



KATJA SCHULZ
(Hg.)



EDDA

SCHULZ (Hg.)
Eddische Götter und Helden

SCHULZ
(Hg.)

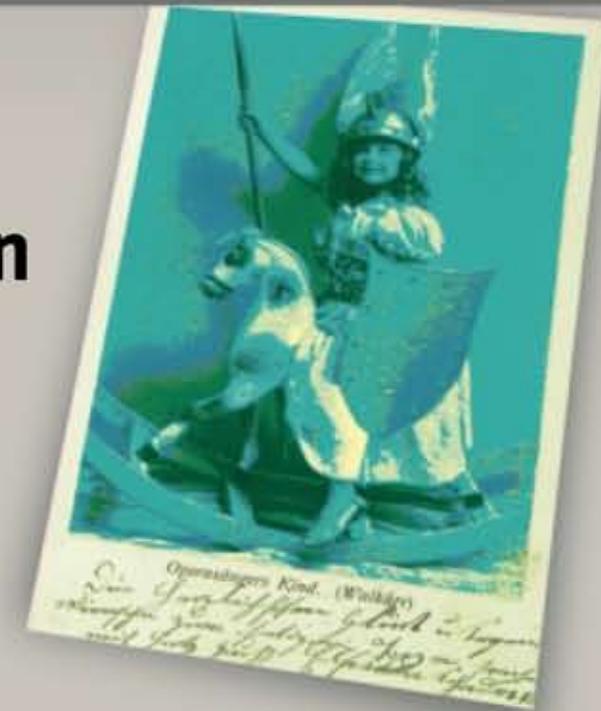
REZEPTION

Der Comic-Held Mighty Thor gehört – jedenfalls im Marvel-Universum – ganz offiziell zu den Superhelden, Frithjof war im ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert nicht minder populär, und Odin wird von brasilianischen Neuheiden verehrt, die mit dem Gott vielleicht über den Konsum von Heavy Metal Musik bekannt geworden sind. Die nordischen Götter und Helden, von denen zunächst, im 13. Jahrhundert, vor allem die Liederreda und die Snorra Edda berichten, sind längst alles andere als ›Buchwissen‹ und haben mit den immer internationaler sich verbreitenden Medien auch weit über Europa hinaus Anhänger gefunden. Ein neues Phänomen ist das nicht; schon im 19. Jahrhundert kam ein entscheidender Impuls zur Popularisierung aus der Welt der Musik: mit Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen*, der seinerseits neben der Musik auch ausstrahlte in die bildende Kunst, in Literatur, Alltagskultur, Propaganda und Bühnenkunst. Der Sammelband beleuchtet die Bewegung nordischer Mythen durch Medien und Milieus in verschiedenen europäischen und außereuropäischen nationalen und transnationalen Kontexten. Zu den untersuchten Aspekten zählen Literatur, Comics und Propaganda, Oper, Heavy Metal und Ballett, bildende Kunst, völkisches Drama und neopagane Mythenportale.

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Eddische
Götter
und
Helden

Eddische
Götter
und Helden
Milieus und Medien
ihrer Rezeption



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EDDA-REZEPTION



Band 2



Eddische Götter und Helden

Milieus und Medien
ihrer Rezeption

Eddic Gods and Heroes

Milieus and Media
of their Reception

Herausgegeben von
KATJA SCHULZ

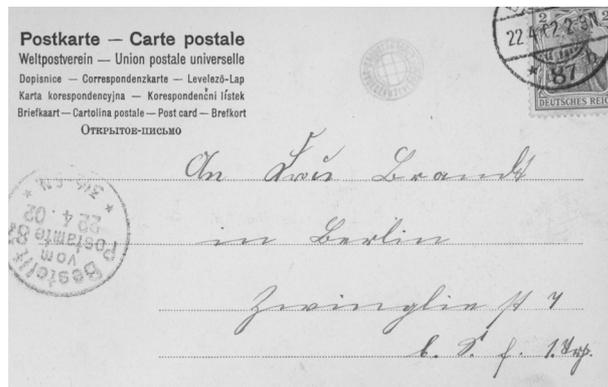
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ZUR ABBILDUNG AUF DEM UMSCHLAG

