulysses, for voyages of exploration not of plunder. We have made analogous discoveries in our own time; and it is easier to parallel the Norwegian enthusiasms of the later nineteenth century in the tenth than at any intervening date. Just a thousand years before Nansen

came as Norway's ambassador to the English court, another Norwegian explorer, Ohthere, visited Alfred, and kindled the king's quick imagination with the story of his voyage round the North Cape into the Murman region of the White Sea.<sup>3</sup> And one of the most romantic of Viking adventurers, Egil Skallagrimsson, equally renowned as warrior and as singer, became the trusted henchman and warm friend of Athelstane. After doing him yeoman's service in field and counsel, and receiving royal rewards, Egil improvised a Norse panegyric (*drápa*) in his praise at the palace board.<sup>4</sup> Athelstane gave him two gold rings as poet's fee, but there is no hint that any English *scop* who listened to the Icelander's staves thought of emulating in his own tongue their brief, weighty rhythm and bold imagery. A Norse song chanted to the English court—that is the nearest recorded approach to a literary contact between Scandinavia and England before the Conquest; and even contact so casual and seemingly fruitless as this, becomes more and more inconceivable after it. The new Northmen completed the estrangement of England from the old. The two Germanic civilizations, so profoundly akin despite their deadly encounter, drew definitely apart. England, after a century of tragic and impotent silence, awoke to find herself bound in the web of continental culture, and rudely or childishly emulating strains of its alien song. While Norway and her great island colony had been working out undisturbed the splendid promise of their chaotic and unbridled youth, and creating the great monument at once of their heroic traditions and of their national art, in the Eddas and the Sagas. Iceland has kept even her language almost unchanged to the present day.<sup>5</sup>

“Undisturbed”: that is at bottom the clue to this startling inequality of literary fortune. And it has to be borne in mind if we would appreciate the energy of the impact, when it came, of Norse story upon the imagination of civilized and Romanized Europe. Undisturbed, above all, until the very close of the first millennium after Christ, by the powerful solvent of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> The fascinating theory of Bugge, that certain Norse myths are transformations of Christian legends, caught up by the Viking marauders in Christian lands, does not affect the truth of this contention. Christianity, even on that hypothesis, only enriched the pagan myth world without disintegrating it, or lessening its power of resistance. Scandinavia was the last retreat of paganism in the West of Europe, and behind its successive

barriers of sea and mountain and sea again, the faith of Thor and Odin and Walhalla held its ground against the onsurging tide of Christianity. The further we go north and west, the more freely its primeval traditions are unfolded and elaborated—its stories of gods and men, of the beginning of the world and its final doom, of the feats of heroes and their death in battle, crowned by an immortality of feasting in Odin's halls. In Sweden and Denmark paganism was soonest submerged, and has left the fewest and the faintest traces. Norway, in its deepset fiords, guarded a rich treasure of lays and sagas. But the real capital of old Norse literature, as of its republican statecraft, was the great island of fire and snow in the far wastes of the North Atlantic, which might seem destined to be its last and loneliest outpost.

Here, and in Norway, the Christian missionaries won their difficult triumph only after A.D. 1000. And even after the conversion, their sagacity or patriotism saved the myth literature from the fate which almost completely blotted it out elsewhere, and has reduced us in England to attest our primitive paganism by a few empty names—Wednesday and Thursday, Wednesbury and Thoresby, and the legend of Wayland the Smith, and the pre-Christian core of *Beowulf*.

The result was, in the first place, the great collection of lays known as the Older Edda, written partly in Norway in the ninth century, then in Iceland in the tenth and eleventh. They were collected in the thirteenth, and first critically edited at the end of the eighteenth. Secondly, a great mass of songs, still mystic in colouring but arising out of historic occasions. In its extant form the Edda consists of some thirty-five distinct pieces, falling into two nearly equal groups—stories of the gods, and stories of the heroes. A few cognate lays are presented in certain sagas. Three only of these stories have counted as creative or even stimulating forces for English poetry. These are (1) the story of Balder, the beloved son of Odin, treacherously slain by Loki (*Voluspá*, 32, f.); (2) the story of Odin's descent to the underworld to procure his reform (*Baldrs draumar*); (3) the great heroic story of the Volsungs,—of Sigurd the Achilles of the North, and Brynhild, its Medea or Lady Macbeth, and Gudrun and her vengeance for his death (*Grippisspá*, etc.). But several others have powerfully contributed to mould our impressions of the scope and reach of this northern poetry: notably, in the first group, (4) the Sibyl's prophecy (*Voluspá*), a sublime hymn of the beginning and the end of the world,

of which the story of Balder is only an incident ; (5) the story of Thor and the giant Skirnir, a huge piece of Aristophanic humour, man making sport of his gods (*Thrymskvitha*) ; and (6) the great Waking of Angentyr, where Hervor the warrior maid goes to her father's burial mound in the burning island to demand from him the sword which, he knows, will be ruin to her race (*Hervar saga*). Further, from the partly historical class, two must be mentioned : (7) the death-song of Ragnar Lodbrok, a chieftain of the twelfth century, thrown into a pit of serpents (*Krakumál*), and (8) the song of the Norns after the battle of Clontarf (*Darratharljoth*).

From this introductory summary let us now turn to watch the fortunes of these primeval and rugged strangers from the North, with their mysterious and witching beauty, in enlightened and prosperous England, when the youngest of them was already almost half a millennium old.

## II.

For the first report of them concurs with the famous Revolution which ushered in Dutch William and Whig government, John Locke and the philosophy of common sense.

Sir W. Temple, the chief agent in the negotiations with William, met Scandinavian scholars in Holland, and read in a northern chronicle in Latin the death-song of Ragnar Lodbrok. Here was something, he thought, fine and heroic among these barbaric peoples ; and he made it a text of his Essay, "on Heroic Virtue," 1690 ; much as Sidney, a century before, had confessed how his heart stirred as with a trumpet at the rude lay of Chevy-chase.<sup>7</sup>

But erudition too, at Oxford in particular, had felt the sting of the new curiosities. The old Germanic world, overlaid and almost obliterated, was beginning to be tracked out and pieced together. Junius, the friend of Milton, was the first thoroughly to master Old English, and his fount of types, bequeathed to the Oxford press, were used to print the first Icelandic grammar, by George Hickes. But Hickes was also the first, in his great *Thesaurus of the Northern Languages*, 1689, to print and translate a Norse poem in English. And fortunately it was one of the grandest of all—the *Waking of Angentyr*.<sup>7a</sup>

