

## ‘THE BANNERS OF THE SPRING TO BE’: THE DIALECTICAL PATTERN OF MORRIS’S LATER POETRY

William Morris’s contemporaries viewed him primarily as the author of *The Earthly Paradise*, and to a lesser extent of *The Life and Death of Jason* and a few later works. Most later critics sharply reversed this judgment, in favor of *The Defence of Guenevere*, which they interpreted as a youthful proto-modernist text of implosive intensity.<sup>1</sup> This profile persists, for example, in Fiona MacCarthy’s comprehensive biography, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*. MacCarthy makes some sustained efforts to evaluate the poems on their own aesthetic terms, but reimposes the usual canon in her summary assessment: ‘I would not press the claims of Morris’s own favourite *Sigurd the Volsung*; it is too large, too chant-like. Volsungs are out of fashion ... But there is much to reward the modern reader in Morris’s early poems, *The Defence of Guenevere*, short, spare, edgy narratives of violence and loss. And most of all his 1890s novels repay reading [...] *The Wood Beyond the World*; *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*; *The Well at the World’s End* ...’<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, perhaps, *The Earthly Paradise*’s length, epic conventions, and narrative architectonic alienate many readers, but so also do the relative brevity, randomness, and apparent disparity of Morris’s later work. In this essay I hope to offer a more inclusive and eclectic view of Morris’s poetic development, and suggest that other parts of his poetic *oeuvre* remain valuable for the variety of their plots and aesthetic effects; for the novelty of their experimental efforts to blend poetry and prose; and for their embodiments of complex and philosophically sophisticated beliefs about language, history, and the fundamental sources of emotion.

Morris’s substantial poetic output after the publication of *The Earthly Paradise* included the four volumes of *Love Is Enough*, *Sigurd the Volsung*, *Poems by the Way*, and *The Pilgrims of Hope*, a number of uncollected poems, and many lovely paeans interspersed through the prose romances. Only measured against the scale of Morris’s other literary achievements – translations from French, Greek, Latin, and Icelandic, writings for *Commonweal* and essays on art and socialism, and historical, political and quasi-Scandinavian prose romances – might his later poems seem in any sense ‘slight’.

<sup>1</sup> Recent North American critics – Florence Boos, Blue Calhoun, Frederick Kirchhoff, Charlotte Oberg, Carole Silver, Jeffrey Skoblow – have shown more interest in *The Earthly Paradise*. A volume on *Sigurd the Volsung*, *After Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris’s Sigurd the Volsung*, edited by John Hollow, was published by the William Morris Society in 1978. The 1996 Morris special issue of *Victorian Poetry* includes articles on *The Earthly Paradise*, *Sigurd the Volsung*, and *Poems By the Way*.

<sup>2</sup> London, 1995, ix.

I will trace the evolution of Morris's later poetry in this essay, and note how its many interrelations developed as he grew older, reevaluated his sense of audience, and recast poetic approaches originally devised for the final sections of *The Earthly Paradise*. Morris had already revised extensively the manner of his earlier poems, of course; the later medieval tales of *The Earthly Paradise* differed substantially from *Jason*, and both from the tone of *The Defence*.

Less closely observed has been the degree to which Morris's subsequent poems – *Love Is Enough*, *Sigurd the Volsung*, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *Poems By the Way*, and all the shorter lyrics – are metrically and historically diverse. Morris's aims were consistent, but he had an experimental bent. Study of the experimental aspects of Morris's later poetry can help us understand his purposes, for they evolved alongside his political convictions, and merged into the mighty torrent of his prose. I will argue that these later works embodied a deeply-held idiosyncratic view of the purpose of poetry, or at least of his poetry: to blend poetic techniques with the language of narrative to attain 'popular' and folklore-derived ends.

Similar ideals had animated German and English romantic poets, of course, but Morris emulated neither their techniques nor their sources. Each new attempt was for him an experiment – some quite brilliant – and dissatisfaction with one led him to try another. Parts of *Love Is Enough* and *Sigurd*, in particular, are as good as anything he ever wrote. Generations have responded to 'For the Bed at Kelmscott' and 'The Message of the March Wind', but he also wrote small inset gems of historical interpretation into his longer translations. All these works – 'occasional', lyrical or realistic – embed allegories of loss, and the longer ones employ complexly iterated patterns of doubling and opposition. These dualities also reflected dialectical oppositions in Morris's own sensibility, for the author of the cloudless lyric 'Hymn to Venus' also wrote the extended and gruesome scene in *Sigurd* in which Gunnar and his kin ravage themselves and each other both verbally and physically – one of the most repellently powerful set-pieces of its kind in English poetry.

As Morris composed *The Earthly Paradise*, his style gained in narrative complexity, emotional resonance, and prosodic skill. He chose stories of an increasingly fantastic, mythical and intricately ironic cast, and shaped the plots of the stories to reflect recurrent passions, obsessions, and ideals. His evolving preoccupations and radical changes in poetic style recognized the fragility of human relations and achievements. They also celebrated the origins of popular literature in anonymous storytelling, and the recurrent roles of transmitter, speaker, and audience as authentic sources of this literature's unwritten history.

Certain significant aspects of this *Earthly Paradise* style persisted throughout Morris's later writing. Among these were his tendencies to

- (a) project a *direct lyric voice*, often in the guise of a poet or 'singer' – most conspicuously in the 'Apology' and the lyrics of the months;
- (b) *refract* or *relativize* this voice, often in imbricated series of narrative frames – a muted version of this appears in the 'Apology'-poet's ironic self-characterization as the 'idle singer of an empty day', and this 'singer' later intervenes in 'The Doom of King Acrisius', 'The Writing on the Image', and other tales;

- (c) deploy certain forms of explicit *moral and metaphysical allegory* – most conspicuously, perhaps, in ‘Ogier the Dane’ and in ‘Bellerophon in Lycia’;  
 (d) make extensive *mythopoetic use of folk and saga material* – more generically in ‘The Fostering of Aslaug’, and more concretely and ‘realistically’ in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun.’

Refracted variants of the ‘singer’s’ direct voice reappear, for example, in *Love Is Enough*, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *Poems by the Way* and the hymnodic ‘Chants for Socialists’, and inset counterparts linger in the lyrics of the prose romances, often cast as communal ‘songs’. Temporal and narrative shifts of perspective are present in *Love Is Enough* and *The Pilgrims of Hope*. Explicit allegory, finally, is central to *Love Is Enough*, and myth-entwined counterparts of moral allegory permeate the saga-derived conflicts between revenge and remorse which rule *Sigurd the Volsung*.

### ***Love Is Enough: Aesthetic Displacement and Autobiography***

Morris kept an extensive journal during his visit to Iceland in 1871, and the experiences there in 1871 and 1873 inflected his poetic sensibility in lasting ways. For *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, he had drawn on wide knowledge of classical and medieval sources, but his stay in *Ultima Thule* gave him a chance to think about *his own plot* – to reevaluate what he admired, and reconsider ways to resolve the *aporiai* of his life. The conclusions he reached directed the future course of his poetic as well as his political career.

Certain aspects of Morris’s style-shift emerged in *Love Is Enough*, a radically personal verse ‘masque’ which he set down in several heavily reworked drafts over a three month period in 1872 and published in 1873. Arranged in a miniature fractal series of narrative iterations, the poem meditates on the displacement of love into hope, and makes open-ended appeals for universality and audience-participation. Indeed, Morris’s later poetry and prose romances can be viewed as a series of attempts to resolve a dialectical conflict between the reconciliatory ethos of *Love Is Enough* and its ‘negation’ in the bitterly tragic *Sigurd the Volsung*. In the end, the resilient spirit of ‘Love’ determined the fluidity and pace of his final imaginative writings.

The basic tenet of *Love Is Enough* is that fulfillment and deferral are in some sense concurrent, that life preserves and celebrates hope amid loss, and that absence and displacement paradoxically preserve hope. *Love Is Enough* grants its hero Pharamond renewed energy after many dislocations and reversals, but refracts his own perspective in a series of larger prismatic frames.

Formally, *Love Is Enough* describes the progress of a medieval poetic masque, performed by a troupe of players for an Emperor and Empress, a bourgeois Mayor, and a mixed audience of onlookers that includes the peasant lovers Giles and Joan. The players enact the story of King Pharamond, a benevolent ruler who abdicates his rule to search for a woman in a distant land. Accompanied by his servant and companion Oliver, Pharamond sails to a country of stark, quasi-Icelandic beauty, falls asleep in despair, and is awakened by Azalais, the object of his search, who has been drawn to him in turn. The two



The latter takes place beneath tapestries of sorrow and reconciliation in a kind of secular church, decorated with artistic images of the celebrants.

