

Victorian Poetry

Volume 13 Numbers 3&4 Fall-Winter 1975

An issue
Devoted to the Work of
William Morris



William E. Fredeman
Special Editor

West Virginia
University

The crisis of the book occurs in the months of September, October, and November. By now Morris has obviously put death into its proportion with life, and become resigned. The dreaminess of "Ogier the Dane," as opposed to the mundane nature of Morris' preceding resignation, implies a change of object. At this stage in the book, it is clear that the months have not simply shown the progress of the seasons, or illustrated their influence on the mind of the Mariners, although it is true that they have emerged from "the winter of their discontent" to the resignation of Summer. More important, the months have also marked stages in the development of the author's thought, from the early escapism to the examination of fate as answers to the crushing consciousness of death. These are experiments. The crisis of the work begins in "September" with "the Death of Paris," and reaches its climax in "October" with "The Man Who Never Laughed Again."

The introductory verses of "September" betray the participation of the author in the narrative. Stanzas four to six indicate that the Mariners, sitting comfortably beneath the trees, are willing to forget their worries. Their sorrow is sweet, and soothed by September softness, they have no fear of death or old longings. Stanza three, which refers to the author, bears a different stamp. It is disturbed, and expresses loss, appreciation of decay, desire, awakening consciousness, and disillusion:

Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again
That thou beheldest once with careless eyes!
Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries
To dream again the dream that made him glad
When in his arms his longing love he had.

(CW, V, 1)

Continuing in the mood of the poem, "The Death of Paris" is also an indication of the passing of the old William Morris, Pre-Raphaelite. The demise of Paris signifies the end of the sensual, unthinking Pre-Raphaelite world. The death is the death of the fantastic, and Morris moves on to the dream vision of reality and knowledge. Paris is the handsomest of mortal men, chosen to judge the contention of beauty between three goddesses. For reward he chose not greatness or power, but love, and so he is the universal symbol of the lover. Cheerful and sensual in Morris' story, Paris is definitely not cerebral.

Morris, dissatisfied with his time, turned for comfort to the things Paris symbolizes, which may be described as the Pre-Raphaelitism of his work. As has been seen, he became uneasy in this emotionally heightened and idealized world. After portraying its banishment from his mind in "The Death of Paris," Morris goes on to transcend its thoughtlessness and sensuousness, and to consider life in a more intellectual way. The same process may be observed in Keats's "Sleep and Poetry." Keats, as fond as anyone of the actual and the

"Landscape and Sentiment": Morris' First Attempt in Longer Prose Fiction

JESSIE KOCMANOVÁ



ON FEBRUARY 11, 1873, following a decade marked by personal "failure" and a series of events crucial to his life and art, Morris wrote to Aglaia Coronio: "My translations go on apace, but I am doing nothing original . . . Sometimes I begin to fear I am losing my invention. You know I very much wish not to fall off in imagination and enthusiasm as I grow older" (*Letters*, p. 53). Biographers have too often quoted the feelings expressed by Morris during this period as if they implied a permanent polarity between melancholy and his general sober and courageous optimism about life, but both biographical and literary evidence confirms that the emotional crisis which affected his creative writing was temporary.

It is generally accepted that his growing appreciation of the Icelandic sagas counteracted his earlier romanticism and "medievalism," giving a new vigor to his literary work, presenting him with a nobler and more useful code of conduct than Malorian chivalry, and coloring his whole future attitude to life itself. It was certainly in this decade that Morris finally bade farewell to any lingering ideas of Christian philosophy, with as much ease as in 1855 he had given up the idea of becoming a clergyman;¹ and his growing preference for the "pagan" outlook of the sagas paved the way for his final acceptance of Marxist materialism.²

The creative block to which Morris refers almost certainly relates to his first tentative essay into prose fiction—his "abortive novel," the manuscript

¹The "laicisation" of Morris' belief is discussed fully by Paul Meier in *La Pensée utopique de William Morris* (Paris, 1972), pp. 17-50.

²See the present writer's interpretation of *Love is Enough*, in "The Poetic Maturing of William Morris," *Brno Studies in English* (Prague, 1964), Ch. 2.

of which is in the British Museum.³ Although the work has long been familiar to Morris scholars, little attention has been given to it, and neither Mackail nor May Morris provides adequate information about its date, origins, or content.⁴

The precise date of composition of the work is uncertain. The manuscript bears no date, and the British Museum *Catalogue of Additional Manuscripts* identifies it only as belonging to "the early 1870's." Mackail's discussion of the work places the composition as roughly simultaneous with *Love is Enough*, and certainly the setting of the novel suggests that the remote Kelmescott countryside of the Thames valley, perhaps mingled with the Essex of Morris' boyhood, provided the landscape background for his "sentiment." Morris' letter to Mrs. Alfred Baldwin of June 22, 1872 established an incontrovertible *terminus ad quem*:

