

MORRISSAGA: Sigurd the Volsung

Hartley S. Spatt

To William Morris, the Volsunga Saga was comparable in its power to "the tale of Troy";¹ towards the end of his life, he was willing to go so far as to call it "the greatest story of the world."² In his transformation of that saga into an epic poem suitable for contemporary readers, Morris achieved his greatest poetic success; but like all the new-minted myths of the nineteenth century,³ Sigurd the Volsung fails of its largest goal. It is the reason for this failure, despite the greatness of the poem, which is my present subject.

The events of Sigurd range over four nations and three generations, embracing murder, suicide, treachery, and self-sacrifice. Clearly, only a remarkably powerful theme can weld such disparate elements into a dramatic whole; for the twelfth-century Icelanders who first wrote down the story of Sigurd, that theme was each character's dedication not only to his immediate ends but also to a preparation for the ultimate end, the ragna rok or dissolution of the gods. This context is implicit in Volsunga Saga, never raised to the level of articulation because there is no need among a circle of men and women aware at every moment of their final destiny; but in an epic poem which aspires to teach the nineteenth century a new form of existence and perception, articulation is a necessity. Indeed, Morris' earlier poetry was marked by such efforts to redefine heroism, in terms of the protagonist's ability not only to act successfully in any given situation but also to re-enact that situation later in artistic form; only thus did Morris' early hero become "father and child of the past"⁴ and thereby transcend the limitations of history.

The narrator and characters of Sigurd therefore constantly allude to "the latter days, / And the entering in of terror" (1); through the verbal creation of ragna rok, they hope to perform their fated roles prospectively, and thus in some way determine their own destinies. The implications of this hope are drawn out by Signy in an early speech:

". . . thine eyes like mine shall gaze
On the day unborn in the darkness, the last of
all earthly days,
The last of the days of battle, when the host
of Gods is arrayed. . . .
Yea, and thy deeds shalt thou know, and great
shall thy gladness be;
As a picture all of gold thy life-days thou
shalt see,
And know that thou too wert a God. . . .
By the side of the sons of Odin shalt thou
fashion a tale." (22)

Each character makes formal acknowledgement of his or her faith in this aesthetic transformation of defeat into divinity (73, 112, 191, 243, 284). Such statements, however, drastically change the psychology of character of the major figures; it is far different to act in accordance with a conscious, acknowledged goal than, like the heroes of Volsunga Saga, under the impulse of a tacit, general motive. Yet it is precisely in such a confrontation of tenth-century action and nineteenth-century awareness that Morris finds the grounds for his art and the true subject of his poem: forced to articulate the conditions of their lives, the protagonists of Sigurd find themselves articulating the formula for transcendence of the individual life.

Brynhild and Gudrun, for example, quarrel like fishwives in Volsunga Saga. In Sigurd, however, they

are heroines who "stand 'twixt death and love" (172), and their struggle is thus exalted to one between two warriors, waging battle with verbal armies and fully aware of the cost of defeat:

There she thought of that word in the river,
and of how it were better unsaid,
And she looked with kind words to hide it, as
men bury their battle-dead
With the spice and the sweet-smelling raiment.
(209)

And if the women are exalted to the status of heroes, the men are apotheosized into gods. We have noted already that Signy predicts her brother will one day be recognized as "a God"; Sigurd, we shall see, is doomed to die not merely because he is cursed with a treasure but because he is blessed with divinity. The death of the dragon-slayer in Volsunga Saga was borne with composure; the passing of "the straightener of the crooked" (206) is marked by universal grief.

It is with the utmost irony, then, that we recognize the first articulation of the process through which men are exalted into gods in the words not of Sigmund or Sigurd but of the poem's chief villain, Regin. Regin is a man (or Dwarf, which for Morris seems to be merely a very long-lived man) seeking double vengeance; his brother, Fafnir, has usurped his earthly heritage, and Odin has usurped his racial autonomy. Anyone familiar with Norse myth can recognize the relevance of these desires: the crime for which the gods must pay at the ragna rok, the breaking of their word to the giant who built Asgard by withholding their payment and subjugating his people, runs exactly parallel to that which Regin seeks to avenge. Moreover, it is but a short step from this parallel to a further extension; Regin, a child of eternity imprisoned in time by the sins of his father

and the crimes of the gods, is a fit emblem for humanity itself, struggling towards a self-determination it can achieve only at the cost of the world as we know it. His own failure in that quest provides one of the finest orations in the poem:

"Then unto this land I came, and that was long
ago
As men-folk count the years; and I taught them
to reap and to sow,
And a famous man I became; but that generation died,
And they said that Frey taught them, and a
God my name did hide.
Then I taught them the craft of metals, and
the sailing of the sea . . .
And they said that Thor had taught them; and
a smithying-carle was I.
Then I gave their maidens the needle . . .
But by then these were waxen crones to sit
dim-eyed by the door,
It was Freyia had come among them to teach
the weaving-lore.
Then I taught them the tales of old, and fair
songs fashioned and true,
And their speech grew into music . . . and the
land grew soft and sweet:
But ere the grass of their grave-mounds rose
up above my feet,
It was Bragi had made them sweet-mouthed, and
I was the wandering scald. . . .
And some day . . . I shall be he that wrought,
And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name
that once was nought.
Yea I shall be Frey, and Thor, and Freyia, and
Bragi in one:

Yea the God of all that is . . .