In his discussion of the ideology of *Love Is Enough* in *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems*, Anthony Harrison claims that Morris opposed its ‘wholly optimistic amatory ideology’ (154) to D. G. Rossetti’s fatalism, and identifies ‘Endymion’ as the poem’s principal Romantic ‘precursor’.<sup>3</sup> This seems too simple, for Morris’s ‘wholly optimistic ... ideology’ *also* foresees that natural cycles inevitably bring new ‘sign[s] of Earth, its sorrow and its bliss’:

– Reward of what? – Life springing fresh again. –  
 Life of delight? – I say it not – Of pain?  
 It may be – Pain eternal? – Who may tell?  
 Yet pain of Heaven, beloved, and not of Hell.  
 – What sign, what sign, ye cry, that so it is?  
 The sign of Earth, its sorrow and its bliss,  
 Waxing and waning, steadfastness and change;  
 Too full of life that I should think it strange  
 Though death hang over it; too sure to die  
 But I must deem its resurrection nigh.

*Love Is Enough* also evolved into a more and more emblematic allegory as Morris discarded ‘realistic’ details from successive drafts. The poem has distant archival origins, as May Morris records – in the *Mabinogion*’s tale of Maxen Wledig, ‘Emperor of Rome’. Wledig dreams of and journeys to a fair isle, and courts there a maiden who sits in a chair of ruddy gold. Offered gifts of her choice, she requests the Island of Britain for her father, and three of its castles for herself. Wledig and his wife live together for seven years, and he then returns to Rome to manage various wars.<sup>4</sup> No traces of symbolism or moral allegory grace this plot, and Morris infused everything of worth in the poem from his own experience – the hero’s vision, travels to a remote land, and awareness of the tensions between inner exile and external responsibility.

May Morris also observed that earlier drafts gave Azalais a different, markedly more ‘northern’ name (Bertha, or ‘bright one’); made Love a speaking character in the inner masque; included many more details of Bertha’s village life; and added Pharamond’s efforts to win her disguised as a smith in her father’s house.<sup>5</sup> Some of these atmospheric details recall Morris’s early prose

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology*, Charlottesville, 1990. He argues that ‘The poem deliberately presents itself, in fact, as doubly dream-bound; a self-conscious retreat into the idealities of love within the idealities of art’ (170). *Love Is Enough* does make emblematic use of Keatsian ‘colored images’, but its allegorical structure also recalls Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, whose hero is surrounded by refracting and mirroring spirits who declaim messages of fortitude, hymnlike closure, and meditations on first and last things.

<sup>4</sup> *Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford, 1938) I: 444-45.

<sup>5</sup> May Morris, *Collected Works* (London, 1910-1915), 266. In May’s words, Morris’s aim was to ‘curtail [...] and discard [...] incidents that might strike a note of commonplace, however pretty in themselves, until at last the charming but rather discursive piece of narrative is remoulded into drama close-knit and passionate’.

tale 'Gertha's Lovers'. These comparisons also suggest that Morris began with the prototype of an unused *Earthly Paradise* tale, like 'The Wooing of Swan-hild', and later abandoned its plot details to express deeper preoccupations.

Morris's fractal iterations of art within art and stories within stories can usually be (re)interpreted as generic appeals for universality and audience participation, and so it is here. We, his readers, are to construe and apply the allegories of Love's Music to ourselves, and to our own lives. Nineteenth-century readers also understood the uses of such daedal self-referentiality, and contemporary reviewers of *Love Is Enough* make essentially the same point. Morris could often count on a practical critical eye for formal metric patterns and ear for aural cadence to convey this hermeneutic. For Victorian readers the poem's verbal polyrhythms reinforced its sense of delicate mystery. G. A. Simcox wrote in the December 1872 *Academy* that:

It is hard to pronounce upon a single trial whether the revival of alliterative rhythm will be a permanent addition to our poetical resources. We are inclined to think that Mr. Morris himself has gained more of the eloquence of passion, and this without any sacrifice of delicacy ... [on Azalais's speech to the sleeping Pharamond] Perhaps the anapaestic movement is here as elsewhere too unbroken ... But we feel it is ungracious to criticize music at once so rich and so simple. ... it is impossible to speak too highly of the rich rapturous melody of the songs, which are all in long anapaestic stanzas with double rhymes ...<sup>6</sup>

Sidney Colvin added his praise in the January 1873 *Fortnightly Review*:

Reading yourself into [the poem], you find much loveliness and a singular originality. There is the originality of using a metrical system of anapaests without rhyme, and with an irregular alliterative tendency, roughly resembling the common form of early English verse [which] is certainly proved capable of effects of great metrical charm and dignity ... Some strokes of the lyric interludes, some passages, like that where Azalais comes upon Pharamond in his sleep, are of an almost perfect poetry.<sup>7</sup>

Also interesting is the topographical specificity of the inner masque. Morris found geography and landscape never-failing sources of pleasure, and the masque's carefully delineated Icelandic-like landscapes are individuated in remarkable ways. We don't *know* what the lovers looked like, or where they lived, and we aren't *supposed* to know. But we *see* Pharamond's approach to the coast of Iceland in surreal detail:

And I woke and looked forth, and the dark sea, long changeless,  
Was now at last barred by a dim wall that swallowed  
The red shapeless moon, and the whole sea was rolling,  
Unresting, unvaried, as grey as the void is,  
Toward that wall 'gainst the heavens as though rest were behind it.  
Still onward we fared and the moon was forgotten,  
And colder the sea grew, and grey, green-besprinked,

<sup>6</sup> Peter Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1973), 207-208.

<sup>7</sup> Faulkner, 209-210.

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And the sky seemed to breach it; and lo at the last  
Many islands of mountains, and a city amongst them.  
White clouds of the dawn, not moving yet waning,  
Wreathed the high peaks about; and the sea beat for ever  
'Gainst the green sloping hills and the black rocks and beachless.

Other descriptions of enclosed valleys, rock, and mist clearly reflected Morris's Icelandic experiences, and added poignance and personal resonance to the other autobiographical elements in the poem.

*Love Is Enough* also introduced a relatively new variety of female protagonist. Most of Morris's heroines had either been passively loving, or active but neurotic and/or capricious. One welcome exception is the energetically loving Philonoë ('lover of thought') in 'Bellerophon in Lycia', the final classical tale of *The Earthly Paradise*. Like Azalais, Philonoë is beautiful, forthright, demonstrative, and affectionate – an Ellen-like expression of unfragile natural goodness, neither static nor entrapped. Azalais too is never at rest, but travels toward Pharamond as he in turn seeks her. Almost no other early Morrisian heroine is so distinguished by her capacity for active sympathy and shared experience.

Consider, for example, Azalais's good-Samaritan-like encounter with Pharamond, as he lies asleep at the side of the road:

– Ah! what lieth there by the side of the highway?  
Is it death stains the sunlight, or sorrow or sickness?  
[going up to Pharamond]  
... I will wait till he wakens and gaze on his beauty,  
Lest I never again in the world should behold him.  
– Maybe I may help him; he is sick and needs tending,  
He is poor, and shall scorn not our simpleness surely ...  
Then ...  
I shall be part of thy rest for a little.  
And then – who shall say – wilt thou tell me thy story,  
And what thou hast loved, and for what thou hast striven?  
– Thou shalt see me, and my love and my pity, as thou speakest,  
And it may be thy pity shall mingle with mine.

Most *Earthly Paradise* heroines are beautiful, of course, many are passionate or intelligent, and some are even loving, but this heroine's interior poise and quick mental life are relatively new. The poem's plot grimly permits the lovers only a few actual moments together, but even *imagined* informality and shared experiences between men and women were rare in Morris's writings to this point.

Azalais also turns out to be unproblematically faithful. She does not cease to love Pharamond, and she embodies the qualities I have described throughout the interior play. This sweet-tempered, clear-minded spirit of ardent affection and symbol of freedom from erotic anxiety does reappear several times in Morris's later writings. A few of Azalais's specific traits – her vaguely Scandinavian ambience, her idealism, her general firmness – have counterparts in the more ambivalent character of Brynhild, and straightforwardness and mental quickness reappear in the heroine of the *Pilgrims of Hope* and several women in the

prose romances. Here, above all, her keen generosity confirms the poem's message of loyal alliance and disinterested love.

Morris's design for *Love Is Enough* effectively refracted or displaced the poem's essentially autobiographical preoccupations, and several aspects of 'refraction' are discernible in the poem's imbricated frames.<sup>8</sup> Obvious referents in Morris's life can be found for the narrator's multiple roles, Pharamond's three years of emotional turmoil and distaste for usurpers, the onlookers' fears before their own marriages, Love's insistence that (true) love can never 'turn [...] to hate', and his desire to inhabit a house filled with storied tapestries. Other allusions to Morris's personal experiences include Pharamond's intense (near-epileptic?) dream-visions, the mediating presence of his male comrades and associates, the protagonist's two journeys to a remote island, and the resonance he finds between the island's stark Northern landscapes and his deepest personal emotions.

