THE ROMANCES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

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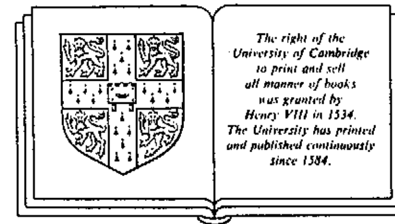

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helps to destroy it by ensuring that the captive women's lovers are able to find the island and free the prisoners. When the sexes are united and the witch is dead all the islands change. The Isle of Increase Unsought becomes barren. When Birdalone revisits the Isle of the Young and the Old she finds many children but no old man; living women now inhabit the Isle of Kings and men the Isle of Queens. These partial restorations of natural order are overshadowed by the triumphant renewal of life on the Isle of Nothing. Here fertility has returned and on the island lives a group of simple, pastoral people. They delight in the processes of growth and in the children who are being born to them. Their hopeful joy in the future fruitfulness of their land and in their descendants reminds us of the need to treat nature as our friend.

In *Sigurd the Volsung* and *The House of the Wolfings* Morris suggested that man need not feel himself at odds with nature despite the reminders it constantly offered of his own mortality. Through perceiving the relationship of an individual hero to the cosmic patterns of Aryan mythology, we may come to understand personal dissolution as a necessary and acceptable part of a process in which each act of heroism contributes to the ultimate good. This is how the death of Thiodolf is received in *The House of the Wolfings*. Thus there is no longer any necessity for a vain struggle against time and change. In the romances even the last traces of stoicism are expunged. The romance heroes and heroines joyfully identify themselves with nature and learn from it all they can – not abrogating their humanity but integrating it with the natural cycles of growth, death and rebirth.[21] This is particularly clear in *The Well at the World's End*, where the quest for natural vitality and power is at the heart of the adventure.

The romance concentrates on that staple character of fairy-tale, the youngest son who turns out to be stronger and wiser than his elder brothers. I have already described how Ralph leaves his father's kingdom and travels through cities and wildernesses in search of the Well at the World's End. He does so against his parents' will. When his elder brothers are allowed to seek their fortunes in the world beyond Upmeads, Ralph is considered too young to risk the dangers of such an adventure. He runs away, therefore; and the story shows how, unlike his more experienced brothers, he matures into a mighty hero, able

to return and save Upmeads from its enemies. At the end of the story he has taken over the throne from his abdicating father and is about to establish Upmeads in prosperity and safety.

The romance is on one level a study of growing up. Like Birdalone, Ralph must learn what it is to be an autonomous human being. His development, like hers, is imaged by his movement away from home and its restrictions, and his return with new power. (The pattern is also like that of Face-of-god in *The Roots of the Mountains*.) Ralph makes two major discoveries on his journey, both of which find parallels in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. He learns, as I have already indicated, something about societal organization and the value of true democracy. Like Birdalone, he adds to his increased understanding of the nature of community an experience of sexual passion and a recognition of its potential for destruction. In this he is also reminiscent of Golden Walter, for Ralph too falls in love with two women. His first love, who relates to Walter's Mistress, is variously described as a fairy, a witch and a benevolent nature-goddess: her name is the Lady of Abundance. Ralph saves her life in the Wood Perilous and becomes obsessed with her beauty and power. She eventually allows him to consummate his passion and we infer that it is his first sexual experience. The Lady foreshadows Habundia in her name, her connection with fruitful nature and her role as teacher of the romance protagonist. Yet the benevolence which we might expect from such a figure in Morris's work sits uneasily with her position as older, sexually dominant and seductive woman, for this is the doubtfully valuable relationship of the Mistress towards Walter. Indeed, to many people in the romance, the Lady of Abundance is an evil force. She is another of the girls brought up to be a snare to men, and her beauty does bring with it anguish and death – a tendency which culminates when she is herself murdered by her jealous husband after she has slept with Ralph. Ralph kills the husband in retaliation, thus becoming involved in the pattern of hatred and bloodshed that goes with the Lady and the passion she inspires. As in *Sigurd*, the hero is threatened by a cyclical and repetitive evil. Also reminiscent of *Sigurd*, however, is the sense of the hero as solar deity. The Lady's husband is the Knight of the Sun; Ralph kills him as 'the last rays of the setting sun' (XVIII. 201) shine on his armour. Two

