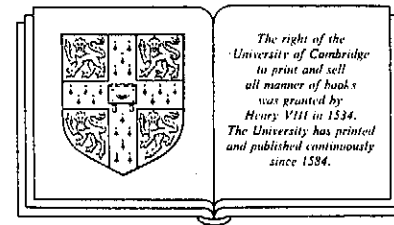


THE ROMANCES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

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disservice among critics. The tendency has been to see him not as a conscious literary artist but as an unreflective spinner-out of tales. If questioned, Morris would undoubtedly have opted for the second of these two descriptions. Yet the disingenuous way in which he talked about his literary work belies the evidence of the stories themselves. Even in his early tales, for example, he is not content to employ simple narrative forms. On the contrary, the narrative line is often highly complicated; and this fact is one justification for the assertion that the stories are highly self-conscious examinations of the nature of the conventions they are themselves adopting. Not only are Morris's stories set in the past; their major theme is the nature and influence of the past and the difficulties encountered by those who wish to preserve it and transform it into art.

I

The first story that Morris wrote for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* was probably 'A Dream', which appeared in March 1856.² It is a ghost story, told around a fire with outside the standard accompaniment of a winter gale. Lawrence and Ella, a noble knight and the beautiful lady who loves him, are separated in their youth. Ella's foolish desire to see Lawrence prove his love for her leads her to dare him to enter a mysterious cavern. Its evil reputation is confirmed when he fails to return. She has promised, however, to follow him if he is lost, and has prayed for a more than naturally long life to enable her to complete her quest. The story tells how Hugh the doctor sees in the bodies of a patient and his nurse the momentary reincarnation of the long-separated lovers. Many years later they are seen again by another witness in the persons of a queen and her knight. And more than a hundred years later still they meet for the last time. Lawrence and Ella become not figures in a story but visible and palpable to the story-tellers:

They stood opposite to each other for a little, he and the lady ... at last he made one step, and took off his gleaming helmet, laid it down softly, then spread abroad his arms, and she came to him, and they were clasped together, her head lying over his shoulder, and the four men gazed, quite awe-struck. (I. 174)

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As they are reunited the bells ring in the New Year, and 'there beneath the eyes of those four men the lovers slowly faded away into a heap of snow-white ashes' (I. 174).

To their own amazement and horror, the story-tellers have conjured up their characters in a more than metaphorical sense. The story is about the power of fiction to blur the normal distinctions between fantasy and reality, past and present. Lawrence and Ella have twice before been glimpsed moving from the timeless world of their quest, in which they are disembodied, into the world of temporality and appearance. It can be no coincidence that their final incarnation takes place immediately after – presumably as a result of – the telling of their story. The power of the story, however, has a double effect. Not only do Lawrence and Ella exist beyond time; those who see them are themselves released from the normal temporal constraints. Perhaps the most chilling moments in the tale are those in which two of the group round the fire realize that the other two are narrating not old legends but events that they actually witnessed – more than a hundred years before. Hugh the doctor, who saw the first reincarnation, is referred to later in the story as dead, but he is currently present to tell his tale. And the other narrator, Giles, has been preserved to add his part of the story; like Lawrence and Ella he has an unnaturally long life. In his case, however, this is not the result of his own choice but imposed upon him so that he can act as a witness. Indeed, when he first saw the ghosts the experience changed his normal relationship with his environment, distancing him from it:

we three moved on together, and soon I saw that my nature was changed, and that I was invisible for the time; for, though the sun was high, I cast no shadow, neither did any man that we passed notice us. (I. 170)

Telling the story can draw characters from the past into the present; those who are involved in some way in the story are also (perhaps involuntarily) freed from the usual constraints on human existence and personality.

In this tale the usual distinctions between past and present cease to operate. Characters who began as fictional figures end as tangible in the present experience of the story-tellers. As a result, other distinctions are also abandoned. We have seen how

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Lawrence and Ella merge with the personalities of those through whom they are momentarily visible. When they achieve their final meeting they have only their own personae; yet there is still ambiguity. They are both the same in appearance as they were when they first parted, but while in one sense time has stood still, in another they have been cruelly marked by the long quest:

her beauty ... seemed to grow every minute, though she was plainly not young, oh no, but rather very, very old, who could say how old? (I. 173)

The figures of Giles and Hugh are similarly ambiguous. They appear to be ordinary living men, yet one is a spirit and the other has had his life unnaturally extended. The two men to whom the story is related are forced by these complexities to reconsider their responses to appearances and, especially, to the past. Appearance is deceptive and identity difficult to establish. The past, no longer safely distant, may become disturbingly close. For the reader, there is an added dimension created by Morris's descriptions of his characters. Throughout the story it is the ghosts, Lawrence and Ella, who are presented in his vivid, colourful, precise style; all other figures are shadowy. The fictional personae are more powerfully present to us than those who tell their story. Is Morris suggesting not only that the past can be made, through story-telling, part of the present but also that it can appear paradoxically more vital, more 'real' than our everyday experience?