Die auf dem Einband abgebildete Postkarte (gelaufen 1902) zeigt, wie Motive aus der nordischen Mythologie schon um 1900 zu einem selbstverständlichen Bestandteil der Alltagskultur geworden waren. Die kleine »Schaukelwalküre« in der charakteristischen Theaterausstattung mit Flügelhelm, Schild, Speer, Brustpanzer und Pferd verweist außer auf die nordischen Mythen vor allem auf Wagners Opernwelt und ihre bildungsbürgerlichen Bewunderer. Massenweise verbreitete Medien wie Sammelbilder, Werbemarken, Publikumszeitschriften und Postkarten trugen solche Bilder über die Grenzen der Milieus und sozialen Schichten hinweg und, wie die Rückseite der Postkarte nahelegt, in viele Länder hinein.



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THE TOPOS OF RAGNARÖK IN THE UTOPIAN THOUGHT OF WILLIAM MORRIS

Paola Spinozzi

I. VICTORIAN QUESTS FOR THE ORIGINS OF GERMANIC CULTURE

The reasons why not only William Morris, but also George Webbe Dasent, Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Laing, Matthew Arnold, Charles Kingsley, Edmund Gosse, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell all read, translated and rewrote Old Norse literature are large-scale, encompassing the history of European culture, politics, ethics, literature and comparative philology. They studied and visited Iceland in order to retrace the cultural origins of Northern Europe, to consolidate their ideological views about social and political institutions, to present the heroic code of behaviour as an ideal ethical model for the Victorians, to revive Old Norse narratives and to find a language which could express their pathos.

Old Norse history and literature were perceived and valued as models for the cultural identity of Northern Europe during the nation-building process in the nineteenth century. Owing to their geographical isolation, Nordic countries had been able to preserve their Germanic matrix. The quest for the origins of Germanic culture in Northern Europe was thus accomplished by assigning a prominent status to Iceland. The originality and distinctiveness of the peoples which settled there is emphasised by Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon in the Preface to the first volume of *The Saga Library* published in 1891:

Iceland has been peopled since the ninth century of our era by men of the Gothic branch of the great Teutonic race: the first settlers there were of the best families of Norway, men of bold and independent spirit, who could not brook what they deemed the oppression of the early form of feudality forced upon the free men of the tribes at the time when Harold Hair-fair was winning his way to the sole sovereignty of Norway.

Defeated in a great battle off the coast of Norway, these men left their country with their families and household gods, taking with them as a matter of course, besides their religion, the legends, the customary law, and the language of their race.

Those of them who made their way to Iceland found an uninhabited country there, so that all these ancestral possessions escaped the speedy obliteration which befell them in the hands of (we must think) their less fortunate brethren who settled themselves in countries (Normandy, for instance) where they were

but a handful amongst people of a more developed civilization, who had gained their position by passing through the mill of the Roman tyranny (Morris and Magnússon 1891, vi–vii).

For Morris ancient Iceland had been able to develop its forms of government and culture owing to the absence of Roman and then Norman feudalism and to develop a form of proto-socialism founded on the concept of kinship. Morris's knowledge of the history of Europe was based on the study of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) by Edward Gibbon in the 1852 edition annotated by H. H. Milman and of *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire* (1834) by J. C. L. Sismondi. In an essay on Morris's German romances Florence Boos argues that his ideological elaboration of Gibbon's historical reconstruction was essential to the identification of forms of proto-socialism in tribal societies. The aim he pursued was similar to the one achieved by Friedrich Engels in *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates* (1884). Even if their ideological views were different, Engels and Morris shared the belief that Germanic tribes developed forms of a socialist state-of-nature. »Morris thus followed Gibbon's interpretations when the latter described the Germanic tribes' struggles against the Huns, but constructed an internal social organization which paralleled Engel's communitarian ideals« (Boos 1984, 321–344).

The Victorian reception of the ethos personified by the saga-heroes entailed philosophical and anthropological interrogations. The acquaintance with Old Norse gods and goddesses, forceful women and warriors, would invite readers to reflect on, and possibly rise to, their stature. Morris believed that the brave endurance of fate exhibited by the protagonists of Nordic legends should be adopted as the attitude most appropriate for understanding, and facing, life. Self-restraint, patience, magnanimity and acceptance enable human beings to cope with fate, unrequited love, loneliness, loss and finitude (Morris 1969 [1887], 185).