mythological motifs are here juxtaposed. Had Ralph killed the Knight of the Sun before he became the Lady's lover, he would have been performing the role of new consort to the nature-goddess which is marked out for Walter in *The Wood Beyond the World*. This condition is linked in the romances with sterile and false Paradises and with recurrent evil. But Ralph is closer to the solar hero who is involved in a cycle that brings life and hope. Like Walter he finds an alternative beloved. Ursula has little of the obvious sexual attractiveness flaunted by the Lady. Instead of meeting her in danger, from which he must heroically rescue her, Ralph first sees Ursula in the ordinary situation of an inn at which he buys food; later she escapes from the castle of the Lord of Utterbol without assistance from Ralph. She has no magic powers. Above all, her relationship with Ralph is one of equal and friend, not of mistress to servant. The Lady has already drunk from the Well and planned before her death to lead Ralph there. Ursula is a fellow-seeker with Ralph. By choosing Ursula, Ralph becomes part of a sustaining union between partners, not a slave to the overwhelming force of sexuality, as he was with the Lady.

Ralph sleeps with the Lady in secret, adulterously. Ursula insists on a formal marriage ceremony before sleeping with Ralph. Thus Ralph's second love is associated with his growing understanding about the need for community; and his change from one kind of love to the other is linked with his move from adolescent self-absorption to socially committed recognition of the role he must perform in the wider world. The first love is not forgotten, nor is Ralph ashamed of it. It appears as a valuable, even necessary experience, part of a process of growing to maturity. Ralph, it seems, has to fall in love with the Lady before the greater rewards of the kind of love Ursula offers are clear to him. Until he has discovered the potentially destructive power of sensuality he cannot accept a less irrational affection. His old servant, however, is relieved when Ralph's emotional allegiance alters:

> now hast thou wedded into the World of living men, and not to a dream of the Land of Fairy. (XIX. 137)

Even Ralph, using an image prevalent in *The Wood Beyond the World*, describes his infatuation with the Lady as having been

'taken in the toils of love' (XVIII. 266). Thus, like Walter and Birdalone, he progresses through a period of sexual obsession to form a fully adult relationship in which lust has given way to fruitful affection and commitment.

Ralph gains, then, both political and sexual wisdom during his adventure. Yet this increased knowledge is only part of the wider development which changes him from a youth to a man and a hero. Ursula thus describes what has happened to him:

> thou art changed since yester-year, and since we met on the want-way of the Wood Perilous ... for then thou wert but a lad, high-born and beautiful, but simple maybe, and untried; whereas now thou art meet to sit in the Kaiser's throne and rule the world from the Holy City. (XIX. 130–1)

Ralph assumes his kingship because he has completed a quest: he has discovered the Well at the World's End. In order to understand some of the implications of this, the romance's central symbol, we must relate it to similar phenomena in Morris's other work. Like the Wanderers in *The Earthly Paradise*, Ralph leaves home to search for an ideal. He has, even less than they, scant knowledge of where to look or even what it is he seeks. Yet, like them, he has as the object of his quest a life-giving force. The water of the Well is for those who drink it a source of longevity, power, youthful strength and energy and protection from evil – Ralph and Ursula will be immune from danger in the final battle because they have completed the quest:

> the hands and the eyes that be behind the bows have other hands and eyes behind them which shall not suffer that a Friend of the Well shall be hurt. (XIX. 207)

Clearly the Well is related to the spring which is one of the legendary attributes of Paradise. Medieval descriptions of the Earthly Paradise, drawing on the account in Genesis of the four rivers which went out from Eden to water the earth, almost invariably include a well or spring. In Mandeville's *Travels* the author claims to have seen a magic well which originates from Paradise:

> And whoso drynketh iii. tymes fasting of that water of that welle, he is hool of alle maner sykeness that he hath. And thei that duellen there

and drynken often of that welle, thei neuere han sekeness and thei semen alleweys yonge . . . Sum men clepen it the Welle of Youthe.[22]

We have already seen that Morris was aware of this tradition when he wrote *The Earthly Paradise*. In *The Well at the World's End* Ralph has to pass by a deadly parody of the life-giving spring he seeks. He has heard that the Well may only be reached by way of the Dry Tree, and he finds it in the middle of an arid, stony desert. The tree stands with its roots in a stagnant pool and is surrounded by what at first seem living people:

all down the sides of the valley sat or lay children of men; some women, but most men-folk, of whom the more part were weaponed, and some with their drawn swords in their hands. Whatever semblance of moving was in them was when the eddying wind of the valley stirred the rags of their raiment, or the long hair of the women. But a very midmost of this dreary theatre rose up a huge and monstrous tree. (XIX. 73)