*Love Is Enough*, in short, allegorizes Morris's increasing search for fulfillment, resignation, and peace as he approached middle age: his understanding of the inherent incompleteness of life and its aspirations and endeavors; his need to balance friendship and love, privacy and marriage, work and rest; and his growing awareness that change and loss rekindle life, and that 'love' – redefined as a search for moments of affection and illumination – can dignify these cycles and elevate them to myth. Morris/Pharamond's 'individual solution' freed him from the need to cast blame or judgment on others, and enabled him to accept his own finitude and fallibility. Humans must cope incessantly with absence and pain, but some are granted the good fortune to decorate the rafters of Love's house, and comforted by the unexpected recurrences of affection and generosity. I have argued in my book that such an ethic of unillusioned stoic acceptance is already discernible in several *Earthly Paradise* plots, and this ethic animated, in fact, all of Morris's later work, from *Love Is Enough* to the end of his life.<sup>9</sup> Assured of his ability to think 'bigly and kindly', Morris and some of his protagonists began to shift their energies to more active endeavors and wider social concerns.

### ***Sigurd the Volsung: History's Pattern of Myth and Hope***

In 1870, Morris and his collaborator and eventual fellow traveler Eiríkur Magnússon published their translation of the *Volsungasaga*, and in 1877, four years after *Love Is Enough*, Morris brought out *Sigurd the Volsung*, a four-book epic poem based loosely on the *Volsungasaga*. Morris's extended 'nordic' poem of twilight struggle is utterly remote in plot from the delicate allegory of renunciation of *Love Is Enough*, but even here he managed to project some of the patterns mentioned above into an originary tale of brutal conflict between two aristocratic houses of medieval Northern Europe. In *Sigurd*, Morris tried to write a

<sup>8</sup> See Florence Boos, 'Love Is Enough as Secular Theodicy', *Papers on Language and Literature* 24.4 (1988): 53-80.

<sup>9</sup> Florence Boos, *The Design of William Morris' The Earthly Paradise*, Lewiston, New York, 1991.



sophisticated ‘popular’ epic, which would draw on the Icelandic historical and legendary materials he had learned. As he had already done in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, *The Earthly Paradise*’s dramatic reworking of the *Laxdaela Saga*, Morris rearranged legendary materials in rather drastic ways. He expanded and interpreted hundreds of incidents in *Sigurd* to express his personal preoccupations with love and endurance, and transmuted the original epic’s carnage and macabre disruptions into a poetic tragedy of fulfilled prophecy and fate.

Morris chose the grim tale of the Volsungs with a good deal of thought, and it held personal as well as cultural significance for him. His co-published prose rendering of the *Volsunga Saga* is still considered a model of Victorian translation, and in its preface, Morris expressed hope that the saga’s beauty and power would endure:

For this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.

Morris also inserted an introspective prefatory poem, which makes its parallel claim in different terms:

Naught vague, naught base our tale, that seems to say, –  
     ‘Be wide-eyed, kind; curse not the hand that smites,  
 Curse not the kindness of a past good day,  
     Or hope of love; cast by all earth’s delights,  
     For very love: through weary days and nights,  
 Abide thou, striving howsoe’er in vain,  
 The inmost love of one more heart to gain!’

So draw ye round and hearken, English Folk,  
     Unto the best tale pity ever wrought!  
 Of how from dark to dark bright Sigurd broke,  
     Of Brynhild’s glorious soul with love distraught,  
     Of Gudrun’s weary wandering unto naught,  
 Of utter love defeated utterly,  
 Of grief too strong to give Love time to die!

Morris expressed his admiration for the saga even more directly in a letter to the American critic and translator Charles Eliot Norton: ‘I daresay you have read abstracts of the story, but however fine it seemed to you thus, it would give you little idea of the depth and intensity of the complete work ... the scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature; there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament’.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Artist, Writer, Socialist* I: 472. Other critics have commented on his softening of the cruelty

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In what follows, I will note some features of the poem's scene-patterning, and emphasize a few plot-elements which I believe have been neglected by earlier critics. These include: proto-feminist roles of women as active agents in the poem's tragic sequence of events, and the presence of certain female wisdom-figures; motifs of prophesy, foresight, and cyclical unraveling, which permit deeply flawed characters to reform and express incongruously noble social ideals; and 'All-father's' (Odin's) role as heroic mentor, reminiscent of Homeric divinities and certain facilitating male guardians in *Love Is Enough*, and of the quasi-angelic Steelhead in Morris's *The Sundering Flood*. Finally, I will also remark on the poem's prosody and contemporary critical responses, and consider the role of rhythms, brocaded patterns, and sense of fate in the poem's final complex tonalities.

The four 'books' of *Sigurd the Volsung* tell relatively self-contained stories, but their interrelations of scene, plot, and motif reverberate with ironic, iconic, and prophetic significance. As the reader traces through the work's many superposed and retrospective debates between female protagonists, scenes of courtship and mating, pledges of 'brotherhood' undermined by male ambition and Grimhild's evil and narrow-minded counsel, allusions to the originary tree 'Branstock' ('Fire-trunk') and the rings of Andvari ('Vigilance'), these contrapuntal echoes accumulate, and gradually heighten a sense of oppressive subjectivity and implacable fate.

Consider, for example, several scenes of the interrelations between thwarted and/or vaguely transgressive sexuality. In one, Sigurd kneels beside the recumbent Brynhild. In another, Sigurd and Brynhild lie transfixed beside each other like figures on a medieval frieze or tomb. And in a third, Sigurd comes to Brynhild's bed in the shape of his 'blood brother' Gunnar. Each of these unions is interdicted in some way – by a sword, a distortion, a disguise, or death itself, on Sigurd's funeral pyre. When Sigurd first enters the ring of fire and finds Brynhild asleep in her coat of armor, he uses 'Wrath' (his mighty Branstock sword) to free and – symbolically – to enter her.

... the sharp Wrath biteth and rendeth, and before it fall the rings,  
And, lo, the gleam of the linen, and the light of golden things:  
Then he driveth the blue steel onward, and through the skirt, and out,  
Till nought but the rippling linen is wrapping her about;

of the saga's prose source, and traced the poem's carefully patterned structures of pervasive images and recurrent motifs – seasonal and weather images, for example, the presence of light and the sun, and the setting of fires. They have also interpreted Andvari's gold ring as an emblem of the corrosive effects of wealth, emphasized Sigurd's reformist vision of just rule, and alluded to the quasi-'revolutionary' aspects of Ragnarök, the 'twilight of the gods'. *Sigurd's* protagonists sporadically express certain social ideals, but I am not convinced that these aspects of the poem's economic subtext are borne out in other elements of its plot, or that an agonistic life of unceasing conflict best represents the ideal of a just ruler.

For some of these lines of argument, see *After Summer Seed: Reconsiderations of William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung*, edited by John Hollow, Pennsylvania: William Morris Society, 1978. A recent discussion of the poem's ethos and style appears in Herbert Tucker, 'All for the Tale: The Epic Macropoetics of *Sigurd the Volsung*', *Victorian Poetry* 34:3 (1996): 373-94.

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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 ... (II, 'How  
Sigurd awoke Brynhild upon Hindfell')

Parallel descriptions attend Sigurd's later visit to Lymdale, when the two exchange antiphonal vows, foresee their ultimate destinies, and fatalistically embrace. All these pledges, vows, and embraces are ironically recapitulated when Sigurd later enters the fiery ring in the guise of Gunnar, to exchange another 'pledge' with her on Gunnar's behalf:

There they went in one bed together; but the foster-brother laid  
'Twixt him and the body of Brynhild his bright blue battle-blade,  
And she looked and heeded it nothing; but, e'en as the dead folk lie,  
With folded hands she lay there, and let the night go by;  
And as still lay that Image of Gunnar as the dead of life forlorn,  
And hand on hand he folded as he waited for the morn.  
So oft in the moonlit minster your father may ye see  
By the side of the ancient mothers await the day to be.  
Thus they lay as brother by sister – and e'en such had they been to behold,  
Had he borne the Volsung's semblance and the shape she knew of old.  
(III: 'Sigurd rideth with the Niblungs, and woeth Brynhild for King Gunnar')

This frieze-frame of recumbent stasis also persists in other scenes. In one, Brynhild sleeps beside Gunnar, and 'the Lie is laid between them, as the sword lay while agone' (III, 'Of the Contention betwixt the Queens'). In another, Gudrun sleeps at Sigurd's side before his murder by Guttorm's sword. In a third, Brynhild lies abed and relates a bitter dream: 'Dead-cold was thy bed, O Gunnar, and thy land was parched with dearth' (III, 'Of the passing away of Brynhild'). In the final such scene, Brynhild orders her laying-out on Sigurd's funeral pyre:

There lay me adown by Sigurd and my head beside his head:  
But ere ye leave us sleeping, draw his Wrath from out the sheath,  
And lay that Light of the Branstock, and the blade that frighted death  
Betwixt my side and Sigurd's, as it lay that while agone,  
When once in one bed together we twain were laid alone ... (*Ibid.*)

Similar associations also accrete around much simpler dramatic images – ring, cup, bed, sword, tree, and sun, as well as fire.

