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INTRODUCTION

William Morris's last decade has long been a disappointment to his biographers. He had developed well enough in the preceding thirty years or so, living down the disgrace of a rich father who made his money from sweated labour in a Devon copper-mine, pursuing simultaneous careers as poet, artist, designer, weaver, glazier, and much else, eventually 'coming out' as a Socialist at a time when to be one could entail some considerable dangers—though not so much if you were a rich man and a rich man's son. Morris even went so far as to associate, if not exactly hob-nob, with Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor and with Friedrich Engels, co-author of the Communist Manifesto. But this good middle and bad beginning did not make for a good end. In 1884 Morris and some of his friends provoked a split in the 'Social Democratic Federation', leaving it to start their own 'Socialist League'. This latter organization continued for some five or six years, till, as Bernard Shaw commented, the author of its plan for 'Anti-State Communism' discovered, 'after spending a good deal of Morris's money...that the logic of their plan involved the repudiation of Morris's directorship (and money) which was keeping the whole affair together. So Morris, who had been holding the League up by the scruff of its neck, opened his hand, whereupon it dropped like a stone into the sea, leaving only a little wreckage to come to the surface occasionally, a demand for bail at the police court or a small loan.' Morris did not change his beliefs, but he gave up
trying to organize political activities. He spent most of his last years publishing books of an inordinately magnificent, expensive and hand-crafted kind through his own Kelmscott Press, and in writing fantasies. Some of these were still decently Utopian or even revolutionary – *A Dream of John Ball*, 1886–7, and *News from Nowhere*, 1890 – but seven were set in places and times so remote that no connection with the real world of politics could ever be made out. Even their titles sound self-indulgent: *The House of the Wolfings*, *The Roots of the Mountains*, *The Story of the Glittering Plain* in a relatively ‘heroic’ group, 1888–90, then in more romantic style from 1894 on *The Wood beyond the World*, *The Well at the World’s End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, *The Sundering Flood*. The last was completed less than a month before Morris’s death on 3 October 1896. Though his career has been described as ‘romantic to revolutionary’, it sounds as if the ‘romantic’ had the last word after all.

Earnest scholars have accordingly not been kind to these late works, though they have tried to be forgiving. ‘Compensation’ is the most common excuse offered. Morris was disillusioned by the collapse of the Socialist League, even more so by his unhappy thirty-year-old marriage to Jane Burden. So, the theory goes, he created these ‘diffuse’ and ‘flimsy’ books, full of ‘compliant, white-armed maidens’, as day-dreams, as protections, as a kind of therapy, as a means of hiding from himself the ‘basic confusions in his thought’ (like being a rich Socialist) which he could not cope with in reality. The keynote of such explanations is Duty. Morris’s biographers, armed with hindsight and twentieth-century liberal opinions, feel they know
how he should have reacted. Inquiry, apology, gentle rebuke, are therefore implicit in their approaches to much of his writing: he should have known better. But to this view there is one sharp and countervailing image, which is that of Morris in his role as Treasurer of the Socialist League, presiding over a meeting of staggering dullness. The air is thick with points of order from self-important nobodies, the debate shows every sign of protracting itself into eternity from sheer love of disputation. Through it all comes the voice of Morris. ‘Mr Chairman, can’t we get on with the business? I want my tea!’ Wanting one’s tea is admittedly rather a Bilbo Baggins reaction (‘baggins’ is indeed the old Northern English word for ‘tea’), but at least there is no doubt about its truth or its immediacy – one might even say its realism. The great mystery of the twentieth century, as George Orwell pointed out in *Coming Up for Air*, is how people have allowed themselves to be distracted from primary gratifications by a grey apparatus utilitarianism, which by further irony often doesn’t even work. Morris could have kept on writing pompous ephemera like ‘The manifesto of the Socialist League, signed by the provisional council at the foundation of the League on 30th December 1884, and adopted at the general conference held at Farringdon Hall, London, on July 5th 1885’. But he wrote *The Wood beyond the World* instead. Even by utilitarian standards, this decision was not self-evidently wrong.