And there shall be no more dying." (87-89)

The inexorable process of cosmic history, in which Gods supersede Dwarves, only to fall themselves in a cataclysm which ushers in yet another cycle of usurpation, is here presented as a function of human perceptions, "destined" only because human time moves ever forward from the present into the unknown, and men will clutch at any explanation for this change that kills them. To end this eternal round of substitutions, Regin can hold out only the vain hope of all failing Romantics: the non-time when "there shall be no more dying."

Morris himself, of course, had long since spurned this vain desire; he knew well that the Norse myths gain their power over men precisely because "the Gods . . . are not immortal, but lie under the same fate as mankind."⁵ Without mortality, there would be no need for gods or tutors; given infinite life, each man would eventually acquire that full knowledge which characterizes the divine. Regin perceives, though he cannot accept, that the only true immortality is knowledge itself; only knowledge exists independently of its creator and all external circumstance, save the consciousness of a single knower. The dwarf therefore submerges his own desire for immortality within a form of knowledge, a tale which can eternalize "my deeds . . . my name."

Here, however, Regin falls victim to a cruel linguistic joke. Regin's life is already embodied in such a tale; "Regin" is already an object of veneration. In Icelandic, "regin" is one of the words for "god"; it is the root word whose genitive form we find in ragna rok. Regin has done the work of a god; he has created everything which defines man beyond the simple fact of breath--agriculture, metal-work, navigation, weaving, art--and thus arguably created man more truly than Odin himself did. Humanity

acknowledges these bounties; but since "Regin" means "god," it is the gods who get the credit after all. When Regin laments that "a God my name did hide," the reader can respond that his name revealed the god in the first place.

But is this the real reason for Regin's frustration? We must not forget that Regin claims his name was "once nought," once lacked such doubleness. Regin's career embodies far more than linguistic coincidence. A man has come among men; he has taught them the eternal forms of knowledge; then, as witnesses died and listeners failed to connect the hero of the tale with the old man working in the smithy, he has seemed to disappear. Humanity has been mysteriously blessed; how else commemorate the providential gift than by transforming history into myth and making "regin" one of the divine names? In other words, Regin's tale follows the paradigm of euhemerism: through passage of time and growing recognition of greatness, heroes become exalted into gods.

But we must go further still. Regin is no hero, apotheosized by a grateful populace; he is the man who creates the terms of godhood itself. Bragi is, after all, only a name applied to the gift of poetry; it was Regin who brought that gift. Freyia exists as the ideal source of weaving; it was Regin who was the true source. When men speak of "Frey, and Thor, and Freyia, and Bragi," they are speaking only of Regin, one of themselves. Regin's tale thus calls into question the very nature of divinity; if "Frey" is merely a name applied by men to the unknown agent of their agricultural lore, can we say that Odin himself exists, save as He is revealed in the first breath impelled by the midwife? The tale thus appears to preach the human creation of divinity. All gods are merely men, named with names that lend a specious validity to their presumed gifts.

Regin works wonders, and thus is lost in the wonder of godhead. Indeed, such a process is inevitable and, save for its victim, beneficial; only thus can men distance themselves from those intimations of the infinite which their "gods" unveil and thus escape despair over their own lack of creativity. But by doing so men also save themselves from the responsibility of being the gods they really are. The ragna rok itself may have been created through this process. "The day of the uttermost trial" is something safely distanced from immediate human worries; from the shelter of their concern for the last day, men can reject the equal potential of each passing moment to provide a trial of their worth. Whenever one man acts to usurp the life or freedom of another, ragna rok arrives; whenever that same or another man acts to increase the sum of human freedom, Baldur (as we have agreed to call the gift of faith in a better future) is reborn.

Through this distillation of myth and history into a wholly human solution, Morris unites the primitive action of his saga and the sophisticated self-awareness of his protagonists. The self which acts for the sake of immediate human goals, and the self which acts for what it believes to be ultimate, cosmic ends, are complementary forms of a single selfhood. Regin is evil precisely because he is attempting to usurp the latter, divine element for himself; the world deteriorates because the people are allowing him to do so. Humanity seems to insist that men like Regin exist, if only to bear responsibility for humanity's creations. Whenever a man capable of merging word and deed, futurity and present action, is born into the world, he is automatically exalted; by raising him beyond itself, humanity perpetuates its own failure to achieve divinity in its own right. It is, probably, this failure which makes the primitive compilation of murder and treachery that is

Volsunga Saga a work which embodies "the highest range of tragedy."⁶ It is Morris' task in Sigurd to reverse this process, through a ritual myth-making. He must create a hero who, in his own failure, brings the notion of godhead back into its human context; Morris must write an epic which justifies the ways of men to themselves. He must write, in short, a work which will endorse his final characterization of Odin as "the Goth" (306)--not God, not man, but a being who, like ourselves, is a little of both.

