Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Keirstead, Christopher M.
Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
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Affinity versus Isolation

Cosmopolitanism and the Racial Dynamics of Morris’s Europe

UNTIL VERY RECENTLY, the name William Morris would have been unlikely to surface in discussions of cosmopolitanism or the idea of Europe, except as a by-product of his later embrace of communism. And even this commitment, it would seem, was tied to an overriding sense of English identity. As James Buzard has remarked recently of News from Nowhere (1890), “What else but race could underwrite the intense devotion to Britishness that Morris’s utopia and his utopians exhibit?” Buzard posits that the “stay-at-home preference” of the novel’s inhabitants “works serendipitously toward the preservation of what is at bottom, and for all Morris’s repudiations of nationalism, a national culture grounded in race.”¹ Morris’s poetry would seem to fare little better, apart from the wide-ranging Earthly Paradise, where travelers from the North of Europe find refuge in an isolated quasi-Greek island and exchange tales with their hosts. Sigurd the Volsung, however, Morris’s next major poem and the one that May Morris claimed “he held most highly and wished to be remembered by,” would seem to return us to more firmly planted notions of racial identity.² As he said in the preface to an earlier prose translation of the Volsunga Saga he completed with Erikið Magnússon, “this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks” (7:286). Herbert F. Tucker perhaps best captures the essential differences between these two
poems: where *The Earthly Paradise* endeavors to “put readers in possession of their heritage . . . as Europeans, beneficiaries alike of a Mediterranean and a Northern mythological legacy,” *Sigurd the Volsung* eschews such “easy-access historicism” in favor of a “monolithic epic [that] would be as uncompromisingly, unforsakably stern as he could make it.”* Sigurd*, by all accounts, is remote and insular—culturally, historically, even stylistically, “a combination of pseudo-anachronism trying to escape from the realities of modern English and an inert obedience to the demands of metre,” as John Goode unforgivingly described the poem’s archaic diction and iambic-anapestic hexameters.*

Morris’s place in this study, of course, implies that I see his work as forming an important stage in the development of the idea of Europe in Victorian poetry, but this significance lies neither in *The Earthly Paradise* alone nor in Morris’s one major poem that followed his political conversion to socialism, *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1885–86). Rather, I want to suggest that an engaged, critical cosmopolitanism reaches its greatest depth of insight where we would least expect to find it: in the collision of kings, clans, and peoples that is *Sigurd the Volsung* and in some of the less cooperative, more racially charged encounters in *The Earthly Paradise*. In fact, Morris’s apparently Teutocentric preface to the prose translation of the Volsunga Saga underscores the peculiar way that concepts of race and international fellowship could commingle in his work:

> [W]e must say again how strange it seems to us, that this Volsung Tale, which is in fact an unversified poem, should never before have been translated into English. 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 came after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us. (7:286)

At the same time Morris lends the Volsunga Saga a special racial magnetism for Anglo-Saxon readers, he is cautious to locate all such myths within the wider social context of world population shifts and the wider literary context of what we would now term “world literature.” Tellingly, when asked in 1886 by the *Pall Mall Gazette* to list what he considered to be the one hundred greatest books ever written, he featured “the kind of book which Mazzini called ‘Bibles;’ they cannot always be measured by a literary standard, but to me are far more important than any literature. They are in no sense the work of individuals, but have grown up from the very hearts of the people.” The first five selections consisted of the Hebrew Bible, Homer, Hesiod, the
Icelandic Edda, and Beowulf, followed by the “Kalevala, Shah-nameh, [and] Mhabharata.” For Morris, literature must emerge first from cohesive national cultures before becoming the property of the world at large. The Tale of Troy, while not inspiring the same racial or ethnic identification as the Icelandic epic, is still a vital narrative, a key component informing European identity. By invoking Mazzini, Morris places himself in the company of other national internationalists in this study—adherents of the Herderian idea that world culture was shaped by the “hearts of the people”—cultural traditions that all have their own intrinsic value, regardless of whether that value translates across national standards of literariness.

With Morris, it is perhaps particularly important not to lose sight of what Doug Lorimer calls “the fluid and contradictory character of Victorian claims about race.” Morris historicizes race in ways that many of his contemporaries strongly resisted. Charles Dilke, for one, preferred in Greater Britain (1869) to take comfort in the belief “that race distinctions will long continue; that miscegenation will go but little way toward blending races; that the dearer are, on the whole, likely to destroy the cheaper people, and that Saxondom will rise triumphant from the doubtful struggle.” In contrast, Morris argues that literature will outlast race and continue to enrich the lives of readers. His primary goal is not to use art to restore and resolidify race: in some sense, race’s only real importance is through its association with art. Morris’s preference for the term “Gothic”—as much an artistic signifier as a racial one—over “Teutonic” is revealing in this respect. Morris is at pains not to over-stress any affinity contemporary “Englishness” might share with the Icelandic sagas and Eddic poems he translates and readapts: he strives just as hard to remind the reader of their distance—in part through those same infelicities of diction and meter that Goode disparaged. In Simon Dentith’s analysis, Morris’s prosody constitutes a “radical break” with Tennyson and other contemporaries who emphasized historical continuity with a poetic voice and style that stayed “within the predominant tradition in English poetry as it was available in the nineteenth century.” Tucker as well stresses how Morris, “surely the least progressivist Marxist on record, was never tempted by the dream of cumulative cultural translatio that entranced his generation” and the forms of epic they produced. For Morris, poetry inhabits its own unique time zone, which gets to why he felt compelled at all to “versify” what was already essentially poetic—a question I return to below.

Morris’s ethical default setting, to put it one way, was one of tolerance and self-criticism: celebrations of English racial or national superiority always seemed to alarm him. As he argued later in “Our Country Right or Wrong,” patriotic rhetoric typically serves to cloak the imposition of economic or
political power at the expense of the disenfranchised: “it prates of the interests of our country, while it is laying the trail of events which will ruin the fortunes, and break the hearts of its citizens: it scolds at wise men and honest men for a policy of isolation, while itself it would have nothing to do with foreign nations except for their ruin and ours.”10 Likewise, the neutral tone in which Morris delivers his observation about racial dissolution in reference to the Volsunga Saga betrays little of the angst surrounding the “extinction discourse” of some later Victorian commentators on race.11 At the same time, Morris resists making global racial assimilation the crowning achievement of world progress, a position Arnold adopts in On the Study of Celtic Literature that enables him to cope with the loss of Welsh as a living language: “the swallowing up of separate provincial nationalities, is a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends; it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation.”12

Morris’s wider perspective is evident even in that most persistent of his racial or cultural distinctions, between the North and South of Europe. Morris, of course, was an early devotee of Ruskin’s commentary on “The Nature of Gothic” in The Stones of Venice (1851–53), where he contrasts two Europes, one rugged and organic in its approach to the arts and architecture, the other more rigidly precise. When the Kelmscott Press reprinted “The Nature of Gothic” in 1892, Morris’s preface called it “one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century.” Ruskin “seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel.”13 That road clearly led north: Morris did not travel often in Europe, but he did make two important trips to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 at a time when British visitors there were still few. Morris also kept journals of his trips that were published in 1911 as part of the Collected Works. Nonetheless, there is little indication in Morris of the need to judge the South as morally and politically deficient vis-à-vis the North. Morris stops well short of the Teutonic one-upmanship displayed, for instance, by Matthew Arnold’s father Thomas or by Charles Kingsley in his attack on Browning noted in chapter 1—ideas that Kingsley developed in a series of lectures later published under the title The Roman and the Teuton.14 Morris’s goal is more to expand the map of Europe—to include those places on the margins, such as Iceland and Scandinavia—and to reveal how they have always informed the cultural identity of Europe. His Northernness is less a repudiation of the South than a recontextualization of it.15 The interest he shares with Swinburne in the medieval, Gothic encounter with classical Greece and Rome is indicative of this attitude as well. Morris sees this crossover not as a travesty but as something that deserved to be understood on its own terms—and on a grander, more epic scale than Swinburne’s.16
As with Swinburne, however, Europe emerges from Morris's work not as a series of separate, inviolate cultures but as regions in continuous negotiation, exchange, and retranslation. His major poems and translations of the North and South—*The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), *The Odyssey* (1887), *The Earthly Paradise, Sigurd the Volsung*—all promote the kinship of sea-oriented traveling cultures in Europe. Morris seems just as consumed by the journeys between places and races as the clashes that occur when travelers arrive. These are very much mobile communities defined by their proximity to coasts and united in ways that go beyond nationality, as the geographer Barry Cunliffe insists in *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples* (2001): “the peoples of the long Atlantic façade of Europe have shared common beliefs and values over thousands of years, conditioned largely by their unique habitat on the edge of the continent facing the ocean. They lived in a resource-rich zone, in many ways remote from neighbours by land yet easily linked to others by sea.”¹⁷ In this grouping, Cunliffe includes most of the same regions Morris traverses—England, Iceland, and the northern and western coasts of France. *Sigurd* especially, as I will discuss, foregrounds the geographical contingencies of the racial and political clashes it explores. Thus well before *News from Nowhere*, Morris was looking for innovative ways to integrate social and environmental contexts in his work.