'A Dream' is a study of the operation of fiction, especially of fiction set in the past. Not a very extended or developed examination, certainly. But questions seem to be raised which have to do with the 'embodiment of dreams' and what happens to those who assist in such embodiment. This theme is further considered through yet another complication connected with the structure of the narrative. Giles and Hugh, mysterious narrators, are themselves figures in someone else's story. An authorial voice describes the whole tale as a dream which is now being retold by the dreamer. He brings his vision into the present consciousness of his readers as Hugh and Giles summon up the actual bodies of the characters in their story by the power of their narrative. The tale ends with a quotation from Tennyson's 'A Dream of Fair Women':

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No memory labours longer from the deep
Gold mines of thought to lift the hidden ore
That glimpses, moving up, than I from sleep
To gather and tell o'er
Each little sound and sight. (I. 175)

Here are linked together Giles's and Hugh's memories and the dreamer's fantasy; both have been laboriously gathered and presented to their audience. Both have the power to transport the listener beyond the present and the ordinary, to remove the limitations imposed by our usual factual apprehension of the world. Perhaps in both cases this power may operate in ways which disturb us, since it removes some of the assumptions about the nature of time and the singleness of the individual personality which help us to deal rationally with our experience.

Many of the other stories Morris wrote for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* have as a major preoccupation the normal distinctions between past and present, dream and reality, and what happens if they are removed. Many have as a characteristic effect the disorientation, the deliberate confusion, of the reader. In the first story to be published, 'The Story of the Unknown Church' (January 1856), the opening sentence is startling since it requires us to listen to the first-person narration of a dead man:

I was the master-mason of a church that was built more than six hundred years ago. (I. 149)

Gradually he recalls his church, and fixes his memory on one particular day:

I do not remember very much about the land where my church was, I have quite forgotten the name of it, but I know it was very beautiful, and even now, while I am thinking of it, comes a flood of old memories, and I almost see it again ... that old beautiful land! Only dimly do I see it in spring and summer and winter, but I see it in autumn-tide clearly now; yes, clearer, clearer, oh! so bright and glorious! (I. 149)

Already the reader is asked to juggle with two different times: the undefined and unlocated present in which the dead narrator is speaking, and the long past but increasingly specific moment which he has recalled. Almost immediately we are reminded of an even more distant past, as the narrator tells us that the church was being built to replace an older one, destroyed by fire,

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which was erected a hundred years before he was born. The story, like 'A Dream', is concerned with the relationships between the past, and day-dream, and the present. Again a character moves from memory and fantasy into reality. Walter the master-mason, while carving, slips into a day-dream about his friend Amyot who is away fighting in the crusades. He is roused from the dream by a voice calling his name – it is Amyot, unexpectedly returned. Immediately the narration slides away once more from the straightforward chronological time-sequence to tell in flashback how Amyot left for the Holy Wars. And the next section of the story jumps forward, leaving a chronological hiatus, to narrate Amyot's death – which was itself prefigured in Walter's dream.

Thus the story's concern with the way memory and fantasy affect our perception of events is mirrored by the use of ellipsis and prolepsis which distort the time-sequence of the fabula, the story-as-it-might-have-happened. Similar confusions may be found in the prose itself, especially in Morris's use of tenses which exhibits a disturbing fluidity. One sentence which occurs at the end of the memory of Amyot's departure is an example of his style:

we had said that we should always be together; but he went away, and now he is come back again. (I. 156)

The sentence begins in the distant past before Amyot left, but as the pluperfect indicates that period is recorded from the point of view of a later time. There follows a projection of the future made in that earliest time. Then comes a simple past tense, denoting the act which negated the possibility of the hoped-for future. And immediately, with only the slightest possible mark of punctuation, we are transported to a present ('now') in which Amyot's return is already in the past. This rapid movement from tense to tense may leave the reader breathless and perhaps understandably confused about the precise status of that 'now' of which the narrator is speaking. Extreme accuracy in the use of tenses has led to confusion rather than clarity. And if the reader is made uneasy by the way the prose seems to slide away from his mental grasp, Walter too feels disturbed when 'one . . . whom [he] had seen in [his] dreams just before' (I. 155) appears to him in the flesh. Indeed he feels 'almost beside [himself]' (I. 155). He

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briefly experiences a loss of identity similar to that of Giles and Hugh in 'A Dream'. For him too, the return in the present of one who had been within the boundaries of dream or memory has a disturbing, disorientating effect.