**Generative Women, and Generational 'Grief and Wrack'**

As in Morris's other poems, *Sigurd's* women characters also assume much more active roles than in his sources. The epic plot ostensibly celebrates male heroism in a warrior-dominated society, but the poem's most important women determine much of its action, and all but Grimhild – a stereotypical meddling mother-in-law – are admirable and/or courageous in their culture's terms. Morris's rhetorical legerdemain of prophetic visions, frozen tableaux, patterned reversals *et alia*, permitted him to portray these women as innocent as well as

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complicitous, providentially wise as well as vengeful, and active initiators in many cases of the events they witness and record.

They are also prophetic, or at least chastened by what they behold. When Brynhild in *Sigurd* learns that Sigurd has connived in Gunnar's deception, she predicts the downfall of the Volsungs, and her prophesy prompts Gunnar to conspire in Sigurd's assassination. Brynhild's powerful rhetoric thus leads indirectly to Sigurd's death, but her pronouncements can be interpreted as simple acts of the sort of clairvoyance central to her character. Gudrun, in her turn, is clearly motivated by insecurity about her husband's affections when she tells Brynhild of the origins of the ring, but she is devastated by her husband's murder, and lives to preserve as well as avenge Sigurd's memory.

Sigurd's aunt, Signy, daughter of the original King Volsung, provides in Book I another roughly parallel exemplar of vengeful courage and doomed clairvoyance. King Volsung, her father, triggers the bloody events of the poem's entire plot when he arranges Signy's marriage to Siggeir the Goth, for reasons of cupidity:

But the King's heart laughed within him and the King's sons deemed it good;  
For they dreamed how they fared with the Goths o'er ocean and acre and  
wood;  
Till all the north was theirs, and the utmost southern lands.

Like most of the tale's women, Signy has prophetic gifts. Volsung asks her whether she is willing to submit to this marriage, and she grimly consents, but foretells dire consequences for herself and others:

A fire lit up her face, and her voice was e'en as a cry:  
'I will sleep in a great king's bed, I will bear the lords of the earth,  
And the wrack and the grief of my youth-days shall be held for nothing  
worth.

A faint hint of Morris's later socialist critique of marriage appears in Signy's apparent self-sacrifice for her father's gain. Pathetic in her terrible foreknowledge, she goes unillusioned to her marital doom. In the destructive field of her world's social forces, Signy's complicity in this marriage she loathes is a mark of forced solidarity, but her subsequent liberation of her brother Sigmund, Sigurd's father, helps ensure that this branch of the Volsung line will continue to exist.

Signy and Sigmund later survive Siggeir's treacherous assault on his in-laws, and she resolutely commits herself to revenge their deaths. She disguises herself and visits Sigmund in his cave hideout, where they conceive a son, Sinfiotli. When Sigmund and his adult son later attack Siggeir in his dwelling, Signy prompts Sinfiotli to kill two of Siggeir's children, his half-siblings, but when Sigurd and Sinfiotli set fire to the king's house, she immolates herself in the flames.

Sinfiotli is later poisoned by Borghild, Sigmund's new queen, but Sigmund

remarries in old age before he dies in a final battle. His prophetically gifted wife, Hiordis, survives to bear Sigurd, their son, whom she carries away to safety in the neighboring land of the friendly Helper and his son Elf, where Regin ('Gods') nurtures and trains Sigurd, as Sigmund had done with Sinfiotli. The bloody collaboration of Sigmund's skill with Signy's and Hiordis's foresight and ironwilled loyalty thus bring the dynasty through the first book.

Another striking woman appears very briefly in Book III, in an addition by Morris which briefly highlights the victimization of women and children by war. As Gudrun is mourning Sigurd's murder, a 'war-chattel' interrupts with a grimmer tale:

Then spake a Queen of Welshland, and Herborg hight was she:  
 'O frozen heart of sorrow, the Norns dealt worse with me:  
 Of old, in the days departed, were my brave ones under shield,  
 Seven sons, and the eighth, my husband, and they fell in the Southland field:  
 Yet lived my father and mother, yet lived my brethren four,  
 And I bided their returning by the sea-washed bitter shore:  
 But the winds and death played with them, o'er the wide sea swept the wave,  
 The billows beat on the bulwarks and took what the battle gave ...'

Gudrun ignores this 'chattel's' eloquent lament, and with it a possible moment of genuinely prophetic insight and solidarity. The Welshland Queen's account, a medieval 'ubi sunt' lament in female voice, recalls the 'Lay of Gormley' as well as the plight of Hecuba in Euripides's Troy cycle, and her sorrow overshadows – in some perspectives, at least – the collective griefs of Gudrun, Brynhild, Gunnar, and the rest of the self-lacerating Volsung/Niblung line.

*Sigurd the Volsung's* most conspicuously impressive heroine, in any case, remains Brynhild, who is clearly a woman of quick intelligence and resolute will. Brynhild's utterances in the original *Volsunga Saga* are full of flat, sententious Polonian bits, such as the following:

Let not thy mind be overmuch crossed by unwise men at thronged meetings of folk; for oft these speak worse than they wot of; lest thou be called a dastard, and art minded to think that thou art even as is said; slay such an one on another day, and so reward his ugly talk.<sup>11</sup>

Morris's Brynhild, by contrast, speaks in resonant biblical periods. When she first meets Sigurd she interprets the Gods' motives, and enjoins Sigurd to constancy of purpose in eloquent, Ecclesiastes-like cadences:

'Be wise, and cherish thine hope in the freshness of the days,  
 And scatter its seed from thine hand in the field of the people's praise;  
 Then fair shall it fall in the furrow, and some the earth shall speed,  
 And the sons of men shall marvel at the blossom of the deed:  
 But some the earth shall speed not; nay rather, the wind of the heaven

<sup>11</sup> Intro. Robert Gutman, 1962, 155.

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Shall waft it away from thy longing – and a gift to the Gods hast thou given,  
And a tree for the roof and the wall in the house of the hope that shall be,  
Though it seemeth our very sorrow, and the grief of thee and me ...

'I have spoken the words, beloved, to thy matchless glory and worth;  
But thy heart to my heart hath been speaking, though my tongue hath set it  
forth:  
For I am she that loveth, and I know what thou wouldst teach  
From the heart of thine unlearned wisdom, and I need must speak thy  
speech.'

This iconically vatic Brynhild is Sigurd's 'speech-friend' indeed. She is more articulate than any of Morris's poetic heroines, with the possible exception of Guenevere, and more fluently eloquent and loving than any other female character in Morris's work before the advent of Birdalone and Elfhild, in the last prose romances. Sigurd learns his destiny well, and falters only when he is drugged by the devious Grimhild. At their original meeting, the newly-plighted lovers even projected a 'day of better things', in language that recalls Christ's view of kingdoms of the earth, or Aurora and Romney's vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of *Aurora Leigh*:

And they saw their crowned children and the kindred of the kings,  
And deeds in the world arising and the day of better things.

The poem provides *sources* for all this vatic wisdom, in the first appearance of yet another motif to which Morris recurs in the late prose romances. Male protagonists are helped by their Allfather, Odin, but Brynhild learns her lore from a female figure – 'Wisdom' herself:

'I saw the body of Wisdom and of shifting guise was she wrought,  
And I stretched out my hands to hold her, and a mote of the dust they caught;  
And I prayed her to come for my teaching, and she came in the midnight  
dream –  
And I woke and might not remember, nor betwixt her tangle deem:  
She spake, and how might I hearken; I heard, and how might I know;  
I knew, and how might I fashion, or her hidden glory show?  
All things I have told thee of Wisdom are but fleeting images  
Of her hosts that abide in the Heavens, and her light that Allfather sees ...

Morris later fashioned brief versions of such tutelage for other, comparably mythic heroines – Birdalone, for example, in *Water of the Wondrous Isles*, who learns nature's lore from the benign witch Habundia.