Ideologically, Morris's poetry can be difficult to characterize, seeming neither culturally conservative nor progressive in the manner of later works, although it does champion an early form of internationalism in the person of Sigurd. Poetry itself, in some sense, fills the gap of clear political aims or ambitions for racial recovery in Morris. What Morris aims for is a poetry of the “science of origins,” as Arnold called the new ethnography in another passage from *On the Study of Celtic Literature*:

> Science has and will long have to be a divider and a separatist, breaking arbitrary and fanciful connections, and dissipating dreams of a premature and impossible unity. Still, science,—true science,—recognises in the bottom of her soul a law of ultimate fusion, of conciliation. To reach this, but to reach it legitimately, she tends. She draws, for instance, towards the same idea which fills her elder and diviner sister, poetry,—the idea of the substantial unity of man; though she draws towards it by roads of her own. But continually she is showing us affinity where we imagined there was isolation. (3:330)

Like the forays onto foreign coasts that constitute much of the movement between nations in *The Earthly Paradise* and *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris shut-
tles between these modes of affinity and isolation. Morris’s poetry attempts to negotiate between a limiting, defining sense of race and the understanding that coming together as a region—Europe—and beyond that, humanity—were equally desirable consummations. The poems test and critique racial affinities, acknowledging their power, but also set them adrift to collide and negotiate with each other. For Morris and Arnold, poetry must be the wide, interdisciplinary discourse that fostered understanding between cultures.

Where, then, does cosmopolitanism assert itself in Morris? Where do his protagonists escape isolation and reach toward affinity? It takes visionary, transcendent figures who in many ways disrupt the normal course of cultural relations in the poems: cosmopolitanism takes wing primarily in the lives and actions of border-crossing, fellowship-seeking heroes such as Kiartan, in “The Lovers of Gudrun” and, to an even greater degree, Sigurd. When they are successful, the fog of tribal and national allegiances lifts to reveal an idealized medieval Europe of free trade, where goods, ideas, and people flow with ease, governed by the laws of guest and host. It is an ideal, however, that tends to vanish as quickly as it appears in Morris. Those factors that stand in the way of cosmopolitanism are never fully reduced: the ties of family and clan, and the violence often necessary to assert them, ultimately overwhelm the Europe of these poems. However, rather than straining against the original sagas and stamping his own political longings on them, Morris remains true to the struggles of these cultures to preserve their identities even as they seek entry into a world that demands engagement of some kind, a world defined by travel. Cosmopolitanism in Morris is always under threat and tempered by this historical reality. Like Clough, Morris pushes hard on the concept before he can claim it as his own.

Turning first to The Earthly Paradise, I want to look closely at how notions of cultural migration manifest themselves in the Prologue and in the poem’s major Northern tale, “The Lovers of Gudrun,” a precursor in many ways to Sigurd the Volsung and the idea of Europe that emerges there. If, as Angela Flury suggests, “to be outside of one’s national boundaries among others is, in fact, to become European,” then The Earthly Paradise attempts to understand the challenges that adhere to this nomadic identity, in both intra-European and extra-European contexts.¹⁸

The Earthly Paradise

At the same time Morris was translating the Volsunga Saga into prose, he continued to work on his long epic The Earthly Paradise, published in four
parts between 1868 and 1870. The poem is massive in scope, consisting of twenty-four tales—two for each month of the calendar year—and is informed throughout by notions of trans-European travel, migration, and hybridity, most pointedly in the encounter between Nordic “Wanderers” and Greek “Elders” that sets the poem in motion. The poem’s cosmopolitan ambitions are thus inherent in its very design, as has been noted by several commentators on Morris including Tucker, as cited earlier, Amanda Hodgson, and Regenia Gagnier. In the introduction to her recent scholarly edition of The Earthly Paradise, Florence Boos draws similar attention to how the poem’s celebration of storytelling embodies cosmopolitan ideals of fellowship, “as tellers of tales from several cultures and chronological periods listen to other tellers of other tales, and contemporary and future hearers share emotions of empathetic recognition.” In my own analysis, I want to elucidate some of the other ways in which the poem dramatizes ideals of European cooperation and exchange while stressing what can be learned from the poem’s emphasis on clashes between cultures, both in the Prologue and in “The Lovers of Gudrun.”

Before the Prologue gets underway in earnest, however, The Earthly Paradise invokes a different, more optimistic kind of travel and exchange that serves as an ideal to which the rest of the poem aims. The opening lines take the form of a command challenging the modern reader’s historical and ecological frame of reference:

Forget six centuries overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
Think, rather, of the packhorse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green. (1–6)

As he would later in News from Nowhere, Morris invites the reader to imagine a landscape freed from the engine of industrialism but not devoid of commerce either. Among the goods traded in the port of London are “pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill / And treasured scanty spice from some far sea, / Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery, / And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne” (10–13). Each good embodies some unique and vital connection to its source, together forming the image of a preindustrial Europe of sustainable free trade, one that will resurface in Sigurd. Presiding over it all, whose “pen / Moves over bills of lading,” is Geoffrey Chaucer in his less familiar role of customs officer (14–15). Morris’s tribute to his poetic forbear
resonates in several ways: the image of the worldly poet, like Morris himself comfortable in the realms of business and art, reinforces the sense of a natural, almost organic Anglo-European cross-cultural fertilization.

In the way the poem sets up each tale, Morris stresses some of the more complex ways that cultures “trade” knowledge of each other through storytelling: after hearing the tale “The Writing on the Image,” the listeners “praised the tale, and for a while they talked / Of other tales of treasure-seekers balked, / And shame and loss for men insatiate stored, / Nitocris’ tomb, the Niblungs’ fatal hoard” (340–43). The Wanderers themselves represent something of a cross-section of Northern European travelers and expatriates, including the “Breton squire” Nicholas (135), who “much lore of many lands” knew and first proposes their journey (139), and a “Swabian priest,” Laurence, skilled in medicine and alchemy (153). The Wanderers also often note the source of their tales in countries they either visited or traded with. The Norwegian teller of “The Proud King” reveals “it happed to me, / Long years agone, to cross the narrow sea / that ’twixt us Drontheimers and England lies” (1.344.5–7), where “many tales we heard, some false, some true, / Of the ill deeds our fathers used to do / Within that land” (15–17). In this case, as he recalls the invasions of England by his ancestors, the teller underscores how these stories can serve as a form of diplomatic recovery going forward in the wake of invasion and war. In some sense, Morris warns against his own perhaps premature celebration of Chaucer’s Europe of free trade and the Wanderers’ investment in finding an even more fanciful “earthly paradise.” In another such reminder, after crossing paths with Edward III of England off the coast of France, Nicholas reveals that his life has always been characterized by the turmoil and unrest of intra-European conflicts: “Thy foes, my Lord, drove out my kin and me, / Ere yet thine armed hand was upon the sea” (519–20). His earliest memory consists of being chased into exile by French royal armies: the “arrow-flight now seems / the first thing rising clear from feeble dreams” (571–72). Indeed, following this opening, Chaucer’s happy port of entry recedes, and the poem segues into the precarious experiences of the Wanderers themselves, for whom peaceful and cooperative encounters are much more elusive.

The Wanderers never find their paradise, but they do arrive finally at a sort of Atlantis, “a nameless city in a distant sea” (17) populated by highly accommodating, sympathetic hosts, not without a sense of cultural kinship to the Wanderers, as the Elder of the City proclaims to them: you are “[n]o barbarous folk, as these our peasants say, / But learned in memories of a long-past day, / Speaking, some few at least, the ancient tongue / That through the lapse of ages still has clung / To us, the seed of the Ionian race” (75–79).
If not actually Greek, then, the islanders identify themselves as cultural forbears of Mediterranean European culture. The leader of the Wanderers, Rolf, reveals that as a child he dwelt with his father, a kind of knight-errant, at Byzantium, the medieval ideal of cosmopolis. The Elders invite him to tell the story of their wanderings, which, along with some of the tales in the body of the poem, begin to reveal a certain nomadic kinship between European cultures north and south. Although the Elders do not travel, several of the stories they tell capture the prevalence of sea-travel in the Greek world. Following the conclusion of “The Lovers of Gudrun,” for instance, one of the Elders introduces the next tale, “The Golden Apples,” which recounts Hercules’s dealings with the sea-god Nereus and his theft of the apples from the daughters of Hesperus, by stating, “My masters! If about the troublous sea / Ye needs must hear, hearken a tale once told / By kin of ours in the dim days of old” (24–26). The longest of the Greek sea-based tales, “The Doom of King Acrisius,” features the island-hopping Perseus, who with the gift of flight ranges across the entire known Greek world, from the western edge of the Atlantic, to Africa, to the distant north where he slays Medusa: “He had passed o’er the Danube and the Rhine, / and heard the faint sound of the northern sea; / But ever northward flew untiringly, / Till Thule lay beneath his feet at last” (964–67).

The Wanderers’ own story, however, is the most expansive and dramatic of the traveling tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, ranging widely across Europe but dwelling more outside its borders in a half-real, half-invented landscape to the West. Here the protagonists hope to find the paradise of the poem’s title but instead encounter a bewildering mix of hospitality and hostility, as if Morris aims to use them to test a broad range of different historical encounters and negotiations. In preparing for the poem, Morris drew on Scandinavian descriptions of the New World centering on the exploits of Leif Erikson, along with accounts of Spanish colonization in Central America, including William Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico* (1843) and Washington Irving’s biography of Christopher Columbus (1828). What might at first seem like a rather odd textual assortment enables the poem to occupy a unique borderland between past and present, travel writing and fantasy, and Europe and its Others. In some ways, the Wanderers’ contact there seems a more hopeful, less imperialistic revision of history. As Rolf notes at one point, “Certes, we might have gathered wealth untold / Amongst them, if thereto had turned our thought. / But none the glittering evil valued aught” (1240–42). With this admission, Morris in fact rewrites an earlier, ballad version of the Prologue where, as Boos puts it, the Wanderers assume the character of “mercenary adventurers—disloyal to each other, heedless of the consequences of
their actions, and brutal to the native peoples they encounter.” This racial antagonism is conveyed in the language of the early draft as well: the most violent of the peoples they clash with is a strangely displaced tribe of “Black men such as our people bring / With ivory and spices rare, / When southward they go sea-roving, / Or like the Greek kings’ eunuchs are.” The later version avoids such racial descriptors; one encounters the term “folk” much more often than race. Morris’s use of the term “forest people” to describe one group they encounter indicates the shift as well to more geographic signifiers. The final impression the Prologue leaves is of a journey historically familiar enough to be recognizable as emblematic of the general European contact with the Americas, yet critically reimagined by Morris: in some respects their encounter is more cooperative and peaceful, but it is still subject to conflicts and misunderstandings by both the Wanderers and those they come across. Morris probes the demands that travel places on both peoples. For the Wanderers, their journey is a process, a test of how to engage others: is their travel motivated by exchange, the desire for fellowship, or by the need to possess and occupy? In some sense, they will not know until they arrive.