Herewith I send by book-post my abortive novel: it is just a specimen of how not to do it, and there is no more to be said thereof: 'tis nothing but landscape and sentiment: which thing won't do. Since you wish to read it, I am sorry 'tis such a rough copy, which roughness sufficiently indicates my impatience at having to deal with prose. The separate parcel, paged 1 to 6, was a desperate dash at the middle of the story to try to give it life when I felt it failing: it begins with the letter of the elder brother to the younger on getting his letter telling how he was going to bid for the girl in marriage. I found it in the envelope in which I had sent it to Georgie to see if she could give me any hope: she gave me none, and I have never looked at it since. So there's an end of my novel-writing, I fancy, unless the world turns topsides under some day. (*Letters*, pp. 46-47)

³British Museum Additional Manuscript 45,328, ff.1-53 contains the "draft of an unfinished novel (without title); Morris' only attempt in this form." The Catalogue does not mention that the MS is not consecutive, though this is a fact well known to Morris scholars from the letter quoted below to Mrs. Baldwin. The break in the manuscript comes at folio 49/50, the first part ending at page 95, while the second part, numbered 1-7, not 1-6 as Morris says, finishes on page 7 after nine and a half lines. The writing is strong and decisive throughout, with no particular striving after beauty, although there are occasional doodles and initial letters. There are a fair number of spelling and grammatical mistakes, but though there are corrections in the manuscript, it is not these mistakes which the writer has been concerned to revise. There are signs that either Morris did not always have the earlier sheets by him when he wrote, or else that he was in too great a hurry in setting down his ideas to turn back for reference.

⁴Both accounts are unusually general and succinct, but they have in common the clear implication that the writing of his novel was no more than an interlude in Morris' other activities. Their respective accounts follow: Mackail: "For some time he had been feeling about for new methods of literary expression: after this poem was written he became once more absorbed in handicraft and the productions of his workshops or of his own unaided hand. Some months before, this feeling after new vehicles had led him to begin what is certainly the most singular of his writings, a novel of contemporary life" (I, 287). May Morris: "Amidst the details of business, the designing, illuminating and verse making, my father once more, before settling down into the frame of mind which led to the long, steady work of Sigurd and the Virgil, tried his hand at the modern story—this time a novel. It was abandoned, not for lack of time, but avowedly given up as a failure" (*CW*, IX, xxxi).

This letter contains virtually all that is known positively about both the novel and Morris' attitude towards it. Unfortunately, there is no record of Mrs. Baldwin's response, but it is clear that Georgiana Burne-Jones's reaction conditioned Morris' own and led to his resolve to abandon the writing of fictions based on contemporary settings and themes. The "abortive novel" was, clearly, an experiment, but rather than being "singular" or a complete freak in the Morris canon, the work is so closely bound up with Morris' development as prose writer that it is difficult to understand why it has not been published.⁵

II

Morris moves into his tale with apparent ease, and the first sentences with their cancellations and corrections demonstrate that he was carefully considering his approach. Even the embarrassing authorial phrase, "and to his house we must go," cancelled in the manuscript, indicates that Morris from the outset was seeking to establish a narrative relationship with the reader by resorting to the use of the editorial "we" as his point of view. The novel begins abruptly with the description of the setting:

<place>

Our story begins in a village not so very far from London, yet in a country out of the track of the busiest people, and at any rate for whatever reason with a remote and unchanging air about it, that put it beyond dullness, and made the common place

<lived>

people, who wore away their monotonous and thoughtless lives there, seem to the dreaming wanderer through those parts as if they must deal with a different code of right and wrong, different ways of hope and fear and pleasure and pain than his. It was an old village of middling size with no squire's house in it or near it, because a very great lord's house some 5 miles off swallowed up almost all the land thereabout: the rectory on the other hand was rich and the rector served for Squire in this village of Ormsted.⁶ (p. 1)

In his essay "Gossip about an Old House on the Upper Thames," Morris describes in detail the house and surrounding countryside which inspired the setting for the novel. Kelmescott Manor—"a mass of grey walls and pearly grey roofs" (*AWS*, I, 366)—is a clear model for the rectory; and Ormsted (or Ormslade) only a thinly disguised Kelmescott village, in its second form perhaps a fusion of Kelmescott and Lechlade.⁷

⁵For permission to quote from BM Add. MS.45,328 I am indebted to the Society of Antiquaries. In quotations from the manuscript, additions, revisions, and corrections, shown in angled brackets, are indicated only when they are used to make a particular point in the discussion. Spelling and other obvious errors are silently corrected; missing particles and other editorial interpolations are supplied in square brackets; Morris' punctuation has been preserved as indicative of the movement of his thought. Page numbers following quotations refer to pagination in the manuscript.

⁶It is interesting that Morris, at this stage of the development of his ideas, should have selected to treat a rector and his family; he may have done so to underscore the contrast between the clergyman, whose life is a denial of his presumed belief, and his sons, for whom conventional religion is an alien and rejected background.

⁷For a parallel instance of Morris' utilization of personal setting, see the description of the visit to Kelmescott in *News from Nowhere*.