Another, less visionary woman is central to Morris's version of the plot: the bitterly wronged and vengeful Gudrun, whose marriage to Sigurd precipitates much woe. Aware that a bond exists between Sigurd and Brynhild, Gudrun boasts idly to Brynhild that she has spent the night with 'the best of men' (Sigurd), which goads the momentarily petty Brynhild to retort that Sigurd is 'the

serving-man of Gunnar ... King of the King-folk who rode the Wavering Fire'. Gudrun then shows Brynhild the ring of Andvari that Brynhild had herself given Sigurd, and he in turn to her.

Gudrun is later devastated by Sigurd's murder, ordered by Gunnar, and she flees the royal homestead to live for seven years among the peasantry, an echo, perhaps, of Nebuchadnezzar's seven years in the fields. In the poem's final book, Gunnar sends again for Gudrun and asks her to marry his oppressive royal neighbor Atli. She consents, but incites Atli to murder her brothers in revenge for Sigurd's death. Shamed by the aftermath of all this vengeful carnage, she then torches Atli's palace, stabs her terrified husband in his bedchamber with the sword of the Branstock, and leaps to her death:

– Begin, O day of Atli! O ancient sun, arise,  
With the light that I loved aforeside, with the light that blessed mine eyes,  
When I woke and looked on Sigurd, and he rose on the world and shone! ...

She hath spread out her arms as she spake it, and away from the earth she  
leapt  
And cut off her tide of returning; for the sea-waves over her swept,  
And their will is her will henceforward; and who knoweth the deeps of the sea,  
And the wealth of the bed of Gudrun, and the days that yet shall be?

The more wholeheartedly evil Sthenoboea in 'Bellerophon in Argos', a late *Earthly Paradise* tale, also leapt to her death from a cliff. Here, Gudrun's courageous and spectacular leap 'away from the earth' finally ends the noble Volsung line, and brings the cycle to its close.

### **Blood-drenched Antiheroes and Numinous Visions**

The poem's many prophecies and intermittent expressions of introspective remorse and atonement interdict final judgments in complicated ways, and one such example of narrative redemption occurs earlier in Book IV. Gunnar, Sigurd's 'blood-brother', and contractor of his murder, struggles heroically to organize the Niblung's doomed resistance to Atli's treacherous attack (itself an analogue of Siggeir's murders in Book I), in one of the grimmer battle scenes in modern English poetry. He and a few survivors are then overwhelmed, and withstand imprisonment in a snake pit, where he refuses under torture to divulge to Atli the secret location of Andvari's gold, 'the ransom of Odin'.

In the final scenes of his life, Gunnar even becomes a skald, and chants several truly beautiful songs as he fights and withstands torture. Like Orpheus and the Gunnar of the *Njáls saga*, the Niblung Gunnar sings most poignantly, as it were, from beyond the grave. His social conscience awakened, he even chants the merits of the 'brother' he has killed:

The praise of the world he was, the hope of the bidders in wrong,  
The help of the lowly people, the hammer of the strong:  
Ah, oft in the world henceforward, shall the tale be told of the deed,  
And I, e'en I, will tell it in the day of the Niblungs' Need:

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For I sat night-long in my armour, and when light was wide o'er the land,  
I slaughtered Sigurd my brother, and looked on the work of mine hand ...

This sudden *afflatus* of physical heroism and prophetic powers adds unexpected power and eloquence to the poem's final book. Gudrun witnesses all this, and her horror at it is one of the reasons for her final murder of Atli and despairing suicide.

Gunnar's redemptive fervor and remarkable end help create, in effect, a kind of collective protagonist for the poem, drawn from all of the Volsungs and Niblungs, more specifically from the original incestual unit of Signy, Sigmund, and Sinfiotli, and their tragically mismated descendants – Brynhild, Sigurd, Gudrun, and Gunnar. All but Sigurd and Brynhild are complicit in the poem's many crimes, and all have epiphanies of courage and self-knowledge.

One recurring quasi-religious motif of the cycle, mentioned earlier, is Odin's advent at moments of stress. The appearances of 'All-father' in many guises are too numerous to trace, but each beneficiary sees him in a different form. Old-Testamental echoes abound, but these 'sendings' sometimes bring a simple sense of renewed purpose, and sometimes comfort. After Sigurd has fallen prey to Grunhild's spell, for example, he struggles to regain clarity and falls into a visionary trance:

But frail and alone he fareth, and as one in the sphere-stream's draft,  
By the starless empty places that lie beyond the life:  
Then at last is he stayed in his drifting, and he saith, It is blind and dark;  
Yet he seeth the earth at his feet, and there cometh a change and a spark ...  
A man in the raiment of Gods, nor fashioned worse than they:  
Full sad he gazeth on Sigurd from the great wide eyes and grey;  
And the Helm that aweth the people is set on the golden hair,  
And the Mail of Gold enwraps him, and the Wrath in his hand is bare. (III,  
'Sigurd rideth with the Niblungs, and woeth Brynhild for King Gunnar')

*Sigurd's* manifold effects are also heightened by its intricate variations in meter and stanza-form, which follow the narrative with the fidelity of a skillful movie-soundtrack. Morris uses one such quasi-musical device, for example – antiphonally-rhymed interlocution, in which two speakers declaim in rhymed alternation – to present lovers' vows and marital conversations, to report events, and to create a stylized form for hostile confrontations. Consider, for example, Atli's exchange with Gunnar before he throws him and Hogni into the pit of adders:

'Yet words of mine shalt thou hearken,' said Atli, 'or ever thou die.'  
'So crieth the fool,' said Gunnar, 'on the God that his folly hath slain.'  
'Yet meeter were thy silence,' said Atli, 'for thy folk make ready to sing.'  
'O Gunnar, I long for the Gold with the heart and the will of a king.'  
'This were good to tell,' said Gunnar, 'to the Gods that fashioned the earth!'  
'Make me glad with the Gold,' said Atli, 'live on in honour and worth!'  
With a dreadful voice cried Gunnar: 'O fool, hast thou heard it told  
Who won the Treasure aforetime and the ruddy rings of the Gold?'



### A Lost Art

Exquisitely sensitive to such metrical nuances, classically-trained Victorian reviewers praised *Sigurd in excelsis*. May Morris cites George Saintsbury's long analysis of the poem's varied seven-beat line,<sup>12</sup> and a reviewer for the *Saturday Review* affirmed that: 'We regard this *Story of Sigurd* as his greatest and most successful effort; of all poetical qualities – strength, subtlety, vividness, mystery, melody, variety – there is hardly one that it does not exhibit in a very high degree ... (January 1877). North American reviews were equally favorable:

After all, quotation ... is vain, as every worthy reader will acknowledge when he turns the last page of the poem, and feels for a moment as if the whole earth were made void by its ending ... [Morris] has now, as it seems to us, fixed forever the most appropriate form of rhymed verse for an English epic. (*Atlantic Monthly*, April 1877)

[His] is the most satisfying English measure ever yet adopted for the telling of a long story in verse ... It is noble, yet changeful; supple and sustained. There is a kind of wistful sweetness, both in its hurrying anapests and its lingering iambics, which makes them cling to the memory; while the frequent use of alliteration marks its kinship with the primeval forms of Scandinavian story. Whatever its immediate reception may be, William Morris's *Sigurd* is certain eventually to take its place among the few great epics of the English tongue. (*Literary World*, February 1877)

[Mr. Morris] has produced a work whose grandeur and beauty will make it for all time to come monumental in the annals of English literature.<sup>13</sup> (*International Review*, September 1877)

Peter Faulkner is surely correct to suggest that critical indifference did *not* move Morris to abandon the writing of long poems.<sup>14</sup> After one allows for cliques, fashions and evanescent hyperbole, these remain remarkable reviews. They are also just appreciations, I believe, of the poem's depth and passion.

The polar tensions of the 'dialectical conflicts' between loss, renunciation, and the attainment of ultimate meaning are more apparent in *Sigurd* than in other works – in the unrepentant vengefulness of many of its major characters, for example, and the horrific, near-masochistic descriptions of the cycle's extended final battle-scenes, unique in Victorian poetic representation of war. Critics have justly noted that *Sigurd's* protagonists sporadically express certain social ideals, but their agonistic lives of unceasing dynastic conflict, in my view, provide few plausible realizations of them. What the poem's antiphonal patterns do furnish are intricate motives of prophecy, foresight, and cyclical unraveling, which permit deeply flawed characters to 'reform' before their death, and express incongruously noble ideals. Viewed in this light, *Sigurd's* dramatic embrace of opposites in suspension yields a work of prosodic brilliance, structural originality, and emotional intensity and narrative depth.

### The Social Turn: 'How the Change Came'

One may wonder why Morris ceased to write such strikingly polarized poetic works (I have in mind the stark contrast between *Love Is Enough* and *Sigurd*)

<sup>12</sup> May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist I*, 476-77.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Faulkner, *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, 267.