*Hervor's Incantation*, as it is also called, was widely admired, and in 1763 was included with *Ragnar Lodbrok* (No. 7) and three

others by Bishop Percy, the editor of the *Reliques*, in his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*. But one better qualified than Percy had already been touching these things to finer issues. About 1760 Thomas Gray made his noble paraphrases, *The Descent of Odin* and *The Fatal Sisters*, the best result of Norse poetic influence which the whole eighteenth century can show. Gray knew something of Icelandic, and his verse comes as near as eighteenth century English could to the brief, pregnant style, the sharp "unmuffled" phrasing of the original. In this Norse poetry he found fulfilled an ideal of poetic writing which he had all his life been feeling after, and it enabled him to strike a new note in English poetry. In the "Spear Song," the original of Gray's *The Fatal Sisters*, we hear the Valkyries, the divine maidens of Odin who gather up the slain after battle, sing their weird Fate song before the battle of Clontarf, where a Norse chief is about to fight with an Irish king. The old image for the making of human fate, as a weaving of a woof, which the Norse notion of Fate shares with the Greek, is here applied with an intense abrupt imaginative power which recalls the Book of Job. "Weave we, weave we, the web of spears!" is the recurring refrain. And in one grim powerful stanza the symbolism of the loom of battle, where the fates of men are wrought, is thrust upon us with remorseless vividness and precision of stroke:—

This web we are weaving of human entrails,  
 And the warp is weighted with heads of men;  
 Blood-besprinkled spears be the shafts,  
 Iron-bound the stays, and arrows the shuttles;  
 With swords we'll thrust close this web of victory.

Such poetry sharply traversed the conventions of English eighteenth century style. Abstract phrase and "glossy" diction could not be further off. But Gray contrived to convey more of it into his English verse than his own antecedents would have seemed to warrant. It fulfilled, clearly, the half-unconscious bent of his own taste, the ideal of a sublime or mysterious matter conveyed with Greek precision. This is how he turns it:—

See the grisly texture grow!  
 ('Tis of human entrails made)  
 And the weights that play below  
 Each a gasping Warrior's head!

Shafts for shuttles, dipt in gore,  
Shoot the trembling cords along.  
Sword that once a Monarch bore,  
Keep the tissue close and strong.

Gray could not indeed wholly escape the poetic rhetoric of his day. "Sword that once a Monarch bore," or "Shoot the trembling cords along," are still in the vein of this rhetoric. But a phrase like "Shafts for shuttles" has a new ring, caught from the short emphatic alliterating poetry of the North. In such phrases, too, though Gray possibly did not know it, he was recovering the manner of the oldest poetry of his own country, for Old English and Old Norse verse and phrasing were built upon the same plan.<sup>8</sup>

The other piece rendered by Gray, the *Descent of Odin*, takes us yet further into the heart of Norse mythology. It has more of the tragic poignancy of Hervor than of the battle spirit of the spear song. Odin, the greatest of the northern gods, and the most moving and fascinating personality among them, has heard that his son, Balder, is doomed to be slain. He resolves to go down to the nether world and force the buried Sibyl to disclose the secret of his son's fate and what should follow. Here, as in Hervor, it is the father's anxiety for his child that makes the situation dramatic and intense, though it is conveyed, with the reticence of great art, solely through the action, the swift thrust and parry between the urgent god and the reluctant prophetic, without a hint of exclamation or sentiment. All kinds of obstacles beset him. As he rides down towards Niflheim, the hound of Hell, the Cerberus of the North, come out, its jaws dabbled in blood, and bays at the greatest of the gods. But Odin rides on, the earth trembling at his tread, to the eastern gate of Hell's mansion, where the dead Sibyl's mound lay. He utters the spells that wake the dead, until reluctant she rises, and her dead body speaks: "Who is it of mortals to me unknown, that has laid this grievous constraint on me? Snow lay on me, rain beat on me, dew was shed on me: I had long been dead." He tells her that he is one Way-wise, a wanderer (like Ulysses). He sees the preparations for a feast. "For whom," he asks, "are these golden seats prepared?" "Here for Balder," she answers, "the mead is ready. Unwillingly have I spoken: and now I will speak no more." "Speak on, O Sibyl! I will question thee till I know all: this further I would know: Who will become the

slayer of Balder, and take the life of Odin's son?" "Hoder," she answers, "will hold the tall bough of fate (the mistletoe branch which he shot at Balder) and take the life of Odin's son. Unwillingly have I spoken: now will I speak no more." "Speak on, O Sibyl! I will question thee till I know all: this further I would know: Who will avenge the death of Balder, and lay his slayer on the funeral pyre?" She replies that "a child is yet to be born who when one day old will avenge Odin's son; his hands he will wash not, nor comb his hair, till he bear to the pyre the slayer of Balder. Unwillingly have I spoken: now I will speak no more." She seems to have told him all, but the most wonderful touch remains. "Speak on, Sibyl! I will question thee till I know all: this further would I know: Who are the maidens who weep for him, casting up their snoods to heaven?" "Thou art not Way-wise, as I trowed," she burst out, "but thou art Odin, the ancient sire. . . . Ride home, Odin, and glory in thyself; for no man again shall hold discourse with me till Loki breaks loose from his bonds, what time the Destroyers come, at the End of the World."

Gray's version of this, as of the Spear-song, is a noble poem. Without surrendering anything of English poetic instinct, as a quite literal version must have done, he has yet, in contact with this new poetry, enlarged the bounds of English poetic expression. Take the lines in which the Sibyl, roused unwillingly from her death-sleep, meets the intruder:—

What call unknown, what charms presume  
To break the quiet of the tomb?  
Who thus afflicts my troubled sprite,  
And drags me from the realms of night?  
Long on these mould'ring bones have beat  
The winter's snow, the summer heat,  
The drenching dews, the driving rain!  
Let me, let me sleep again.  
Who is he, with voice unblest,  
That calls me from the bed of rest?

But Gray's Norse studies told also upon his original poetry. Both his two famous Odes, *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard*, written about 1755, betray the growing dominance in his mind of the poetry of the primeval peoples, which was now from many sources emerging above the horizon of his generation. That illustrates the

complexity of the literary forces which went to emancipate our poetry from the pseudo-classicism of the Augustans, and to shape the great poetic renaissance of the early nineteenth century. For these very Odes were in form the result of an effort to recover the bold imaginative speech and closely ordered structure of the Greek lyric Ode. Gray was, in spite of a certain constitutional timidity and reticence, a discoverer and a pioneer of the highest rank ; not merely because his instinct for new and rare sources of poetic effect was exquisitely delicate and sure, but because he understood perfectly how to attach the new to the old, so that it seemed to grow out of it. His contemporaries, it is true, complained that the Odes were obscure, and Johnson severely blamed his inversions, and other departures from prose order. Yet we can easily recognize that these were criticisms natural to a generation which had forgotten what the language of poetry is. But at the very moment when Gray was thus trying to bring the boldness and splendour, together with the ordered symmetry, of Greek art into English, he had begun to be aware of the treasures of poetry lurking among other ancient peoples, less familiar to us, but nearer both geographically, and in race : the Welsh and the Scandinavian. Hence, in the first Ode, his allusion to the power of poetry

In climes beyond the solar road  
Where shaggy forms o'er ice-built mountains roam.