Old as the village street was it looked still older, for in that country of good building stone, people kept on building all decent houses with little mullioned windows a good hundred years later than in most parts of England, and the houses here were mostly built of the brown stone with <grey> stone slate roofs. (p. 1)

The church, however, has little in common with Kelmscott church. Rather, the description of the church, and particularly of the elaborate baroque tomb, is closely linked to the characterization of the rector,

a marvel for miles around; there was a death and his dart in it and the rector on his knees, and his wife of her own accord opening death's door in the towering marble rock work, amidst wh: an angel held a scroll of fiat voluntas tua and the date, simpering meantime on a stained glass bishop in the opposite window who for all return grinned queerly on him from his aureoled head held in his hand. (pp. 2-3)

Morris next moves to the village, and at this point he introduces, at least tentatively, the theme of the work:

The church was wretchedly kept enough amidst all these signs of former wealth, and was rather a place for an antiquary than for a searcher after the picturesque; and the village again full of architectural and historical interest as it was, would not have been called pretty or charming by people; and certainly I should not have called it cheerful though there was nothing squalid about it: the general absence of gardens towards the street, the

<bent>
brown walls & brown road meeting, the brown faced heavily walking men, the brown faced anxious looking women, the silence of the world as it were among the many noises of this summer afternoon, the landscape beyond so rich and so limited, no big hill no wide river to lead one's thoughts or hopes along: was it a place to crush passion or to soothe it, or rather to nurse and foster it with brooding, with a sense of isolation and imprisonment?⁸ (p. 3)

The present rector and the rectory are now introduced in a highly detailed description which presents vividly a background of dull and disappointed Victorian empire-building. The late rector had been a sepoy captain, and his trophies include a shabby, though carefully dusted, stuffed tiger in a corner. The sharp eye for telling detail, combined with the placement of village, rectory, and rector in a precise economic, historic, and social context, recalls the method of Scott, although the humor of the baroque tombstone is more reminiscent of Dickens. The introduction of the rector and his problems strikes a note of psychological realism, and through page twenty-four of the manuscript, the situation and character of the rector are the center of interest. When the story opens, the rector is meeting with the local doctor who has come to attend Arthur, the younger of his two sons. The rector's

⁸Cf. the conclusion of *News From Nowhere* when the dream ends, and turning a corner, the dreamer encounters a real inhabitant of nineteenth-century Kelmscott:

It was a man who looked old, but whom I knew from habit. . . was not much more than fifty. His face was rugged, and grimed rather than dirty; his eyes dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping. His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real good-will and courtesy, and much servility. (CW, XVI, 209-210)

silence obliges the doctor to take his leave, and as the rector goes out into the garden on this June evening, the reader is given a glimpse of his gloomy personality:

[He] stared hard at the beauty before him, muttering She was right that day it was a dull place to bury oneself in! a pang strangely compounded of the memory of hopes, fears, pleasures and pains [of] many past years shot through him as he spoke: one of those sparks of feeling which sometimes touch dull or dulled natures for a moment: if they could only catch at them and grasp in them the thread that would lead them out of the wretched maze. (p. 8)

In appearance, the rector is

liker to a captain of dragoons than a parson one would have said: tall and well-knit, with black hair, black eyebrows over fierce looking grey eyes, a straight well made nose, a well fashioned mouth and large chin and jaw; all the features cast in a fine mould—yet all spoilt; his brow knit in to an ugly halfscowl, his eyes with little expression in them but suppressed rage, his nose swelled and reddened, his mouth and chin grown coarse and lumpy—an unlovely face! people in general are nothing quick to read character in faces but the simplest people had found out that Parson Ridley was of no use to them in spite of his good looks. (p. 8)

Morris draws a parallel between parson and church:

Even as the <solemn> beautiful church with its art and history was a grave and a ruin: the comely and well conditioned village a <dull> <prison>, the fair sweet scented countryside a sort of dull enchanted valley to be escaped from so was this handsome house <& its> and handsome man owner the scene and actor of a tragedy without meaning, without ending, a curse without a name. (p. 9)

That Morris conceived of the rector in at least semi-symbolic dimensions is evident from the partial revisions in this passage.

Next follows a flashback of the rector's married life with his unloved, unattractive wife. This narrative is not integrally linked to the introductory presentation. From letters which his wife had found, the reader learns of the rector's secret intrigue with a mistress, Eleanor, who visited him after his wife's death. Her letters present a vivid picture of her psychology and of her wanderings about the London streets, in passages which suggest that had he continued in this genre Morris might have attained some very Gissing-like effects. For a moment during the unexpected visit the rector fears her:

He rose up from his chair in terror for he really began to think she was a ghost: all the dreadful threatenings of the disbelieved or disregarded creed of which he was the priest flashed across his brain mingled with naif or gross ghost stories read long ago in queer little penny garlands with woodcuts. (p. 19)

Telling her he hates her and wishes she were dead, he turns her away, experiencing afterwards one of those ambiguous moments of psychological doubt and hesitation which Morris best expressed in terms of landscape:

The night had fallen now, but the thin crescent moon was high up & bright the boughs
<rack>
were tossing about in the wild wind a great mass of rain clouds was far down in the leeward, and light ragged clouds were drifting across the remote watery grey strip; he ran out bareheaded into the moonlight, but turned back when he had got his hand on the wicket latch and walked slowly into the house. (p. 22)

Some details in the letters suggest that at one point Morris may have considered carrying on the tale of the rector and Eleanor as a contrast or supplement to the main plot,⁹ but he may have changed his mind or not known how to carry it through, for on page twenty-three the reader is told abruptly that the rector "never heard what became of her, nor need we."