These last seven books by Morris are usually called ‘romances’ or ‘fantasies’, in deference to their non-novelistic nature. It is worth considering for a moment whether they could not be called ‘historical fictions’.
It is true that not one of them contains a date or an identifiable place-name. Still, they are not completely contextless. The first group of three, from *The House of the Wolfings* to *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, are all set in pagan times among Germanic peoples, Goths or Norsemen. They contain names like 'Mirkwood' and 'the Acre of the Undying', evident translations of Old Norse *Myrkvithr*, *Ódáinsakr*, and carrying with them faint suggestions of the saga- or edda-worlds from which these names come. The stories are accordingly fierce, contentious, a little gloomy. By contrast the four later works, beginning with *The Well at the World's End* (started before *The Wood beyond the World* but not published till after it, in 1895), are set in Christian epochs, if still in the North-West of Europe; they carry the more mysterious and less morally black-and-white tone of medieval romance. The claim to being 'historical fiction' rests, however, not on the scraps of information dropped here and there inside the stories, but on the notion that they contain what Georg Lukács calls the distinctive feature of the true historical novel, 'derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age'. In these books Morris is presenting individual people and destinies. But he is also using them, sometimes more, sometimes less, to suggest the charm and power of past ages.

Most modern historical novelists, attempting that feat, cannot resist the temptation to use the 'Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur' motif, in other words to introduce some modern character or character with anachronistically modern opinions, to point the difference between then and now: so we
have Captain Horatio Hornblower, with his physical squamishness and dislike of flogging, T. H. White's Merlin, with his Peter Scott postcards and explanation that he happens to be living backwards in time not forwards, Mary Renault's incipiently democratic Theseus, and many more. Morris does not use that trick. Indeed by his heavy use of archaic words, sentence structures and narrative turns, he seems to want to keep modernity at bay, not to present his heroic or medieval worlds even for flattering comparison with his own time (or ours), but to leave them as they are, beautiful and unreachable. It has been well said by Philip Henderson in his biography, William Morris: his Life, Work and Friends, 1967, that Morris's aim in poetry was not vividness but rather 'the cool remoteness of pictures on a frieze or the figures on a faded tapestry'—or, one might add, of paintings like Sir Edward Burne-Jones's 'Love Among the Ruins' on the cover of this book, and his frontispiece to the Kelmscott Press edition of The Wood beyond the World. All are sharply-focused, too clear indeed for naturalism, full of minute detail like folds in dress and cracks in walls. At the same time these clear sharp images are set in narrative blanks. They feign to be frameless relics, slipped down through the gap of time which has swallowed so much, and now presented without explanation or apology. Many such fragments were brought to light by the thoroughness of nineteenth-century philology, and often they lie at the kernel of modern romance. A part of the genesis of J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings is the snatch of song from Edgar in King Lear, 'Child Roland to the dark tower came'. Morris's group of heroic fantasies owes a
similar debt to 'the pathless Mirkwood' of which so many stories are not quite told in the Norse Eddas, his romantic ones to the haunting list of lost tales in the sixteenth-century Complaynt of Scotlade – 'the tayl of the v[elle] of the varidis end, the tayl of the reyde eyttyn vith the thre heydis, the tail of the thre futtis dog of norrouay'. How Morris must have wished these had survived! In the end he wrote some of the tales for himself.

The frisson which one can still get from the unknown, or rather from the bare hint on the edge of the unknown, perhaps explains the most characteristic feature of Morris's last four romances, which is their sense of wavering uncertainty. This is not very common in real medieval romances, and when it does occur there one often thinks that the medieval authors (some of them incurably hard-headed, like Sir Thomas Malory) would have eliminated it if possible. Why was the stroke that Sir Balin struck the most dolorous that ever man struck but one, and why should three kingdoms be brought by it into 'grete poverté, miseri and wrecchednesse twelve yere'? Because Balin struck it with the Holy Lance with which Longinus smote Our Lord to the heart, says Malory, and seems to think it sufficient explanation. But to any modern reader – and this includes Morris, for Sir James Frazer had published the first edition of his Golden Bough in 1890 – the Dolorous Stroke and the Maimed King are wound round with vague anthropological hints of myth and sacrifice and infertility, so much so that the prosaic medieval reactions seem even more deeply subtle. To us romance and fairy-tale have been sharpened by what Tolkien called 'the elvish hone of
"antiquity"; the sharp bright colours of their surfaces, like the queen's little daughter 'as white as snow, as red as blood, as black as ebony', hint all the more at depths and shadows. It was this effect that Morris aimed at above all. He did not want literal authenticity, still less Utopian propaganda. He wanted to reproduce for others the sensations which saga and romance had aroused in him. Cultural solidity was one of these. Eeriness, the uncertainty of Sir Percival faced with the Grail procession but ordered to silence, was another.

