

Deluded by the long, mellow  
Dew-webbed autumn, whose yellow  
Promise corrodes to frost,  
These nesting birds, the last  
Slow builders, late to love  
Find hope and trust deceive.

For heart or nest, a cell  
Of clay daubed on a wall  
In the grey time grows cold.  
Love, callow and late, has failed.  
Unfledged, dull blue as lead,  
Songless, the birds lie dead.

MARGARET STANLEY-WRENCH

## An Unpublished Poem by William Morris

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THANKS to the assiduous literary executorship of his daughter, May Morris, there is very little of William Morris's work which has escaped publication, or at least description, in the twenty-four volume *Collected Works* or the two volumes of biography, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*. There is, however, one untitled poem of fifty-six lines, surviving in two manuscript drafts, which is of particular interest to those lovers of Morris who also have some knowledge of Old Icelandic; for it is written in sufficiently close imitation of eddic metres and Norse poetic conventions for both manuscripts to have been catalogued as translations. May Morris certainly knew this poem, and probably intended to publish it, for British Museum Add. MS. 45318, willed to the museum by Miss Morris, contains both the rough draft of the poem and two letters from her to Dame Bertha [Phillpott] which seem to refer to it.

The relations between Mrs. Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti will be finally made clear only when their correspondence becomes available

to readers in the British Museum;<sup>1</sup> but Oswald Doughty (*A Victorian Romantic*, Muller, 1949) has convincingly shown that there was an affair which reached a climax between 1871 and 1874. It was against Morris's deepest principles to interfere, and this fact, coupled with his reticence in conversation and correspondence, persuaded some of his circle that he was uncaring; yet this unpublished lyric is an outspoken and poignant expression of regret. Morris maintained as a veil the pretence of being only the translator of the poem, by signing the fair copy 'Vilhjálmr Vandráðaskáld', a wry joke and no great disguise, for 'Vilhjálmr' is 'William', and 'Vandráðaskáld' is the nickname of a famous poet of sagatimes, rendered by Morris in the *Heimskringla* as 'Troublous Skald'. (It may be conceded that Morris earned the nickname as fairly as ever its original owner did.) It was the concern

<sup>1</sup> Since this article was written these letters, in B.M. Add. MSS. 52232 and 52233, have been opened for inspection, fifty years having elapsed since Mrs. Morris's death.

of all Morris's friends and family to avoid open scandal, and it is clearly for this reason that May Morris decided against publishing this poem as soon as she understood (presumably from Dame Bertha) its real import. I would suggest that the poem was written in 1873, shortly before Morris's second trip to Iceland, during which Janey Morris and Rossetti were both living at Kelmscott Manor. A later date seems unlikely, as on his return to England in 1873 Morris definitely resolved not to go to Iceland again, while the kenning 'wave-swine' for 'ship' in line 6 seems to be borrowed from a verse in the saga of Harald Greycloak in *Heimskringla*, which he began to translate at the very earliest in the summer of 1872.

The reader who has no knowledge of the Old Norse idioms which Morris uses may find parts of this poem a little obscure. I have therefore appended notes on the kennings (periphrastic and enigmatic metaphors constructed according to strict convention, conveniently set out for the instruction of aspiring skalds, or poets, in the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson); and when these are understood, the reader will have no difficulty in appreciating the beauty and pathos of the poem. The following text is printed from the fair copy, MS. J 150 in the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, by kind permission of the Borough Librarian, and notes are given on the variants found in the rough draft (B.M.).

O fair gold goddess<sup>1</sup>  
As fain as thou mayst be  
That gone I were  
To the white sea's-roof land,<sup>2</sup>  
Yet fairer were I  
To leap on the wave-swine,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A standard kenning for 'woman' found, for example, in *Grettir the Strong*, ch. 47. The reader must not make the mistake of supposing Morris to be addressing any but a mortal woman—in this case his wife. The metre of this first section is an imitation of the early eddic *forjötislag* or 'old-love metre'. The metrical unit is a short line of two stresses, corresponding to the half-line of Old English epic metre, the lines being joined in pairs by alliteration.