The time gap is clumsily bridged in an attempt at conventional novel structure wherein a neighboring squire and his sister, Miss Godley, an eligible wife for the rector, are introduced. But this passage of about a page is without any particular significance, badly and superficially narrated.

Meanwhile, the little boys grow up neglected by their father. They know Squire Godley's, their school ten miles away, and some local farms, and they are happier in the society of the servants than with their father, who is frequently away. By page twenty-four the flashback ends. The transition to the present is as weak as the author's dismissal of Eleanor: "So passing over a good many years let us come back to the day we began with" (p. 24). John and Arthur, aged fifteen and fourteen respectively, are shown in the latter's room, the spartan simplicity of which—only "a great brown jug" stuffed with "a huge bunch of summer flowers" adorns the room—contrasts with the ornate and heavy lifelessness of the rest of the rectory. The two boys discuss their situation. Though they are friends, they do not seem genuinely to share each other's confidence. Both have refused to be clergymen, John because he thinks it "wrong if a fellow didn't very much want to be," although he did not give this reason to his father because "I knew he would laugh at me." His refusal means that he "must turn to at something next year and mustn't be too particular either." Arthur, who would like to be a farmer, is sensitive to local opinion about his father, and at the height of his delirium has been dreaming about him. The dream, of vain pursuit and search, is related in full: twice the father's face turns into a sheet of glass with flame behind it (pp. 27-28). This dream is linked not only to John's subsequent experience but also to the stained-glass bishop grinning at the tomb in the church. A detailed description of the two boys on page twenty-nine stresses the similarities to and differences from their father.

Digging worms in the garden, John experiences a moment of intensified perception:

For some strange reason that moment and the half hour were one of the unforgotten times of his life, and in after days he could never smell the mixt scent of a tool house, with its bast mats and earthy roots and herbs in a hot summer evening without that evening with every word spoken or gesture made coming up clear into his memory. (p. 30)

⁹Eleanor's letter says she will go as housekeeper to her godfather, an eccentric and learned recluse who has unconventional ideas on marriage and society.

It is such a moment as makes us feel "as if we were on the threshold of a new world," but in fact when John comes to the walk "covered over with clipped yew trees," he has a different kind of encounter:

Just as he was reaching out his hand to the catch of the door it opened suddenly, and he started back with a queer sound of terror one would not have expected to come from the strong healthy looking youth: it was his father, who stopped a moment startled too it seemed and looked at him, and then walked on again swiftly. (pp. 30-31)

In contrast to Arthur's dream, it is too dark for him to see his father's face, but as he comes into the "broad light" of the garden, he is relieved to meet a cowhand, whose gossipy conversation brings him back to reality and introduces the main theme of the work. His talk is of Mrs. Oldham of Fairmead Farm, of her daughter Clara, and of the dead farmer, who had been the rector's bitter enemy: "Mr. O. wasn't right about his religion not exactly a dissenter you know, but thought there was no bible nor miracles, nor nothing" (p. 32). This whole passage, with its indication of the cowhand's savage resentment against the informer who got him dismissed from Fairmead Farm—"I often wish I'd got his head under my spade I do"—with its anti-clericalism—"folk say the parson would be best pleased if the church were to walk off to London, so that nobody might come to it"—and with the accusation that the rector abetted the village bad girl in "fathering a child" on Clara's father—all this implication of sordid intrigue and gossip bearing clearly on the innocence of Clara's father, the evil of the rector, and the simple country folk's comprehension of the situation—is a mere shorthand notation of Morris' purpose. The effect of the cowhand's disclosures, coming as they do after John's sinister dream and encounter with the rector, is to help normalize John's emotions, but there is an implied warning that this state will not last: "How happy he was as he strode out into the light that the just lit up house threw over the dewy lawn; strong and happy and full of life what should touch him or harm him?" (p. 35).

At the gloomy supper table, the father warns John that in two months' time he must decide on his future and also that he should avoid "that woman at Leaser Farm & her brat." The insensitivity of the rector's statement destroys the pity that John had begun to feel for his father. This passage illustrates Morris' inability both to maintain consistency and to handle the ordinary temporal demands of narrative development, for during the conversation John inexplicably becomes two years older. Morris' interest seems to have shifted, within a single episode, from the rector to his sons, and since he now wishes them old enough to become rivals for Clara's hand, he arbitrarily advances their years without any preparation.¹⁰

¹⁰There are other examples of Morris' inconsistency. Mrs. Oldham's name is changed to Mason, though he frequently omits; or perhaps forgets, to include it; Fairmead Farm becomes Leaser Farm, and the village of Ormsted is renamed Ormslade.