But in the second Ode, *The Bard*, there is far more unequivocal witness to the stimulus given by his Norse studies. It has worked creatively. The great Norse manner of song, in which a story, tragic and intense, is not told, but conveyed through the talk of the persons engaged, has helped to fashion this Ode, in which almost all is told by the impassioned prophetic lips of the Bard. But more than that, the very motive of a prophecy delivered has its analogues, as we have seen, both in *Hervor* and in *The Descent of Odin*, while the idea of *The Fatal Sisters* (the Valkyries) weaving the fates of battle, is expressly invoked in the grim refrain which runs through the Bard's prophecy :—

Weave the warp, and weave the woof.

It is here the slain Bards who are to rise from the dead and avenge their country, and the Bard sees them arise :—

No more I weep. They do not sleep.  
 On yonder cliffs, a grisly band  
 I see them sit, they linger yet,  
 Avengers of their native land :  
 With me in dreadful harmony they join,  
 And weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line,

—just the grim Norse notion of the “red woof” of slaughter woven by the terrible battle-maids, the daughters of Odin.

Gray’s “runic” poems appeared in 1768, and fairly started the Norse vogue. Solid help was provided, nearly at the same time, to the growing host of dilettante admirers and imitators, by the translation in 1770 of Mallet’s *Introduction to the History of Denmark*. Mr. Farley, of Harvard,<sup>9</sup> has shown that a flood of forgotten translations and adaptations poured from the press during the next fifty years. It rang the changes on, especially, the lay of Hervor and Lodbrok ; less often on Odin, Thor, Balder, and The Twilight of the Gods. A great part of the Edda was translated, with solid merit, by the Hon. W. Herbert.<sup>10</sup> The fashion ran to seed. The sublimity of Norse heroics was in danger of toppling over into the ridiculous, and those feasts in Valhalla once felt so thrilling, where drink was quaffed in the skulls of enemies, became a standing jest.<sup>11</sup> Several distinguished men of letters, it is true, found their good, incidentally, in Norse myth. Scott puts a song of Harald Harfager in the mouth of Halcro in *The Pirate*. Landor cast an episode from the *Gunnlangs Saga* into his marmoreal verse. W. L. Bowles, a Tory clergyman, indicted a hymn to the heathen Wodan ; Southey hoped to write a “Runic song” ; and George Borrow, doughtiest of translators, rendered passably the kindred Danish ballads (1826).

### III.

But to create new and noble poetry out of the Norse stories was reserved for the second half of the nineteenth century, and for three men, utterly unlike in genius, temper, and line of approach—Matthew Arnold, Robert Buchanan, and William Morris. The first two owed little but their material to Norse myth. Arnold, like his Greek, in the *Grande Chartreuse* is “thinking of his own gods” as he stands “beside the northern strand,” and his *Balder Dead*, though a noble poem, is noble in the Homeric, not the Eddic way. And if Arnold

is antique, Buchanan is defiantly modern. His *Balder the Beautiful* (1877) is an old wine-skin filled with new wine, the heady vintage of a fervid Scot who turned the story of Odin's son into an epic of the suffering and sacrificed Christ, and ostentatiously disclaimed indebtedness to the vulgar myths of the Edda. William Morris, on the other hand, was, as we know, a devoted, even a fanatical, lover of northern story and of the northern land. And his own elemental grandeur and simplicity of nature made him more instinctively and easily at home there than either the fastidious Hellenist or the neo-theologian could ever have become.

Moreover, Morris devoted his most sustained poetic labour in this field to the story which was at once the most neglected among us, and the most rich and various in its scope and movement, the grandest in its tragic intensity, of all the stories of the North, perhaps even of the world. And his *Sigurd the Volsung* is, when all reserves have been made, a great and splendid poem, the one adequate presentment to-day in English of the story which Wagner has so magnificently clothed for the world in the universal language of music. On all these grounds it is by far the most significant result in our poetry of the influence of Norse myths, and it will be not unfitting that it should occupy us for the remainder of this discourse.

The story of Sigurd and Brynhild is, strictly, only the kernel or nucleus of the story of the Volsungs, as told in the Edda and in the prose Volsung saga based upon it. It is preceded and followed by two story groups of distinct character and lesser value, the one—which we may call the antecedent story—telling his youth and early feats and the career of his father Sigmund, the other—the sequel story—the vengeance for his death.

Heroism is the ground tone of all three. But the antecedent story moves among primeval figures, with more of elemental and subhuman forces in them and less of man. There are dwarfs and giants, and you can change into a beast, or a dragon at will. Sigmund is more dæmonic, less human, than Sigurd; dæmonic too is his sister Signy, who, fearful lest the Volsung race should die out, takes the shape of another woman, seeks out her brother, and, unrecognized, bears him a son; dæmonic, no less, this son, Sinfjötli,—a marvellous, uncanny child, who at ten does fabulous feats, as becomes one who is of Volsung stock on both sides.

In the sequel story, on the other hand, primeval myth recedes, and we are on the borders of history. When Sigurd has been slain by his wife's brothers, Gudrun marries Attila, the Hun king of the fifth century; Attila invites them to his court, and they and all their retinue perish in a great battle in his hall, after which Gudrun takes her own life.