Clearly the strange shifts of time, the narrative confusions, are not caused by ineptitude on the part of a young author. Morris is in complete control of other elements of his story; for instance, the locations in Walter's dream are reflections, and distortions, of the scenery around the church, and fully convincing as examples of the way dream-experience builds on and transforms reality. Morris was preoccupied by the idea of time and deliberately used his story to raise questions about its nature and operation. This is attested by his insistent harping on the word. In the penultimate paragraph alone we read 'I was a long time carving it . . . a very short time . . . thinking of the time . . . as I had time' (I. 158). The tale, like 'A Dream', suggests that normal distinctions between past and present, dream and reality, may not be as rigid as we would perhaps like to imagine.

In 'A Dream' and 'The Story of the Unknown Church' the merging of past and present seems to necessitate frightening realignments of perception on the part of those who are involved. Two other stories are concerned with the suggestion that the past and fantasy may actually be useful (though still sometimes disturbing) to those who can relate them to their own present experiences. 'Frank's Sealed Letter' is set, unusually for Morris, in a contemporary world. Its subject is memory. The narrator, Hugh, tells us of his love for his childhood sweetheart, Mabel, and describes his proposal to her, which she contemptuously rejects. In the next scene, Hugh opens a letter formerly sent to him by his dying friend Frank, which he was to read only if Mabel refused him. The letter counsels Hugh not to attempt to forget Mabel and his love for her, but to accept the suffering his memories will cause and believe that they will make him love other people more. Hugh, however, does not follow this advice. He does his best to forget Mabel, works hard, and becomes famous for his wisdom and loved for his philanthropy. Yet he finds that he forgets Frank as well as Mabel in his busy life. Eventually, years later, his control suddenly breaks; memories of his childhood with Mabel come flooding back, and he loses all will to work. He retires from the world,

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and ends by contemplating suicide. At this point comes another of Morris's surprise realignments of his narrative. Hugh wakes up from a day-dream to find that he has only just read Frank's letter. All the years of struggle, success and ultimate failure have been imaginary. He now has to choose between accepting Frank's advice or following the path of his dream. He decides to take the former course, and the story ends as he prays that his memory will remain always green.³

Again Morris has played tricks with the chronology of his story. The present we had accepted, from which Hugh is narrating the tale, turns out to be false, what we thought had happened was only a dream, and what seemed past is still in the future. The actual present is a moment in what we had thought of as the past. Thus, as in the previous stories, we are made aware of the fluidity of time. Hugh's experience takes us further. We are led to consider whether the past can affect our present actions. Hugh attempts (in his dream) to forget his childhood and youth. When he suddenly remembers them again, his whole life collapses. He decides, therefore, to take the opposite course; he will live with memory, and suffer gladly the pain it causes him. Has he done the right thing? It is hard to judge; but certainly his dream of a possible future has led him to certain decisions about how he wishes to live in the present. He believes that memory of the past will also be valuable, since his identity, his self-image, is necessarily bound up with his past.

In 'Lindenberg Pool' the narrator not only finds himself recalling his own past, but also experiences something like a racial memory of an event which is the substance of an old legend. He finds his personality merging with that of the hero of the folk-tale; and his own actions of ten years previously appear strangely linked with those of his legendary predecessor. The outline of the story is taken from a collection of Scandinavian tales by Benjamin Thorpe, called *Northern Mythology* (1851-2). One of them explains the origin of an unfathomable lake. Formerly a castle stood where the lake now lies. On the eve of a holy day, when their masters were absent, the servants of the castle got drunk and played a trick on the local priest. They dressed up a pig in a night-cap, put it in a bed, and asked the priest to come to give it absolution as if it were a dying man. He did so, but just as he was about to administer the sacrament he