The next morning John sets out ostensibly to go fishing, but his real purpose is to visit the farm. Morris carefully stresses the innocence of both boys and their unconsciousness at this point of what their relationship to Clara means—an innocence actually more appropriate to their original ages:

Both the lads and he more especially would have been called very childish at most times by superficial observers, from the eagerness with which they caught at little pleasures, their shyness, and when they were talking to strangers their clumsiness of expression and the care with wh. they avoided any words or talk that expressed strong feeling of any kind: and certainly John was more excited with his day's fishing than one would have expected a big fellow of 17 to be. (pp. 41-42)

Morris seems to have had difficulty in conforming to a method that might be said to characterize the "well-made novel"; it was a failure, in part, to provide the scaffolding adequate to build a sustained narrative. This deficiency is apparent in the scene which follows, in which Arthur's doctor gives assurances, first to John, later to Mrs. Mason, that Arthur is sufficiently well to attend the picnic with Clara and her mother. It is, in fact, the short unobtrusive but sharply clear passages of description that provide the dramatic contrasts in the work far more effectively than all but a few passages of dialogue or narrative action. These passages also serve to advance the narrative, and where they are not used, the transitions almost always seem weak and unprepared for, or else there seems to be a lacuna in the story. That Morris himself recognized this failing is subsumed in his remark about "landscape and sentiment." That he took the trouble to revise, however casually, this hurriedly written fragment shows that he was feeling his way towards the method of the late prose romances, where the landscape assumes, as in Hardy's novels, an intrinsically dramatic function and becomes a positive vehicle of narration, if not, indeed, of characterization.

At this point a descriptive landscape vignette is followed by a cancelled passage delineating an encounter with a farmhand, which Morris replaced by a description of the approach to the farm, in which he stresses the contrast between the farm and the rector's village:

For though there was nothing marked or impressive about the landscape here any more than at Ormslade village; yet just as an atmosphere of fullness & hopelessness hung about that, so about this was one of quietness and rest the rest not of death but of happy life. (p. 47)

Clara now appears, running out with a letter she has written to Arthur, which she intends to send with some aloe blossoms, "because you know they say they only blossom once in a hundred years, and I thought he should have something to remember his being ill this year" (p. 49). The description of Clara, especially of her eyes, in breathless, scarcely punctuated sentences, ends with a hint of Morris' future purpose:

Her face like her figure had something strong and massive amidst its delicacy somewhat sunburnt too like her hands, beautifully clear of skin but without much red in the cheeks: dark brown abundant silky hair; a firm clear cut somewhat square jaw and round

well developed chin; lips a little over thin for her youth & happiness, a little too firmly closed together a straight nose with wide nostrils and perfectly made but somewhat short; rather high cheek bones that gave again too much of a plaintive look to the cheeks a wide forehead and beautiful[ly] shaped head above it, and to light all this up large grey eyes set wide apart fringed with dark lashes, so capable of all shades [of] expression that they were liable from their very sensitiveness to be misread, so sympathetic with the soul that shone through them that in times of strong emotion, before the lips had begun to tremble the whole change would have come over the eyes: amidst apparent acquiescence they would be cold with disdain, amidst apparent coldness they would be tender, O how tender, with love; amid apparent patience they would burn with passion; amid apparent cheerfulness they would be dull & glassy with anguish. No lie or pretence could ever come near them they were the index of the love and greatness of heart that wielded the strong will in her, which in its turn wrought on those firm lips of hers and that serious

air expression
brow which gave her the air of one who never made a mistake, an look which without
would
the sanctification of the eyes might perhaps have given an expression of sourness and narrowness to her face. I have told of what she was like here; and it is true that even at this time all this was in her face; yet certainly undeveloped much of it.¹¹ (pp. 50-51)

The manuscript breaks off abruptly in the middle of page fifty-one with Morris' reminder to himself that "one must say something about the said dress though there was little to be told about." On the reverse of the page there is another note: "in writing to John, Arthur is to tell him that he heard her telling her kid about him and what a fine chap he was talk about getting old at the picnic." Just as part of the description of Clara relates to the future, so, too, the first part of the note apparently refers to a much later period of development. The "her" in the pencil note is of course Clara; the "kid"¹² is the child of Clara and Arthur. The last phrase is Morris' reminder to deepen the note of conversation at the picnic and thus tie it to future events. The whole context indicates that Morris was intending a lengthy novel in which one of the major themes was to be the contrast between what people plan and what time makes them do and become.

Without further explanation, the text resumes with the description of Clara's simple, but dainty, dress: "There was nothing clownish about her, rather a very visible taste in the make of her clothes" (p. 52). The whole mood of the visit to the farm is pastoral, the farmhouse, its garden and its inmates presenting a complete contrast to the gloomy rectory and the boys' life there. The account of John's visit continues for fifteen pages. Various motifs appear in the conversation, notably that kindness for the sake of

¹¹This passage echoes the description of Georgie Burne-Jones by Graham Robertson in *Time Was* (London, 1931): "Eyes like those of Georgiana Burne-Jones I have never seen before or since, and, through all our long friendship, their direct gaze would always cost me little subconscious heart-searchings, not from fear of criticism or censure, but lest those eyes in their grave wisdom, their crystal purity, should rest upon anything unworthy" (p. 75).