The Wood beyond the World accordingly thrives on loose ends. For though the ends look loose in the mundane world of physical reality, the stress that falls on them and the way strands suddenly twine round each other imply strongly that they are not loose at all, but appear so only because mortals cannot see them in the right number of dimensions. Why should Golden Walter—a nice young man, 'rather wiser than foolisher than young men are mostly wont'—have the sheer unexplained bad luck to marry a wicked woman, and the sudden desire to go away, and then the further misfortune to lose his father, who has been so strongly urged to conciliation? This all appears to be chance, and no other explanation is offered for it. But in romances 'chance' is a tricky phenomenon. One can only say that while the surface of the first few chapters—a bright and glittering surface packed with suddenly glimpsed heraldic signs—presents Sense and Duty, there is beneath it an undertow of Despair in life and Desire for something else. Walter's father feels the 'Katherine' should be a lucky ship, 'whereas she is under the ward of her
who is the saint called upon in the church where thou wert christened, and myself before thee; and thy mother, and my father and mother all lie under the chancel thereof, as thou wottest'. But the wind that fills the sails of the ‘Katherine’ in chapters IV and V blows dead against church and clan and ancient bones; and Walter is happy, as if the gale came from his own heart, as if some inner compass were guiding him to the vision that has called him three times, from the harbour, from his home, from the city where they told him his father was dead.

Just as in the Middle English poem *Pearl*, where a bereaved parent finds himself in a dream-landscape with his heart suddenly and unreasonably light, our natural reaction is to wonder what can be so strong as to outweigh death and sorrow. We may wonder too whether this new power can be good. Morris’s agent for projecting that query is the ‘carle’, the Robinson Crusoe figure unexplainedly present in the green landscape to which the ‘Katherine’ is driven, itself ominously reminiscent of Circe. He is another loose end. We never find out what happened to him, where he came from, what he did for the Lady. He does say, though, some half-connected things. He is an inheritor; he killed his predecessor; his predecessor died willingly; the carle regrets the killing now. All this hovers on the edge of allegory. Any medieval friar, we can be sure, would by this time have explained that the carle was Man, his predecessor Jesus, that the inheritance of the killing was Peace, and so on. But nothing like this surfaces in Morris, and indeed that interpretation is ruled out by Walter’s question and the carle’s answer: ‘What came thereof? said Walter.
Evil came of it, said the carle.' Is the whole episode pointless, then? It is certainly redundant in a narrative way. But it has roused the interpretative faculty, like the locked door setting every one of Bluebeard's wives groping for keys. Could the second road out of the green land, the one that does not lead to the land of the Bears, the one that the carle took after killing his predecessor — could this be perhaps the road to Paradise, or to Hell, for the carle thinks he may have come back from it without his soul; or as in the ballad 'the road to fair Elfland', where the bitter choice of good and evil is never forced on you at all? Again there is no answer, but thoughts of the Fall of Man, the Earthly Paradise, the Land of the Undying begin to buzz like bees in bonnets.