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realized the deception, and went away in anger, with the revellers laughing behind him. As he left the castle the clock struck twelve; the castle collapsed, and sank into an abyss from which a lake arose. Floating on the water was a stool, on which lay the breviary which the priest in his haste had left behind.⁴

In Morris's version, the story begins with a nineteenth-century man going on a midnight expedition to fathom Lindenberg Pool. The only thing we learn about him is that exactly ten years ago he committed a murder. As he contemplates the pool, he suddenly finds himself transported to a wood through which he appears to be riding. In a way which we may be coming to see as typical of Morris's early prose, his identity gradually merges with that of another man in another time and place:

Ah! what was that which touched my shoulder? Yes, I see, only a dead leaf. Yes, to be here on this eighth of May too of all nights in the year, the night of that awful day when ten years ago I slew him, not undeservedly, God knows, yet how dreadful it was! Another leaf! and another! Strange, those trees have been dead this hundred years, I should think. How sharp the wind is too, just as if I were moving along & meeting it; - why, I am moving! what then, I am not there after all, where am I then? (I. 246-7)

At first this disorientation is horrifying:

I shall go mad - I am mad, I am gone to the Devil - I have lost my identity, who knows in what place, in what age of the world I am living now? (I. 247)

But gradually he discovers that instead of losing his identity he now has two personae: his original one, and that of a thirteenth-century priest - the very priest who is riding to shrive the pig in the castle. The rest of the story is told through the priest's perceptions, but he also retains his nineteenth-century persona and sees such things as his drunken companion with a double perspective:

I watched him in my proper nineteenth-century character, with insatiable curiosity and intense amusement, but as a quiet priest of a long-past age, with contempt and disgust enough, not unmingled with fear and anxiety. (I. 247)

During the rest of the tale he continues to think with 'all thought strangely double' (I. 248). The baron whom he believes

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he is going to shrive has the same face as the enemy whom he killed ten years ago – in his other persona. When he reaches the castle, confusions continue. The people are moving about in 'a bewildering dance-like motion, mazy and intricate' (I. 251); curtains swing to and fro, giving momentary glimpses of endless corridors. The people are not what they seem, for to the priest's horror some of them are women dressed as men. The dance tunes seem like ones he has heard before, in the nineteenth century. Finally he is totally bemused:

Still more and more people talking and singing & laughing and twirling about, till my brain went round and round, and I scarce knew what I did. (I. 251)

Morris shows remarkable skill in evoking the blurred and shifting scene; the series of participles conveys the bewilderment of the narrator when faced with the phantasmagoric, subtly evil vision of the revellers. In the end he confronts a further confusion, of man with beast, as the pig breaks out of the bed and wounds him in the hand with its tusk. The priest breaks out too, using a sword to clear his way through the drink-maddened dancers and smashing the castle gate with super-human strength. Then he watches the castle sink and the pool appearing in its place. Here the story abruptly ends. Although we are reminded of the narrator's nineteenth-century persona by the final sentence ('And this is how I tried to fathom the Lindenberg Pool' (I. 253)) we do not discover whether or not he completely returns from the thirteenth century.

By now we are familiar with confusions of this nature. There is a further one, however, in 'Lindenberg Pool': that of the narrator with the author. Morris frequently uses first-person narration in his early work, but usually distances himself as author from the speaker by such devices as the dream, or at least makes it clear, as in 'Frank's Sealed Letter', that the narrator has a character and name all his own. In 'Lindenberg Pool', on the contrary, the narrator speaks of himself as both 'I, the priest' and, immediately afterwards, 'I, the author' (I. 250). At the beginning of the story, Morris (unusually) tells us how he came to write it. After reading Thorpe's account, on a stormy May evening, he felt he had to make his own version:

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whether I would or no, my thoughts ran in this way, as here follows. So I felt obliged to write, and wrote accordingly, and by the time I had done, the grey light filled all my room. (I. 245)

He indicates that the story aroused something in his own subconscious, which he had to exorcise by writing. In the same way the narrator may be hoping to exorcise his guilt as a murderer by shriving the man who reminds him of his victim. Yet the man is no man; and the pig takes his revenge by wounding the priest as he escapes. Morris links himself as author with the narrator all the more firmly by carrying over into his fiction the date (May) and the weather of the evening on which he was writing. Thus there are three united characters at the centre of the story, and we do not know which of them is 'real' and to which the guilt of murder should be attributed. At the end we are not sure whether the nineteenth-century murderer has assuaged his conscience in the figure of the thirteenth-century priest, nor how far the feelings of either are reflections of feelings entertained by Morris the author. That there are connections seems the only certain fact. In some way priest and murderer are the same, though six hundred years separate them, and both spring directly from the author's subconscious.