The New World of the Prologue is a highly complex, unique kind of contact zone, one that frustrates the Wanderers’ desire to read “paradise” onto the various locations they discover. Morris sets the stage for these potential misreadings when he notes the Wanderers’ dependence for navigation upon Nicholas’s knowledge of the “lore of many lands.” As Rolf explains,

since I knew
Nought but old tales, nor aught of false and true
Midst these, for all of one kind seemed to be
The Vineland voyage o’er the unknown sea
And Swegdir’s search for Godhomme, when he found
The entrance to a new world underground;
But Nicholas o’er many books had pored,
And this and that thing in his mind had stored,
And idle tales from the true report he knew. (333–41)

Based on this knowledge, Nicholas advises that, once reaching the West, they steer south of Greenland where they “shall find / Spice-trees set wavering by the western wind, / And gentle folk who know no guile at least” (363–65). Eventually, however, we discover that Nicholas’s knowledge has little more to offer in the way of fact than Rolf’s legends of Vineland: Morris reminds us that these are stories written on the New World, imported from the West. Overall, their journey traverses an elusive, uncertain geography, and they end up continuously revising their destinations and assumptions about them.
Their first impression of the world beyond Europe is literally one of impenetrability: a “thick, black wood” (944) confronts them, and after failing to cut their way through it, they return to their ships and set out again to find a more accommodating destination. So begins the Prologue’s alternating pattern of sites characterized by strife and confusion followed by oases vaguely resembling the earthly paradise they seek but always leaving something wanting. Morris in many ways brilliantly underscores the confusion of motives and reactions of his travelers, who are never sure how to judge or how to engage the new races they find. The first people they encounter greet them warmly, even as gods: “sure of all the folk I ever saw / These were the gentlest” (1203–4), Rolf says. These natives create a sense of comfort and even familiarity: “though brown indeed through dint of that hot sun,” Rolf surmises, they “[w]ere comely and well knit, as any one / I saw in Greece, and fit for deeds of war, / Though as I said of all men gentlest far” (1227–30). Rolf’s comparison to the fitness of his Ionian hosts reveals a kind of tolerance but also his understanding that he and his listeners must inevitably interpret this new landscape through European racial and cultural norms. Ten of these brown warriors join up with the Wanderers, and other scenes of such cooperation follow, but with a sense of ambivalence on Rolf’s part. At another landing, after first falling victim to a surprise attack that kills their navigator Nicholas, they meet again with a more peaceful people, “most untaught and wild, / Nigh void of arts, but harmless, good, and mild, / Nor fearing us” (1473–75). The Wanderers “built them huts, as well as we could, for we / Who dwell in Norway have great mastery / In woodwright’s craft” (1499–501). The poem leaves open the question of whether these “forest people” are good because they are peaceful or because they are passive and allow themselves to be improved upon. What to take from these people, and what to give them, poses something of a problem for the Wanderers and causes some of them to revise the aims of their quest.

Rolf reflects this uncertainty in several ways, as he expresses the limits of his engagement with the “forest people”: “They learned our tongue, and we too somewhat learned / Of words of theirs; but day by day we yearned / To cross those mountains” (1505–7). He is willing to go a certain distance to understand and bond with them, but their overriding quest and mission—the promise that beyond the hills lies the earthly paradise—compels them onward, although not without some debate. Rolf in fact berates those who refuse to join him and “think it well / With this unclad and barbarous folk to dwell” (1551–52). Anticipating the modern reader’s potential discomfort with Rolf’s remarks here, Boos suggests in an annotation that “Rolf and the others move on because they are impelled by their quest, not for reasons of racist contempt” (119–20n)—contempt of the kind she suggests is evident,
by way of comparison, in Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall” (1842). If the poem is free of the unabashed Eurocentrism of Tennyson’s speaker—and Morris’s attempts to tone down the racial language of the first draft of “The Wanderers” would also support this—the passage remains emblematic of the sense of cultural proprietorship in Western colonial encounters. At the same time, Morris reveals his own struggle over how to present native American peoples, not just from his own point of view, but from the late-medieval perspective of the Wanderers he is attempting to recreate.

Morris’s larger point seems to be, simply, that the Wanderers don’t know what they are getting themselves into, and there is a good deal of debate among them about how to proceed and engage the people they encounter. In what might be a form of poetic justice for his eagerness to read his own desires onto a landscape resistant to them, Rolf’s journey over the mountain brings them up against “folk the worst of all we came to know; / Scarcely like to men, yea, worse than most of beasts, / For of men slain they made their impious feasts” (1614–16). Their fighting with them represents some of the most brutal in the poem. The Wanderers kill their wounded prisoners, and Rolf recognizes that “[s]o with the failing of our hoped delight / We grew to be like devils” (1632–33). After some weeks Rolf and his men return to those they had left behind, some of whom, in a possible allusion to Tennyson, have taken “brown wives” (1664). By now, however, Rolf has gained new-found respect for those “grown too wise / Upon this earth to seek for paradise” (1591–92). There remains throughout the poem a conflict between the benefits of staying put, or negotiating with this new world on its own terms, and an equally powerful wanderlust that brings Europe into contact and conflict with others. Even later, when Rolf and his men find themselves happily ensconced in an idealized Aztec city of gold, “We longed to be by some unknown far shore; / Once more our life seemed trivial, poor, and vain, / Till we our lost fool’s paradise might gain” (2056–58).

The Wanderers’ final stop in the West comprises Morris’s most sophisticated commentary on the confused, often contradictory nature of European encounters abroad and what they reveal about European identity overall. While still living in the gold city, a “young man strange within the place” (2127) convinces Rolf that, if he will follow him to a different island, they will finally achieve their goal of immortality. They make the journey, but, once there, find they have been tricked. They are greeted as gods, but in a sort of contemptuous, self-serving way that the young man explains:

O ye, who sought to find
Unending life against the law of kind,
Within this land, fear ye not now too much,
For no man's hand your bodies here shall touch,
But rather with all reverence folk shall tend
Your daily lives, until at last they end
By slow decay: and ye shall pardon us
The trap whereby beings made so glorious
As ye are made, we drew unto this place.
Rest ye content then! for although your race
Comes from the Gods, yet are ye conquered here,
As we would conquer them, if we knew where
They dwell. . . . (2459–71)

It is an altogether bizarre episode: stripped of their armor, the Wanderers must sit imprisoned as they behold the “many mummeries that they wrought / About the altar” in a rite of worship as torture (2505–6). The incident also recalls a moment from earlier in the poem, when, as the Wanderers contemplate what the New World has in store for them, they remember a warning from a Genoese trader: “for mayhap men dwell here / Who worship dreadful gods, and sacrifice / Poor travellers to them in such horrid wise” (858–60). In effect, the Wanderers become those gods and their sacrificial victims, overtaken, in some sense, by the narrative that they projected onto the New World. Eventually the Wanderers are freed—not by their own efforts—but as a result of a rebellious attack on the city. The specific motives of the attackers, or why the Wanderers’ captors thought possessing them would somehow prevent the attack, are not made clear—and what to conclude from the encounter overall, with its many layers of irony, is also ambiguous. Postcolonial theorization of the self-defeating nature of the colonial gaze, “as anxious as it is assertive,” according to Homi K. Bhabha, provides one way of interpreting this scene.26 Joining Frantz Fanon with Jacques Lacan, Bhabha continues, “In the objectification of the scopic drive there is always the threatened return of the look; in the identification of the Imaginary relation there is always the alienating other (or mirror) which crucially returns its image to the subject.”27 Morris similarly captures the schizophrenic, self-contradictory nature of Western views of civilizations in the New World. The Wanderers, in essence, are made captive by the same motives that propelled their own quest: they encounter a people seeking divine favor that will preserve their wealth and comfort in an earthly paradise. They become the captive audience to a parody of their own pretensions to immortality and the status of gods.

Does Morris suggest, then, that the better alternative for the Wanderers was simply to have stayed at home? The Earthly Paradise does not appear to
advocate this either: somewhat ironically, perhaps, it was only through their travel that the Wanderers were able to question and revise their impression of that unknown world. In addition, for all of the misunderstanding overshadowing the Wanderers’ travels, Morris points as well to a future of conversation, if only briefly. As Rolf describes the process, “Those forest folk with ours their lot had cast” begin the process of translation: “when all our tongue at last they knew / They told us tales, too long to tell as now” (1732, 34–35). One could argue here, from a more critical perspective, that the forest people nonetheless remain silenced, accompanying the Wanderers but not really saying or doing anything of consequence. While their untold stories remain a blank space in the poem, to his credit, Morris acknowledges that he does not really know (or can faithfully render) the stories of the forest people. Elsewhere, however, as we have seen, he stresses the importance of learning these stories, absorbing the “Bibles,” as he put it in the Pall Mall Gazette letter, that undergird world literature. What the Prologue to The Earthly Paradise presents is a kind of fellowship in the making—a dialogue that has begun but with the translation still ongoing, and this is where Morris’s own social goals as a poet come into play. Fictional narratives of travel, poetic or otherwise, grow out of real world encounters: the dialogue that The Earthly Paradise consists of in its entirety, and that we participate in as readers, represents one way to break free from internecine conflicts.

