DICKENS STUDIES ANNUAL

Essays on Victorian Fiction

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VOLUME 10

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AMS PRESS, INC.
NEW YORK, N.Y.

Introduction to *The Novel on Blue Paper*

Penelope Fitzgerald, editor

The novel which William Morris began to write early in 1872 is unfinished and unpublished and also untitled. I have called it *The Novel on Blue Paper* because it was written on lined blue foolscap, and Morris preferred to call things what they were.

The only first-hand information we have about it is a letter which Morris wrote to Louie Baldwin[1] on the 12th of June, 1872.

> Dear Louie,
> 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. Health and merry days to you, and believe me to be
>
> Your affectionate friend,
>
> William Morris.

The tone of gruff modesty, and in particular the catch phrase from Dickens,[2] is habitual to Morris and can be taken for what it is worth. In spite of the disapproval of Georgiana Burne-Jones, whose opinion he valued at the time above all others, he did not destroy his MS, but

kept it; and after what was presumably further discouragement from Louie, he kept it still. He must have been aware, too, why he had been given no hope. Mackail[3] tells us that Morris "had all the instinct of a born man of letters for laying himself open in his books, and having no concealment from the widest circle of all," and (of the Prologues to *The Earthly Paradise*) that there is "an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself." That, we have to conclude, was the trouble with the novel on blue paper; it did speak for itself, but much too plainly.

The background of the novel—the "landscape"—is the Upper Thames valley, the watermeadows, streams and villages round about Kelmscott[4] on the borders of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. Morris had gone down to inspect Kelmscott Manor House in May 1871, and in June he entered into a joint tenancy of the old house with Rossetti at £60 a year. The grey gables, flagged path, enclosed garden cram-full of flowers, lime and elm trees "populous with rooks," white-panelled parlour, are all recognisably described in this novel, although Morris when he wrote it had never spent a summer there. It was the house he loved "with a reasonable love, I think." Rossetti, not a countryman, had hoped that the place would be good for his nerves. But the seclusion, despite the constant presence of Jane Morris, and his intimacy with her, did his nerves little good. Morris had a business to run and was obliged to be in London a good deal. An inevitable tension arose among the three of them which has been so often and so painfully traced by biographers. To Morris it was "this failure of mine." Mackail, cautiously describing the subject of the novel as "the love of two brothers for the same woman," evidently saw no farther into it than the failure. Once, however, when I was trying to explain the situation, and its projection as myth, to a number of overseas students, one of them asked a question which I have never seen in any biography: "Why then did Morris not strike Rossetti?"

I hope to show that this question is very relevant to the novel on blue paper. Certainly Morris was not "above," or indifferent to, his loss. It is a mistake to refer his much later opinions, as reported by Shaw, or Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, or Luke Ionides, or as expressed in *News from Nowhere*, to his "restless heart" of 1868–73.[5] Which of us would like to be judged, at thirty-nine, by our frame of mind at the age of fifty-seven? Morris himself knew this well enough. "At the age of more than thirty years," he wrote in *Killian of the Closes* (1895) "men are more apt to desire what they have not than they that be younger or older."

And Morris's attitude toward his wife's infidelity may have been affected by the profoundly unsettling behaviour of his greatest friend, Edward Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones had been married since 1860 to Georgie, the charming, tiny and indomitable daughter of a Methodist minister. The Neds had started out in lodgings with £30 between them, and their happy and stable marriage, together with Burne-Jones's designs for the Firm, were part of the very earth out of which Morris's life and work took growth. But in 1867 the quiet Ned suddenly claimed, much more openly than Rossetti, the freedom to love unchecked. He had been totally captivated by a tempestuous member of the Greek community in London, Mary Zambaco.[6] Of this unpredictable young woman, he drew the loveliest by far of his pencil portraits; "I believed it to be all my future life," he told Rossetti. The affair came and went and came again, to the fury of Ionides, and the sympathetic interest of the Greek women. It lingered on, indeed, until 1873. Morris, stalwart, stood by his friend, but the effect of this new confounding of love and loyalty, on top of his own "failure," must have been hard to master; the effect of Mary herself can be guessed at, perhaps, from the strange intrusion of one of the characters, Eleanor, into the novel on blue paper.

Meanwhile, Georgie was left to manage her life and her two children as best she could. In his own loneliness and bewilderment Morris felt deeply for hers, and at this time he was apparently in love with her, or at least, he turned to her for affection; for gratification of the need to share thoughts and feelings; for the pleasure of believing himself understood.

Some of his drafts and manuscript poems of 1865–70[7] show this without disguise, though always with a chivalrous anxiety. He must not intrude; he thanks her because she "does not deem my service sin." A pencil note on one draft reads "we two are in the same box and need conceal nothing—don't cast me away—scold me but pardon me." He is "late made wise" to his own feelings, and can only trust that time will transform them into the friendship that will bring him peace. Meanwhile the dignity and sincerity with which she is bearing "the burden of thy grief and wrong" is enough, in itself, to check him.