It must by now be clear that for Morris these early stories were the product of his passion for the past in a deeper sense than as mere enthusiastic replicas of medieval legend. They are carefully wrought examinations of the relationship of history, and of fiction, to contemporary experience. In the stories we have so far examined, the past is summoned up and made manifest in the present – sometimes by means of telling, or reading, a story and often in conjunction with a dream or day-dream. This process has an effect on the dreamer, or reader, or story-teller which usually involves some confusion, disorientation or distortion of perception; the accepted limitations of time, place and personality may be transcended. And this experience is often sinister, though it may also (ambiguously) appear beneficial to those who learn from it. So the frightening loss of identity of the 'Lindenberg Pool' narrator perhaps leads to his assuaging the guilt of the murder; Hugh in 'Frank's Sealed Letter' believes that his experience of a fantasy past has taught him the value of

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memory so that he can order his future life in a productive way. Yet the blurring of past into present and fiction into reality may not always be helpful; and neither is it always voluntary. The listeners in 'A Dream', and those who see the reincarnations of the ghosts, do not choose to be present and to suffer the consequences. The author in 'Lindenberg Pool' wrote from a sense of compulsion. Sometimes the power of the past is forced upon us. All these stories seem to exist in an atmosphere of danger; to summon the past is to tamper with the usual limitations on human experience in a way which may have disturbing results.

Like his colleagues on the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Morris believed that it is important for (men) to understand the past, both their own and that of their race. In his review of Browning's *Men and Women* (1855) he praises the poet for his success in giving life to historical characters, adopting the magazine's usual terminology:

What a joy it is to have these men brought up before us, made alive again, though they have passed away from the earth so long ago. (I. 330-1)

But Morris had a greater awareness than his colleagues of the potential dangers of such vivification. In some of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* stories he examines the role of the artist who attempts to make the past live in the present. For him, as well as for those who listen to his stories, there may be serious problems.

II

In discussing Morris's early stories I have found myself continually linking historical with fictional processes. It is indeed hard to distinguish the two in Morris's tales; they seem to have a necessary, though varying, relationship. In 'A Dream' the ghost story appears at first to be fiction but is later perceived to be the history of events actually experienced, in part, by the narrators. In 'Frank's Sealed Letter' the day-dream is stimulated by written communication and though it appears to tell of the past turns out to be fiction. In 'Lindenberg Pool' the reading of a legend prompts the author to write a fiction combining the ancient and

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a more recent past. These images indicate that Morris was considering the relationship of past and present not only in a general way but also with reference to his role as story-teller. In 'The Story of the Unknown Church' there is a vivid reminder of the way the artist attempts to unite past and present through his creative power. The master-mason is first seen carving on his church porch a figure of Abraham. His artist's fancy sees Abraham not with the appearance of a Jewish patriarch but as a knight, a contemporary of the artist:

riding far ahead of any of his company, with his mail-hood off his head, and lying in grim folds down his back, with the strong west wind blowing his wild black hair far out behind him, with the wind rippling the long scarlet pennon of his lance. (I. 153)

From this vision his imagination slides into the day-dream which has such a disturbing relevance to the fate of Amyot his friend. Connections, as usual in Morris, are implicit; but it seems that the artist's imagination naturally abolishes distinctions between chronologically separate periods.

Yet the artist has to create an identifiable image, to fix upon a specific representation of his imaginative conception. And here we are approaching a second subject with which Morris was obsessed. We have seen how his belief in the close relationship of past and present expressed itself in images of whirling and blurring, of ambivalence between dream, fiction, fantasy and reality, of a merging of separate identities into composite personae. In contrast, his images which refer to the role of the artist - he whose task it is to present these strange confusions of experience - are regularly images of stasis, fixity, hardness, rigidity. His artists, characteristically, work in stone, the least flexible of media. The paradox obvious in the conjunction of these two kinds of image reflects the central tension in Morris's artistic theory at this period of his life. Time is fluid, past and present may merge. But if the artist tries to recall the past, to make it part of the present, does he only succeed in destroying its vitality? In capturing the essence of the past, does he render it powerless by fixing it in one particular mould? Or, perhaps worse, does his representation inevitably fail in its attempt to capture and embody living men and women and their volatile, evanescent experience?