II

Victorian Englishmen, of course, do not believe in Odin; in 1875 it can be argued that they do not even believe in Christ. The apotheosis of heroes depicted in Sigurd the Volsung can strike no response in readers who have lost the ability to perceive anything beyond themselves, whether he be heroic man or awful god. But Morris has not spent the past decade establishing a successful business without learning the true religion of modern men: the worship of the institution. It is the institutionalized system of social rituals by which Victorian men live and swear; and it is this system which Morris superimposes on the disordered world of Volsunga Saga. In the original, for instance, there is a mad rush of men hoping to be the first to draw Odin's sword out of the Branstock (VII, 295); but in the ordered cosmos of Sigurd first the guests, then the "homemen," then the members of Volsung's family stride one after another up to the tree. Even simple details which the saga ignores are eligible for this process of ordering. Signy departs with her evil husband:

Then were the gangways shipped, and blown was
the parting horn,
And the striped sails drew with the wind. (12)

One's first thought might be that Morris has merely indulged his love for visual details; but the care with which he draws the scene--the close links between "blown" and "wind," "parting" and "drew"--indicates a conscious effort by Morris to ritualize each action.

There is a series of such rituals added to the first part of Sigurd, culminating in the murder ritual performed by Sigmund, his wife, and Sinfjotli, who has been forced to kill his step-uncle. She offers a cup of poisoned wine; Sinfjotli peers into the cup and sees death; Sigmund, immune to poison, drinks instead. When Sigmund, addled by all this wine, breaks the ritual matrix of offer-vision-sacrifice and tells his son to drink, it marks the breakdown of Volsung society as well as a personal tragedy; the narrator makes explicit this fusion with a line of description: "And the floor of the hall of the Volsungs beneath his falling shook" (47).

Such establishment of each action's social matrix prepares the reader for the three rituals which reside at the heart of Sigurd, and of all social existence: the birth, marriage, and death of the hero. Sigurd's birth is expanded from a simple notation in the saga to a lengthy ritual of questions and answers, at the end of which "a man most ancient" (66)--the representative of Odin--rises to pronounce the name of Sigurd.

Men heard the name and they knew it, and they
caught it up in the air,
And it went abroad by the windows and the doors
of the feast-hall fair . . .
And over the sea-flood's welter, till the folk of
the fishers heard,
And the hearts of the isle-abiders on the sun-
scorched rocks were stirred. (66)

This triumphal journey is at once a culmination of previous rituals and a type of new forms to come; a mere name has, through the power of ritual process, acquired a title, power, and destiny of its own. The people celebrate the birth and naming with songs alluding to the entire sweep of history, from the "unnamed Sons of God" to "the Victory yet to be" (67); all of time and space are justified by the embodiment of the heroic name. The keynote of the saga, its proverbial instruction, has given way to the exemplary ritual figure.

The second exemplum occurs just after Sigurd's marriage to Gudrun; the wedding itself is glossed over as a matter of no import, but the vow of loyalty between Sigurd and his brothers-in-law is central to the theme and action of the poem. Thus it is the latter scene which Morris ritualizes, in a ceremony which brings together scattered bits of Norse marriage and funeral rituals "in such wise . . . As the God-born Goths of aforetime. . . . Among the folk of the Niblungs fares forth the tale of the same, / And men deem the tidings a glory and the garland of their fame" (181-82). The ritual, in other words, provides a figure of Sigurd's life, while it ties him to both "the God-born Goths" and "the folk of the Niblungs," the divine and the mundane.

These connections between hero and people, hero and gods are affirmed and made a part of humanity's institutional religion with the final ritual, Sigurd's funeral. The hero is laid on the pyre, and "a man of the ancient times" (Odin's avatar again) comes forth and draws the sword from its scabbard:

And wide o'er the plain of the Niblungs doth
the Light of the Branstock glare,
Till the wondering mountain-shepherds on that
star of noontide stare. . . .

Then is silence over the plain; in the noon shine
the torches pale . . .
Then a wind in the west ariseth, and the white
flames leap on high,
And with one voice crieth the people a great
and mighty cry,
And men cast up hands to the Heavens, and
pray without a word,
As they that have seen God's visage, and the
face of the Father have heard. (243-44)

The ritual form of Morris' poem is complete. Long before Gunnar will sing of the ragna rok as a day when "the torch shall be lit in the daylight" (284), Sigurd lights a torch of his own ascent to godhood. Regin's despair stemmed from his having done the work of a god, but being denied the title and honor of divinity; Sigurd, because he has fused his work with the ritual forms of the people, is granted divine apotheosis.