Morris's approach to Old Norse literature will permeate his utopian frame of mind. The inclination, which affects most utopian thinkers, to simplify the anthropological complexity of humankind is tempered by the importance he attributes to endurance, a universally acknowledged paradigm of behaviour which, however, varies according to individual nature and experience. The capacity to endure is highly valued by Morris because it allows human beings to cope with irrational drives. Nonetheless, the 1890 utopian romance which Morris serialised in the *Commonweal*, the magazine of the Socialist League, depicts a world in which human passion can still be overpowering: in *News from Nowhere* social order continues to be threatened by outbursts of uncontrollable instincts (Spinozzi 2006).

Both the Romantics and the Victorians regarded myth as a powerful imaginative and speculative mode. Not only were ancient stories and legends re-narrated, often with didactic overtones, but also reinterpreted and reconceptu-

alised. For Morris the revival of Old Norse myths was a counter-response to the narrow-mindedness and materialism of the bourgeois value system brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Nobility, an inborn genius for poetry and dramatic narrative, an exceptional ability to cope with an inhospitable land and challenging climate conditions are the prominent qualities Morris attributes to the settlers in Iceland, defined as the »Gothic branch« (Morris and Magnússon 1891, vi) of the Germanic peoples. Owing to these features, Iceland became »the treasure-house of the mythology of the whole Teutonic race« (Morris and Magnússon 1891, vii). Although the dwellers in Iceland interacted with Norway and other northern European countries, including Great Britain, they developed autochthonous customs, institutions and forms of artistic creativity. Morris praises the relative isolation of the Icelanders because, when their oral heritage was transfused into literature, unique modes of expression could thrive freely. The epical narrators present settings, plots and characters with vivid realism and shun over-explanation, didacticism and rhetoric, while medieval writers in the rest of Europe assimilated the classical tradition.

Morris's understanding of Old Norse literature, which surpassed the erudition of any other Victorian intellectual, becomes apparent in a detailed taxonomy of the whole corpus in prose and verse:

Icelandic original mediaeval literature may be divided by its subjects much as follows:

1st. Mythology, as set forth chiefly in the two Eddas, the Poetic and the Prose Edda, though much information on the subject is scattered up and down other works.

2nd. Romances founded on the mythology; of these the Volsunga Saga is the most striking example.

3rd. The histories of events foreign to Iceland, the chief work of which is the collection of »King-Stories«, familiarly called the Heimskringla.

4th. The histories of Icelandic worthies, their families, feuds, etc. These form the great mass of the literature, and are in some respects the most important, as being most characteristic and unexampled. [...]

5th. Mere fictions which, on account of their confessedly unhistorical character, are looked upon with little favour by the Icelanders themselves.

It is a matter of course that they are of later date than the historical tales. It must, however, be said of some of them (as notably the story of Viglund the Fair, included in the Saga Library), that they are of high literary merit (Morris and Magnússon 1891, xi–xii).

Morris's relevance among the translators of Old Norse literature is mostly due to the archaisms and idiomatic expressions he painstakingly adopted in the attempt to achieve the highest degree of similarity with the original language. For him the work of the translator consists in the choice of terms etymologically close to the Old Norse and of archaic forms which reproduce alliteration. Lee

Hollander's translation of *The Poetic Edda* (1928, 2. edition 1962), characterised by the use of »terms fairly common in English balladry« (Hollander 1962, xxix), evidences Morris's legacy. Pseudo-archaism must be avoided, but style can be faithful to the translation only if it springs from creativity, not neutrality. In his review of Hollander's version of *The Poetic Edda* T. C. Cave defines two methods of verse-translation, one attempting to recreate the original, the other producing a literal transposition, even in prose, more suited to study purposes but not necessarily less valuable in aesthetic terms. »William Morris, after all, was interested precisely in the possibilities of enriching the English language by new contact with its Germanic ancestors« (Cave 1963, 614).