The kernel story is of finer stuff than these. It has not only heroism but tragedy; not only colossal daring or ruthless revenge, but love and hate in conflict and in league. It will suffice to recall the crucial situations and moments. There is (1) Sigurd's discovery of the Valkyrie Brynhild, on the wild mountain top, Hyndfell, where she has been laid asleep by Odin, within a wall of flames which the man who would win her must break through. They plight troth, exchange rings, and part. (2) Sigurd's reception at the court of the Niblung kings on the Rhine, the magic potion given him by their crafty mother which obliterates the memory of Brynhild, and his marriage with their sister Gudrun. (3) Sigurd's second visit to Brynhild, still oblivious of the past, to help Gunnar, the eldest of the kings, to win her for his wife. When Gunnar's horse will not face the flames, Sigurd assumes his likeness, enters her bower, and receives from her, as Gunnar, the ring, his own, which she may not refuse to the man who penetrates her fire-wall. (4) The marriage of Gunnar and Brynhild, and their life, full of sinister presage, side by side with Sigurd and Gudrun, in Gunnar's palace. (5) The quarrel of the two queens by the river side; when Brynhild taunts Gudrun with being the wife of Gunnar's serving-man, and Gudrun retorts that it was this serving-man, not Gunnar, who had crossed the flame-wall, and won her hand, in Gunnar's name, and received her ring, and she shows her the ring. (6) Brynhild's vengeance for her betrayal by her first lover. In one last consummate scene with her, Sigurd tries all possible solutions: her love will not be tempted nor her hate appeased.<sup>12</sup> Then she compels the unwilling Gunnar to take his life. He is slain in Gudrun's arms, and when Gudrun's shriek is heard, a wild laugh rings out in the court,—the laugh of a woman who has triumphed but whose heart is broken; she plunges the dagger into her breast, and her body and Sigurd's, united at last, are burnt on the same pyre.

Such, in bald summary, was the complex Volsung story: a German legend blended, by steps we can only in part decipher, with Norse

myth. And as the kernel was German, so to Germany belong, apart from the Eddic lays, its most splendid embodiments in art : the twelfth century *Nibelungenlied*, the *Nibelungen* trilogy of Hebbel, and the *Ring der Nibelunge* of Wagner. Of these I must say no more here than that the poet of the *Nibelungenlied* softens and humanizes the mythic and savage elements ; ignores in particular the first meeting of Sigurd and Brynhild, thus completely changing the character of their relations ; and invests the whole with the manners and the atmosphere of the feudal and chivalrous age in which he lived. While Wagner, glorying in myth as the century of Jakob Grimm had learnt to do, fearlessly draws gods and demons, dwarfs and dragons into the magic sphere of his music drama. And this, too, was the way of William Morris.<sup>13</sup>

## IV.

Morris's close concern with the North did not begin with his work upon *Sigurd*, but it was then still comparatively recent. Iceland was not his first love. His first poems, of 1858, are steeped in French and Celtic romance, in Froissart and Malory ; the gracious charm of French cathedrals and chateaux, and of tapestry and metal work, had captured the artist in him, and they never lost their hold. Northern stories are told, alongside Greek or eastern ones, by the mariners of the *Earthly Paradise*, eleven years later ; and these included the great story of *Gudrun's Lovers* from the Laxdæla saga, where the very situation of Sigurd and Brynhild—the lover slain by the woman who loves him, by the hand of her unloved husband—reappears, translated into terms of the feuds of Icelandic farmers in the thirteenth century.

But here, too, Iceland, like Greece, shimmers through an atmosphere of delicate artistry and gracious romance. Then came a great, decisive experience. In 1871, two years after the *Earthly Paradise*, three years before *Sigurd*, he visited Iceland for the first time. His notes of this journey vividly reflect the deep impression it made on him :—

“ I have seen many marvels, he writes, and some terrible pieces of country ; slept in the home field where Bolli [the Gunnar of the Laxdæla story] was killed. . . . I was there yesterday, and from its door you see a great sea of terrible, inky mountains tossing about ; there has

been a most wonderful sunset this evening that turned them golden though." <sup>13a</sup>

And how it transformed his conception of the events and persons :—

"Such a dreadful place," he says of Grettir's lair, "that it gave quite a new turn in my mind to the story, and transfigured Grettir into an awful and monstrous being, like one of the early giants of the world."

Two years later, in 1873, he went again, and the land impressed him with a sense of "almost sacramental solemnity".

We can understand, then, that this experience threw a new and transforming light upon the Volsung story also, which already in 1870 he had proclaimed to be one of the great stories of the world, destined to be to our race what the tale of Troy "was to the Greeks, and to those who came after, when our race has vanished, no less than the tale of Troy is to us".

But these impressions, powerful as they were, did not and could not sweep away Morris's long and rich experience as a poet and artist in many fields. He was in the full maturity of a genius tenacious as well as receptive, and the old familiar joys were not obliterated because the new and fiercer joys broke across them. They were only momentarily put to flight, like birds at the coming of storm, to return full of song again when it is over. The Morris who has seen "the fearful land," and that "great sea of terrible inky mountains tossing about" is there all the time and we never forget him for long. But there, too, is Morris the lover of old France, and Morris the weaver of tapestry and experimenter in dye; there even, in germ, is Morris the socialist orator, by and by, at London street-corners, the great-hearted herald and builder of a new Utopia. Brynhild's wild, flame-girt, mountain bower is of the fearful land of fire and snow; but when she has descended to her sister's house in the dale, her dwelling is some manor-house of Touraine or Kent, embowered in its gardens and orchards:—

A builded burg arising amid the leafy trees.

The close is full of fruit, the garden of roses and lilies; doves flutter about the roofs; and in the soaring turrets the casements stand open to the summer breeze. The Niblung burg, again, where Gunnar and Gudrun dwell, is a mediæval town such as Iceland never knew, with a ring of many towers standing up "stark and sharp and cold" above

a grim old girdling wall "dark red and worn, and ancient," and the smoke of many dwellers rising over it.

Morris the art-worker, too, finds or makes his opportunities. He likes to tell us not merely, like your mere literary poet, what things looked like, but how they were made. The saga tells simply that the halls had a golden roof; Morris, not content, adds that there were silver nails in the door. His furniture is of rare and costly materials, and cunningly wrought. When the young Sigurd goes to his uncle's hall, he finds him sitting in a chair of walrus-tusk, and his robe is of mountain gold, and the floor of the hall sea-green, and his royal staff tipped with a crystal knob. The forging of Sigurd's sword ("The Wrath of Sigurd") is full of the zest of the metal-worker.<sup>14</sup> We know, too, that Morris was experimenting with blue dye while engaged on the poem; he tells us in his letters that he often wrote with blue hands, and some of the blue seems, in fact, to have come off on to the poetry. Blue is the colour of every one's best clothes. The Niblung warriors are blue-clad. When Gudrun goes with her maids to visit Brynhild, they put on their dark-blue gear, and Brynhild rises to meet them from a throne covered with dark-blue cloth. And at night they sleep on dark-blue bolsters. Even the Valkyrie Brynhild's awesome, fire-girt bower, built by Odin on Hyndfell, has been provided by a thoughtful upholsterer with a bed and bolster of blue.<sup>15</sup>

If Morris the art-worker found his opportunities, Morris the socialist was, if not made, certainly nourished and stimulated by what he saw in Iceland. The republican society of which he read in the sagas, where the greatest chief might be met in his hay-field tedding his hay, had already attracted his interest, and begun to thrust social questions and problems to the fore in his mind. Thus the curse that lies upon the land of the Volsungs is conceived not as a pestilence, or an unappeasable blood feud, but simply as the present state of society, the economic system founded on labour and capital, under which we live. So that when the curse is removed,

Men's hearts are fulfilled of joyance; and they cry, the sun shines now  
With never a curse to hide it, and they shall reap that sow!

