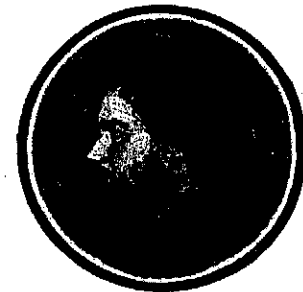


# Victorian Poetry

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An issue  
Devoted to the Work of  
William Morris



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might become rational, harmonious, and beautiful," Goodwin finds a synthesis for Morris' ideas and their manifestations in the literary and figurative arts in an "iconographical representation" of "the curve of contraflexure," which oscillates, in a conscious poetic and decorative "patterning," between several sets of extremes: love and violence, happiness and sorrow, hope and fear, life and death, past and present, change and changelessness.

Goodwin's work has prepared the ground for a whole new approach in Morris research, for Morris, more than any other figure in the nineteenth century, is ready made for the cross-disciplinarian. That there is still ample room for specialized studies is apparent in this special number of *Victorian Poetry*, which contains fresh examinations of Morris' poetry, his prose romances, and several aspects of his design work, especially in the book arts.

Owing to the topicality of so much of his writing, Morris will probably always remain to some degree a cult figure, whose appeal to those with a particular aesthetic or political axe to grind is essentially sentimental. In that vein, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of Jack Lindsay's new biography welcomes the book because "the ideas that [Morris] attempted with such vigour to spread are by no means irrelevant today," including concern about pollution and a diminishing supply of foodstuffs and natural resources.<sup>9</sup>

In 1869, Rossetti's question, "What may he not yet do?" was a pertinent one to ask about his multi-talented friend. The answer finally, however, lies as much in Morris' universal artistry as in his actual accomplishments. There is in Morris something for almost everyone, and Morris' real contribution and the main source of his continuing influence is owing to his ability to bring together the fine, the practical, and the domestic arts. He was not always successful in effecting a coalescence of the three as the foregoing analysis of his poetic theory and practice demonstrates. Like Whitman, Morris contradicts himself frequently; but, like Whitman, Morris, too, contained multitudes.

<sup>9</sup>Edmund Penning-Roswell, "Father of the Firm," October 3, 1975, p. 1124.

## William Morris and the Uses of the Past

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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY is the great epoch of history. From the vast millennia of Darwin's *Origin of Species* to the few decades of Mill's *Autobiography*, from the objective effort to reconstruct a dead past visible in Mommsen's *History of Rome* to the subjective attendance of Turner at the last rites of the "Fighting Téméraire," the ruling passion of the age was displayed in men's efforts to uncover the source, not of the Nile, but of the present. One form which that passion took was the creation of a band of artists who, in token of their reverence for the perspective of the past, took the name of "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood." Most of the group went on to become eminently respectable Victorian gentlemen; but among the people who gathered in their wake was one young man who never lost the simple conviction that contemporary life was ruled by an historical paradox which modern conventions struggled to ignore: "The past is past, though I cannot forget" (*CW*, II, 293).

"The past is past," and nothing men do can annul the progress of time; what lies in the past can never be reborn into contemporary reality. But such remoteness furnishes a sort of blessing for Victorian men. The past can be contemplated as a wholly imagined form, leached of all the complex interrelations and ambiguities which inevitably distort men's individual perceptions of ongoing action. The raw data of the past have already been converted into something ritualized, something alien to the "history" of Reform Acts and Revolution but closer akin to myth. The subjects of Morris' early poems and tales reveal the artist constantly basing his perspective on the avowed myths of imaginative history rather than the merely human histories of Elizabeth or Cromwell: the quests for the Grail or the Fleece; King Arthur and his Table Round; demi-gods like Bellerophon and Perseus. Such conscious preference for the overtly mythical underscores the alien nature of the past, enforcing its imaginative status as something remotely, not nearly, akin to himself. The special gift of the past, as Morris sees it, lies precisely in its closeness to what men associate with the eternal and the immortal.

Yet the kinship remains; men "cannot forget" that their very existence has been determined by their pasts. Morris' early work may be seen as a series

of experiments testing men's aspiration to revive the past in memory, seeking to discover why men are driven to overcome their remoteness from history through imaginative recreation or ritual reenactment. There was nothing terribly original in this focus; in the work of the historical novelists, linguists, and cultural anthropologists Morris could see similar efforts to fuse the past's stasis with its continuing process. The history painting and the portrait had already merged into the characteristic form of Victorian art, the narrative painting.