The ritual form far transcends the proverbial form of Volsunga Saga. Proverbs are embodiments of human wisdom and powers, but the force of ritual raises the people above mere reflection on their environment to a conviction of divine creation, and thence to a share in its enactment. Suzanne Langer once noted that "divinities are born of ritual";⁷ she went on to assert, however, that comprehensive theologies can only be based on myths. What Morris establishes through the ritual form of Sigurd is that humanity, in its instinctive urge to create itself anew, makes gods in order that they may make theologies. The rituals framing Sigurd's life and death reflect a steady progress towards conscious, active participation by the people in the process of self-deification. They begin passively: "the hearts of the isle-abiders . . . were stirred." They move to a conscious judgment: "men deem the tidings a glory." And they end in active communion with their creations:

"men . . . pray without a word." Further, it is a communion not restricted to some nebulous, solitary "God" but with a figure possible only in a sophisticated theology: a "Father."

In this way, social rituals transform themselves into vital components of human existence, determining the lives of the people and in turn being determined by them. When Sigurd arrives at the Niblung palace, he dedicates himself to social justice in the well-known "peace speech." In this oration, Sigurd prophesies his doom, by including in his list of goals "that the loving were loved" (155); when he later sees Gudrun standing "'twixt death and love" (172), the choice he must make is ordained by his prior ritual speech. In similar fashion, Sigurd also prepares his apotheosis in this first speech; in the hemistych which follows his commitment to love is a glimpse of Sigurd's new life: "and I would that the weary should sleep." When he lies dying, Sigurd comforts Gudrun with just this thought:

"Cloudy of late were the heavens with many a
woven lie,
And now is the clear of the twilight, when the
slumber draweth anigh." (214)

Of course, ritual oaths can be circumvented. Sigurd dies because he has sworn fealty with only two of Gudrun's three brothers; the unsworn Guttorm wields the sword. It is a characteristic of Sigurd that evil-doers always evade the making of oaths; they force such compacts with humanity to be made by their surrogates. Yet even the tragic implications of such oaths may be tempered by heroic ritual action. Near the end of the poem, the Niblungs swear to visit Atli; Hogni, foreseeing an ambush, sneaks out that night to save the only portion of the Niblung heritage not compromised by the oath, Sigurd's gold. His ritual sinking

of the treasure in the tarn creates a new potential, a new tale for men of the future: "As a flame in the dim grey morning . . . the tinkling Gold fell home . . . a wonder and a tale" (264). It is this act of direct participation in the ritual structure of creation which redeems Hogni's complicity in Sigurd's death.

Through the creation of a comprehensive ritual framework, Morris goes far beyond the Northern definition of man as a being determined by his actions and by the tale which defines those actions; for Morris, man is a being who, through ritual, defines his own deeds and thus determines the shape of his tale. Only thus could Morris suggest to the readers of his poem a way of functioning as individuals, despite the restrictions which their social codes place on action and articulation. But a problem still remains after one has been thus initiated into the knowledge of words and deeds; the vocabulary of those rituals is still determined by the institutions one is attempting to redefine. Hogni has no alternative to his action, for before he can speak during the banquet "Gunnar's word is said" (262). Sigurd, as we saw above, speaks the form of his own doom. Even Volung walks knowingly to his death, because "My word is given" (11). Morris himself, finally, is in the same position; no matter how he may transform Sigurd's actions through ritual, the verbal form of his action will be read in only one way, the way of the modish mythographers of the mid-Victorian era. Henry Hewlett, reviewing Sigurd for Fraser's magazine, could not avoid bringing up "the recent school of mythologists who, on the strength of certain etymological evidence, have fitted this and every other love-story of Aryan origin with a 'solar' or 'cosmical' interpretation."⁸ This is indeed a problem; Morris must transcend this superimposed perception of events before his own vision can reach the eyes of his readers.

Thus yet another bulk of verse must be added, this one not creating a liberating ritual form but destroying the constricting pedantic one.

Morris begins his campaign against the simplistic solar myth in his first lines. The Volsung hall is introduced to us not as the home of the sun, or as the sun itself, but merely as "a candle in the dark" (1). The patriarch of the clan does bear resemblance to the sun, but only within the context of a single daily cycle: "His dawning of fair promise, and his noontide of the strife, / His eve of the battle-reaping" (1). Merely because the myth has been abused, it must not be discarded; the transfer of power from Sigmund to Sigurd can employ no more fitting agent than the sunrise, which bathes both the father's dying eyes and the son's new-born ones (56, 62). Sigurd's foster-father exclaims that it is "the dawn of day begun!" (65); but Gripir the sage correctly declares that it is a "Day he wakened and made" (100).

Sigurd himself knows the absurdity of such self-aggrandizement; though he creates an image of light, it is no divine imago:

"Yea me, who would utterly light the face of
all good and ill,
If not with the fruitful beams that the summer
shall fulfill,
Then at least with the world a-blazing." (106)

Though Brynhild calls him the "Day" (124) and swears her oath on the sun, Sigurd leaves for the "dark . . . dusk" (152) walls of the Niblungs. Once he is thus thoroughly entered into the world, the sun becomes an attribute akin to his gold, something which can be seized by any man; it is Gunnar who "stands in the beam of the sunlight" (250) and Atli who is compared to "the sun" (141) by his ambassador. No longer is there an

"earthly sun" (141) where Sigurd walks; no longer does "the light of the world"⁹ shine gloriously on "the field of the people's praise" (126). Instead, the second half of Sigurd figures forth only the "blaze," as aspiration degenerates into greed:

. . . and the sun clomb over the Eastland
mountains' rim
And shone through the door of Atli and the
smoky hall and dim,
But the fire roared up against him (304-5)

The beauty of sea and air on the "merry morning" of the poem's final pages renders absurd the feeble efforts of men to erect a facade of greatness before their puny acts of murder; the death of three races affects the universe of nature not at all.