¹²Morris used the word "kid" as if in jest to hide his emotions; see his letter of January 18, 1861 to Ford Madox Brown, announcing the birth of his first child: "Kid having appeared" (*Letters*, p. 21).

evoking kindness “may bring on dreadful things” (Mrs. Mason, p. 55), and once more the idea of “suddenly remembering little scraps of time gone by” is remarked upon (Clara, p. 62). The picnic is planned as a visit to a large manor nearby, and John breaks the news that he is to go to London. The scene shifts from the garden to the cool oak parlor and back to the grass under the walnut tree where Mrs. Mason milks the cows and prepares a syllabub in the “green dragon bowl,” which Morris had jotted in the margin some pages earlier. The detailed presentation of the “cool clean house with its sanded passages” and the

impression which clung to the whole house, that though old, handsome in decoration and picturesque in outline it had never been built for anything different from what it was: everything was what was thought fit for a rich farmer of that passed day, and everything added had grown on to the place as naturally as the growth of the big limes and walnuts (p. 56)

confirm that Morris had in mind the whole social history of the place and its people, although his draft—at times so hurried and impatient—does not convey his full intention.

The ensuing passage, up to page seventy-five, tells of John's return home that day, of Arthur's reticence about Clara's letter, and of Arthur's dream after reading its naive and friendly message. He wakes in the earliest dawn and imagines wandering about the meadows with Clara. However,

his waking dream turned into a sleeping one without changing much at first except that it was suffused with a vague <and luxury> excitement and <fear withal> that <he> had <not felt> been absent before; and he was walking with Clara through <other> meadows not at all like the Leaser meads which yet they both agreed to think none other it seemed; they were thickly studded with apple trees in bloom, and it was moonlight, yet the birds were singing in full chorus; and Clara herself was clad in fluttering raiment like he had seen on angels in old pictures instead of her usual dress, and she spoke to him in verse in the rhythm of some fragment of old poetry that he had forgotten awake, and so they passed on till as it happens in dreams the landscape changed and there were big blue mountains all about the mead and a rushing stream through it, and suddenly his heart seemed to stop beating for fear and she stopped him & faced him, with fear in her eyes too, and as he tried to speak & could not, she had turned into his brother and they were both quite children again and he thought they had lost themselves & were to die, and the rush of the stream seemed to get louder & louder, and the wind to rise & howl about the hollows of the mountainside, and presently a horse came galloping past, and then a herd of cows rushed up and then a great flock of sheep seemed to fill up all the valley their endless backs all moving like a sea, and the sound of the bell wethers filling all the air, and then with a sense of something dreadful going to happen he woke panting & gasping with an unuttered cry, and the horror of the dream was so strong on him that at first he seemed to wake into a world of white flame. (p. 74)

If the beginning of this dream recalls “The Blessed Damozel,” the conclusion contains the germ of motifs which occur frequently in the later romances, and even the motion of the prose recalls that of *The Well at the World's End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. But while the dream narrative and Arthur's moment of waking are rendered so clearly and strong-

ly, the passing of time once again is too bluntly rendered: “This brought the time to the end of June” (p. 75).

Finally, the day of the picnic comes. In narrating the mild incidents of the drive to the farm and on to Ruddywell Court, Morris has some difficulty in combining the innocence of his characters with the need to have them behave with middle-class Victorian propriety. At the Court, there is a long scene between Clara and Arthur in the “room with the red beds,” which has already been mentioned by Clara (p. 60). The room is depicted in some detail; it is hung with faded tapestry and one window looks over wide flat meads to the “flashing river beyond.”

Their conversation is inconclusive, for Clara has not yet realized their mutual love. Only the somewhat repulsive housekeeper, in describing whose character Morris hovers between an unsuccessful realistic sketch and the romance or fairy-tale demand for a witch-like figure, attempts a joke at the expense of Clara and Arthur; Mrs. Mason perceives nothing, although she would not have opposed their love “after her first qualm of fear at the parson's violence, or indignation at his brutality; of doubt as to whether John would not have made the better lover” (p. 84). Mrs. Mason's character, which seems somehow related to her physical appearance, is itself puzzling. As earlier described, she is

a woman of not more than 36, much taller than her daughter, of looser make and most certainly beautiful, but little like her daughter; her hair was abundant dark and crisped, she had great soft brown eyes, and a large mouth with full lips; she was thin now, and her face looked worn but not unhappy; but the principal expression on it was of kindness that expects its full reward of affection and indicates an exacting and rather restless heart. (pp. 53-54)

Yet her nature seems to contradict her way of life as a busy and prosperous farmer,¹³

for she whose sweet & kindly feelings hardly included passion as her dreamy & vague mind hardly included reason, found unfailing interest in contemplating the future of her daughter's heart whom she loved tenderly scarcely remembering it may be that she was her daughter.¹⁴ (p. 85)

¹³ A correction on page 63 of the manuscript suggests that Morris is concerned to make her a “farmer” in her own right and not merely farmer's wife or widow.