Morris’s own creative engagement with the North of Europe could also be seen as part of that ongoing dialogue—the need to bring to the fore neglected stories, in this case from the outlands of Europe. His major effort to set the dialogue in motion in The Earthly Paradise is “The Lovers of Gudrun,” the longest tale in the volume and the one he regarded most highly.28 “The Lovers of Gudrun” anticipates the direction Morris would soon take with Sigurd the Volsung by offering a more concentrated investigation of a culture defined by travel, one also at a historical crossroads in its relations with the rest of Europe. Like “The Wanderers,” it foregrounds the question of what compels people to travel and what can be achieved, not merely lost, when cultures make contact.

By the time Morris began the poem, he was already deep in his study and translation of Icelandic literature. He had experimented with doing a prose translation of the Laxdaela Saga from which the Gudrun story derives, but later abandoned it, thinking his efforts would be better directed toward composing his own poetic re-vision of the material. As he explained in a letter:

The saga itself is full of interesting incident, but has no pretensions to artistic unity, being indeed what it calls itself, a chronicle of the dwellers in Lax-
Phrases such as “coarseness of manner” and “I had a right to soften” are red flags for readers anticipating a quintessentially “Victorian” mistranslation of Morris’s source, and it remains something of a commonplace among critics to lament the way he apparently sentimentalized the story or infused it with elements of his own troubled marriage. Morris did concede that Gudrun’s role in the original saga was minor and more one-dimensional, “much more the stock ‘stirring woman’ of the north than I thought fit to make her.”

Morris also expounded more fully on the thoughts and motives of the other members of the love triangle in the poem, Kiartan and his brother-in-arms Bodli. By updating the characters’ emotional and psychological dimensions for a modern audience, so the argument goes, Morris thus diminished the spare, dignified tone that he admired of Icelandic literature in general. At the same time, Morris’s poem lost some of its purchase on the “science of origins,” teaching us less about the culture that conceived the Laxdaela Saga. I want to argue, however, that these changes, especially as concern Gudrun, who comes to embody the larger cultural struggle between home and abroad, work to reinforce the poem’s exploration of the competing demands of situated versus traveling identities. Morris, in fact, would perform a similar makeover on Gudrun’s namesake in Book IV of Sigurd, who relives the dilemma faced by the homebound Laxdaela-Gudrun but would take bolder action in the political sphere.

Just as he promises, Morris provides greater narrative unity in his rendition of the saga, but he does not lose the sense of a tale historically and geographically grounded in the transformations of Icelandic and Scandinavian culture. “Herdholt my tale names for the stead” (1), it begins, identifying the location in western Iceland where the families of Gudrun and Kiartan reside. The plot shifts between Iceland and Norway—where King Tryggvesson, at his seat in Drontheim, had begun the process of Christianizing the region around A.D. 1000. In several ways, Morris draws attention to how much Icelandic culture is defined, on the one hand, by isolation, being “[c]ooped up in this cold corner of the world” (1003), and, on the other, by necessary and frequent contacts with the outside world. Morris, for
instance, reminds us that the wood used to construct King Olaf’s homestead has been “brought / Over the sea” from Norway (406–7). Christianity was another cultural import Iceland struggled with at this time. The historical Thangbrand, the same “German bishop” (1542) who converts Tryggivson, later travels to Iceland to evangelize there but is forced to flee. The tale thus features a culture already well defined by the nomadic movements that sustain it but also pose unique challenges to its identity.

Kiartan, who pledges himself to Gudrun shortly before setting out abroad, is the character most defined by travel. The poem notes his gifts as a swimmer (522) and his related longing to be on the sea in order to establish his true identity: “I yet must think of roving” (1021), he tells Gudrun at one point, summing up his identity as the quest-oriented male. The poem, however, does not restrict this longing to him. Gudrun offers to accompany Kiartan overseas, a scene Morris develops much more fully than the original saga does. Morris chooses to underscore Gudrun’s longing to take control of her fate:

Things have there been more strange,
Than that we three should sit above the oars,
The while on even keel twixt the low shores
Our long-ship breasts the Thames flood, or the Seine.
Methinks in biding here is little gain. (998–1002)

Sensing that Kiartan gives serious attention to this possibility, another difference from the saga, Gudrun attempts to persuade him further: “let the rough salt sea / Deal with me as it will, so thou be near! / Let me share glory with thee” (1128–30). Gudrun has already lost another husband at sea and senses she is about to lose another, and we see her frustration at not being able to infiltrate the male culture of travel in the poem. With Kiartan unable to say yes or no, Gudrun finally answers for him, “I know my heart, thou knowest it not; farewell” (1152). This becomes a crucial failure to connect in the poem, one that overshadows Kiartan’s happy prediction to Bodli of the potential fruits of their voyage, which could take them as far as Byzantium:

He fell to talk of all that they should do
In the fair countries that they journeyed to.
Not Norway only, or the western lands,
In time to come, he said, might know their hands,
But fairer places, folk of greater fame,
Where 'neath the shadow of the Roman name
Sat the Greek king, gold-clad, with bloodless sword. (1230–36)

Kiartan here speaks as much to the lost potential in his relationship with Gudrun, the voyage together never undertaken. Tellingly, Bodli barely listens to him, his mind still wandering back to Gudrun. Kiartan nonetheless undergoes a significant transformation once abroad, as he endeavors to find ways to bridge the distance between Norway and Iceland and between Christian and pagan Europe.

Kiartan must face this challenge the moment he arrives in Norway, where, for King Tryggvason, “nothing else... was good / But that all folk should bow before the Rood” (1280–81). Historically, the kingdom’s acceptance of Christianity represents an important stage in Scandinavia’s integration with the traditions of continental Europe, and Morris does much to show what was at stake in the conversion. Kiartan strongly repudiates the new faith at first: “I left Iceland for another thing / Than to curse all the dead men of my race” (1375–76), capturing the threat posed by the new religion to native culture. Morris also stresses the political motives on the King’s part, subtly conveyed at one point through the image of his enormous church, which “cast its shadow down / Upon the low roofs of the goodly town” (1324–25).

Kiartan instinctively resists the not-so-subtle ways King Tryggvason tends to mix hospitality with threats. Tryggvason invites them to his hall only to insist on their conversion, and Kiartan must struggle with the question of whether to defend his honor through violence: “It seems the master of this new-found lore / Said to his men once: Think ye that I bring / Peace upon earth? nay, but a sword. O king, / Behold the sword ready to meet thy sword!” (1455–58). The lines represent an unlikely familiarity with the Bible on Kiartan’s part and reveal less about him than they do Morris’s medieval narrator. Speaking from the perspective of a fourteenth-century Christian European, the narrator struggles to balance his admiration of the pagan heroes of the tale with the spiritual investment in Christianity that he and the other Wanderers share—betrayed on occasion by lines such as, “Fair goes the ship that beareth out Christ’s truth / Mingled of hope, of sorrow, and of ruth” (1796–97). The cultural border-crossing of the poem thus operates on two textual and historical levels.

At the hands of Morris and his medieval spokesman, Kiartan’s struggle between the two directions is amplified more than in the original saga, where he breaks down rather suddenly after hearing a Christmas sermon. In the poem, after an uneasy feast together, Kiartan returns to the king the
following day and describes a more pitched mental struggle between the two traditions:

He looked upon the king a little while,
Then slowly sank his sword, and, taking it
By the sharp point, to where the king did sit
He made his way, and said: Nay, thou hast won;
Do thou for me what no man yet has done,
And take my sword, and leave me weaponless:
And if thy Christ is one who e’en can bless
An earthly man, or heed him aught at all,
On me too let his love and blessing fall;
But if no Christ, nor Odin help, why, then
Still at the worst are we the sons of men,
And will we, will we not, yet we must hope,
And after unknown happiness must grope,
Since the known fails us, as the elders say. (1621–34)

Even as he says of the new religion, “all these things are but words” (1636), Kiartan seems to be turning into a Christ figure himself, echoing another passage from the Bible as he brings the “Son of Man” down to a human level. Kiartan appears more willing to be transformed by the new religion on its merits, unlike Tryggvason, who sees it primarily as a means to greater power. In turn, a kind of role reversal takes place, with Kiartan’s speech converting him—if not to the dogma of Christianity than at least to its message of peace and brotherhood. Tryggvason tells him to keep his sword and “[d]eem of my land and house e’en as thy home” (1639). The remainder of Kiartan’s stay is marked by peace and gestures of fellowship, even though technically Kiartan is held in ransom pending Iceland’s conversion, while Bodli is allowed to return to Iceland: “Great love there grew ’twixt Kiartan and the king / From that time forth, and many a noble thing / Was planned betwixt them” (1652–54).

What these plans lead to is a Kiartan increasingly set off from those around him, such as Bodli, who has always seemed the more reluctant traveler. Kiartan’s vision and leadership continue to evolve, however, while everyone else’s remains stagnant. His attention to the king’s daughter Ingioborg, for example, seems less a betrayal of Gudrun than an act of kindness and fellowship. Ingioborg senses this, and is remarkably forgiving of his decision to return to Iceland, when one considers the vows of vengeance that usually follow broken engagements in the sagas. She makes a telling gesture of hos-
pitality to him and Gudrun: “Fain were I she should hate me not. Behold, / Here is a coif, well wrought of silk and gold / By folk of Micklegarth, who had no thought / Of thee or me, and thence by merchants brought / who perchance loved nought” (2248–52). The reference to Micklegarth, the Norse settlement near Constantinople, is also significant, invoking the idealized cultural crossroads that Rolf had mentioned in the Wanderer’s prologue.