The literary result is that nothing afterwards can be taken as mere narrative, without further significance; the most minute details demand scrutiny and gain clear focus. Once he is past the waste land Walter comes on a cherry-tree (why cherries?), and starts to eat. As he does so (is it cause and effect?) there comes a 'roaring and braying' which disconcerts Walter so much that he faints (faints?) — and it comes from the dwarf of Walter's magic vision, 'clad in his yellow coat, and grinning up at him from his hideous hairy countenance'. This tiny scene is littered with clues, even though we have not yet been introduced to the mystery. For a start the whole thing sounds very like 'Beauty and the Beast', for in that story it is the picking of a rose which angers the Beast and forces the merchant to hand over his daughter. As in many tales from 'Childe Rowland' to Spenser's Cave of Mammon in The Faerie Queene, there is a taboo on the food and
drink of Fairyland. But to that one might add the thought that cherries (like roses) are a folk-symbol of virginity, the virginity Walter will not be allowed while he is in the Wood to touch; while the dwarf, with his sadism and gibbering and interest in the white flesh of the Maiden ‘underneath its raiment’, is an evident image of dangerous sexuality. At the end when Walter kills the dwarf he sees that it ‘was girt with a big ungainly sax’. ‘Sax’ means ‘knife’? So dictionaries tell us. However it is noticeable that whatever the sax is, the Maiden will not touch it. And when they bury the dwarf (with precautions to ensure he will not rise again) they bury the sax with him too.

Morris, we can be sure, did not mean to tell a Freudian tale, and in any case Freudian interpretations are no more fully satisfactory, for The Wood beyond the World, than the medieval friar style of allegory imagined earlier. What Morris wanted was a shimmer of suggestion, a shimmer not even identifiable as primarily religious or sexual or political or historical. The centre of the story is indeed the magic Wood where all appearance is illusion. This is an ancient motif too, used by Shakespeare in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, by Milton in Comus. Morris’s Wood is by contrast almost underpopulated, with only four people in it not counting the dwarf or dwarves. The four however go through a quadrille of cavedroppings. Walter sees the King’s Son and the Lady walking naked in the moonlight; he hears the King’s Son browbeating the Maiden; the King’s Son overhears the Maiden making assignations with Walter; we do not know what the Lady hears. Characters change from truth to lies in mid-sentence, and the Lady shows both
anger and fear which seem genuine at the time but are denied by the Maiden. But then the Maiden is a liar, or anyway she says she is. Is the lion in the forest a 'sensing'; is the hart (heart?) the Lady hunts a real one; why is she so furious when it gets away? Who, besides, sent the vision and the gale which drew Walter to the Wood in the first place? Answers are not given, or not reliably. One result is Walter's fury and weariness at 'this house of guile and lies', so reminiscent of the tedium he found in ordinary life at the start. Another is the sense of looking on at some eternal struggle between unknown powers or principles – for the Maiden does not know where she comes from nor how she became the Lady's slave, while even after the Lady is dead there are hints that she is not quite dead, not safely dead for good and all.

Over the whole Wood there hangs besides a miasma of sexual desire. Walter lusts for and possesses the Lady. He lusts for but may not deflower the Maiden (not till they get to the city). He cannot even touch her, for the Lady would snuffle out his trace. Nevertheless the Maiden is continually present as something to see, to brush past, to smell – even to whip. The Maiden's iron anklet shows she is a thrall, and many Anglo-Saxon laws incorporate an ominous alternative to a fine, 'if he be a thrall, let them take it out of his hide'. The King's Son knows how the Lady chastises her slave, the dwarf has a relish for her tears, even the Maiden seems not wholly averse to the lash: 'O if then there might be some chastisement for the guilty woman, and not mere sundering!' Biographical criticism could be most unpleasant about this. What needs to be said, though, is that the
'glamour' of the Wood contains a menacing element of frustration in desire, from which Walter and the Maiden flee as soon as its spell is snapped by death.