<sup>14</sup> Faulkner, 14-16.

at the height of his technical powers. He continued to be moved by a contrapuntal sense of 'tragic' and 'romantic' approaches to a common subject matter, and might well have found other poetically and historically appropriate subjects for these polarities, and consolidated his reputation as a poet of epic scope into the twentieth century.

One possible answer is that Morris, in the end – like Pharamond, his hero in *Love Is Enough* – set aside one 'love' for another. Wider sympathies and a mature social conscience led him to attempt new subjects and literary media – poetic prose, for example; novellas-in-poetry; and lyric-within-narrative, a genre he virtually made his own. His growing radicalism and socialist commitments also impelled him to seek ways to appeal to audiences broader and less formally educated than the readers of the *Fortnightly Review* or the *Athenaeum*.

Many years later, May Morris recalled her father's wry remark that 'A man shouldn't write poetry after fifty'.<sup>15</sup> Morris was fifty in 1884, the year he left the Social Democratic Federation to co-found the Socialist League. He continued to write poetry all the same, with a social and communal focus, and in more accessible forms, but he sought to write for a literate 'popular' audience, and talk to it about certain recurrent human needs – for social justice ('fellowship'), and for a new aesthetic, one that might express the harmonies of a better social order, and encourage forms of affection wider than individual and familial 'love'.

### ***Pilgrims of Hope: Love's Bloody Cup and the Religion of Socialism***

*The Pilgrims of Hope*, which appeared serially from April to June, 1885, was the first poem Morris published in *Commonweal* after he became its editor in January of that year. He considered it too rough for republication in book form, but included its opening lyric ('The Message of the March Wind') and fourth section ('Mother and Son') in the 1891 volume *Poems by the Way*. The hero's lifelong commitment to the cause of socialism and acceptance of his late wife's preference for another man reflect personal and political aspects of wider egalitarian values Morris wanted to realize and diffuse, and I have elsewhere argued that linkage of these autobiographical concerns made *Pilgrims* a proto-feminist work – indeed, the *only* male-authored nineteenth century poem which set forth programmatic 'socialist-feminist' tenets about a woman's right to sexual autonomy.<sup>16</sup> I will not elaborate these points here, or discuss the poem's depictions of contemporary socialism or the fall of the Paris Commune, but will focus instead on the poem's qualities as an experimental verse-novel, its disrupted time-sequence, and its lyrical interludes of visionary emotion. Interesting resonances also emerged in Morris's factually commonplace but politically unorthodox

<sup>15</sup> *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, I, 496.

<sup>16</sup> Florence Boos, 'Narrative Design in *The Pilgrims of Hope*', *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, eds. Florence Boos and Carole Silver, Columbia, Missouri, 1990, 147-66. See also Anne Janowitz, 'The *Pilgrims of Hope*: William Morris and the dialectic of romanticism', *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge, 1995) and Nicholas Salmon, 'The Serialisation of *The Pilgrims of Hope*', *William Morris Society Journal* 12.2 (1997), 14-25.

plot, in which a male hero survives his wife's early death to raise alone their infant child.

The poem's six-beat line is more balladic than *Sigurd's* seven-beat anapaests, but it permitted rapid immediacy, colloquial informality, and credible evocations of the poem's social ambiance. Consider the following sample, in which Morris's narrator attends a gathering at which soldiers are sent off to an imperial war. Born and bred in a rural village, the hero Richard sadly describes a crowd of lost proletarian onlookers who '... *never never never/ shall be slaves*':

And earth was foul with its squalor – that stream of every day,  
The hurrying feet of labour, the faces worn and grey ...  
... these are the sons of the free,  
Who shall bear our name triumphant o'er every land and sea. (III, 'Sending to the War')

In *Love Is Enough*, Pharamond witnesses a Eucharist-like tableau, in which the figure of Love offers a blood-filled cup. Here, Morris refits popular Christian iconography to serve the cause of socialism: 'I was born once long ago: I am born again tonight' (V, 'New Birth').

Richard begins the poem as a twenty-five-year-old joiner-carpenter, the son of an unmarried village woman whom Richard's father deserted before he was born. A small inheritance comes to him unexpectedly at his father's death, and this enables Richard and his wife to rent a small cottage outside London. He and his wife share radical views, and his employer fires him shortly after his father's lawyers have swindled him out of his money. Lower middle-class Victorian readers wisely feared such reversals, and all could identify with the humiliations that attended them:

I take up fear with my chisel, fear lies 'twixt me and my plane,  
And I wake in the merry morning to a new unwonted pain. ('The New Proletarian')

The poem's sections incorporate two interesting shifts of voice. In sections two, three, five, and six, Richard describes his youth, marriage, political radicalization, and unemployment. In section four, the anonymous wife sets forth her view of life in a wryly intelligent, soft-spoken monologue to her uncomprehending infant son, and she describes in section seven Richard's arrest and imprisonment for political agitation. In section eight, 'The Half of Life Gone', the narrative suddenly flashes forward. Richard now grieves for his dead wife, and seems to see her working in a field, then admits to himself that

She is gone. She was and she is not; there is no such thing on the earth  
But e'en as a picture painted; and for me there is void and dearth  
That I cannot name or measure.

Richard recalls the intervening events in sections nine through thirteen. After Richard's release from prison, a young middle-class socialist named Arthur has befriended them and visited their house. The three friends decide to leave the

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couple's son in the care of friends – contrary to Victorian expectations – and join the Communards. Shortly before they leave for France, Richard learns that Arthur and his wife have fallen in love. The three young idealists leave together all the same, and they know when they find their way to the Commune that they have made the right decision:

... at last I knew indeed that our word of the coming day,  
That so oft in grief and in sorrow I had preached, and scarcely knew  
If it was but despair of the present or the hope of the day that was due –  
I say that I saw it now, real, solid, and at hand. (XI, 'The Glimpse of the  
Coming Day')

Later Richard, his now-estranged wife ('A sister amidst of the strangers – and, alas! a sister to me'), and Arthur have become street-fighters as the siege tightens. In one engagement, Richard's wife turns to see Arthur die, and is killed herself as she runs toward him across the path of an exploding artillery shell. Richard, who has run after her, is severely wounded by the same shell, but lives to remember that:

she never touched the man  
Alive and she also alive; but thereafter as they lay  
Both dead on one litter together, then folk who knew not us,  
But were moved by seeing the twain so fair and so piteous,  
Took them for husband and wife who were fated there to die,  
Or, it may be lover and lover indeed – but what know I? (XIII, 'The Story's  
Ending')

In the final section, the now solitary and recovered 'pilgrim of hope' has managed to return to England, where he finds work, raises his son, and clings resolutely to '... the love of the past and the love of the day to be'.

Richard's valedictory in section thirteen is very brief for a work filled with reflective flashbacks, descriptions of nature, and evocations of socialist ideals, and the poem would have benefited from more counterparts of the wife's lovely dramatic monologues in four and seven, in which she gives her own view of Richard and Arthur, or describes her experiences in the Commune. There is something deeply beautiful, nonetheless, about the abrupt dissolve from the wife's monologue in section seven, to the husband's sorrowing elegy in section eight. *Women* often survived the deaths of *male* lovers in Morris's literary writings, but Morris never again closed a tale in this way.<sup>17</sup>

The poem's disjunctions and discontinuities remain interesting, however, for they show in rough-cast the emergence of a verse-novel style that Morris might

<sup>17</sup> Some of the poem's narrative discontinuities probably reflected the exigencies of its serial composition and appearance. This was Morris's sole effort to bring out a poem in shorter units: even the four volume *Earthly Paradise* appeared in several-hundred page bound 'parts'. Had Morris ever chosen to revise the poem, he might well have enlarged and reordered its final sections, and perhaps added a socialist lyric to supplement the opening 'Message of the March Wind'.

well have refined and developed had he not turned in the last decades of his life to prose. Problems of time-ellipsis are not peculiar to Morris, of course – they are conspicuously present in other first-person-narrated verse-novels, such as *Aurora Leigh*, in which the poet must balance narrative immediacy, absence of plausible foreknowledge, and the importance of retrospective self-knowledge. *Pilgrims* maintains this balance, and some of its *hiatus* – like the abrupt dissolve mentioned above – actually heighten the poem’s effect, as do skillfully-managed cinematic flashforwards and flashbacks. Richard’s experiences – of familial disruption and social upheaval – are themselves fragmentary and disjointed, and the meditative hand-held camera of Morris’s poetry reflects them well.