Upon his return to Iceland, however, Kiartan discovers the consequences of not taking Gudrun with him and the difficulties that can overwhelm the return of the native: “well-known things, did seem / But pictures now or figures in a dream” (2382–83). Kiartan is unable to transcend the family rivalries that have continued to fester in his absence: Bodli has married Gudrun after convincing her that Kiartan no longer wished to return to her. Kiartan in turn also marries someone else, but the tension between clans goes on unabated. The gift of the coif is stolen amidst a series of other insults and retaliations between clans, all pointing toward the general breakdown of hospitality that had peaked in Drontheim. Completing his transition into a sacrificial Christ figure, Kiartan is finally ambushed and killed by Bodli at Gudrun’s behest. The lost promise of Kiartan’s and Gudrun’s never realized marriage and journey together haunts the poem right up until the end and is captured in Gudrun’s famous line, when called upon to look back at her life, “I did the worst to him I loved the most” (4903).

Left behind in her cold corner of the world, Gudrun’s emotions have nowhere to go and turn inward. In the end, as much as Kiartan, she epitomizes the struggles between affinity and isolation that define Iceland. In the closing scene of the tale, Morris offers one final glance into the limitations gender imposes on her. The son to whom she speaks her final assessment of Kiartan enjoys the freedom to range abroad, making it to Byzantium as a member of the Scandinavian bodyguard that attended the emperor. If he lacks the messianic overtones of Kiartan, he does recover something of his wider vision: “A travelled man and mighty, gay of weed, / Doer belike of many a desperate deed / Within the huge wall of the Grecian king” (4844–46). The contrast between maternal and filial identities here could not be clearer: Bodli (her son’s name) goes where she might have. Longing to reach outward, she is charged instead with preserving and fostering domestic identity. In the end, her character serves as a microcosm of the larger ebb and flow of the culture she embodies. In Morris’s next major poem of the North, Kiartan, the noble traveler figure sacrificed to family quarrels and ambitions, will reappear as Sigurd. Gudrun, the woman of restricted movements and ambitions, will also reappear, as Morris asks again how these seafaring cultures will engage the world around them.
Sigurd the Volsung

Sigurd the Volsung is much more than a longer, bloodier version of “The Lovers of Gudrun”: the poem’s settings, peoples, and history all change in significant ways. On all of these fronts, the poem is a good deal less specific. Where the Volsungs reside is never made clear, except that it must be somewhere near the shore since it is easiest to reach the kingdom of Siggeir the Goth to the south by sea. J. M. S. Tompkins theorizes that “Morris’s conception of the story of Sigurd as a developing myth, valid for his own age and those to come, probably accounts for his snapping the twisted and eroded links which still hold the Volsungasaga to the history and topography of the North.”

Of the racial makeup of the poem, Tompkins observes, “All his characters, except Atli and his Easterners, are Goths, and worship Odin the Goth. His only place-name is Lymdale.” Indeed, there are few if any appeals to what might be called Anglo-Norse ethnic or genetic pride in the poem, apart from the fact that Sigmund is taller than his foreign adversary Siggeir whom, as Tompkins notes, is racially akin to him anyway.

This racial and topographical indeterminacy is even stronger than Tompkins implies. Morris consistently opts to stress culture more by compass heading than race: in Book 4, Atli is never the Hun, but the “Eastland” lord, who rules by the “inner sea” (254). Other geographical allusions include references to Atli’s “[w]hite steeds from the Eastland horse-plain” (247) and how the sun sets differently relative to the horizon there, “hold[ing] dusky night aloof” (257). In turn, the poem’s cultural collisions have the feel of inevitable movements or migrations across the face of the earth: the quest for power and wealth seems almost an afterthought. Along similar lines, Morris drops the family connection between Brynhild and Atli, so that he is no longer drawn to engage the Niblungs out of the need to avenge her death. Gudrun, as Atli’s envoy describes her, is “the glory of the Westland” (247): only later does Atli find out about the treasure horde the Niblungs have acquired from Fafnir via Sigurd. Peoples are defined by their proximity to each other and the topography of the lands they inhabit. One is east, west, south, north; or resides in the outlands or on the sea-rim; or, if not as fortunate, in the “waste places of the earth” with the shape-changing serpent Fafnir (61). It’s also worth recalling that the poem, unlike the prose translation, makes no claim in a preface or prologue to inspire readers along racial lines.

These changes all contribute to what might be called Morris’s “geographical vision,” one that organizes, in a sense, his aesthetic and ethnographic aims, and points to something more innovative than the kind of dehistoricizing Tompkins describes. In Morris’s time, geography, as an organized field
of study, was first coming into being and was more closely tied to exploration. Even more so than today, geography was a highly interdisciplinary field, as Helena Michie and Ronald R. Thomas explain: “the tools and discourse of geography were being appropriated by a host of other disciplines—for example, biology, anthropology, ethnology, physics, and literary and travel writing—and the influence of geography expanded well beyond the confines of the profession of geography itself.”

Morris had a broad understanding of the cultural and natural forces that shape human societies—one of “the most interdisciplinary figures in all of western culture,” as David Latham has described him. All of these interests—in work, travel, translation, race, politics—in some ways come together under Morris’s geographical vision. What Morris is up to might best be equated with the subfield of “human geography,” as it became known in the twentieth century, which concerns itself with how human beings adapt to the topographical and meteorological conditions of their environment. Morris’s geographic rendition of the poetry of the “science of origins” thus places culture, nation, and race within a new intellectual frame of reference. War and other struggles between peoples do not form part of a social-Darwinian contest to see which race is the more fit. Morris instead foregrounds how cultures come to terms with the challenges, threats, and opportunities posed to them by their environment and the peoples that come in contact with them. These encounters can trigger intense and bloody defenses of tribal honor, but the poem also seeks some way out of this cycle through more cooperative negotiations spearheaded by Sigurd.

Viewed from this geographical angle, Morris’s objection to Richard Wagner’s rendition of the Volsunga Saga, made before he had decided to “versify” it himself, is all the more revealing. Morris appears to have disliked opera to begin with, but he seems equally concerned about German colonization of the story. Two years before he began work on Sigurd the Volsung, he complained, “I look upon it as nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gaslights of an opera: the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art—the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express!” First, by accusing Wagner of co-opting a “world-wide” subject for German nationalist ends, Morris fashions a space for his own somewhat denationalized version later. The reference to opera as a “rococo” form also resonates along national lines, betraying his fear of an Italianate, spectacle-oriented treatment of the saga; Wagner becomes a kind of unholy German-Italian hybrid in Morris’s eyes. It was therefore important to return the saga to its most unadorned, authentic state, and he saw poetry as the vehicle for this endeavor. It is ironic,
perhaps, to claim that an English poetic translation would be more “world-wide” than a German operatic one, but what this points to is how Morris has all along defined poetry as the genre of a more objective science of origins. Only through the more historically grounded, ideologically less determined medium of Morris’s poetry could the saga retain its “world-wide” relevance and argue on behalf of those same cosmopolitan values.

Book 1 of the poem sets the stage for Sigurd’s later arrival by focusing on the generation previous to him. The lives of his grandfather Volsung, father Sigmund, and step-brother Sinfiotli are all largely defined by insults to tribal honor and the reprisals that must inevitably follow them. If anything, Book 1 displays the failure of cosmopolitanism and diplomacy amid a world of disorder that Sigurd must later set to rights. Book 1 also raises the question of whether a tradition-bound, largely self-contained community such as the Volsungs can fruitfully engage a more complex, threatening modern world and still survive. This challenge appears in the shape of King Siggeir of Gothland, who sends an envoy asking for the hand of Volsung’s daughter Signy. They feel vaguely insulted by Siggeir’s offer to make them, essentially, his ally: “Now he deems thy friendship goodly, and thine help in the battle good, / And for these will he give his friendship and his battle-aid again” (2). Although Siggeir’s kingdom is wealthier and militarily more powerful, the Volsungs still recall with pride “how they fared with the Goths o’er ocean and acre and wood, / Till all the north was theirs, and the utmost southern lands” (2). They accept the proposal, but it is almost immediately overshadowed by feelings of hurt pride between the kingdoms, exacerbated in many ways by the arrival of the “one-eyed and seeming ancient” Odin at the marriage celebration. Odin thrusts a sword into the Branstock at the center of Volsung’s hall, precipitating a contest of national prowess in which each of the Goth guests fails to retrieve the sword before Sigmund finally succeeds. Siggeir grumbles, “They have trained me here / As a mock for their woodland bonds-men; and yet they shall buy it dear” (7). When Siggeir asks for the sword as a gift, offering in return “a store-house” filled with “iron, and huge-wrought amber, that the southern men love sore,” Sigmund refuses: “when the purple-selling men / Come buying thine iron and amber, dost thou sell thine honour then?” (8–9). The exchange underscores the clash of values embodied in the two cultures: one more expansive, defined by wealth cultivated through trade and conquest, the other content more to stay within its boundaries and traditions.

It soon appears that the Volsungs might have been better off had they remained at home and refused Siggeir’s initial offer of intermarriage between the kingdoms. The poem also makes clear, however, that there is no alter-
native to this engagement. Cultures will collide, especially those defined so much by their proximity to the sea. Volsung himself recognizes this and will not refuse Siggeir’s offer to “come to the house of the Goth-kings as honoured guests and dear,” even though he knows he has grounds for concern. Volsung “speedily” replies to him, “No king of the earth might scorn / Such noble bidding, Siggeir: and surely will I come / To look upon thy glory and the Goths’ abundant home” (9). Later Signy and the other Volsung women warn them not to go, but Volsung reveals the dilemma his sense of honor leaves him in: “shall a king hear murder when a king’s mouth blessing saith?” (12). These are the values he clings to and that have defined an orderly Europe of hospitality and exchange. Unable to heed Signy’s final warning to “turn back from the murderous shore” (13), Volsung and his sons are ambushed upon their arrival in the land of the Goths. The poem thus foregrounds the question of what, or who, might emerge to restore the values Volsung dies upholding, or enable them to travel and readapt to a world inhabited by the likes of Siggeir.