Though the struggle to subjugate the natural world to human perception is inevitably a failure, it is a very real aspiration. All human desire, it may be, is reducible to a series of such apings of the superhuman, heroically vain efforts to incorporate the unknown. Though the desire to become the sun is absurd, the grandeur of the wish lends a tragic glow to what might otherwise be a pathetic sight: little sun-gods killing one another off, committing suicide in their quest for immortality, while the real sun continues its eternal circling. Without what Brynhild in one of her finest speeches calls "the house of hope" (127), the death of a hero would be meaningless. Not even the ritualization of death itself, as seen in Sigurd's three-day journey into darkness, the digging of his own grave, and a struggle with "the swaddling of Death" (109) during his battle with Fafnir, can protect Sigurd for more than a moment when Guttorm raises his sword over the sleeping hero. Though the Niblings sail to Atli's land in ritual array, arriving at "the seventh dawn of day" (272), such actions

have, like the sun, reasserted their independence from grasping men who would exploit the forms of the divine for earthly ends. The sun-god is revealed to be a mere worm of sixty summers.

Such deterioration might be expected; after all, this is a universe winding down towards ragna rok. These two failures of solar identity and ritual resurrection must be set within a larger context of failure created by the images of nature; the universe itself is losing its ability to draw fertility from the sun and achieve rebirth. The Volsung hall, for example, was built around the great tree, the Branstock, and was thus eternally "wreathed . . . with the glory of summer" (1); for the early members of the clan, there is a similar fusion of natural glory and human heroism, a "battle reaping" or a "battle-acre" (1, 5). Speech itself is a function of nature (13); even the fire that destroys Siggeir's palace is not an earthly fire, the narrator says, but "the tree-bough . . . that sprang from murder's seed" (39). Most importantly, the life of the Volsung family is dedicated to "blossom and bear the fruit of worth / For the hope of unborn people and the harvest of the earth" (42). Sigmund is the Branstock, exists simultaneously in the human and cosmic realms:

White went his hair on the wind like the ragged
drift of the cloud,
And his dust-driven, blood-beaten harness was
the death-storm's angry shroud . . .
And his sword was the cleaving lightning . . .
and his voice was the following thunder.

(53)

After Sigmund, this fusion disappears. Sigurd, who must preside over the estrangement of hero and cosmos, also must take responsibility for humanity's loss of natural fertility; when he kills Fafnir and brings the

sunlight back to Glittering Heath, fertility follows only metaphorically, as a "sea-plain," or in the simile of "the acres' face" (111). The problem lies in Sigurd's very aspiration; by attempting to be the sun, a farmer scattering his "seed" in "the field of the people's praise" (126), Sigurd has divorced himself from the earth. When he and Brynhild plight their troth, the narrator notes that "far away beneath them lie the kingdoms of the earth" (129; emphasis added). It is the people of Lyndale, not Sigurd, who flourish in "the wood [that] is their barn and their storehouse, and the bower and feasting-hall" (140). Sigmund's "fruit of worth" becomes for Sigurd and Brynhild a bitter "fruit" indeed: "men's remembrance of the grief" (147). And when the action shifts to the land of the Niblungs, even this ambiguous fruit withers. The Niblung palace is "glassy" (152); each moment of seeming fruition is quickly revealed to be as barren "as the rainless cloud" (200). The naked sword lies between the lovers.

In place of blossoms comes a new metaphor, hidden in previous sections "as the tide of the norland main / Sweeps over the hidden skerry, the home of the shipmen's bane" (3): the image of the stone. Sigurd sits, the day before his death, isolated from nature, power, and the sun:

So whiles in a city forsaken ye see the shapes
of kings,
And the lips that the carvers wrought, while
their words were remembered and known,
And the brows men trembled to look on in the
long-enduring stone. . . .
But now are they hidden marvels. (221)

There is a bitter irony in the immortality Sigurd achieves just before his death, lying in bed "as the carven dead that die not" (228). Gudrun, years later, will re-enact

the tragedy of fratricide because she has accepted this final glimpse of her lover as a true vision and model: "she stood as a carven image, as a stone" (251). Nature is wholly excluded from the poem's final act; Atli's hall is pure artifact, "fine-wrought as a silver cup" (254), his spearmen like "the sparks of the white wood-ashes" (274). When Gunnar and Hogni enter the city they will never leave, all around them they find the symbols of frustrate nature: "The hook hangs lone in the vineyard, and the scythe is lone in the hay, / The bucket thirsts by the well-side" (274). They find instead Gudrun, once again "silent as the ancient shapen stone" (276). The world, which Gunnar calls "the garden of God" (298) in his final struggle with the worms of death, must go through its cycle of life alone, and patiently await the new spring when, after ragna rok, the "seed" of "hope" bears more lasting fruit.