II. MORRIS'S REINTERPRETATION OF EDDIC MYTH FROM MEDIEVAL ICELAND TO VICTORIAN ENGLAND

It is known that Morris was familiar with George Webbe Dasent's *The Prose or Younger Edda* (1842) and Benjamin Thorpe's *The Elder Edda of Saemund Sigfusson* (1866). In her »Introduction« to volume VII of her father's collected works, May Morris discusses his acquaintance with, and reception of, contemporary translations of Old Norse texts (May Morris 1911, vol. VII, xvi). Morris's study of the Eddas offers important clues to understanding the development of his philosophical and political ideas. Ideally suited to reinterpretations and re-contextualizations, the prophecies about Ragnarök strongly appealed to his imagination. The inevitability and stoic endurance of the end, the destruction of the world and subsequent reconstruction are recurrent themes in his writings.

Morris was particularly impressed by the gods' acceptance of the violent battle which would cause their death and the end of the world. Odin knows he is doomed and the other gods are also doomed: in *Vafþrúðnismál* it is he who (under the name of Gagnráðr) asks the giant Vafþrúðnir how he will die:

52. Much have I journeyed,
much experienced,
mighty ones many proved.
What of Odin will
the life's end be,
when the powers perish?

Vafþrúðnir.
53. The wolf will
the father of men devour;
him Vidar will avenge:
he his cold jaws will cleave,
in conflict with the wolf (Thorpe 1866, 18).

Although he is well aware that his life will end fighting the monstrous wolf, he is the first to reach the battlefield, because his duty is to embrace destiny with stoicism: »first rideth Odin with golden helm, and fair byrne, and his spear Gúngnir hight; he stands against Fenriswolf« (Dasent 1842, 60).

Vafþrúðnismál and *Völuspá* from the *Poetic Edda* and *Gylfaginning* from the *Prose Edda* are re-written in the manuscript J 146 kept at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow. The description of Doomsday develops through the merging of two temporal dimensions: the ancient North is evoked through references to Balder, Loki, the blind Hoder, Odin, Thor, Surt, the Fenris Wolf and the Midgard Serpent, while Victorian England is brought into prominence by the first-person narrator who lives in it. The contrast between the impending, fatal end of the world and the unrelenting courage of the elected ones is powerfully conveyed:

[A]ll rule is left to Odin, the Father of the Chosen; who watches day by day that he may gather his servants to him against that inevitable end of all that he has given shape to: free of will they are as he is, but fated as he is; like him they were born not to live but to make, and no deed they do shall die (Morris ms. J 146, 1r–1v).

In the central part of the manuscript Morris presents the Ragnarök: although the original lines in *Gylfaginning* can be easily retraced, his purpose is not a translation, but rather a re-elaboration which allows him to conjure up and access the Old Norse world. By re-writing the myth he can build up a mental picture in which he introduces references to the historical context in which he lives. The whole rendition can be regarded as a rhetorical construction in which Eddic cosmogony and the Victorian age are connected:

I think the Fimbul winter prefigures this – five winters with ne'er a summer between – earth lying joyless and hopeless. So at any rate comes the end at last, and the Evil, bound for a while, is loose, and all nameless merciless horrors that on earth we figure by fire and earthquake and venom and ravin. So comes the great strife; the strife on earth prefigured it, and all who did deed in that earthly strife and died there, are here – to do deeds again, and die again [...] – till at last the great destruction [...] breaks out over all things, and the old earth & heavens are gone. And then a new Heavens & Earth, and the serene Balder ruling there, and his slayer, the once blind Fate, sitting beside him, they two in all peace (Morris ms. J 146, 1v, 2r).