Sigmund is only the partial answer, since he must first lend himself to an existence defined by survival, war, and vengeance for his father’s killing. After the ambush, all are wiped out except for Sigmund and nine of his brothers, who have been taken prisoner and chained to trees in a remote forest where a she-wolf appears nightly to devour them in succession. Sigmund alone survives when he “too grew woolfish” and bites into her before freeing himself and strangling her (21). Morris seems eager to play upon these clashes between civilized and barbaric behavior and, similarly, between human and animal that characterize the sagas and ancient epic in general (one thinks of Gilgamesh, for instance, or The Odyssey). Morris retains another scene from the saga when Sigmund, with his son Sinfiotli, go on a kind of killing spree after donning wolf-skins: “and they howled out wolfish things, / Like the grey dogs of the forest; though somewhat the hearts of kings / Abode in their bodies of beasts” (32). Sinfiotli, in fact, points to another taboo Morris links with animalism—incest—since he is conceived when Signy appears to Sigmund in disguise. Signy cites the demands of family honor to justify her incestuous sin: “my child and thine he is, / Begot in that house of the Dwarf-kind for no other end than this; / The son of Volsung’s daughter, the son of Volsung’s son. / Look, look! might another helper this deed with thee have done?” (41). Signy here links her actions to the barbarous, prehuman race of dwarves, highlighting the sort of regression embodied in her deed and in the fierce, ruthless Sinfiotli. Later, Sinfiotli kills Signy’s children—his own half-brothers—when they storm Siggeir’s castle: “Sinfiotli taketh them up / And breaketh each tender body as a drunkard breaketh a cup” (36). He
personifies the last, violent gasp of the all-for-the-clan mentality that gave him birth. Sigmund too must grow wolfish at times to survive and win vengeance, but he remains more sober and humane in contrast. Signy calls upon him first to slay her children, and he replies, “Nay this shall be far from me / To slay thy children sackless” (36). The incidents serve as a reminder of the strong demand that acting on behalf of blood ties places on human morality and human communities at large. Family and national pride, displayed in excess by both Siggeir and the Volsungs, feed upon themselves even if in retaliation: indeed, incest and cannibalism become twin taboos in the poem. They are stark violations of the body—of oneself and one’s fellow humans—an unhealthy turning inward that is about as anti-cosmopolitan, presumably, as one can get. Signy, in fact, commits suicide after revealing the incest to Sigmund. Later, foes taunt Sinfiotli as the one who “slay[s] his brothers” (44), ironic for someone whose very existence is for the vindication of family honor. It is fitting, then, after they return to the Volsung kingdom, that Sinfiotli’s stepmother Broghild poisons him in retaliation for murdering her son Gudrod. Vengeance on behalf of family and clan is associated with a kind of inevitable, necessary animalism if it is to be successful, but it is also clearly a dead end in the poem, one indeed characterized primarily by murder and suicide.

The killing over bonds of kinship finally overwhelms Sigmund as well. Its demands have always dictated the battles he engages in and his movements back and forth across borders. Following the death of Siggeir, he at last departs from “the strangers’s shore” (43), but only to see his kingdom come apart later in the conflict between Broghild and Sinfiotli. With strong echoes of Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” he declares, “I would cross this water, for my life hast lost its light, / And mayhap there be deeds for a king to be found on the further shore” (48). He travels to an unspecified island kingdom to wed another queen, the mother of Sigurd, the hero and leader who will begin to break the cycle of vengeance killing. In the end, Sigmund lives and dies as a kind of transitional figure, caught between the animalistic Sinfiolti and the more hopeful future embodied in Sigurd. Caught between civilization and the forest, wolf and man, he also seems caught between home and abroad, longing to travel but impeded by the demands of family honor. Fittingly, his last battle and his death occur by the sea, “on the edge of a stranger-land” (58), the realm of Hiordis’s scorned suitor Lyngi. Book 1 leaves open the question of whether cultures can travel, engage others, and still remain internally cohesive. These are the priorities Morris puts to the test in Books 2 and 3 of the poem and that he embodies in Sigurd.

The circumstances surrounding Sigurd’s birth and upbringing differ
remarkably from Sinfiotli’s. As Book 2 opens, “Peace lay on the land of the Helper and the house of Elf his son” (61), where Hiordis is taken after the battle by the sea: “There no great store had the franklin, and enough the hireling had; / And a child might go unguarded the length and breadth of the land” (61). The land of the Helper seems a model community distinguished by fellowship and cooperation among its inhabitants, values Sigurd puts into practice later among the Niblungs. As is prophesied of him in his childhood,

Men heard the name and 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;  
It went through street and market; o’er meadow and acre it went,  
And over the wind-stirred forest and the dearth of the sea-beat bent,  
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)

Despite his ultimate goal to use Sigurd to steal the Reingold from his half-brother Fafnir, Sigurd’s tutor, the dwarf Regin, offers his pupil a remarkably well-rounded education, one not without attention to languages and the arts:43

he learns him many things;  
Yea, all save the craft of battle, that men learned the sons of kings;  
The smithying sword and war-coat; the carving runes aright;  
The tongues of many countries, and soft speech for men’s delight;  
The dealing with harp-strings, and the winding ways of song. (68)

Sigurd’s destiny is to travel, but not without some reluctance to abandon the home that has treated him so well—a dilemma that will be repeated later with Brynhild and the Niblungs, who pull him in opposing directions. Only through Regin’s pleading, which Sigurd knows is mostly self-serving, is he able to leave: “thou, a deedless man, too much thou eggest me: / And these folk are good and trusty, and the land is lovely and sweet” (73).

Considering the case for going, Sigurd says to himself, “I dwell in a land that is ruled by none of my blood” (72). It stands out as the only time in the poem when Sigurd expresses anything that amounts to family or racial identification—and it comes at a time when he’s somewhat disingenuously searching for reasons to abandon the foster-land of the Helper. Thus rather than emphasizing Sigurd’s Volsungian allegiances, the reference foreshadows that Sigurd’s ideal state is to be unaffiliated—a kind of free-agent bestowing
on others what he has gained from the Elf-kingdom. Sigurd also overlooks his family in another more literal way that distinguishes Morris’s poem from the original saga: he forgets that he has to avenge the death of his father at Lygni’s hands, a mission he undertakes in Morris’s prose translation before going after Fafnir but which Morris drops from his itinerary in the poem (Collected Works 7:324–27). Morris is careful not to cast Sigurd in the same clan-focused, vengeance-fueled mold as his step-brother Sinfiotli or even his more civil father. The omission, if not “true” to Morris’s source material, does help to lend unity of purpose to his more highly evolved rendition of Sigurd.

Vengeance and the promise of riches are never enough to motivate Morris’s hero. Even with Regin, it is not until Sigurd inadvertently tastes of Fafnir’s heart and undergoes an animalistic reversion that he is able to kill him: “wise in the ways of the beast-kind as the Dwarfs of old he grew; / And he knitted his brows and hearkened, and wrath in his heart arose; / For he felt beset of evil in a world of many foes” (115). Sigurd, however, soon forgets this taste of anti-social feeling, and the rest of his deeds in the poem reaffirm the commitment to the wider ideals of friendship and egalitarianism he first exhibited in the land of the Helper. After taking the treasure that had been guarded by Fafnir, “somewhat south he turneth; for he would not be alone, / But longs for the dwellings of man-folk, and the kingly people’s speech” (119). After first meeting and rescuing Brynhild, Sigurd briefly visits among her people, where he is welcomed in a way typical of the spontaneous hospitality that he seems to invite everywhere: “Hail, thou that ridest hither from the North and the desert lands! / Now thy face is turned to our hall-door and thereby must be thy way” (141). His hosts “are all unsatiate of gazing on his face / For his like have they never looked on for goodliness and grace” (143). Sigurd’s arrival among the Niblungs evokes similar feelings of awe, although this time he will stay and forge an alliance. Sigurd announces to them what amounts to a justice-driven interventionist foreign policy:

For peace I bear unto thee, and to all kings of the earth,
Who bear the sword aright, and are crowned with the crown of worth;
But unpeace to the lords of evil, and the battle and the death;
And the edge of the sword to the traitor, and the flame to the slanderous breath:
And I would that the loving were loved, and I would that the weary should sleep,
And that man should hearken to man, and that he that soweth should reap.
Now wide in the world would I fare, to seek the dwellings of Kings.

(154–55)
Duty to others rather than personal glory fuels his quest narrative. He touches as well on what will become a recurring theme of communication and cooperation between others under his leadership—the different peoples he encounters all begin to “hearken” to each other.