Are we in a fairy-tale about the non-humans who seek continually to gain souls by marriage with the 'children of Adam'? Or in an allegory about Titania and Bully Bottom and the way that love is blind? Or in a myth about how the White Witch of Winter was killed and the Spring-Maiden in her costume of flowers abducted by the sun-hero Golden Walter? *The Wood beyond the World* contains all these interpretations and more (the *Spectator* in 1895 thought it was all about Capital and Labour, though Morris wrote in to say it wasn’t). Yet it insists all the time on being 'only a story', producing every now and then a bit of quasi-history or geography like the Starkwall, or Langton on Holm, or the stone-age pastoral Bearfolk who lurk in the hinterland of the world like the Cornish giants of English folk-tale. In a medieval romance one suspects that some hermit would be brought on to explain the whole thing as soul’s heal, or the bondage of the flesh dissolved by the grace of the Virgin. In the modern world a rather similar if diametrically opposite belief was put forward by W. B. Yeats, who saw all Morris's later romances as celebrating his own pagan ideals of the Green Tree and the Water of Life (though not yet of mystic gyres). But no single explanation can be true. Truth demands a frame, a context, some assurance of where a work comes from and how it is to be judged. Being a modern man rather than a medieval, Morris did not have to pay even lip-service to any orthodoxy, and could therefore present his fictions to be judged

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entirely on their own merits. The 'cloud of unknowing' which surrounds *The Wood beyond the World* is the product of art, and so to be enjoyed not dispersed.

It might be thought that such a tenuous literary mode would find no imitators, and certainly 'influence' is in this area more than usually hard to prove. Almost certainly J. R. R. Tolkien remembered *The Roots of the Mountains* when he created Gollum; probably *The Wood beyond the World* was an element in the making of Lothlórien, or better still Fangorn, where also characters wander in a network of lies and glimpses and coincidences presided over by a White Wizard, Gandalf, and his counterfeit Saruman, the shape-changer, the 'dwimmer-crafty', master of eidolons and seemings. However Tolkien could read sagas and romances as well as Morris (indeed rather better), so that when one sees similarity it may not be descent from one to another, but rather descent of both from some centuries-old common source. In the same way, if dates of publication were lost, anyone would say that Fletcher Pratt's fantasy *The Well of the Unicorn* was one of the many Tolkien-successors; but actually it came out in 1948, while *The Lord of the Rings* was still only a manuscript. The map of twentieth-century fantasy is a bit like Morris's enchanted wood, full of overhearings and mistaken identities. Still, there are two things that can be credited to Morris with some surety. One is that he showed the power of medieval and Northern and popular legend to a world which had since the Renaissance been educated away from it, and showed also that this was a living power needing no support from scholarship. The other is that he introduced to fantasy a note of baffled yearning, even
of homesickness, which many writers have drawn on since.

This is especially true of science fiction, the form above all others conscious of the brevity of life and the isolation of the contemporary in a waste of time. Morris’s epigraph to *The House of the Wolfings*, at the very start of his last romantic period, would do almost as a motto for science fiction as well. Just as a man might look back on a winter night at some house he had once lived in in happiness, says Morris, so we are allowed to fantasise:

As still the dark road drives us on.
E’en so the world of men may turn
At even of some hurried day
And see the ancient glimmer burn
Across the waste that has no way ...

Morris was talking about history, of course, while writers of science fiction look to the future. Still, the ‘waste that has no way’ has meaning for fantasists of either kind. No one can go back into the past. But the future which science fiction writers look to is of course not the future, but a future, a future they all know will never exist. All fantasy writers know there is no escape. That is why the best of them build a yearning even into their day-dreams. One catches the note at the end of Jack Vance’s stories, like those of the end of time in his *The Dying Earth*, 1950. More recently it has been strongly and truly struck by Avram Davidson, whose *The Enquiries of Doctor Eszterhazy*, 1975, presents an analogue of Sherlock Holmes in the Kingdom of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, an Austro-Hungarian Empire that
never was, very much in the style of Morris's 'Mirkwood' or 'Upmeads' or 'Utterhay'. Works like these, and like Morris's, are neither modern novels, nor ancient folk-tales, nor medieval romances, but have their own rules and proprieties compounded of many predecessors. Maybe the elixir would have mixed itself without William Morris. Still, Morris's brew appeals to exactly the same taste. Odd as it seems, these consciously archaic works of the 1890s have not dwindled down to 'great-great-grandfather's favourites' anything like as fast as their soberly up-to-date contemporaries.

TOM SHIPPEY