Morris's double movement – backward, towards the mythical past, and forward, towards the future – achieves its climax in the end. The last part of *Gylfaginning* recounts how Víðarr and Váli, sons of Odin, Móði and Magni, sons of Thor, Balder and Hoder will sit together in Ida-Plain, where Asgard once was, to talk

about past events, the great Gods and Fenrir. Líf and Lífthrasir, the two human beings who will survive destruction by hiding in Hoddmímir's Holt and eating dew, are the ones from whom humankind will be born again (Dasent 1842, 84). While envisaging how the events described in *Gylfaginning* could take place in the present, Morris hopes that men of his age will have a new life after the end of their decaying civilization. The new beginning will be celebrated with a reunion in which they will talk like the gods did after Ragnarök:

And what shall be our share in it? Well, sometimes we, yet alive in the unregenerate earth, must needs think that we shall live again in the regenerate one there, and be happy, and talk together of the old days of Odin and Thor, and the slaying of the great dragon [...] – yet if that were not, would it not be enough that we helped to make this unnameable glory, and lived not altogether deedless? [...] So may the Gods help us that we be no cowards nor traitors. This seems to me pretty much the religion of the North-men. I think one could be a happy man if one could hold it (Morris ms. J 146, 2r–2v).

Morris fully embraces the values of Old Norse culture: poignant and appealing without being overtly didactic, the ›religion of the North‹ offers a pagan code of heroic values which he finds more authentic and energizing than Christian faith.

III. RAGNARÖK AND SOCIALISM IN *NEWS FROM NOWHERE*

The early literature of the North enabled Morris to develop his views about the advent of socialism after the envisioned destruction of capitalist society. Doomsday is at the core of Morris's socialist utopia, which can be built only after a radical, palingenetic event.

Karl Litzenberg's in-depth study of Norse themes in Morris's work offers compelling arguments to support the idea that the recontextualization of Edda was not only literary but also, and more importantly, philosophical and political:

The very essence of his theory of revolution, and the peace which follows, and the idea of convulsion and cataclysm as a prelude to eternal harmony, were not first discovered by Morris in his readings in European social and economic writers. In the *Völuspá* story of Balder the White God, in the legend of Ragna Rök, Morris found the very words which he later used to express his belief in the ethical necessity for revolution. That his social and economic philosophy as it was ultimately developed had many connections with contemporaneous socialist and communistic theory no one can deny. Yet this does not obscure the fact that the ethical basis of Morris' social philosophy was always closely related to his strange and stubborn belief in the Ragna Rök of the pagan Norsemen (Litzenberg 1947, 24).

The appropriation of Ragnarök in Morris's poems and political views has been investigated by Karl Litzenberg in »The Social Philosophy of William Morris and the Doom of the Gods« (1933) and by Edvige Schulte in *Saggi, saghe ed utopie nell'opera di William Morris* (1987). The impact of the Old Norse myth on his utopian thought still calls for closer examination. In *News from Nowhere* Ragnarök, apocalypse and Marxist thought are finally interlocked.

Western utopia has been defined as a hybrid plant with two roots: classical thought, based on the myth of the eternal return, implies a circular conception in which the end goes back to the beginning, while Christian Judaic thought presupposes an eschatological tension in which the *telos* is projected forward (F. E. Manuel and F. P. Manuel 1979). Nineteenth-century utopian writers were challenged by the dialectical view of history introduced by Karl Marx (1818–1883). Depictions of the future in Victorian utopias show an oscillation between a radically new beginning and nostalgia for the past, complete oblivion and haunting memories (Spinozzi 2005).

Capital, which Morris read in French in 1883, impressed him not only for the concept of class consciousness but also for the notion of historical dialectics supporting a constructive view of the future. In contrast with the Fabian Society, according to which democratic socialism could be achieved through gradual reforms, and with the American writer Edward Bellamy, who in *Looking Backward* (1888) imagined the transformation of the U.S. into a socialist utopia, Morris hoped for a revolution which would radically break with all previous social institutions. The end of capitalism and the advent of socialism, described as a cataclysm followed by a new, higher stage of human civilization, echoes both the biblical apocalypse followed by palingenesis and Ragnarök followed by regeneration. Morris declared himself an atheist but struggled to take distance from Christian culture, which however kept resurfacing. While the Bible is an influential, but more subterranean, hypotext, Nordic sources are more freely exhibited. Eddic cosmogony, in which, as the prophetess reveals, the world's conflicting forces finally confront and annihilate each other, provides him with an inspiring pagan scenario. The incorporation of Old Norse myths can be regarded as one of Morris's major innovative contributions to the utopian genre.