(p. 53).

And when Sigurd goes forth to battle with his new kinsfolk the Niblungs, his victory will bring in the reign of social equality:—

—the lowly man exalted, and the mighty brought alow:

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

V.

But it was not as yet the society which chiefly attracted him in Iceland, or worked creatively on his imagination. It was, of course, above all the great Volsung story itself, its heroic and tragic intensity, and its savage and dæmonic horror. But it was also the scenery, the wild tossing of those "terrible inky mountains"; and it was, not less, the grave, melancholy wisdom, penetrated with foreboding and the sense of doom in earthly things, which rises like an emanation, from the lips of this tragic humanity in the midst of this stern nature, at hours of crisis, or in the last encounter with death. Let us see first what Morris's Iceland looks like when his eye is really on it.

There is "a desert of dread in the uttermost part of the world,"

Where over a wall of mountains is a mighty water hurled,  
 Whose hidden head none knoweth, nor where it meeteth the sea ;  
 And behind the green arch of the waterfall as it leaps sheer from the cliff,  
 The hush of the desert is felt amid the water's roar,  
 And the bleak sun lighteth the wave-vault, and tells of the fruitless plain,  
 And the showers that nourish nothing, and the summer come in vain.

That is the haunt of the dwarf Andvari, who guards the fateful treasure of the Niblungs. And here is Brynhild's Hyndfell. Sigurd is riding towards it. For days he rides through this desert, longing in vain for the dwellings of man and the joyance of human speech. At length, one dawn,

From out of the tangled crag-walls, amidst the cloudland grey  
 Comes up a mighty mountain, and it is as though there burns  
 A torch amidst of its cloud-wreath.

He rides on, and at noon it is covered with clouds. Then, as the day wears, the winds rise and disperse the clouds,

And, lifted a measureless mass o'er the desert cragwalls high,  
 Cloudless the mountain riseth against the sunset sky . . .  
 And the light that afar was a torch is grown a river of fire,  
 And the mountain is black above it, and below it is dark and dim,  
 And there is the head of Hindfell, as an island in the sun.

But even in the southern type of scenery hints of this Icelandic desolation and awe at moments intrude. Thus hard by the Niblung burg is "a black pool huge and awful, unfathomable, and lined with dark sheer crags" (p. 339).

And when the men and women who lived amid these scenes uttered their thoughts about life and death, it was in a sense which appealed powerfully to Morris, so that he would gladly have made it his own,—a kind of intuitive and untaught philosophy, the philosophy of brave men, unconscious of Christianity, untouched by Christian hopes. "What a glorious outcome of the worship of courage these stories are!" he once wrote after re-reading *Njála*, the greatest of them. And then, to another correspondent: "It may be that the world shall worsen . . . and Evil break loose . . . and like the kings and heroes . . . also the gods must die, who made that imperfect earth. . . . Sometimes we think that we must live again; yet if that were not, would it not be enough that we helped to make this unnameable glory and lived not altogether heedless? This seems to me pretty much the religion of the Northmen."

And this is the temper of the wisdom that Morris has put into the mouth of his Valkyria Brynhild, in the great troth-pledging scene with Sigurd on Hyndfell. He did not find it in his source. Her "wisdom" in the corresponding saga scene is of later origin and represents on the whole a sound prudential morality. She bids him avoid the wiles of women, and drunken brawlers, beware of provoking feuds, and see that the dead have decent burial: ideas quite out of keeping with the magnificent contempt of life which inspires Sigurd's reply in the genuine stanza just before, to her warning that their love will mean their doom:—

I will not fly, though death be my fate,  
Born I was not to blench;  
All I would have is to love thee only  
As long as my life shall last.

And so, in company with Achilles, but against all the moralists, he chooses a brief existence of supreme bliss instead of many days of common-place ease. And it is in the spirit of this choice of Sigurd's that Morris has framed the wisdom of his own Brynhild. In these lines, for instance, he has nobly expressed the great thought that heroism and courage are vital to the life of the universe—that they are the

sustaining powers that keep the fabric of the world from tottering to its fall :—

Know thou, most mighty of men, that the Norns shall order all,  
 And yet without thine helping shall no whit of their will befall ;  
 And the night of the Norns, and their slumber, and the tide when the world  
     runs back,  
 And the way of the sun is tangled, it is wrought of the dastard's lack ;  
 But the day when the fair earth blossoms, and the sun is bright above,  
 Of the daring deeds is it fashioned and the eager hearts of love.

(p. 163).

Nor does she warn him, in the spirit of Polonius, to keep out of quarrels. She bids him act where need calls, and then neither repent his action nor exult in it, but *abide* it ; and then he will be enthroned above all the chances of time,

And look on to-day and to-morrow as those that never die.

And how did Morris handle these deeds and sufferings themselves ? How did he shape and present them as an artist ? Here, too, there is no doubt, Iceland had her way with him ; he felt the spell of her story tellers no less than of her makers of story. And it was strong enough to make him defy very deep-rooted and authoritative canons of art. The great tradition of epic poetry would have bidden him concentrate upon the supreme central phase of the story ; the subject of the *Iliad* is not the siege of Troy, but an episode in its last years ; the action of the *Odyssey* covers six weeks, that of *Paradise Lost*, from the waking in Hell to the expulsion from Eden, need not be more than a few days. Fastidious poetic artists, like his French contemporaries Leconte de Lisle and Sully Prudhomme, had taken a single poignant moment—the death of Sigurd and Brynhild's terrible laugh, the waking of Angentyr or the slaying of Hjartan, and carved it in the flawless marble or onyx of their verse. But Morris, like the German poet Hebbel, whose *Nibelungen* trilogy had appeared thirteen years before (1862), felt, with the old saga writer, the grandeur of the whole cycle of lays, the story not of Sigurd only but of the House of the Volsungs—his forbears and his progeny—and he put the whole cycle into his poem. It moves before us like a vast piece of tapestry such as Morris may have been weaving as he made it, for no poet, he declared, was worth anything who could not make an epic while he wove—where everything that belongs to the story is naïvely put into it,

men and gods, trees and beasts, the human and subhuman, the tragic and grotesque. Every moment and incident has for him its own kind of power and value, and he accepts and renders it with the same large-hearted and equable serenity. This did not always tend to propitiate his readers. Victorian England, for which Tennyson had veiled in distant and awestruck allusion the incestuous birth of Arthur, was disconcerted to read at the very outset the primeval loves of Sigmund and Signy told at length; and his friend Rossetti angrily derided Fafnir's transformation into a dragon as "silly," provoking a drastic retort from "Topsy". Even in Wagner the dragon has tried the patience of the unlect.