And such a seed does exist, in a few moments of vision which stand outside this degeneration of the cosmos. The dying Niblungs are likened to a "doomed ship" which, as each hero falls, sinks ever further into oblivion; the Niblungs go to join their literal vessels which, left unattended after their landing, have likewise disappeared from human "story" (274). When we watch Gudrun throw herself into the surf, we cannot help but feel that the sea has conquered all; the heroic ethos has drowned in its own desires. But once before, at the analogous moment when one hero was dead, but the new and greater hero was not yet born, ship and sea have appeared in far different guise. The "Volsung dwelling" had been left vacant and ruinous after Sigmund's death; the narrator asks, "to what end was [it] wrought?" The response, which seemingly comes from within the poem itself, is a simile which utterly rejuvenates the dying stem of the Volsungs:

Lo, the noble oak of the forest with his feet
 in the flowers and grass . . . an exceeding
 glorious thing;
 Then come the axes of men, and low it lies on
 the ground,
 And the crane comes out of the southland, and
 its nest is nowhere found . . .
 But the tree is a golden dragon; and fair it
 floats on the flood,
 And beareth the kings and the earl-folk. . . .
 A dear name hath it got like a king, and a fame
 that groweth not old. (58)

We live in a world of eternal transformation, in which death and life have equal value (298); if man is not to be "speechless" and "hopeless" he must embrace the vital change which mortality provides.

Sigmund had known this essential condition for life, and through his embrace of the human condition he had fused his being with the cosmos and been a god. For Sigurd, the son of the natural god, such unmasked-for divinity is impossible; yet by aspiring to godhead he cuts himself off from nature. He still shares his father's power, but it is "as as God" that he looks down upon the world that is his "heritage" (129). He appears to the Niblungs as "a King of the Kings," lives and dies among them as "the King of glory," "the redeemer," the "star" beheld by shepherds (213, 232, 244); if he cannot be a new Odin, he is at least a Christ. Even Gunnar, who shares only collaterally in the Volsung greatness, can rouse in his people "the very joy of God-folk . . . and the glee of them that die not" (270). Men must ever seek the sun, yet gain the fire; they aspire to rule the forces of nature, and inherit only barren storms. Yet it is in just such self-defeating quests that men sow the seeds of their apotheosis, become gods presiding over their own

metamorphoses. The Branstock dies with Sigmund, but lives again in Sigurd as "the Light," the sword which has been broken and reborn in the fires of three ritual deaths. Finally, Sigurd the Volsung gains the embracing form its action demands; two comprehensive symbols, themselves complementary forms of a single principle, fulfill the aspiration of men and nature: the Branstock and the fire.

We have already touched on the transformation of the Branstock. It is the world-tree which men, in their striving for something beyond the merely human, cut down and scoop out; but it then becomes a beam for Valhalla (127), or a ship for explorers, and once again symbolizes its world. Finally, in the inevitable change of time, it becomes the torch which consumes ship, and roof-tree, and men; yet the ashes of its consumption fertilize the land for a new growth. As he sets fire to Siggeir's hall, Sigmund says: "Now is the tree-bough blossomed" (39); Gudrun, fleeing from Atli's palace, is amazed that nature "gave back no sign of the burning" (306). Morris himself had taken great pains to elucidate this pattern for his readers. In a lecture delivered in 1885, he explained that he had drawn on "the mystic symbols of the Holy Tree, and the Holy Fire . . . symbols of life and creation" which "hint at a time before the dawn of history" (XXII, 226-28, 276). They are two forms of a single mystery, timeless emblems of the divine; and it is their eternal interfusion, their constant metamorphosis one into the other, which figures to men that divine ordering and reordering which characterize the changes of each individual life. Therefore, Edward Burne-Jones, begged by Morris to furnish some illustrations for Sigurd even though he hated the poem, finally did two for the Kelmscott Press edition, "one, at the beginning of . . . the Branstock . . . , the other, at the end, [of] Atli's hall in flames."¹⁰ Only within such a universal "frame, as it were"¹¹ can

Morris range Sigmund and Atli, the primitive ideal and the sophisticated man of today, about his central figure: a hero who, fated to fall through the vanity of his ideal, yet achieves a measure of divinity through the power of his enactment of the quest. Only within the context furnished by a tree and a fire which alike mean "life and creation" might such glorious waste be revealed as the ultimate act of heroism, the sacrifice of life to be resurrected eternally in art.

III

Resurrection may be possible in art; it is not possible in the world of Victorian England. Morris has attempted to exorcise the spectre of Odin and his deterministic "wird," making from the saga's central action a new myth dedicated to the heroism of self-determination. By allowing the vitiated gods of old time to crumble under human gaze, Morris has hoped to construct patterns of perception and action which can bear the weight of modern man's feverish introspection. And he has succeeded in creating a coherent, formalized structure within which his characters may play out their heroic parts; Sigurd the Volsung provides an embodiment for the self-sustaining myth of the individual artist of the self.