Eddic mythology permeates chapter 17, entitled »How the Change Came«. The great revolution is followed by an intermediate stage of »State Socialism« finally overcome by the establishment of a society based on equality and fellowship. The history of Victorian Britain and the myth of Ragnarök merge in the description of the dramatic events which ignited the revolution. The facts minutely narrated in chapters 17 and 18 create an ideal link between the Victorian age and the imagined future: William Guest, the traveller from the past, carefully listens to Old Hammond, the embodiment of historical and cultural memory in the socialist utopian England. On the 13th of November 1887 the

meeting summoned by the Social Democratic Federation and the Irish National League in Trafalgar Square was violently disrupted by the police. Three people were killed, over one hundred injured and two arrested. That very evening Morris delivered the lecture entitled »The Future of Society« at a meeting organized by the Socialist League at Kelmscott House in Hammersmith. In *News from Nowhere* the precision with which the London demonstration known as Bloody Sunday is reported blends with the magniloquence of divination; while achieving the realistic precision of a chronicle, the narration acquires the power of a prophetic revelation. The visionary rendition of a dramatic event which changes the course of history and gives rise to a new civilization is a reinterpretation of Ragnarök:

›The closely packed crowd would not or could not budge, except under the influence of the height of terror, which was soon to be supplied to them. A few of the armed men struggled to the front, or climbed up to the base of the monument which then stood there, that they might face the wall of hidden fire before them; and to most men [...] it seemed as if the end of the world had come, and to-day seemed strangely different from yesterday. [...] a hoarse threatening roar went up from [the crowd]; and after that there was comparative silence for a little, till the officer had got back into the ranks. [...] »Throw yourselves down! they are going to fire!« But no one scarcely could throw himself down, so tight as the crowd were packed. I heard a sharp order given, and wondered where I should be the next minute; and then – It was as if the earth had opened, and hell had come up bodily amid us. It is no use trying to describe the scene that followed. Deep lanes were mowed amidst the thick crowd; the dead and dying covered the ground, and the shrieks and wails and cries of horror filled all the air, till it seemed as if there were nothing else in the world but murder and death. Those of our armed men who were still unhurt cheered wildly and opened a scattering fire on the soldiers. [...] How I got out of the Square I scarcely know: I went, not feeling the ground under me, what with rage and terror and despair.‹
 [...] ›How fearful! And I suppose that this massacre put an end to the whole revolution for that time?‹
 ›No, no,‹ cried old Hammond; ›it began it!‹ (Morris 1890, 154–156).

It is not only a revolt, but an extraordinary event which marks the end of an epoch and heralds a radically different one. Its uniqueness is expressed through the clear reference to the end of the world which evokes both the apocalypse and Ragnarök. Resounding with the two mythical narratives of annihilation and rebirth, the description transcends the historical event and acquires universal value. In the Eddic myth after the great devastation the fields start to blossom spontaneously and all is pervaded by peace: it is a world Balder can wisely rule. In *News from Nowhere* the tragic events of revolution fuel an intense political activism channelled towards the construction of a socialist society:

›But now that the times called for immediate action, came forward the men capable of setting it on foot; and a new network of workmen’s associations grew up very speedily, whose avowed single object was the tiding over of the ship of the community into a simple condition of Communism; and as they practically undertook also the management of the ordinary labour-war, they soon became the mouthpiece and intermediary of the whole of the working classes; and the manufacturing profit-grinders now found themselves powerless before this combination‹ (Morris 1890, 159–160).

Morris’s ability to merge facts and prophecies, realism and visionary imagination, transform historical events into paradigmatic models of human actions marked by incessant cycles of death and rebirth, disrupted by devastating ends and enlivened by auspicious origins:

›Yes,‹ said the old man, ›the world was being brought to its second birth; how could that take place without a tragedy. Moreover, think of it. The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and almost overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves; this, I say, was to be the new spirit of the time‹ (Morris 1890, 175).

The great destruction described in the Ragnarök of Norse mythology was fused with the revolution foreseen by Marx and the Socialists. Whether the society foreseen in *News from Nowhere* could assimilate Old Norse anthropological and sociological models remains to be tested, because the revolution never happened. Rather, the legacy of Eddic myth in Morris’s utopian project is to be found in the dialectical view of historical processes empowered by the visionary potency of ancient narratives from the North.

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