## VI.

Nevertheless, the enduring interest of Morris's *Sigurd*, as of Wagner's *Nibelungen Ring*, must rest mainly upon the tragic and lyric power of the great central scenes. Here, again and again, the equable flow of Morris's verse becomes close knit and weighty in answer to the grip of the situation. When Brynhild, for instance, coming into Gunnar's hall, as his bride, sees one far surpassing the Niblung brother, seated beside them, and is told that it is Sigurd, once her betrothed, she addresses him with a greeting full of restrained passion under the courtly words:—

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

And he replies, with anguish no less resolutely kept down:—

She heard and turned to Gunnar as a queen that seeketh her place,  
But to Gudrun she gave no greeting, nor beheld the Niblung's face.

Then the discovery scene, in the river, where Brynhild suddenly wading deeper in, Gudrun cries:—

Why wadest thou so  
In the deeps and upper waters, and wilt leave me here below?  
Then e'en as one transfigured loud Brynhild cried and said;  
So oft shall it be between us at hall and board and bed; . . .  
E'en so shall the gold cloths lap me, when we sit in Odin's hall,  
While thou shiverest, little hidden, by thy lord the Helper's thrall,  
By the serving man of Gunnar, who all his bidding doth,

And waits by the door of the bower, while his master plighteth the troth.  
But my mate is the King of the Kingfolk who rode the Wavering Fire,  
And mocked at the ruddy death to win his heart's desire.

It is well, O ye troth-breakers! there was found a man to ride  
Thro' the waves of my Flickering Fire to lie by Brynhild's side.

Then no word answered Gudrun till she waded up the stream  
And stretched forth her hand to Brynhild, and thereon was a golden gleam;

White waxed the face of Brynhild as she looked on the glittering thing:  
And she spake: "By all thou lovest, whence haddest thou the ring?"  
And she turns on the mocking Gudrun "as one who clutches a knife".

And Gudrun tells the deadly secret.

"I had the ring O Brynhild, on the night that followed the morn,  
When the semblance of Gunnar left thee in thy golden hall forlorn."

For he cloaked him in Gunnar's semblance and his shape in Gunnar's hid:

Thus he wooed the bride for Gunnar, and for Gunnar rode the fire,  
And he held thy hand for Gunnar, and lay by thy dead desire.  
We have known thee for long, O Brynhild, and great is thy renown;  
In this shalt thou joy henceforward, and nought in thy nodding crown.

Now is Brynhild wan as the dead, and she openeth her mouth to speak,  
But no word cometh outward. . . .

Then follows the long, bitter brooding of Brynhild in ever deepening gloom, and the great scene where Sigurd seeks her out, and begs for her love despite the bonds which bind them both elsewhere. Like the sun-god he shines upon her despair, radiant with the temper that looks eagerly to the future and will not succumb to the past:—

Awake, arise, O Brynhild! for the house is smitten thro'  
With the light of the sun awakened, and the hope of deeds to do.

But all hope is fled from her.

And she cried: "I may live no longer, for the gods have forgotten the earth,  
And my heart is the forge of sorrow, and my life is a wasting dearth."

Then once again spoke Sigurd, once only and no more:  
A pillar of light all golden he stood on the sunlit floor;  
And his eyes were the eyes of Odin, and his face was the hope of the world,

And he cried: "I am Sigurd the Volsung, and belike the tales shall be true,  
That no hand on the earth may hinder what my hand would fashion and do:  
. . . . .

O live, live, Brynhild beloved ! and thee on the earth will I wed,  
 And put away Gudrun the Nibling,—and all those shall be as the dead.”  
 (But his breast so swelled within him that the breastplate over it burst,)  
 And he saw the eyes of Brynhild, and turned from the word she spake :  
 “ *I will not wed thee, Sigurd, nor any man alive.*”

A great line, terrible in its naked simplicity, prelude to the ruin which she is about to bring upon them both. Then, after the death of Sigurd, Brynhild's own end. Her vengeance is over ; Sigurd, her victim, is now to be her bridegroom and she his bride. She arrays herself, like the dying Cleopatra, in her royal robes, and her face no more is wan ; then thrusts the blade into her breast, and delivers her last charge to Gunnar helplessly standing by :—

“ I pray thee a prayer, the last word in the world I speak,  
 That ye bear me forth to Sigurd, and the hand my hand would seek.  
 And lay his sword, ‘ the blade that frighted death,’  
 Betwixt my side and Sigurd's as it lay that while ago,  
 When once in one bed together we twain were laid alone :  
 How then when the flames flare upward may I be left behind ?  
 How then may the road he wendeth be hard for my feet to find ?  
 How then in the gates of Valhall may the door of the gleaming ring  
 Clash to on the heels of Sigurd, as I follow on my king ? ”

With that magnificent cry of triumph in death, like Cleopatra's  
 “ Husband, I come ! ” I close.

Morris's *Sigurd* can hardly be counted among the supreme poems of English literature. The facile troubadour eloquence of the born romancer was too deeply engrained in him to admit, save at rare moments, the rigour and the economy of great style. If we are to compare the style of *Sigurd* with that of any of the great epics of the world, it is plainly not with the subtle and compressed manner, or the high-wrought harmonies of Vergil or Milton, that we must place its easy, spontaneous flow. Nor, save for its spontaneous flow, does it recall the simpler art of Homer. The simplicity of Homer goes with a flawless clarity of outline and a limpid speech which fits the meaning.

What, then, has Norse myth and its influence meant for English poetry ? Two things :—

(1) It brought to the cognizance of our eighteenth century poets, who up to 1760, with all their brilliant accomplishment in oratorical, expository, and satiric verse, knew neither how to sing a song nor to tell a story, a new and noble poetry of which song and story were the

vital breath and blood. Percy's *Reliques* were still to come, and Burns was but just born : only the greatest of the old ballads and of Burns' songs can match the finest Eddic lays in power, or in exemption from the vicious diction of the age. The nineteenth century had learnt, long before William Morris, to sing ; but its mastery of *story* in verse, on a grand scale, was still faltering and uncertain. Tennyson, Byron, are great in single scenes, episodes, idylls, but cannot shape a larger whole. Morris, when all deductions have been made, has left us the nearest approach to great epic made in our time.