> . . . nor joy nor grief nor fear
> Silence my love; but those grey eyes and clear
> Truer than truth pierce though my weal and woe . . .

Georgie in fact, was steadfast to her marriage, and strong enough to wait. "I know one thing," she wrote to her friend Rosalind Howard,

"and that is that there is love enough between Edward and me to last out a long life if it is given us."

In the meantime, what was Morris's outward response to the assault on his emotions? Work, as always, was his "faithful daily companion." After returning from Iceland in September 1871 he illuminated the *Rubaiyhat* of Omar Khayyam, designed the Larkspur wallpaper, began his novel, and fiddled about in "a maze of rewriting and despondency" with his elaborate masque, *Love Is Enough*. But the moral of *Love Is Enough*, (as Shaw complained), is not that love is enough. Pharamond, coming back from his quest for an ideal woman to find that his kingdom has been usurped by a stronger man, accepts that frustration and loss are worthy—"though the world be a-waning"—to be called a victory in the name of love. But Morris knew, as Shaw knew, that this is nonsense. The victory, melancholy as it is, is for self-control. Renunciation is achieved through the will and strengthens the will, not the emotions. And this, with a far more positive hero than poor Pharamond, is, I believe, the real subject of the novel on blue paper.

Morris had been delicate as a child; but as soon as he grew into his full strength, he was subject to fits of violent rage, possibly epileptic in origin. To what extent these were hereditary, it is impossible to say. When Morris was eleven he was sent as a boarder to his school at Woodford, although it was only a few hundred yards away from his home. What seems strange in his later life is the attitude of his close friends, who seem to have watched as a kind of entertainment his frenzied outbursts, followed by the struggle to control himself and a rapid childlike repentance. At times he would beat himself about the head in self-punishment. "He has been known to drive his head against a wall," Mackail wrote, "so as to make a deep dent in the plaster, and bite almost through the woodwork of a windowframe." Yet with the exception of the day when he hurled a fifteenth century folio at one of his workmen, missing him, but breaking a door panel, there is no record of his making a physical attack on anyone. To return to the student's question, it is possible that Morris did not strike anybody, least of all the ailing Rossetti, because he waged almost to the end of his life a battle of self-control; though his acceptance of Jane Morris's infidelity, repeated in later years with Wilfred Scawen Blunt, also has to be taken as a fact an itself, subject to some other psychological explanation.

The recognition of restraint as an absolute duty may be referred back to the tutor who prepared Morris, when he was seventeen years old, for his entrance to Oxford. This tutor, the Rev. F. B. Guy, was one of the faithful remnant of the Oxford Movement, who had survived Newman's conversion, or desertion, to Rome. Morris believed at this time that he was going to enter the Church, and probably learned from Guy the Movement's insistence on sacrifice and self-correction, even in the smallest things. The Tractarians saw the religious impulse not as a vague emotion, but as a silent discipline growing from the exercise of the will. All that we ought to ask, Keble had said, is room to deny ourselves. And Morris, willingly enlisted in a struggle which he was never to win, persisted in it long after he had parted from orthodox Christianity. At the age of twenty-three he concluded that he must not expect enjoyment from life—"I have no right to it at all events—love and work, these two things only." In 1872, when love had betrayed or rejected him, he wrote: "O how I long to keep the world from narrowing on me, and to look at things bigly and kindly!"[8]

The most telling expression of Keble's doctrines in fiction was Charlotte M. Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). It was said to be the novel most in demand by the officers wounded in the Crimean War, and it was the first book greatly to influence Morris. Here he read the family story of a tragic inheritance. Guy, the Heir, has the ferocious temper of his Morville ancestors, and has to struggle as best he can with "the curse of sin and death." All his "animal spirits," all his great capacity for happiness is overshadowed by the temptation to anger, and he is driven to strange extremes, cutting up pencils, biting his lips till the blood runs down, and refusing, in obedience to a vow, even to watch a single game of billiards. "Resistance should be from within." He sees his whole life as "failing and resolving and failing again." Phillip, on the other hand, the high-minded young officer, provokes the Heir and leads him, from the best possible motives, into temptation. Here the novel sets out to show the evil that good can do, and when Guy dies to save him from fever, Philip is left to suffer for ever "the penitence of the saints."