Morris' first published work, "The Story of the Unknown Church," in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, reveals the young artist's concern with this common struggle. The tale supposedly narrates the story of unrequited love between a knight and the sister of his best friend, a master mason; the last tells the story. But this conventional plot and structure are exploded in the first lines, when the mason says that the events he is recounting occurred "more than six hundred years ago" and that he himself died some twenty years later (I, 158). In a past some six centuries removed, an historical event has taken place; in the present that lives in the work, a witness to that event speaks directly to the reader. The guaranteed shock value of this structure may have been Morris' only reason for using it; but its effect goes far beyond the superficialities of terror-Gothic. The effect of the frame is the annihilation of time and death as efficient causes of action within the narrative realm; space alone, and the adornment of space, are left as viable subjects for the historian. Morris thus has compelled his readers to perceive his tale not as historical narration but as narrative painting, as icon.<sup>1</sup>

The scene which the mason sets emphasizes this quality of static pictorialism. The church which he is building is embedded in the balanced, concentric circles of natural colors: "Green . . . golden . . . scarlet . . . blue . . . scarlet . . . gold . . . green" (I, 150), all of which are themselves held "within the circle of the poplar trees" (I, 151). There is, on the one hand, a static Nature which exists as a perfect, but hollow, form; there is, on the other, a human work of art and worship which achieves its full meaning only when set within that form, which in turn seems to gain its own validation through its embrace of a human focus.

Just before the knight returns, the mason stops working on the church and falls into a reverie. His dream consists of a series of pictures that are

<sup>1</sup>Following the lead of Raymond Lister in *Victorian Narrative Paintings* (New York, 1966), I define the narrative painting as a represented moment which embodies a continuing temporal process; "The Long Engagement," for example, presents the poor curate who has sworn love yet cannot until some time still long distant marry his faithful love. On this level, it is quite similar to the icon, which may be defined as an embodiment of some divine process which equally establishes a continuum between the immediate reality and the imagined one.

irresistible reminders of a traditional progress piece. Yet within this analogous iconic structure the progress remains clearly determined by the human dreamer; in each case it is a willed act of the mason which compels the image to change. Finding himself on a river bank, he "stooped to drink of the water" (I, 154); when he straightens, he is in a small boat floating under the walls of a castle. A banner floats down from the battlements, and he decides to "let it stay there"; instantly he is within the garden of the castle, listening to the birds. Spying his friend, he "reached out [his] arms to him, and suddenly . . . [is] walking with him" (I, 155). Overcome by the strain of this Wordsworthian progress, half created and half perceived, the mason finally puts his hands over his eyes; when he looks again, the dream has disappeared, returned to that state of potentiality in which it must stay until once more called into existence by the willed act of vision.

As if created by this interchange between human contemplation and natural forms, the knight appears in the flesh. What follows is quickly told: the knight dies before his marriage can be solemnized, and the sister dies of grief. The narrator becomes a monk and dedicates the rest of his life to the construction of a tomb for the unrequited lovers. By the time he finishes, twenty years later, the pair have been completely "buried" under a canopy which rises "quite up to the top of the arch" (I, 158), filling the little church. On that canopy, the mason has carved "flowers and histories," reproducing within the human bounds of art the formal perfection of natural and temporal forms. The past has been wholly alienated from the present, hidden underneath present adornment; yet that same art has transformed them into relics which can never be forgotten by the monks who worship within the church. The mason's act of commemoration thus distances the past's reality while simultaneously ensuring its imaginative survival into the present.

It is with the greatest irony, therefore, that the reader recalls the opening lines of the story: "It is now two hundred years since that church vanished from the face of the earth; it was destroyed utterly" (I, 149). The effort to transcend the pastness of human life and aspiration through artistic forms which draw equally from temporal and natural models has, it seems, failed as utterly as the original aspirations of knight and lady. Yet the narrator persists in his aesthetic pleasure; despite the loss of the icon, the beauty which it embodied remains: "The place where my church used to be is as beautiful now as when it stood in all its splendour" (I, 149). How is it that a man can dedicate his life to an act of commemoration which soon disappears from sight, yet maintain an exquisite delight in contemplating the natural forms which have usurped his creation? The answer, of course, is that the mason's commemoration does not reside in the icon; it resides in the act of creation through which the icon achieved its temporal reality. Men usually think of an icon as "a clean patch in the misted pane of glass that stands between us and

the invisible presences that press in around us from the other world";<sup>2</sup> but Morris' mason reveals to us that the significance of the image resides not in its providing a clear vision of the past, but in the clear vision of each man's relation to the past which is provided merely by the act of creation. Within a perfect natural order, the mason has built an artifact which validates that order through the creation of a meaningful focus; within that center he reproduces in time-bound form the eternal order which was his first inspiration. Time's destruction of all that is made within it is inevitable; but there remains the eternal beauty inherent in imaginative recreations that are no less time-bound, since they are subject to the moment of their conception, yet capable of sustained existence through the repeated acts of memory. It is in his memory that the mason sees his church still standing, the tomb still just finished, his life still a fact of present perception.