Again Morris powerfully returns to the picture of death-in-life. Ralph is nearly deceived by this savage mirror-image of the Well he is seeking. Fascinated, he comes close to drinking the poisoned water and joining his predecessors in immobility. He is saved by Ursula, who recognizes the evil; and by the provision of a substitute victim in the shape of a crow which flies down to the water, drinks and dies. Morris is here reworking images which were central to *The Earthly Paradise*. Ralph is on a quest for a life-force that will enable him to defeat evil and death. Like some of the searchers in the poem, he discovers a source of power which appears to cheat the process of change and decay but which in reality only offers the unfruitful stasis of arrested growth. The difference between Ralph and many of the *Earthly Paradise* characters is that he is able to pass through the deathly experience and discover a true Paradise beyond. The crow seems to act as a kind of proxy for Ralph and to die in his place. Death must be faced, not evaded, if one is to attain the Paradise. Unlike most of the heroes in *The Earthly Paradise*, Ralph passes this test and is rewarded with a draught from the waters of life.

The World's End is described in terms which relate it closely to Eden. Animals are tame there; Ralph and Ursula feel that they have 'come into the very Garden of God' (XIX. 87). Bathing in the sea, the source of life, they discover that old scars have

been washed away in a process of healing and revitalizing. Eventually they seem to have returned to a primal strength and beauty, so that Ursula looks to Ralph like a reincarnation of Eve:

here is no mark nor blemish, but the best handiwork of God, as when he first made a woman from the side of the Ancient Father. (XIX. 85)

All the imagery reminds us that the true Paradise, in contrast to the false one, involves a return to a harmony between man and nature. One of Ralph's qualifications for becoming a seeker after the Well is his belief in the primacy of nature. When the monks at Higham ask him to join their retreat from the world, Ralph is adamant that the world is the creation of a benevolent God and not, therefore, to be escaped from:

'Wilt thou tell me, father, whose work was the world's fashion?'
The monk reddened, but answered nought, and Ralph spake again: 'Forsooth, did the craftsman of it fumble over his work?' (XVIII. 36)

Part of his vow, when asked what he would do with the power conferred by the Well, is a promise never to deny his relationship with nature:

The dead would I love and remember; the living would I love and cherish; and Earth shall be the well-beloved house of my Fathers, and Heaven the highest hall thereof. (XIX. 37)

As he drinks the water he calls a health over the cup which similarly unites man and the natural world: 'To the Earth, and the World of Manfolk!' (XIX. 83). Morris claims, as he does in *Child Christopher* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, that the power of the hero is not a transcendence of natural laws but their greatest fulfilment; the true hero becomes so only when he is fully in harmony with nature. To remind us of this, the sign carved on the rock to guide the seekers to the Well combines an image of heroic strength, a sword, with the natural symbol so important to Frazer: a 'three-leaved bough' (XIX. 39).

The Well at the World's End synthesizes the images that have been crucial to Morris's literary imagination throughout his career. Ralph, vestigially a solar hero, seeks a true Earthly Paradise where he can find regeneration. He is offered two false Paradises: one in terms of the love of a dominant woman, who like Morgan le Fay in *The Earthly Paradise* provides endless but unproductive bliss, the other more clearly evil since it is an

obvious parody of the well and the tree of life that he seeks. These two, however, are really one and the same – for the Lady of Abundance, whose name promises fertility, is also the queen of the Champions of the Dry Tree. Though the Tree itself is widely separated in the story from the events concerning the Lady, its eventual appearance fully demonstrates the danger she represented to Ralph. In escaping it, he becomes qualified to discover the Tree of Life. But where is this final symbol? Not at the World's End; though it contains so many images that relate it to Eden, it does not contain a tree. Has Morris omitted it through an oversight? That he has not becomes clear when we realize that as well as a parody of the complete Paradise symbol, there is after all in the romance a combination of fruitful tree and water. This does not exist, however, in a place through which Ralph travels. In fact he bears it with him throughout his quest – for it is the badge of Upmeads:

> his surcoat ... was of fine green cloth, and the coat-armour of Upmeads was beaten on it, to wit, on a gold ground an apple-tree fruited, standing by a river-side. (XVIII. 101)

The story, then, is of a hero who finds a true but incomplete Earthly Paradise. The quest for Ralph is not linear but circular; he must leave home to discover the source of life and heroic power, but for a full expression of his new heroism he must return home. Only there, the tree imagery suggests, is the complete Paradise.