Though she cannot compete with the iconic figures of Signy, Brynhild, and Gudrun, *Pilgrims*’ unnamed ‘wife’ is a brave woman of strong character, and *Pilgrims* is a good-faith first effort to explore in a contemporary context controversial questions of female sexual autonomy and participation in war. ‘Mother and Son’ has suffered unjust neglect in comparison with better-known, ‘canonical’ monologues of the period – Browning’s ‘Pompilia’, for example. Morris’s working-class heroine also has some strong socialist-feminist lines – among them the following, spoken to her son in section 4:

Prudence begets her thousands: ‘Good is a housekeeper’s life,  
So shall I sell my body that I may be matron and wife.’  
‘And I shall endure foul wedlock and bear the children of need.’

Whatever his deficiencies as a feminist, Morris did understand completely that ‘the personal is political’. *Pilgrims of Hope* is the *only* long English poem of the period which presented political ideals and conflicts from any sort of socialist or communist perspective, and this surely has something to do with its neglect. This near-unique document in the social history of nineteenth-century poetry blended and recombined basic motifs from *Love Is Enough* and *Sigurd the Volsung* in a vastly different, near-contemporary setting, and its tone of mingled celebration and empathetic regret lingered in its two immediate prose successors, *A Dream of John Ball* and *The House of the Wolfings*. The poem’s colloquial flexibility, satiric precision, and utopian insight reappeared in *News from Nowhere* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, and some of *Pilgrims*’ lyrical passages – like other shorter poems Morris wrote for *Commonweal* and the Socialist League – anticipated the hymnlike vision of a transmuted world found in poetic interludes of the last prose romances.

### **Late Poems and ‘Chants’, and Hymns of the Folk**

Six years later, in 1891, Morris published *Poems By the Way*, whose modestly casual title reflected the fact that he had first drafted a number of its poems around 1870 or shortly thereafter. Several of these recast Scandinavian accounts of ill-fated love in artful stanzaic and metrical variations.<sup>18</sup> ‘The Wooing of

<sup>18</sup> Among these are ‘The Wooing of Hallbiorn’, ‘The Raven and the King’s Daughter’, ‘The Lay of Christine’, ‘Hildebrand and Hellelil’, and ‘Hafbur and Signy’.

Hallbiorn', for example, which Morris glossed as 'A Story from the Land-Settling Book of Iceland, Chapter XXX', skillfully darkens each taunting repetition of one of its refrains, first sung at the wedding feast of Hallbiorn and Hallgerd by Snaebiorn, Hallgerd's once and future lover. Among the volume's other poems is 'The King of Denmark's Sons', a tale of fratricide and paternal grief in rhymed couplets, patterned loosely after Rossetti's 'The White Ship'. 'The Son's Sorrow: From the Icelandic' is another refrain-poem, remarkable in this case for the naturalistic plausibility of the death it mourns – that of the speaker's wife, who has died bearing her third son. 'The God of the Poor' and 'The Burghers' Battle' celebrate medieval conflicts against evil rulers. Some of the volume's poems – among them 'The Hall and the Wood', 'The Folk Mote By the River', and 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks', the latter written by Morris especially for the volume in 1891 – reflected his more anthropological, 'folk'-centered priorities in meliorative stories of rewarded love.<sup>19</sup> He also intoned several poems – 'Hope Dieth: Love Liveth', 'Error and Loss', 'Meeting in Winter', 'Love Fulfilled', 'Thunder in the Garden', 'Love's Reward', 'Love's Gleaning Tide', 'Pain and Time Strive Not', and 'The Half of Life Gone' – in the unmediated personal voice of *The Earthly Paradise's* lyric singer, but he had already inscribed most of these in his physically lovely manuscript 'Book of Verse' in 1870.

Three of the volume's better-known poems emerged from Morris's visits to Iceland in 1871 and 1873: 'To the Muse of the North', 'Iceland First Seen', and 'Gunnar's Howe Above the House at Lithend'. The last of these records the speaker's profound response at the grave of the murdered *Njálssaga* warrior, who was heard in the saga singing at night in his grave:

O young is the world yet meseemeth and the hope of it flourishing green,  
When the words of a man unremembered so bridge all the days that have  
been,  
As we look round about on the land that these nine hundred years he hath  
seen.

This aspect of the legend clearly influenced Morris's elevation of another Gunnar's defiant last songs in *Sigurd the Volsung*.

I have seen Gunnar's grave. The 'howe' (*haugr*) is a barely-discernible grass-swept elevation on a gentle slope above a green, treeless, receding plain, and Morris effectively recorded a moment of his own spiritual autobiography in his meditation over its solitary, windswept *Útsýn*. His deepest preoccupations with 'men unremembered' resonated in its lines.

The speaker's relief and happiness spring from his recognition that nine hundred years have not (yet) entirely effaced Gunnar's gallantry in the face of death. Retrieval of such tenuous memories from the abyss of oblivion seems to him a kind of psychological resurrection: if he helps preserve it, the 'bridge' of

<sup>19</sup> See Peter Faulkner, 'The Male as Lover, Fool, and Hero: "Goldilocks" and the Late Prose Romances,' *Victorian Poetry* 34.3 (1996): 413-24 and Ken Goodwin, 'The Summation of a Poetic Career: *Poems By the Way*,' *Victorian Poetry* 34.3 (1996): 397-410.

days still stands, and something in himself may stand as well. Morris closed the poem with a tribute to the enduring qualities of the long Icelandic summer twilight, in which ‘day and night toileth the summer lest deedless his time pass away’.

Morris’s ‘Chants for Socialists’ and ‘A Death Song for Alfred Linnell’ adapted hymnodic forms to new circumstances. Socialists set Morris’s ‘Chants’ to familiar tunes, and sang them at their meetings, which competed for some of their audiences with the Salvation Army and the uncertain harmonies of the local pub. Morris remarked in his 1887 ‘Socialist Diary’ that he found it difficult to convey socialist doctrine to semi-literate audiences, but he expressed in his songs the movement’s basic verities: that workers have a right to the fruits of their labor, and should act in solidarity to secure that right for all the dispossessed. Morris’s hymns remained staples in socialist and labor circles for many decades, as generations of labor-songbooks show.<sup>20</sup>

All these motifs resonated in ‘A Death Song of Alfred Linnell’, written for the funeral of an innocent bystander killed by the police in Trafalgar Square in 1886:

We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,  
 They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;  
 We craved to speak to them our woeful learning:  
 We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.  
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
 But one and all if they would dusk the day ...*

Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison;  
 Amidst the storm he won a prisoner’s rest;  
 But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen  
 Brings us our day of work to win the best.  
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
 But one and all if they would dusk the day.*

Morris hardly belonged in the extensive company of Victorian hymn writers, but he did in effect write successful hymns for the ‘religion of humanity’ of a different, secular church.

Most critics have also neglected the eighty-odd pages of poems Morris interspersed in his prose romances, especially in the ‘German’ romances, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, which he wrote for *Commonweal* in 1888 and 1889. Almost all moments of high emotion in *The House of the Wolfings* – prophecies, histories, avowals of love and commemorations of the dead – provided occasion for such interspersed lyrics, and they heightened and varied the tales’ prose narration in sometimes surprising ways.

*Wolfings*, in part, is a gentler successor to *Sigurd*, especially in its fatalistic acceptance of ‘good’ heroic death, and its careful attention to the implications of

<sup>20</sup> Chris Waters, ‘Morris’s ‘Chants’ and the Problems of Socialist Culture’, in *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, 127-146; Florence and William Boos, ‘Orwell’s Morris and Old Major’s Dream’, *ENGLISH STUDIES* 71.4 (1990): 361-71.

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many marginal skirmishes with an evil enemy might even allegorize aspects of concurrent Socialist League struggles. The poetic speeches of the prophetess Hall-Sun; the resolute action of the selfless chieftain Thiodolf; and the ardor of the half-divine Wood-Sun, who lies to Thiodolf about the efficacy of the hauberk she gives him, in the hope that this will save his life – all these characters' interactions form a stately antiphony to the tale's archaic prose and simple plot. The analogy between the Roman enemies of the Goths and imperialist English exploiters of sweated labor may have been clearer to Morris than it was to his contemporaries, but *Wolfings* provided especially striking instances of the framing of poetry in an accessible prose narrative, and interspersal of choral and expressive verse into otherwise terse accounts of locally significant quasi-historical events. In several of the interpolated poems Morris experimented boldly with medieval Scandinavian meters, and these unexpected rhythms bring to the narrative a sense of surprise, exoticism, and heightened authenticity.