(2) The Norse influence brought into a society fastidiously refined, or sordidly gross, or good-humouredly prosaic, the tonic spectacle of a humanity which was in some indefinable way, great, simple, heroic, where colossal things were dared and suffered, and the gods were never far off. And if our own age is more complex, more experienced, more rich with the intellectual spoils and the spiritual treasures of the world, it has learned to see only the more clearly and comprehensively, this elemental poetry, where Life, and Death, and Love, the eternal themes of all poetry, are thought of in so great and simple a way, and where beauty, the beauty begotten of a "fearful land," and only possible there, is so superbly wrung from fear.

#### NOTES.

<sup>1</sup> (p. 5) *Beowulf*, 885 f. It is unimportant for the present purpose that the scene of the recital of the Volsung song, is laid in a Scandinavian land ; the story was in any case made his own by an Anglian poet. The story of *Beowulf* itself is well known to have Scandinavian analogues ; but the evidence does not justify us in reckoning it the first (and one of the greatest) examples of Scandinavian literary influence by assigning it to a Scandinavian source.

The Volsung story as told in *Beowulf* differs from other versions in making Sigmund, not Sigurd his son, slay the dragon, and win deathless glory thereby. Müllenhoff peremptorily dismisses this as a perversion of the original story. But it has to be remembered that it emerges centuries earlier than any other version.

<sup>2</sup> (p. 6) This is consistent with the occasional quotation of a story from Saxo. Thus Nashe in *Piers Penniless* tells from this source the gruesome story of the two friends Asmundus and Asuitus, one of whom insists on being buried in the other's grave, and is found, some days after, mutilated by the corpse ;—a mixture of romance and horror quite in the Elizabethan vein.

<sup>3</sup> (p. 7) Inserted by Alfred into his translation of Orosius's *History of the World*, reproduced in Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader III*, and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> (p. 7) *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, c. 55. Much other Norse poetry was, of course, composed on English soil; but it was intended for Norse, not for English, ears. The Scandinavian kings of the tenth and eleventh centuries all had fighting singers in their train; some of them invaded England, and had their battles, or their death, thus commemorated then and there. Thus Thjodolf Arnórsson sang the battle of Stamford Bridge (1066), and the death of his master, King Harald, after fighting in it himself. Egil Skallagrímsson's own most famous poem, *Hofudlausn* (*Corp. Poet. Bor.*, I., 266), was composed in a York prison, as the price of his life. It is needless here to notice the contention of Vigfússon that a great part of the Norse poetic literature was actually composed in these islands. He stood practically alone in this view.

<sup>5</sup> (p. 7) Egil Skallagrímsson, who praised Athelstane, could have understood without great difficulty the praise of Shakespeare written two years ago, in the same measure, by the veteran Icelandic poet Matthias Jochumsson, for the *Book of Shakespeare Homage*. It arrived too late to appear there and was separately published (*Ultima Thule Sendeth Greetings*: Univ. of Oxford Press, 1916).

<sup>6</sup> (p. 7) Sophus Bugge, *Studies on the Origin of the Scandinavian Stories of Gods and Heroes*, Christiania, 1881-9. *The Heroic Poems in the Older Edda*, *ibid.*, 1896. The latter is translated by W. H. Schofield (*The Home of the Eddic Poems*, London, 1899). A good brief discussion is given by H. Gering, *Die Edda*, Introd.

<sup>7</sup> (p. 9) W. P. Ker, *The Literary Influence of the Middle Ages* (*Camb. Lit. History*, Vol. X, Chapter X), to which this section is otherwise indebted.

<sup>7a</sup> (p. 9) Though often translated and always admired, the Waking has inspired no notable poetry in English. Leconte de Lisle rendered it finely in *L'Épée d'Argentyr* (*Poèmes Barbares*). A notice of it is subjoined in Appendix I.

<sup>8</sup> (p. 11) It is interesting to remember that when Gray's lay was published in 1768, it was read by a clergyman in the Orkneys to the peasants there. After a few lines they said they knew it in Norse and had often sung it to him when he asked them to recite an old song. Scott, *Pirate*, XV.

<sup>9</sup> (p. 14) *Harvard Studies*, Vol. IX, 1903.

<sup>10</sup> (p. 14) *Select Icelandic Poetry*, 1804. Byron notices him in the *English Bards*:—

Herbert shall wield Thor's hammer, and sometimes  
In gratitude thou'lt praise his rugged rhymes.

<sup>11</sup> (p. 14) It was based on a curious misunderstanding, "crooked boughs of skulls" being merely a poetic periphrasis for drinking horns.

<sup>12</sup> (p. 16) Of this scene, as known to us through the prose of the saga, Andrew Lang wrote (*Homer and the Epic*, p. 396, quoted by Professor Ker, *The Dark Ages*, p. 282): "Homer has no such scene, no such ideas. The mastery of love in Brunhild's heart, her scene with Sigurd, where he ranges through every choice before them, to live as friends, to live as lovers, her disdainful rejection of friendship, her northern pride of purity, his anguish,

her determination to stay and follow him . . . all this is mere perfection, all is on the loftiest level of Shakespeare, and has no parallel in Greek or Roman poetry." This and several other crucial scenes, are known to us unfortunately only from the prose paraphrase, the corresponding verse having belonged to the lost leaves of the great Edda MS.

<sup>13</sup> (p. 17) On the German development of the story see Appendix II.

<sup>13a</sup> (p. 18) *Journals of Travel in Iceland*, 1871.

<sup>14</sup> (p. 19) The forging of this sword, called "The Wrath of Sigurd," suggests comparison with the famous Homeric making of the shield of Achilles; Morris's love of showing how things are done and made, his insight into arts and crafts, is in fact a Homeric trait. All the famous writers of epic before him, Virgil, Tasso, Milton—were men of letters whose only artistry was verse: Morris alone was craftsman as well as poet. It is true that the motive of Morris's forging scene is not only, like Homer's, the craftsman's art; Regin, the Northern Vulcan, is "Master of the Masters in the smithy-craft," but he is also cunning with all the cunning of the dwarf race, and does his best to cheat the boy of the sword he has promised him: so when it is tried on the anvil it shivers into fragments. The scene is thus tense with drama; but we feel the craftsman's instinct in the vivid rendering of that fierce exposure of the fraud: Sigurd bids Regin try the finished weapon:

Then Regin trembled and shrank, so bright his eyes outshone  
As he turned about to the anvil, and smote the sword thereon;  
But the shards fell shivering earthward, and Sigurd's heart grew wroth  
As the steel flakes tinkled about him: "Lo, there the right hand's troth!"