By employing the Aryan image of the tree Morris combines nature and history – the two pivots of his imagination – into a single, potent focus for his romance. And he also attempts to claim universal significance for his story. With the tree and the well, another image also drawn from the remote past provides him with a second motif around which the romance's meaning may be organized. In several of Morris's designs, especially those dating from the 1880s,[23] can be found the pattern of a tree, pillar or flame flanked by animals or monsters. In his lecture 'The History of Pattern Designing' he discusses its significance. The Holy Tree or Holy Fire, he says, originated in Chaldea, and 'both the fire and the tree are symbols of life and creation' (XXII. 228). As for the supporting beasts, he admits that they may be guardian spirits, but adds another suggestion:

> I have, however, seen a different guess at their meaning; to wit, that they represent the opposing powers of good and evil that form the leading idea of the dualism that fixed itself to the ancient Zoroastrian creed. (XXII. 228)

The image of the life-force fought over by opposing good and evil spirits appears in *The Well at the World's End* when Ralph leaves Upmeads and crosses the downs which lie south of his home. He sees a shape cut out from the turf above him:

> A tree with leaves was done on that hill-side, and on either hand of it a beast like a bear ramping up against the tree. (XVIII. 19)

The tree, as we have seen, appears again many times in the romance. The bears also recur. Sometimes they seem to be threatening forces. The second, wicked queen of the Champions of the Dry Tree is described by Ursula as 'like a grey she-bear' (XIX. 175) and the Lord of Utterbol carries the bear as his badge. Ursula is almost killed by a bear in the mountains. Yet bears may also be on the side of good, as are the shepherds of the downs who help Ralph in the final battle and who believe themselves descended from a 'Bear-father' (XIX. 203). Ursula's name means 'little bear'. Thus bears can be associated both with life and death. The duality reflects the image of opposed forces struggling for control of the life-giving tree which Ralph sees as he begins his quest. His task is to recognize, and align himself with, the side of right. Only when he has done so can he achieve his apotheosis – a description in which he is revealed as the solar hero:

> there, standing by himself, was Ralph, holding the ancient lettered war-staff; his head was bare, for now he had done off his sallet, and the sun and the wind played in his bright hair; glorious was his face, and his grey eyes gleamed with wrath and mastery as he spake in a clear voice. (XIX. 231)

Once more, triumphantly, Morris reminds us that all heroes are one hero. Ralph's search for life, his enrolment in the band of those who are on the side of good in the long struggle against evil, follows the pattern established for Aryan heroes in the dawn of history – a pattern which must inspire us to emulation.

Medieval writers used the Dry Tree as a symbol of the death which entered the world at the Fall but which is overcome by Christ's sacrifice. In Malory, Sir Bors sees a Dry Tree with a

pelican in its branches, feeding its young with its own blood. This is an icon of Christ:

by the bare tre betokenyth the worlde, whych ys naked and nedy, withoute fruyte, but if hit com of oure Lorde.[24]

No such interpretation may be attached to Morris's Dry Tree. Ralph is not saved by any divine intervention; he has himself to enter the lost Eden and take a drink from the Well of Life. And when he has found Paradise he does not reach a place of retreat from the dangers of a fallen world. On the wall of the guest house at the Abbey of Higham he sees a tapestry depicting the pilgrimage of the soul of man. He too is a pilgrim; but his quest will not take him out of the world into a spiritual realm. He travels to the World's End but no further. He must return the way he came and put what he has achieved into practical use in order to preserve his own home, which is the true Paradise. In this romance Morris provided the final answer to the escapist seekers after Earthly Paradises. By all means, he seems to say, seek an ideal and make it your motivating force. But remember that ideals must be tested and applied in the real world if they are to be life-giving rather than attenuating or destructive. When this practical setting of the ideal at the service of reality is achieved, the Earthly Paradise is attainable not in fantasy but in actuality. By this means man may join with the unfettered powers of nature to make time and change benevolent, for each moment brings us nearer to the ultimate romance happy ending – the Socialist society. Morris believed in its inevitability and his romances are deeply imbued with this conviction. In symbol and structure they reflect his hope.