It is when we take the step which this completed form invites us to, and attempt to recreate that mythic structure in our own terms and through our own perspectives, that the seams begin to show. The ethos of the North is based on an external teleology; one struggles in this world not in order to succeed but in order to initiate oneself into the further struggle that will be required of one in another sphere of action. The end is not achieved within the self, or even in the greater selfhood that is the race, but in some alien destiny which no amount of heroism can do more than delay for a moment. Admittedly, it is a form of necessity which is far more satisfying than, say, the cold inquisitions of Hardy's Immortals;

there is at least the comfort that the Norse gods too "lie under the same fate as mankind." But that fate remains something wholly cut off from the humans who must act it out. The lucky humans who survive ragna rok and begin the new life of the coming cycle are not the warriors--they will be the first to fall--but that random group of people who happen to take shelter in the tree Yggdrasil and thus escape the fire which destroys the cosmos. The relationship between tree and fire in this Norse perspective is not a symbiotic transformation, not "alike life," but merely an absurd toss-up.

Obviously, the basic Scandinavian myth is not the informing spirit of Morris' poem. In Sigurd the tree and the fire are one; at the very least, Morris has moved from cosmic pessimism, relieved only by a religion of courage, to a cosmic optimism based on that courage. In addition, ragna rok itself has been transformed from the ultimate failure, in a cycle of failure, to the ultimate battle-harvest, in a cycle of natural growth. Such a step, though increasing the pleasure we feel in the presentation, still provides no place for our own urge to determine our free destinies; that place only Regin can provide.

Regin, by acting out the roles of all the gods, has called divinity into question; each hero, by attaining a kind of godhead for himself, further undermines the perception of the divine until, in the last line, Odin is no god at all but merely a "Goth." The traditional Norse mythology is revealed to be a tautology: men perceive gods because they perceive divine acts, yet those divine acts are merely the heroic deeds of men who have sacrificed their human identity for the common good. If the gods are humanly created, further, then man's perception of eternity itself may be a function of temporality, and his very notion of the cosmos may be nothing more

than an extrapolation from his belief that the world around him is a diminutive universe. Men conceive of ragna rok, Morris' poem implies, because they need a single temporal and spatial structure outside themselves upon which they can focus all the frustrations and failures they experience in this space and time. What other teleology, indeed, could result from such a perspective? The destruction of time, and the redemption of failure through the gift of eternal success, are conceptions possible only in a universe created and sustained by a supreme divinity; but the god of Sigurd the Volsung is merely the sum of its inhabitants. A Christian can await the Second Coming; a Hindu can seek Nirvana; an Algonquin can look forward to a seat in Michabo's house beyond the dawn; a member of Sigurd's world can believe only in Sigurd and his greatness.

The ethos of Sigurd the Volsung thus comes down to a simple program. A man must strive with all his power to live within and for the sake of the natural, human order; when he finally fails, as all men inevitably must, he "changes his life" and becomes what his deeds have made him, a god. As a god he is still powerless to affect the permanent structure of reality, but the tale men tell about him can affect others to continue the eternal struggle against formlessness and in behalf of meaning. Through such an ethos, the necessary conceptions of victory, fame, and salvation (functions of immediacy, historicity, and eternity, respectively) are made available to man. In the striving one gains victories, and the tale of these victories spread throughout society brings fame; when that fame grows to the point where it affects later audiences, one has achieved the ultimate transformation. One has triumphed over death, for both oneself and others; one has performed the act of a god. That deed in turn enters into one's story, fusing history and myth in a single narrative form. Thus

the world is structured by an eternal process of interaction between hero and society not unlike that between tree and fire, real and metaphoric suns. In this fashion Morris hopes to make the ethos of his characters one with the mythos of his frame, and the unified rhythm of their larger interaction he hopes will provide for the nineteenth-century reader that common perspective which was the unconscious property of every twelfth-century Icelander.

It is this close fusion of ethos and mythos which brings Sigurd the Volsung to the verge of achieving Morris' goal of a self-sustaining myth. Morris creates an artistic form which demands no exterior object, and thus metamorphoses the "curious entanglement of the ages"¹² into a continuous pattern independent of temporality. But his very success destroys his chance for any larger triumph. Sigurd the Volsung is so autonomous that, like Yeats' early mythologies, it "makes nothing happen." The poem justifies the ultimate act of heroism; but Sigurd saves no one, fails to change his life into ours. The rituals which ennoble his acts and integrate him with the humanity he seeks to redeem rebuke our own attempt to share in the process of god-making; Sigurd has his audience, and therefore has no need of us. It is this near-total isolation from present experience which gives rise to the exasperation nearly every reader of Sigurd feels. A tree becomes a candle, which lights an all-consuming fire; out of that fire comes a new tree, which supports the roof of a metaphoric Valhalla. A hero changes his life into a second hero, who in turn changes (literally at one point) into a third, and all ultimately transform themselves into chapters of a tale. A series of journeys from death-in-life to life-in-death occurs, fulfilling the prophecies which impel the journeys. In sum, the historic and mundane transforms itself into the mythic and divine, in order to play out an eternal

process whose meaning resides in the mundane perspective which has created it.