The Heir of Redclyffe, as an exemplary text, asks for a kind of inner or even secret knowledge from its readers. From page to page we are reminded of Kenelm Digby's *Broadstone of Honour*, which held up the example of mediaeval chivalry to Young England. That is why Guy's nearest railway station is called Broadstone. Again, Guy and his sweetheart Amy are, in a sense, acting out the story of *Sintram*[10] (the book which Newman would only read when he was quite alone.) Sintram, tempted by the world, the flesh and the devil, and burdened by his father's crime, has to toil upward through the snows to reach Verena, his saintly mother. That is why the wid-

owed Amy calls her child Verena. And *Sintram* itself makes mysterious reference to its frontispiece, a woodcut version of Dürer's engraving *The Knight, Death and the Devil*, over which Morris and Burne-Jones, as students, had "pored for hours."[11]

These potent images remained with Morris, even though in *The Earthly Paradise* he had unlocked half the world's tale-hoard. In the second of his late romances, for example, *The Well at the World's End* (1892–3), Sintram's evil dwarf reappears. In 1872, the time of his greatest emotional test and stress, he set to work on this novel which is a temptation story, although the hero must proceed simply on his own resolution, without prayer, without divine grace, without the saving hand of the loved woman. And most unexpectedly, Morris returned from his dream-world, the "nameless cities in a distant sea," to place the story in a solid English parsonage, or, to be more accurate, in Elm House, Walthamstow, the first home that he could remember.

Morris opens his tale with the sins of the father. One of those impulses which "sometimes touch dull or dulled natures"—a distinction which Morris was always careful to make—arouses the train of memory in Parson Risley. Eleanor's letters follow. The parson's sin is not that he was Eleanor's lover. This is shown clearly enough later in Mrs. Mason's reproach: "Mr Risley, if my husband likes to make love to every girl in the village he has a full right to it if I let him"—a remark which blends well with the "sweet-smelling abundant garden" and the fertile melon beds. Risley's guilt then, is not a matter of sexuality but a denial of it, firstly through cold cowardice in rejecting a woman "like the women in poetry, such people as I had never expected to meet," and secondly through his vile temper. These two aspects of his nature are his legacy to his sons.

The Parsonage, as has been said, recalls the house in Walthamstow where Morris was born, and in the two boys, John and Arthur, Morris represents the opposing sides, as he understood them, of his own character. In some ways the brothers are alike or even identical. Both are romantically imaginative and given to dreaming their lives into "tales going on," both are fond of fishing (not a trivial matter to Morris), both, of course, love Clara, both dislike their father and both resemble him. "As to the looks of the lads by the way it would rather have puzzled anyone who had seen them to say why the little doctor should have said that either was not like his father; some strange undercurrent of thought must have drawn it out of him, for they were obviously both very much like him." John, however, is manly, open, friendly, bird-and-weather-noticing; Arthur is a book-worm, and sickly. ("Love of ease, dreaminess, sloth, sloppy good-nature," Morris said, "are what I chiefly accuse myself of.")[12] Arthur is "versed in archaeological lore," while John is in touch with earth and water—"with a great sigh of enjoyment he seemed to gather the bliss of memory of many & many a summer noon into this one"—and yet, perversely, Arthur is to be the farmer and John the businessman. From the guilty father John inherits anger, Arthur cowardice. John's loss of temper alarms Arthur; "are you in a rage with me? Why do you know, your voice got something like father's in a rage." But just as Parson Risley fails to answer Eleanor's letter, so Arthur conceals John's.

John's struggle for self-control is marked by very small incidents. Resistance, as the Heir of Redclyffe recognizes, must be from within. At the beginning of the day's outing, when Clara greets Arthur tenderly, "they did not notice that J turned away to the horses head." At Ruddywell Court, when Arthur begins to do the talking and Clara is entranced, John "got rather silent." On the return to the farm, when Clara kisses Arthur, John is left "whistling in sturdy resolution to keep his heart up, and rating himself for a feeling of discomfort and wrong." When she is poised for a few moments between the two of them in the rocking boat, but at length sits down by Arthur, so that both of them are facing the golden sunset to which John's back is now turned, he pulls at the oars "sturdily," exerting his strength for them in silence. These small everyday victories of the will lead up to a disastrous failure, the furious and destructive letter, and the despairing attempt to redeem it by a postscript—"Tell Clara I wrote kindly to you."

Arthur, on the other hand, the "saint" of the novel, is shown indulging himself in the sweetness of his dreams and the horror of his nightmares; and even when he becomes the centre of consciousness, this self-indulgence is obvious. Clara's love for him is founded, in the Chaucerian mode, on pity. When he reads John's letter, he is afraid. He lies to Clara, who against her better judgement accepts the lie. Arthur is, in fact, almost without will-power, while John, in his blundering way understands keenly the importance of the will. "Nobody does anything," he tells Mrs. Mason, "except because he likes it: I mean to say even people who have given up most to please other people; but then theyre all the better people to be pleased by what's good rather than by what is bad." And he has "a feeling not very pleasant of not being listened to."