V

In the introduction were identified three basic qualities of romance: the distancing in time and place, the use of 'flat' characters and the happy ending. We have seen how in Morris's early work all these aspects of the form were questioned by the ambiguities with which he surrounded them. Though so many of the stories had as a major theme the power of the past, the use of the past as a setting was criticized as escapist. Art based on the past could be falsificatory and restrictive, offering an illusion of permanence that killed or ossified the life it was supposed to capture. The heroic characters seemed inadequate when the values they endorsed were so doubtfully practical. Above all, the happy ending was a consolatory sham, reflecting wish-fulfilment rather than reality. In Morris's later literature these doubts were gradually eroded. Largely through reading the sagas, he began to see the possibility of a genuine heroism. His researches into Aryan imagery allowed him to envisage man as organically linked with the past, a view reinforced by Marxist historical analysis. So to study and write about the past became necessary, not escapist. Finally, the Socialist hope made romance happy endings the required formal expression of Morris's political conviction that the true Earthly Paradise would eventually be attained.

Morris's own word for the kind of art he created in the romances was 'typical'. He used it of the woes of Sigurd in the *Nibelungenlied*, while he was still searching for a style in which he could hope to convey, as he believed Wagner had not, the true quality of the medieval story.[25] By the time of the romances he had become confident in his use of the heroic quest as a type for all actions which try to change the world. And thus for Morris romance provided not only a fictional satisfaction of his aesthetic and emotional desires, but a radically effective expression of his social and political views. He had always known that his literary and artistic bent was towards the transmission of fantasy or dream-experience. As a young man his description of himself as one whose work was 'the embodiment of dreams' was in the specific context of a rejection of political commitment. In *The Earthly Paradise* he identified himself again as 'dreamer of dreams' and seemed, to a large extent, to despair of ever setting 'the crooked straight' (III. 1). In *News from Nowhere*, however, Morris drew a distinction between two kinds of fantasy when he hoped that his story of life after the revolution might be 'a vision rather than a dream' (XVI. 211). In other words, he hoped that it might be the kind of imaginative construct that had practical results. In the lecture 'The Society of the Future' he clarified the difference between 'vision' and 'dream'. Here visionaries are defined not, as we might expect, as escapists, but as the truly *'practical people'*;[26] their perception of the ideal for which they are struggling is a more powerful

motivating force than the arid speculations of economists. The embodiment, not certainly of self-protective dreams but of practically operative visions, became for Morris the most creatively political act of which he was capable.

When in *The Earthly Paradise* Morris wrote of himself as the poor dreamer, he was deeply troubled by the paradox that the imaginative freedom from the torment of time and change he imaged in the Earthly Paradise was itself destructive: because it was eternal it denied the possibility of hope and therefore of life. In 'The Hill of Venus' his hero is appalled by the 'never-ending, hopeless day' (VI. 302) of the Venusberg. The June lyric contains a Paradise-style secluded haven where in a 'rare happy dream' the poet and his mistress can escape from the world and from states of emotional intensity:

> See, we have left our hopes and fears behind. (IV. 87)

Yet here as in other Paradises to give up fear means to give up hope also. In contrast, when he was writing the romances Morris had come to see time as benevolent, leading the 'pilgrims of hope' forward to a true Earthly Paradise. With this insight went an ability to combine past and future in a fruitful way: so the tree imagery in *The Well at the World's End* develops the organic imagery of *The Earthly Paradise* into positive symbols of hope. As we have seen, Morris knew that this could only be done by romance, that 'capacity for a true conception of history'.[27] Much later an outstanding literary critic had a similar perception:

> the recreation of romance brings us into a present where past and future are gathered.[28]

Northrop Frye has comprehensively demonstrated the need to take romance seriously. In analysing the structure of the genre, he has defended it against charges of escapism, irrelevance and naïvety. For Frye, romance is a revolutionary mode, since it operates in freedom from particular social constraints. Thus it is entirely appropriate that Morris the Socialist should have been also a writer of romance – indeed, one of the 'three major centers [*sic*] of romance' (the others are Spenser and Scott) in its 'continuous tradition'.[29] Frye also stresses the essentially circular nature of romance form:

> most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of descent into a night world and a return to the idyllic world, or to some symbol of it like a marriage.[30]

This insight relates precisely to the central quality of Morris's romances. They are attempts to gain access to the 'idyllic world', the point of rest where stasis is achieved not through stagnation but by creative tension between past and future. Morris knew he would not see the Earthly Paradise; but he achieved artistic projection of it in his last romances.