<sup>2</sup> Iceland (Morris's note). Cf. í Marþaks firði = in Leifirh, in *Grettir the Strong*, ch. 52, where Morris renders 'sea-roof-firth'.

<sup>3</sup> Wave-swine = ship. Cf. unnsvin in *The Story of Greycloak*, ch. 18.

If God for me  
The ghosts would quicken  
Of Odin's fellows,  
The old abiders  
In the land of Naddod,<sup>4</sup>  
To live a life there  
Too short for sorrow,  
Too loud with sword-clash  
For any weeping.

Might the world go backward<sup>5</sup>  
Then, Roses' Freyia,<sup>6</sup>  
Soon were I faring  
Along the way  
That leads to Valhall,  
Long rest before me,  
And my right hand holding  
A story maybe<sup>7</sup>  
To give to Odin.

For foul is waxen  
That world the gods made,  
And I—I help nought<sup>8</sup>  
Nor holpen am I.

But all are gone by,<sup>9</sup>  
And the edge-play is over<sup>10</sup>  
And the long frost is fallen upon them.  
There the wind wails ever  
Without a story;  
No whither the sea's way leadeth.

<sup>4</sup> Iceland (Morris's note). Naddod the Viking was one of the first two Norsemen to discover Iceland.

<sup>5</sup> This line is missing from B.M. and there is no paragraph division. Although not absolutely required by the sense, the line is necessary to the alliteration.

<sup>6</sup> Freyia is the goddess of beauty. Roses' Freyia thus = beautiful woman. According to Snorri's *Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál*, 31) 'women are called in kennings by all feminine tree-names', but 'rose' does not occur in any recorded kenning. Is it too far-fetched to catch, in this apostrophe to Janey Morris, an echo of her lover's name?

<sup>7</sup> B.M. 'And in my right hand Maybe a glory'. For the sake of alliteration I should prefer to restore 'glory' for the 'story' of the fair copy, though the latter makes clearer sense. 'Glory', however, might be regarded as a 'heiti' (a simple synonym as opposed to a kenning) for 'poem'—cf. *Skáldskaparmál*, 53, on the synonyms for poetry.

<sup>8</sup> B.M. And I help not.

<sup>9</sup> The metre here changes to an imitation of the eddic *ljóðaháttir*, or 'chant-metre', in which each pair of short lines is followed by one three-stress line, alliterating internally, and six lines form a stanza.

<sup>10</sup> Edge-play—cf. O.N. *egggleikr* = battle, warfare.

*An Unpublished Poem by William Morris*

The deeds they did  
 Are as hopes foredone  
   Cumbering the heart with curses.<sup>1</sup>  
 Have ye not heard  
 How hard they wrought?—  
   —And lo, the world ever worseneth.  
 Yet these are they  
 I must turn to now,  
   The dead—Yea the dead forgotten.  
 Fair friends were they  
 Were they alive;  
   And now for me meet friends it may be.

<sup>1</sup> B.M. Cumbering the world with curses.

<sup>2</sup> A compound version of the kenning in line 1. Gold is 'fire' because it shines, and 'Rhine-fire' by reference to the story of the Nibelung hoard.

O Rhine-fire's goddess,<sup>2</sup>  
 This wretched trickle<sup>3</sup>  
 Of Kvasir's mead,<sup>4</sup>  
 (The last it may be)  
 Thy skald now poureth;  
 Still praying pardon  
 For fainting heart  
 And tongue grown feeble,  
 Since nought he helpeth  
 Nor holpen is he.

<sup>3</sup> B.M. This wretched trickling.

<sup>4</sup> Kvasir's mead = poetry. Strictly this should be 'Kvasir's blood' or 'dwarf's mead'; mead brewed by the dwarfs from the blood of Kvasir bestowed the gift of poetry on a man.