Sigurd’s status among the Niblungs is best described by King Giuki: “thou, our guest and our stranger, thou goest to the war, / And who knows but thine hand may carry the hope of all the earth” (159). Giuki recognizes that Sigurd is not merely a vassal or mercenary who has joined up with them out of convenience: as an outsider with a higher purpose, there are limits to what he will do on their behalf. Being a guest and stranger, Sigurd is not kin, but he is still something more than a visitor. True to his promise, Sigurd accomplishes much more than merely going to war and raking in the spoils. He and the Niblung sons range across the north of Europe, “to the sea . . . and the battle-laden oak” (160), and the continent seems transformed in their wake. The Niblung women “sing of the prison’s rending and the tyrant laid alow, / And the golden thieves’ abasement, and the stilling of the churl” (161). Rather than creating enemies in the lands they invade, Sigurd and his men forge allies and open up lines of communication and trade. They sing too “in the streets of the foemen of the war-delivered land; / And they tell how the ships of the merchants come free and go at their will” (161). The contrast to the original saga, as rendered in Morris’s prose translation, is noteworthy. While certainly heroic, the Saga-Sigurd is still part of the same warrior culture where conquest and treasure-seeking require no justification beyond being that they’re just what great kings do: “His sport and pleasure it was to give aid to his own folk, and to prove himself in mighty matters, to take wealth from his unfriends, and give the same to his friends” (7:342). Morris’s poetic Sigurd is much more careful about the friends he chooses and the quests they undertake, which are never about self-aggrandizement or profiteering: he is redistributing wealth more than anything else. In *Sigurd* the poem, the peaceful, medieval Europe of free trade seen at the beginning of *The Earthly Paradise* reemerges:

So fares the tale of Sigurd through all kingdoms of the earth,
And the tale is told of his doings by the utmost ocean’s girth;
And fair feast the merchants deem it to warp their sea-beat ships
High up the Niblung River, that their sons may hear his lips
Shed fair words o’er their ladings and the opened southland bales;
Then they get them aback to their countries, and tell how all men’s tales
Are nought, and vain and empty in setting forth his grace,
And the unmatched words of his wisdom, and the glory of his face.
Came the wise men too from the outlands, and the lords of singers’ fame. (162–63)

Morris attributes a free flow of goods, ideas, and the arts to Sigurd’s leadership that is global in its reach. In many ways, this passage records Sigurd’s and the poem’s high-water mark, the complete disappearance of tyranny and tribal infighting: “And no foe and no betrayer, and no envier now hath he” (162). The next section of the poem is entitled, “Of the cup of evil drink that Grimhild the Wise-wife gave to Sigurd,” and it marks the resurgence of family allegiances and ambitions in Sigurd the Volsung.

The central role of the “stirring woman” Grimhild in Sigurd’s downfall and the end of the poem’s outward-looking ethos begs the question of whether women merely impede cosmopolitanism in Morris’s adaptations of Icelandic sagas. Do women have any role to play—other than as diplomatic barter—in peaceful negotiations between kingdoms? Women in Morris do embody stronger feelings toward kin and homeland, as we have already seen with Signy, and often seem to be in the position of pleading with the men in the poem not to leave home. In turn, their most important investment in Sigurd’s global village, it would seem, is the preservation of domestic peace: it is women, primarily, who sing in the streets when Sigurd brings tyrants low. Even this, however, points to women’s greater investment in preserving and strengthening the home front. Denied the journey themselves, their attention is fixed inward, as with Gudrun in “The Lovers of Gudrun.” The same pattern repeats itself in Sigurd with Grimhild and with Brynhild too. Only the Sigurd-Gudrun strikes out in a different direction, as we will see. As concerns gender relations and empowerment in the poem, the ideal state seems to be premarital—Gudrun and Kiartan imagining their journey together, Brynhild and Sigurd surveying the continent before their commitment to each other: “So they climb the burg of Hindfell, and hand in hand they fare, / Till all about and above them is nought but the sunlit air, / And there close they cling together rejoicing in their mirth; / For far away beneath them lie the kingdoms of the earth” (129). Like Sigurd, Brynhild is a traveler who has “ridden the sea-realm and the regions of the land, / And dwelt in the measureless mountains and the forge of stormy days” (126). She assumes a more passive, inward role only upon her marriage to Gunnar, which also means abandoning her own “high-built tower,” where Sigurd at first assumes a great king must dwell (144). Only upon marriage, then, do the women start stirring or, more accurately, interfering. And in some sense, by interfering, they are simply performing the role assigned to them in these intensely patriarchal societies: the promotion and preservation of the nation.
In many ways, this promotion is what Grimhild of the poison cup has undertaken, but with extreme methods. Gudrun falls in love with Sigurd of her own accord, but Grimhild recognizes that there is more than her daughter’s happiness to be gained by securing this match. Grimhild’s drink causes Sigurd to forget his promise of betrothal to Brynhild, and it also represents the first stage in restricting his movements politically by removing the main reason for his eventual departure from their kingdom. Grimhild aims to transform Sigurd from an unaffiliated, free-lance knight-errant into a mercenary fighting on behalf of the Niblungs. And with Brynhild no longer betrothed as well, Grimhild sets up a plan that will win her for her son Gunnar and thereby extend the Niblungs’ influence over Lymdale. These goals all float just beneath the surface of the congratulations she offers Sigurd when he agrees to marry Gudrun:

But uplift thine heart and be merry, for new kin hast thou gotten today;
Thy father is Giuki the King, and Grimhild thy mother is made,
And thy brethren are Gunnar and Hogni and Guttorm the unafraid.
Rejoice for a kingly kindred, and a hope undreamed before!
For the folk shall be wax in the fire that withstandeth the Niblung war;
The waste shall bloom as a garden in the Niblung glory and trust,
And the wrack of the Niblung people shall burn the world to dust:
Our peace shall still the world, our joy shall replenish the earth;
And of thee it cometh, O Sigurd, the gold and the garland of worth!

(166–67)

Becoming “new kin” carries duties at odds with the aims Sigurd had fashioned for himself as “guest and stranger.” Grimhild stresses rewards of gold and glory that have never held much motivation for Sigurd, and she transforms his wars of peaceful intervention into quasi-imperialist ventures. Her words craftily interweave the language of peace and conquest: they shall “still” the world—subdue it, in effect—and impose their “joy” on others.

Against the backdrop of Grimhild’s co-opting of Sigurd, the scene shortly after, when he blends his blood with his new brothers in the bosom of the earth, takes on more sinister tones: “Then each an arm-vein openeth, and their blended blood falls down / On Earth the fruitful Mother where they rent her turfy gown: / And then, when the blood of the Volsungs hath run with the Niblung blood, / They kneel with their hands upon it and swear the brotherhood” (182). Morris turns the scene into a macabre spectacle, a violation of the earth that overcompensates for the lack of genuine fellowship between the men. No longer true to his political visions, much less his
eventual reunion with Brynhild, Sigurd seems only an empty shell of what he once was: “the smile is departed from him, and the laugh of Sigurd the young, / And of few words now is he waxen, and his songs are seldom sung” (182). As in the saga, Sigurd does literally become someone else—Gunnar—who he disguises himself as in a complicated effort to entice Brynhild into marrying Gunnar. She agrees to his request, but with the understanding that Sigurd is still true to her in his heart. Later, however, when Gudrun boasts to Brynhild that Sigurd has given her Brynhild’s ring, she turns on Sigurd and impels her new husband Gunnar toward vengeance, framing it in terms of the preservation of his family honor: “I look upon thee. . . . I know thy race and thy name, / Yet meseems the deed thou sparest, to amend thine evil and shame” (225). Now begins a cycle of “honor” killings that will consume the Niblungs for the remainder of the poem, or as Gunnar describes it, “the war without hope or honour, and the strife without reward” (225). Gunnar himself is unable to carry out the deed, and once more it falls to Grimhild, who now sees Sigurd as a threat to the family, to prepare a potion that facilitates his murder. She gives it to the only one of her sons who did not participate in the blood-brother ritual. With “the heart of the ravening wood-wolf and the hunger-blinded beast” (227), Gutrom is able to overcome the bond he nonetheless feels for Sigurd and kill him as he lies in bed. Gutrom “knows not friend nor kindred” (228), recalling Sinfiotli’s wild, debased killing of his half-brothers. As word of Sigurd’s death spreads, Morris stresses what the community and wider world has lost due to this internal familial struggle: “many there were of the Earl-folk that wept for Sigurd’s sake; / And they wept for their little children, and they wept for those unborn” (232). Gudrun flees when she realizes what has happened, remarking, simply, “my kin hath slain my lord” (231), capturing how the ties of kinship and guest have been overturned, never to be fully restored for her.

Book 4 of the poem, “Gudrun,” in many ways returns us to the clashes and false overtures of diplomacy between powerful families and kingdoms that characterize Book 1. The impending demise of the Niblungs again underscores what has been lost with Sigurd, although Gudrun remains true to his cosmopolitan vision in a profound if dark way, as we will see. For the Niblungs, a new threat emerges out of the East, “a King of the outlands . . . Atli was his name” (245), based, as in the saga, on Attila the Hun: “Great are his gains in the world, and few men may his might withstand, / But he weigheth sore on his people and cumbers the hope of his land” (255). When he comes asking for Gudrun to be his wife, the Niblungs agree with the hope that he can be appeased and that a pointless conflict can be avoided. As Gunnar states, “What then . . . shall we thrust by Atli’s word?”
Shall we strive, while the world is mocking, with the might of the Eastland sword, / While the wise are mocking to see it, how the great devour the great?” (249). As in Book 1, however, following the marriage, a diplomatic invitation that disguises other motives leads to a bloody ambush. The Niblungs travel to Atli’s “land far-off and grey” (272) only to be betrayed: “where is the ransom that shall buy your departure again?” (277). Morris thus sets the stage for a clash of East and West, another contest of family and tribal honor, and the battle that ensues makes Book 1 seem peaceful by comparison. But history does not simply repeat itself. The central role of Gudrun in Book 4 alters the course that this encounter takes. Through her strategy, neither side will win: “In this house, in the house of a stranger shall be the tale and the end” (254).