There is a closer parallel to the Homeric shield with its inwrought bas-reliefs of Greek life, in the description of Brynhild's weaving (Morris's special craft) of a golden web, with all the feats of Sigurd wrought in it. And he does not forget to tell us that the weaver of the glittering gold is seated on cloths of dark-blue (p. 186).

<sup>15</sup> (p. 19) Blue is frequent in the early art of man; but Morris's turn for it was derived from artistry not archæology.

## APPENDIX I.

### THE WAKING OF ANGENTYR.

The *Waking of Angentyr* is one of the pieces which reflect most distinctly the savage grandeur and the volcanic terrors of Iceland. In poetic greatness, as in concentrated power of style, it surpasses anything in Old English. Hervor, daughter of the dead hero Angentyr has come across the sea to the island where her father lies buried, to wake him from his death-sleep and demand of him the magic sword Tyrning, forged by the dwarfs, her heritage. It is a sinister heirloom, fraught with disaster to her race, and the girl's quest, like Childe Roland's in Browning, is at once heroic and tragic, an undaunted thrusting on towards an end which, she knows, means her doom. And as only in the tragedies of the primitive myth world, and as in that wonderful fantasia on them, *Childe Roland* itself, all the earth and heaven, man and nature, appears as grim onlookers at the tragic action filling the whole scene with bodeful or mocking voices and appalling visions. Nothing is indifferent.

The whole story is told in brief pregnant dialogue, with barely a line or two of narrative. "At sunset in Munarvoe the young maid met a shepherd with a flock." A weird haunting picture in itself. The shepherd bids her turn back and seek shelter. She scornfully refuses, and asks the way to the burial mounds. He is horror-struck. "Ask me not that, thou art in evil case! Let us run thence fast as feet can carry us: for out of doors all is awesome to men's eyes." She offers him gifts to guide her. But the richest gifts would not keep him from rushing home. For all the island is ablaze with flames; the graves are opening, field and fen are all alight. "What of that," quoth Hervor; "though all the island be aflame, we must not let the dead men scare us so soon: we have to parley with them." And so the shepherd speeds away to the woods, but "greater grows at the stress of peril the close-knit heart in the breast of Hervor". She comes to the grave mound and calls aloud to her father through the flames: "Wake thou, Angentyr! It is Hervor thy only daughter that bids thee wake! Give me the sword out of the grave which the Dwarfs forged." There is no answer. She turns to scoff at all the buried chiefs. "Surely ye are become heaps of dust since ye will not answer me." And she calls again, and curses their obstinacy. At last Angentyr unwillingly replies: "Hervor, daughter, why dost thou call and curse? Thou art walking to thy doom: mad art thou grown, and wild of wit that thou wakenest the dead?" She answers sharply: "I was ever held to be like other mortals till I came hither in search of thee: give me the sword!" He pretends that it is not there; for foemen

buried him and kept Tyrning. Let her hurry back to her ship out of the flames while she may. She only answers by threatening to lay spells on them so that they would rot and be really dead. At last he confesses that the magic sword lies under him, all wrapped about with fire, and no maid on earth dares brandish it. "I care nothing for the burning fire, the flame sinks before my eyes." And when she rushes forward towards the fire to clasp it, he thinks only of saving her and gives her the sword: "for I cannot deny thee, thou young maiden!" She breaks into an exulting cry: "Well hast thou done, O Viking chief; me sees a happier lot is mine than if I had conquered all Norway". But the father answers sadly and scornfully: he knows that her joy is vain and the prelude to doom. "Thou knowest not, daughter, whereat thou rejoicest: hapless are thy words. Thou shalt bear a son who shall wield Tyrning, and it shall be the ruin of all thy race." "Little I reckon how my sons may quarrel, the daughter of kings is of high heart." And she speeds away with a last greeting to the dead in the mound. But now, like Lady Macbeth, after the crisis she knows what she has gone through. "Truly I felt between life and death, she mutters, when all around me the fires were burning!"

## APPENDIX II.

### THE GERMAN AND THE NORTHERN VERSIONS OF THE VOLSUNG STORY.

In the German epic the complex story has an artistic unity which it has not in the North : on the other hand, the primitive sublimity of the tale has been attenuated along with its primitive paganism ; we are reading a romance of adventure, reflecting the Christianized manners, the brilliant court life, and the chivalry, of the Minnesinger age. Instead of the Valkyrie on the wild fell top, only to be won by riding through the ring of flames, Brynhild is a princess in a palace, overcome by cunning in a test of strength. The whole is more concentrated and better organized. In particular, the antecedent story of Gudmund and Signy, so loosely attached to that of Sigurd, and so deeply tinged with the savage grandeur of the pagan age, falls away altogether, and had probably quite faded out of the German tradition. The sequel story, on the other hand, receives a new and powerful motive, which for the first time knits it close to the story of Sigurd. For it becomes now the story of Gudrun's vengeance upon her brothers for the murder of her passionately loved lord. Whereas in the Northern version, Gudrun's marriage to Atli begins a new chapter in a story already complete ; and Atli's treacherous attack on Gunnar is motivated not by vengeance for Sigurd, but by hunger for the treasure he has won. Gudrun's passion of grief for the glorious hero she has lost is incomparably rendered in the northern poems ; but they have nothing parallel to the terrible heroine of the Second Part of the *Nibelungenlied*, transformed by her loss from a tender woman into a pitiless avenger, insatiable in her consuming anger until the last of her guilty kinsmen is dead. The central story, on the other hand, has in the German version been impoverished by the loss of its most potent trait. Brynhild and Sigurd have had no earlier meeting on Hyndfell, no exchange of vows nor of rings. Hence, when he helps Gunnar to win her by personating him in shape and name, he is not playing false to an old love, and the wrong she suffers, though mortifying to her pride, is not the deadly offence of the perjured lover. The tragic tension of the situation is therefore very sensibly diminished.

It was necessary to indicate the chief points in which the Norse and German developments of the German legend go apart, in order to appreciate the great nineteenth century versions of the Volsung story. It is the strongest evidence of the superiority of the fragmentary but sublime Norse poetry to the rounded, coherent, and humanized German epic that the Norse form of the Volsung story rather than the German was chosen by the two great poets who nearly at the same time were occupied with it, one of them a German himself,—Richard Wagner and William Morris.

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