In *The Roots of the Mountains*, the poetic interludes were briefer, and their more formal, generic and iconically abstract meters served to celebrate social aspects of Wolfing life, memorialize past conflicts, and honor the Wolfing dead. An antiphonal poem sung by Bow-may and Gold-mane, for example, as they prepare to join the Wolfings' defensive campaign against raiders from Silverdale, became a poetic celebration of a male-female partnership in battle. Paradoxically this provided a gracious interlude in the tale, for in Morris's writings, men and women often share love, but seldom labor; and women's love typically requires that their male partners risk loneliness and death. Here, the (unromantically attached) warriors sing:

*She singeth:*

Bare are my feet for the rough waste's wending,  
Wild is the wind, and my kirtle's thin;  
Faint shall I be ere the long way's ending  
Drops down to the Dale and the grief therein.

*He singeth:*

... Come, for how from thee shall I sunder?  
Come, that a tale may arise in the land;  
Come, that the night may be held for a wonder,  
When the Wolf was led by a maiden's hand!

*She singeth:*

Now will I fare as ye are faring,  
And wend no way but the way ye wend;  
And bear but the burdens ye are bearing,  
And end the day as ye shall end ...

*They sing together:*

Over the moss through the wind and the weather,  
Through the morn and the even and the death of the day,  
Wend we man and maid together,  
For out of the waste is born the fray.

After the tale's final battle, the Wolfings return home to bury their dead, and consecrate their Mote-House with song:



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We are the men of joy belated;  
    We are the wanderers over the waste;  
We are but they that sat and waited,  
    Watching the empty winds make haste.

Long, long we sat and knew not others,  
    Save alien folk and the foes of the road;  
Till late and at last we met our brothers,  
    And needs must we to the old abode ...

Over the waste we came together:  
    There was the tangle athwart the way;  
There was the wind-storm and the weather;  
    The red rain darkened down the day.

For here once more is the Wolf abiding,  
    Nor ever more from the Dale shall wend,  
And never again his head be hiding,  
    Till all days be dark and the world have end.

Morris also intended the tale's retrospectively utopian lyrics to express the values of a quasi-democratic 'tribal' society at peace with itself, and these poems' antiphonal patterns suggest deep natural recurrences that underlie human desires. They resonate with assurance, and are unique achievements of their kind.

In summary, Morris's poetry continued to evolve after *The Earthly Paradise*, as he recast traditional legends and meters, balanced tales of ill-fated love with celebrations of natural cycles of rebirth, and found new ways to blend the rhythms of poetry and natural speech. His quasi-populist efforts to seek less 'elite' and more varied audiences and explore new styles and modes of expression expressed his personal belief in utopian communism and the efficacy of 'hope,' but they also anticipated and paralleled some of the generic and thematic innovations of the *fin de siècle*.

**Conclusion: Was Morris a 'Fin-de-Siècle' Poet?**

The originality and experimental qualities of Morris's poetry might have been better appreciated had he accomplished less in other areas of his life. As we approach the end of the twentieth century, we typically evaluate the literature of the previous 'end of century' in terms of something notoriously ill-defined called 'modernity'. How should one compare Morris's later poetry with that of his 'decadent' near-contemporaries, among them Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Thomas Hardy, Ernest Dowson, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, or Vernon Lee?

To what extent, for example, was this vigorously romantic late-Victorian dissident also a proto-aesthetic poet? It seems to me that the elegantly muted visual patterns Morris designed in the 80s and 90s were as proto-'modernist' as the delicately colorful ones he crafted in the late 60s and 70s were 'Victorian'. Both types of patterns were excellent of their kind. And so, I believe, were the different modes of poetry Morris cultivated during his career.

Morris's poetry – early, middle, and late – anticipated one theme that became

central in various ways to *fin de siècle* writers – the blocking or interdiction of love. Poets and other writers in the 90s often argued explicitly or implicitly that gratified love (hetero- or homosexual) is not only *unattainable*, but in some cases even *unimaginable*. Examples abound: Wilde's 'Ballad of Reading Gaol', Mary Coleridge's 'The Other Side of the Mirror', Rosamond Marriott Watson's 'The Witch', Hardy's 'Satires of Circumstance', Arthur Symonds's 'The Loom of Dreams', and Lionel Johnson's poignant 'The Dark Angel'. In his preoccupation with doomed or postponed love – displacement and sublimation, if you will – Morris also seemed to anticipate certain forms of Freudian *Unbehagen in der Kultur* (the original title of *Civilization and Its Discontents*) that one commonly associates with the age that followed him.

Even Morris's historicism and fondness for archaic medievalism in the 1880s and 90s had 'modern' aspects, for his later research methods were self-consciously anthropological and receptive to the original sources he knew – as deeply grounded in them as his early work had been in the romantic renditions of Walter Scott, Charles Kingsley, and medieval compendia in the 1850s and 60s. Josephine Guy has remarked in *The British Avant Garde in the Nineteenth Century* that British writers who wished to subvert authority typically sought to find radical antecedents in reconstructions of the historical past, whereas their continental analogues tended to reject such antecedents.<sup>21</sup> If Guy is right (and I believe she is), it becomes thoroughly understandable why the late Victorian poet who most fervently embraced radically revolutionary ideals experimented with so many traditional aesthetic forms.

Likewise the quasi-biblical imagery and overtones of Morris's secular-humanist 'religion of humanity' is surprisingly consistent with a *fin de siècle* affinity for iconic, ritualistic, or spiritualist turns, found in such late-century and turn-of-the-century poets as Alice Meynell, Michael Field, or Francis Thompson, and even W. B. Yeats. The emblematic, strongly patterned, and self-referential aspects of Morris's poems are equally 'aesthetic', and his social concerns allied him with several contemporary and subsequent writers of 'new woman' fiction.

It is not coincidental, therefore, that his writings – especially *News from Nowhere* and his essays on the decorative arts – were admired by contemporary feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Emma Lazarus, and by feminist-utopian writers of subsequent generations. Many writers have commented by now on the 'tree-hugging' qualities of Morris's belief in a communion between the natural world and its inhabitants, and Morris's political ideals and their ecological urgency seem much clearer now than they did to Morris's own socialist descendants half a century ago.

Morris's attempts to recreate/invent a 'tongue of the folk', by contrast, found few immediate emulators. The rise of critical interest in the poetic prose of his romances suggests that Morris's later work blended the boundaries of poetic and fictional, historicist and utopian modes of writing in unexpected ways. His eclectic work contributed both to efforts to create a 'vernacular revival', and to

<sup>21</sup> Brighton, 1990.

the complex mixtures of sensational and quotidian elements in the work of modernist writers such as Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Charlotte Mew, James Joyce, and their successors.

Despite his apparent 'simplicity', then, Morris had as much in common with later disillusioned poetic dissectors of the heart such as Wilde or Mary Coleridge or T. S. Eliot as he did with Browning and Tennyson. His most distinctive attribute, however, was his ability to reconcile this unillusioned 'level gaze' with an organic view of the possibilities of earthly renewal – a complex synthesis which mediated to his poetic successors one of the strongest legacies of his century's romantic sensibility.

Many significant aspects of Morris's poetry and beliefs were independent of the trends that flowed around him, however – as he would have wished. Modern appeals to alienation, 'silence and cunning', for example, were utterly foreign to Morris's firm belief in the social nature of identity. His temperamental holism and awareness of the interrelatedness of human lives – indeed, of all life – prompted him to hope for a literature that would benefit an entire people. This ambitious aspiration remains one of the broadest visions ever indited of fully social literature, in an even broader kingdom of aesthetic ends.

No writer could accomplish more than a modest part of such a task, of course, or even suggest what forms its realization might take. But this was hardly to Morris's discredit. He was exactly right when he wrote to Bruce Glasier, without false modesty, that 'my life ha[s] been passed in being defeated; as surely every man's life must be who finds himself forced into a position of being a little ahead of the average in his aspirations'.<sup>22</sup>

As for the emerging political ideals which underlay much of his later poetry from *Love Is Enough* through *The Pilgrims of Hope*, these surfaced first in the realms of allegory – in his many apostrophic appeals to 'love', 'courage', and 'hope'. Morris once wrote to his wife that he thought 'imaginative people ... want to live to see the play played out fairly – they have hopes that they are not conscious of'. The mingled effortlessness and strenuously urgent qualities of Morris's poetry similarly expressed the healing power of such 'hope' – eternally recurrent, yet eternally deferred.

In the end, Morris's sense of such 'allegorical' ideals was neither Victorian nor *fin de siècle* – not of its own time, or perhaps of any other. It expressed his deeply personal desire to resolve into words new forms of political and artistic 'hope' – an infinite task, for the object(s) of hope can never be fully represented, at least in any language we may hope to speak. But the resonance of Morris's poetry with the practical and visual arts, and its attention to the need for such hope, will continue to evoke surprise and recognition from the readers who follow us, and inspire creative interpretations in the generations to come.

University of Iowa  
Dept. of English  
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

FLORENCE S. BOOS

<sup>22</sup> Kelvin, ed., Vol. 2, 1885-88, 684, letter of August 15th, 1887.