¹⁴ Although she had faced up in argument to the rector when he had induced the village girl to compromise her husband. The cow-hand relates what a housemaid had overheard:

She was proud and stiff and talked beautiful and your father raved and made a noise—and this she heard her say Mr. Ridley if my husband likes to make love to every girl in the village he has a full right to if I let him. (p. 34)

For the theme of unconventional love relations see also note 9.

It was probably in the months when he was discovering Kelmscott, from spring to early summer of 1871, that Morris' "novel" began to demand expression. Writing of life at Kelmscott in her childhood, in the first summer the girls and their mother were there with Rossetti, and later, May Morris recollects:

The manor, or the "Lower House," as it is called in the village, belonged to a yeoman family, whose graves lie in the little churchyard, going back to the sixteenth century. Mr. Turner was dead, but his widow, our landlady, lived with an unmarried sister and brother in her old home down the river. We used to make pleasant visits there, going to see the beasts and watching the cheese making, and after gigantic teas coming back in the cool of the evening, the boat laden with flowers and fruit—everything the freehanded souls could prevail upon us to take away. A tall frail handsome woman was Mrs. Turner: she left the farm down the river and crossed over to Kelmscott as a bride, and then left the manor and crossed back to her old home—and died there. Perhaps the serene-looking face had lived down some impatience, mastered some vagrant fancies as the long years slipped by, but to picture that quiet journey from home to home and at last to the churchyard that lies embowered among orchards high above the river, is indeed to think of life as a placid dream. (*CW*, VII, xxx)

This delicately observed passage not only conveys much of the same atmosphere as the novel fragment, but also suggests a very probable original for Mrs. Mason and even some of the background—a village scene where "House" and farmhouse are on terms of social intercourse with a shared gentility, served by the cap-touching farm servants.¹⁵ That the upper Thames side is indeed the scene is implied in the description of the broad stream which has even in this remote upper reach "that look of nobility, which never belongs as I fancy to any river that does not personally meet the sea" (p. 86).

The picnickers take a boat at the inn on the river. Perhaps the grass-covered road on the other side of the ford, a road that seemed "to lead nowhere at all" from the little inn which "looked at the very end of the world" provided the germ of the idea of young Ralph crossing the ford from his father's kingdom as he set out on his journey to the Well at the World's End and back. "Cast no least thing thou lovedst once away," Morris says in *The Earthly Paradise*, and even the discarded name of Fairmead Farm was to have a partial resurrection in the little kingdom of Upmeads when the time was ripe, when in a sense the world had turned "topsides under," and Morris the Marxist was exploring his fantasy world of friendship, love, and heroism, no longer in doubt about how to tell his tale.

The "talk of growing old at the picnic," which Morris had planned in his earlier note, is realized in a conversation between Clara and John, and later there is a moment of tension when the two change places in the boat:

And as they stood thus with her hand on his shoulder she stopped and said John look at the sun set now, Mother and Arthur turn round and look; for a sudden change had come over the sky by the drift of light clouds & the whole was full of strange golden light, and in the west the clear sky passed from orange to pale yellow & green, and the long strips & light flecks were deep crimson unnameable colours: they looked silently, while the stream gurgled past them and the water hen cried among the weeds and the big eyed heifers stared at them from the bank but Arthur turned soon to look at her: there she stood with her hand still on John's shoulder, and he holding the other hand: she had half bared her arms beautiful but slim as a young girls are, her head was bare and little locks of hair were floating about her face in the light wind, her lips were a little parted amid pleasure and thought and her eyes fixed full on the sky, as if she would never think of anything on earth again. (p. 91)

The next morning John is summoned to his work in a merchant's office in London by a letter from the rector with the advice to

work hard & try to make money & you will find the making of it more amusing than anything else, besides all the amusement you can buy with it: dont get into a mess: I did when I was young and that has tainted my position ever since: if you think this queer for a parson to write I cant help it I am not. (p. 94)

At this point the manuscript abruptly stops. The first four of the seven added pages which Morris, in his letter to Mrs. Baldwin, referred to as "a desperate dash at the middle of the story to try to give it life when I felt it was failing," contain John's letter advising Arthur to ignore all other considerations and marry Clara if he is sure of her love, but John's consciousness of his own love for Clara overcomes him, and the letter turns into an almost hysterical tirade:

If you feel real love you must know that you really think the whole world exists only to minister to your passion. . . . It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it—and if you do not feel this, you are not in love: and the desire you have will pass away into something else—into friendship, or into disgust or hatred? . . . All is either love or not love, there is nothing else, friendship, kindness, goodness, is a shadow & a lie! (p. 4)

Arthur, brought to the point of decision, goes to the farm and tells Clara of the letter, though he does not show it to her; she fears that something may have happened to John. They announce their betrothal to Mrs. Mason, of whose rapture "the two lovers were a little ashamed." After parting in the evening, both are conscious of a lack of confidence because the letter has not been shown. The last sentence consists of Clara's recognition that she cannot now ask to see the letter: "No I cannot now, after that unlucky speech about its being the whole truth, he would think I half suspected something wrong: & it would look ugly & not as if I were his love" (p. 7).