But there must be some means of breaking such a cycle long enough to allow the reader to enter into the mythic action; at some point the vision must be shared. The twelfth century had such a means, because readers or listeners shared the same core of experience and perceptions as the characters; the tale could be narrated and the meanings, "which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express,"¹³ left to the automatic inferences of the audience. Such unmediated perception in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, though, would be possible only through the agency of "a sandy-haired German tenor tweedle-deeing"¹⁴ Wagner's music at Bayreuth; for Morris there is no choice but mediation.

It is this quandary which Morris has attempted to escape through the sensuous creation of an emblematic natural world, where every action is a ritual and every hint of the divine is "figured" (155, 171, 175, 177, 196, 228, 245) in tapestry. Such sensuous perception is precisely what causes the myth to crumble, for the autonomy of the eternal is subjugated to the immediacy of its temporal reflection; myths must remain somehow unlike the human actions which figure them. Historicism demands that the artist fuse himself with the subject; it cannot say, though, how the readers of the history, who after all are the ultimate subjects, can so fuse themselves with the mediator as to share his ennoblement. In effect, Morris is forced to strip away the veil from the statued god, gaining artistic wholeness and poetic unity at the expense of that ambiguity which must always reside at the core of the universal. Many years later, Burne-Jones would identify by implication the crucial difference between the myth of Sigurd and the myths a modern reader might still embrace:

The Sphinx and all the beast and bird-headed things are symbols of certain mysteries of religion. The Jeremiah and the rest are symbols of the mystery of existence. Get up the Book of the Dead, and your Egyptian mysteries cease to be mysteries. They are just metaphors. . . . Jeremiah remains a mystery.¹⁵

The ragna rok, and that fate which is felt in "earth's hidden might" (166), reject this essential mystery in favor of a collective clarity, a universal metaphorization. Each metaphor enacts a "mystery," but works to reveal the unseeable core of its juncture; inevitably, with this revelation the metaphor fragments back into its components. The reader once more becomes aware that the poem is a created thing, that the journey of each man towards his personal ragna rok is itself nothing more than metaphor. Sufferers and exploiters, renouncers and graspers, alike become members of a single exploited class, man. It is one thing to create one's own gods; it is another thing to embrace the gods one has created as eternal lords over one's selfhood.

The entanglements of the Volsunga Saga Morris could make clear; the affairs of heroes and men he could "straighten" (206). But the entangled web of history and myth, humanity and selfhood, time and eternity, no one can escape. Morris himself, ultimately, must pay the price Sigurd pays before him: "even the simplest words are not typical enough" to leap the boundary between the languages of man and the silence of the gods. Yet if Sigurd becomes a god only through his failure, so too does William Morris achieve a place beyond his time, in the grand failure of Sigurd the Volsung. We end saying of Morris and Sigurd, as Gunnar said of his late antagonists, "I, I, I am of these" (298).

Maritime College, State University of New York

Notes

1. The Collected Works of William Morris, ed. May Morris (24 vds., London: Longmans Green, 1910-15), VII, 286.
2. Letter of Sept. 12, 1894, to Prof. F. Peterson, in William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist, ed. May Morris (2 vols., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), I, 475.
3. Compare any of the great poet-prophets' vain attempts to revive the noble dreams of past myths: Prometheus Unbound, The Idylls of the King, Culture and Anarchy.
4. See my essay, "William Morris and the Uses of the Past," Victorian Poetry 13, nos. 3-4 (Winter, 1975), 1-9.
5. Eugene LeMire, ed., The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 188-89.
6. Ibid., p. 192.
7. Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 169.
8. Quoted in William Morris: The Critical Heritage, ed. Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 255.
9. Matthew 5:14, used by Holman Hunt for his great painting of 1853-56, which Morris knew well.
10. G[eorgiana] B[urne]-[Jones], Memorials of Edward Burnes-Jones, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1904), II, 270.
11. Letter of 22 October 1873 to Mrs. Baldwin, in The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends, ed. P. Henderson (London: Longmans Green, 1950), pp. 59-60.

12. Letter to Peterson, in William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist, I, 475.
13. Letter of 1873 to H. Buxton Forman, quoted in Collected Works, XII, viii.
14. Ibid.
15. Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, II, 263.

This illustration was drawn by
Sir Edward Burne-Jones for the
Kelmscott Press edition of
The Story of Sigurd the Volsung

GUDRUN BURNS THE HALL OF ATLI

There Gudrun stood o'er the tumult, there
stood the Niblung child;
As the battle horn is dreadful, as the winter
wind is wild.

.
Then adown the hall and the smoke-cloud the
half-slaked torch she hurled.