Morris makes several crucial changes to Gudrun from her counterpart in the original saga, changes that critics have generally not noted to his credit. The first concerns the effects of the potion Grimhild gives her so that she will forget about Sigurd’s murder and thus accede to her family’s request to marry Atli. Instead of forgetting Sigurd entirely and willingly joining up with the alliance they have planned for her, “many a thing she forgat, / But never the day of her sorrow, and of how o’er Sigurd she sat” (252). As a result, what motivates her actions later becomes more ambiguous. If she remains determined to wreak vengeance on her brothers, why then does she kill Atli as well? As Henry Hewlett complained in a July 1877 review in Fraser’s Magazine, “Gudrun . . . is consistently delineated by the Saga-man as . . . dominated, after the manner of her race, by the superiority of her congenital ties to those created by marriage. Mr. Morris less truthfully depicts her as of a more modern type; gentle by nature and mastered by a noble passion.”

Noting her “gentle” attachment to her first husband, Hewlett in some ways anticipates modern feminist criticism of Gudrun. Whereas in the original Gudrun has forgotten Sigurd and actively sides with her brothers—even taking up arms and joining in the battle—Morris’s Gudrun becomes “a strange, passive creature,” as Heather O’Donoghue describes her, choosing to watch silently over the battle while the hem of her gown becomes drenched in blood. Echoing some of the criticism leveled at the “Lovers of Gudrun,” O’Donoghue charges Morris with crafting “an atmospheric family drama” out of his source material, “smoothing away its rough edges and elaborating its emotional currents.”

What both of these complaints overlook, however, are the ways Gudrun is exercising a will of her own, covertly defying Grimhild’s overriding family pride, rather forcefully stated as she presents Gudrun with the demand she accept Atli: “By me and my womb I command thee that thou worship the Niblung name” (252). Gudrun agrees to
the marriage, but with a bitter undertone that betrays her awareness of how she is being manipulated: “Bear me back to the Burg of the Niblungs, and the house of my fathers of old, / That the men of King Atli may take me with the tokens and treasure of gold” (253). She has become political barter being passed along with the hope of preserving the Niblung kingdom. Once she is in the East, however, she encourages Atli to invite her Niblung brothers there, but not with the object of freeing herself and warning them of Atli’s designs on their kingdom, as in the saga. She plays upon the personal and national pride of each side, goading Atli by asking, “Have I wedded the king of the Eastlands, the master of numberless swords, / Or a serving-man of the Niblungs, a thrall of the Westland lords?” (257). This kind of reverse-nostos on her part—longing not for return home to family and kindred but to lead them away to destruction—did not make sense to Hewlett except as a noble if excitable devotion to the institution of marriage. Morris does more, however, than rerender her a “gentle” passive creature in line with Hewlett’s “modern” and O’Donoghue’s Victorian woman. Rather, Morris compels the reader to reweigh the “congenital” motive entirely, challenging notions of the determining power of race and home, which have been especially powerful in women up to this point in the poem. In more senses than one, Gudrun is “the white and silent woman above the slaughter set” (282).

In a grim way Gudrun reassumes Sigurd’s unallied presence in the poem, choosing to play both sides against each other. The more noble position, of course, is to take neither side, but it is an option that her status as a woman does not leave her. She is either a wife or a sister and daughter, as she explains to Atli: “I have neither brethren nor kindred, and I am become thy wife / To help thine heart to its craving” (256). She turns on Atli as well, but there is nothing in the poem to suggest that she has second-guessed herself and now demands atonement for the loss of her brothers. Her motivation seems more to extinguish the kingly pride and will to power over others that Atli boasts of after subduing the Niblungs: “For this day the Eastland people such great dominion win, / That a world to their will new-fashioned ’neath their glory shall begin” (301). The hitherto mostly silent Gudrun now begins to speak, and knowing the plans she has in store for Atli and his men—to set fire to the hall while they sleep off their drunken celebration—her words to him become an ironic commentary on his political ambitions, likening his deeds more to a kind of cannibalistic feast: “Thou hast swallowed the might of the Niblungs, and their glory lieth in thee: / Live long, and cherish thy wealth, that the world may wonder and see!” (302). Morris here alludes to the original saga, where Gudrun murders the children she begat with Atli and feeds them to him: “thou hast lost thy sons, and their heads are become
beakers on the board here, and thou thyself hast drunken the blood of them blended with wine; and their hearts I took and roasted them on a spit, and thou hast eaten thereof (7:390). And while Morris's more “gentle” Gudrun refrains from this act of revenge, she makes a more subtle point about how Atli has always been feasting upon others—first his own oppressed people, now the Niblungs. She remains, until the end, the “Stranger-Queen” (303), alienated from family and her later husband alike, repudiating the cycle of conquest and national pride. If she cannot play the role of peacemaker or diplomat, she can at least pass stern judgment on the motives of the participants in this conflict.

Through her actions, the memory of what Sigurd stood for returns at the end of the poem. Before setting fire to the hall, she sees his image: “I woke and looked on Sigurd, and he rose on the world and shone! / And we twain in the world together! and I dwelt with Sigurd alone” (304). Her thoughts may seem selfish, given the slaughter she has just witnessed, but they are also self-assertive: Sigurd returns for Gudrun, alone, without the family and social contexts that have dictated most of her existence. Gunnar’s final words, spoken from the snake-pit in which Atli casts him, recall Sigurd as well and speak accurately to his impact: “Sigurd, child of the Volsungs, the best sprung forth from the best: / He rode from the North and the mountains and became my summer guest, / My friend and my brother sworn.” Recalling his just leadership and worldwide appeal, Gunnar adds, “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” (291).

The last word and reflection on Sigurd belongs to Morris, as narrator, who concludes that he “dwelt upon Earth for a season, and shone in all men’s sight” (306), suggesting a transcendent, idealized figure caught in a world beset by indifferent cycles of birth and death, the rhythms of nature and human geography, where there’s always another threat out of the south or east. Affinity and isolation seem the natural, inevitable poles of human existence and of the players, both individual and collective, in Morris’s poetry. The overriding sense of Sigurd’s loss also helps explain Morris’s decision to end Gudrun’s story with her leap into the sea: in the original, the winds carry her to a new land where she will again marry and give birth to Swanchild, who becomes the next point of focus in the saga (7:392). Morris, however, writes, “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 day that yet shall be?” (306). She too is subsumed, overtaken by the forces of the earth, which like Odin seem to come and go in the poem with no more apparent purpose than to keep the drama going.
Indeed, one does sense an almost Hardyan Immanent Will at work in the poem, a kind of naturalistic pessimism where human actions play an at best uncertain role. As Brynhild tells Sigurd, “Know thou, most mighty of men, that the Norns shall order all, / And yet without thine helping shall no whit of their will befall” (126).

The poem thus ends on a solemn note, as it only could given Morris’s source material and his determination to be true to the aims of the poetry of origins. Morris veers away from the kind of historical allegory one sees, for instance, in Arnold’s only Nordic poem, *Balder Dead* (1855), which fore-shadows the return of the Christ-like Balder with the progress of modern civilization: “From the bright Ocean at our feet an earth / More fresh, more verdant than the last, with fruits / Self-springing, and a seed of man preserved, / Who then shall live in peace, as now in war” (528–31). In contrast, when the risen Balder makes an appearance in Morris’s poetry, as in “Iceland First Seen,” it’s almost as if Morris is not sure what to do with him: “Ah! when thy Balder comes back and we gather the gains he hath won, / Shall we not linger a little to talk of thy sweetness of old, / Yea, turn back awhile to thy travail whence the Gods stood aloof to behold?” (9:126). Defined by this backward glance, Morris’s poetry reveals something of what he would later call a “sympathy with history”—a vague expression, perhaps, but one that captures the diminished, ambivalent ideology of his poetry of the North—his refusal to overinvest in race even as he insists on its crucial relevance to European culture and identity.48 Sigurd’s promise ends with the deaths of Sigurd and Gudrun. It would be up to Morris’s generation to invent its own cosmopolitan future, and for Morris, that future would of course take on an increasingly revolutionary cast of appearance.

It was a future that he initially saw poetry playing little part in. Judging his verse against the higher stakes of this later commitment to communism, Morris continues in the letter quoted above, “Poetry goes with the hand-arts I think, and like them has now become unreal: the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again.”49 Only when armed with the more directive ideological blueprint of socialism would Morris himself be “born again” and attempt another long poem, although one that would still fall short of the epic length or ambitions of *Sigurd*.50 With *The Pilgrims of Hope*, published serially in the *Commonweal* from 1885 to 1886, Morris would return to questions of European identity and fellowship. The poem paints, in some ways, a more satisfying vision of Europe in the beginning stages of a revolution he hoped would unite all classes and nationalities. In a section entitled “A Glimpse of the Coming Day,” the poem’s protagonist, Richard, travels abroad for the first time to take part in the Paris Commune:
“Never yet had I crossed the sea / Or looked on another people than the folk that fostered me” (24:400). The differences that had divided folk from folk disappear, however, under the “red and solemn” flag of communism: “when we came unto Paris and were out in the sun and the street, / It was strange to see the faces that our wondering eyes did meet; / Such joy and peace and pleasure! That folk were glad we knew, / But knew not the why and the wherefore” (24:401–2). On this more modest poetic scale, Morris was able to reaffirm the hope that appeared to have died with Sigurd—that affinity would be Europe’s and humanity’s ultimate destination. As he would succinctly put it later in *A Dream of John Ball* (1887–88), “fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell” (16:230). The dreams and hopes of Morris’s later works, of course, would not be borne out in the twentieth century, as the internecine conflicts that had plagued Europe though much of its history returned on a more modern, mechanized, and horrific scale. Not long before the outbreak of that violence, however, one more Victorian poet would try his hand at staging a cosmopolitan future for the continent. Thomas Hardy, the “last Victorian,” as he became known, would have the last word.