III

At first sight it would seem that of all Morris' prose works "Frank's Sealed Letter" stands closest to this manuscript. Published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856, it is the only one of Morris' tales apart from the short "Lindenberg Pool" from the same period to be set in contemporary England. The scene is also Thames-side, the theme is an unhappy love—a

¹⁵Cf. Mackail (I, 242), quoting F. S. Ellis with reference to Morris' embarrassment at the cap-touching of the Kelmscott caretaker.

letter plays a significant role—and a dream-conditioned time shift is exploited. But in fact there is a profound difference in intention between the two works. "Frank's Sealed Letter" is in essence a short tale, limited in conception and reference, and the main literary influence is almost certainly Poe.¹⁶ But Morris' purpose in the fragment was undoubtedly to write a full-length novel. He could achieve a convincing background—the countryside, in its topographical, economic and social aspects, is as clearly set out as the milieu of the later prose romances; he could achieve vivid and poignant moments of tension within and between his characters; but he could not manage the narrative techniques required by the Victorian realistic novel.

Indeed, Morris appears to have been striving for something different. It is not definitely known whether he had read *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) or *Rhoda Fleming* (1865) at the time he commenced his novel, but in spite of May Morris' accentuation of the differences in the authors' temperaments¹⁷ Morris' fragment is perhaps closer to certain aspects of Meredith's two books than to any other contemporary novels—although of course the element of class is treated in quite a different way. This kinship with the immediate predecessor of the "modern" novel suggests that Morris was looking for a new method of depicting the consciousness of his heroes, though he did not succeed in fusing his analysis, presented by means of associating inner consciousness with descriptions of scenery, place, and weather—his "landscape and sentiment"—with narrative progression.

This is not to say that he discarded the ideas and impulses which had led him to try to achieve psychological realism in prose. The manuscript shows that it was not "because he could not resolve the problem he had posed himself" (*Letters*, xlvi) that he gave up. The writer of the manuscript clearly knows what is going to happen to the two brothers and the woman they both love. The problem he could not solve was form. In short, he was not yet a master of prose. It was only after the discipline of his lectures and polemical prose that Morris achieved an individual style adequate to his unique form of prose fiction.

The core of what Morris wanted to express is, however, discernible in his novel fragment, namely a solution to moral problems in personal relationships without recourse to religious sanctions. It is true that at this time in Morris' own life he was discovering how impossible it is to expect people of

different temperaments and beliefs to behave as one would have them.¹⁸ But Morris did not need to try to write a novel in order to find out what to do: he acted according to his own unconventional but humane and logical ideas, which, however, he did not egoistically advertise to all and sundry. Even his good—though not intimate—friend, Ellis, who for some time shared the tenancy of Kelmescott with him after Rossetti left, was not aware of them, and later (1887) wrote of this early Kelmescott time: "If I thought his opinions on the relations of the sexes in old days were the same as he professes to hold now—why then, you might believe anything" (Henderson, p. 219). Perhaps one of the reasons why Georgie did not encourage Morris to continue with his "novel" was that it contained hints that he might want to treat too openly matters which had better for convention's sake be left obscure.

All the later prose romances pose questions of personal behavior and relationships in a background of commitment to some group of friends or some social community or kindred. Only when the personal relationships are resolved within the community can the story come to an end. Because he gave his tales the framework of the romance fantasy or the dream, Morris could exploit the simple technique of romance narrative. But what he expressed in the later romances was in essence what he had tried to express in this manuscript fragment: the virtues of truth, sincerity, fair-dealing; the conflict of friendship, kinship, duty, and love. He used and carried to a higher power in his later prose romances many of the motifs and techniques adumbrated in this fragment: the hold of the past and of the future on the present; subconscious conflict finding expression in dreams; landscape, buildings, rooms, furniture symbolically rendered in both characters and narrative. To achieve his purpose in this fragment, Morris would have had to invent a new kind of novel, and this he was not encouraged to do. When he returned to prose fiction fifteen years later, he was master both of a unique prose style and of a logical and consistent theory of life and history which enabled him to transform the stored seed-corn of "landscape and sentiment" into the magnificent harvest of the late prose romances: "The ear is stored for nought to move / Till heaven and earth have ending."¹⁹

¹⁶ May Morris has noted "a streak of Edgar Allan Poe" in at least one of the early tales, though she does not specify which (*AWB*, I, 384).

¹⁷ "A few of Meredith's novels he certainly read, notably 'Evan Harrington,' but no one who understands his temperament would expect to hear that he was a constant reader of Meredith" (*CW*, XXII, xxvi).

¹⁸ See his letter to A. Coronio, November 25, 1872, complaining of Rossetti's being "unromantically discontented" with Kelmescott and "the whole thing" (*Letters*, p. 51).

¹⁹ "Love's Gleaning Tide" (*CW*, IX, 120), according to May Morris, written about 1872 (xxxv).