In 1872 Samuel Butler published *Erewhon*, Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. All of these seem

very far removed from the unfinished tale-telling on blue paper. But when Morris told Louie Baldwin that he was impatient at having to deal with prose, he underrated the poetry of his story. This lies in the interrelationship of the three journeys—the passage of a summer's day, the first walk upstream to the paradise of the farm, and the crucial turning-point of John's adolescence. The June prologue of *The Earthly Paradise* opens, (also in the meadows of the Upper Thames):

> O June, O June, that we desired so,
> Wilt thou not make us happy on this day?
> Across the river thy soft breezes blow
> Sweet with the scent of beanfields far away,
> Above our heads rustle the aspens grey,
> Calm is the sky with harmless clouds beset,
> No thought of storm the morning vexes yet.

This is the exact poise of the novel, between past darkness, present happiness (John when he first goes to Leaser is "happier than he was last year") and the coming unknown discontent. And so John, at seventeen, stands on the confines of his own home, with

> the expectant longing for something sweet to come heightened by rather than chastened by the mingled fear of something as vague as the hope, that fills our hearts so full in us at whiles, killing all commonplace there, making us feel as if we were on the threshold of a new world, one step over which if we could only make it would put life within our grasp—what is it? Some reflex of the love and death going on throughout the world, suddenly touching those who are ignorant as yet of the one, and have not learned to believe in the other.

Mackail quotes this passage in part, but dismisses the novel as "certainly the most singular of his writings." Jane Morris's comment on the *Life*, however is interesting: "You see, Mackail is not an artist in feeling, and therefore cannot be sympathetic while writing the life of such a man."[13]

NOTES

1. Louisa Baldwin (1845–1925) was the youngest surviving child of the Methodist minister, George Macdonald, and the sister of Georgiana Burne-Jones. On her eleventh birthday she was taken as a treat to meet Rossetti, and became a pet of the whole circle. Although her marriage to the manufacturer Alfred Baldwin was a happy one, Louie's health failed and she became a chronic invalid.
2. *Little Dorrit*, Book 1, chap 10. The Circumlocution Office "was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving HOW NOT TO DO IT."

3. J. W. Mackail, O.M. (1859–1945) married Margaret, the Burne-Jones's daughter, and was commissioned to write his classic *The Life of William Morris* (2 vols. [London: Longmans, 1899]) by Burne-Jones himself. Mackail's letters and unpublished notes show that he was obliged to exercise a great deal of tact and to omit some episodes altogether.
4. Historically speaking, the village should be spelled Kelmscot and the house Kelmscott, but the villagers themselves seem to have given up the distinction.
5. "Morris was a complete fatalist in his attitude towards the conduct of . . . all human beings where sex was concerned." (Bernard Shaw, *Morris As I Knew Him*, 1936). "Women did not seem to count with him." (Luke Ionides, *Memories*, 1925). "He was the only man I ever came in contact with who seemed absolutely independent of sex considerations." (W. S. Blunt, British Library MS. Additional 45350.) Blunt did not know him well until 1899.
6. The head of the Greek community in Victorian London was Constantine Ionides, "the Thunderer," a wealthy stockbroker and a generous patron of the arts. Mary Zambaco was a granddaughter of the House of Ionides, a wealthy beauty with "glorious red hair and almost phosphorescent white skin," who had left her husband in Paris in 1866 and come to London. She was also a talented sculptress, with a temperament which Burne-Jones described as "like hurricanes and tempests and billows . . . only it didn't do in English suburban surroundings." In 1868 he made his first attempt to break with her; she threatened to throw herself into the Regent's Canal. In 1869 he painted her as Phyllis pleading with Demophöon, with the epigraph *Dic mihi quod feci? nisi non sapienter amavi* (tell me what I have done, except to love unwisely). Rossetti was in their confidence, writing in 1869 to Jane Morris that Mary had become more beautiful "with all her love and trouble . . . but rainy walks and constant journeys are I fear beginning to break up her health."
7. British Library MS. Additional 45298. Some of these poems were included, in variant forms, by May Morris in the *Collected Works* volume XXIV and volume I of the supplementary volumes.
8. Letter to Aglaia Coronio, 25 November 1972.
9. Sir Kenelm Digby; *The Broadstone of Honour; or The True Sense and Practices of Chivalry*, 1846.
10. H. de la Motte Fouqué, *The Seasons: Four Romances from the German* (English trans: 1843). *Sintram and his Companions* is the winter romance.
11. Guy stands looking at the woodcut "as it were a dream," but Philip thinks it "hardly safe for so excitable a mind to dwell much on the world of fiction." *The Heir of Redclyffe*, chap. 5.
12. Mackail, II, 158.
13. Letter to W. S. Blunt, May 6, 1899. Fitzwilliam Museum Library.