By stepping back from the tale to contemplate it as Morris' own act of artistic commemoration, the reader can posit the process which is validated by Morris' creation of narrative. A man has a moment of vision, in which he sees his own relation to the world of the past; when that moment passes, he attempts to reproduce it through artistic forms. But language, being time-bound, can never perfectly reproduce visions; the timeless quality of the moment can only be transmitted through a distorted medium. When we read the words, however, we come to share in the memory of that moment when the vision was present to its guardian; our own contemplation of the icon that is the tale creates in us a memory akin to the artist's own. At that point the icon has fulfilled its purpose; it may without loss decay back into the natural forms from which it was born.

In this way Morris' early works attempt to transform the raw data of history and legend into formal memories of characters and scenes. These memories succeed partially in transmitting the data; but that is not their purpose. Though the characters live within the work only if they successfully reproduce the objective conditions of their historic lives, they live more completely within the mind of the reader who validates their pasts through his present act of resurrection. The reader learns something about the past; but he also learns that the past exists within the present as a form of beauty whose archaeological content is irrelevant. Through the recreation of time, the past's temporal existence can be abolished; when the past achieves sensuous being in the present act of reading, contemporary existence and perception become at once creators and created, fathers and children of the past.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Brown and Sabine MacCormack, "Artifices of Eternity," *NYRB*, 22 (February 20, 1975), 19.

This interfusing of past and present is a constant preoccupation in Morris' early poems. Morris has perceived that man's alienation from the past is a blessing, for it compels him to resurrect history in memory; that act of memory, when made permanent through its transformation into ritual or aesthetic action, revives the past as a living presence. If there were such a thing as a typical Morris poem, it would be one in which a character is forced to confront his past within the general pastness of memory, attempting to fulfill those possibilities which went unrealized because his past perceptions were bound by the physical circumstances of history. As Ralph Berry has phrased it, the character ultimately comes to realize that "within the historic past rests a personal past" which "fixes the present" through its recreation in speech.<sup>3</sup>

Guenevere, in her "Defence," never answers the charge which Gawaine has brought against her; she chooses rather to confront her accusers with a series of icons which, she hopes, will justify her action through aesthetic definition. Her first attempt in this direction, however, is the famous analogy of the two colored cloths (I, 1-2), in which she attempts to perform her redefinition within the received iconic structure of Christianity. The "choice of Hercules," which is of course the traditional topos for this analogy, depends on the reliability of each emblem's past associations; but when Guenevere chooses "heaven's colour, the blue," the entire tradition of conventional iconography is shown to be invalid: "and he said: 'hell' " (I, 2). Her second attempt develops out of this failure of the past as a determining structure for the present; she reminds Gawaine of her early love for Launcelot:

No minute of that wild day ever slips  
From out my memory....  
I dared not think, as I was wont to do,  
Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had  
Held out my long hand up against the blue,  
And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,  
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,  
There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers,  
Round by the edges; what should I have done,  
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,  
And startling green drawn upward by the sun?...  
I lose my head e'en now in doing this. (I, 4-5)

Guenevere rejects the iconic frame she tried out twenty-five stanzas earlier; she holds her hand in front of the blue heavens, substituting a personalized icon of her own beauty for the received icon of symbolic color which no longer works. The status of the icon as basis for decision remains, though, in

<sup>3</sup>"A Defense of *Guenevere*," *VP*, 9 (1971), 281.

the spiritual significance she ascribes to her own flesh, "by rights one ought to see quite through" her fingers to the timeless beauty they image.

The rest of her speech reveals just how heavily Guenevere relies on this formal determinant; the beauty of the heaven within herself, "there, see you," remains potent in the present beauty by which she defines her past selfhood. For it is that eternal beauty which is her ultimate defense: "Say no rash word / Against me, being so beautiful" (I, 8). Her body, a transparent image of time's negation, defines Guenevere's "innocence": "See through my long throat how the words go up / In ripples to my mouth....Will you dare, / When you have looked a little on my brow, / To say this thing is vile?" (I, 8). The traditional explanation of iconic power, that forms of beauty reflect God's own beauty, rests on an implicit assumption that beauty is an inherent quality of goodness. Guenevere, proving through the flawed analogy that this explanation no longer holds, merely inverts the assumption: her present beauty, which reflects her past beauty, justifies her actions because goodness is inherent in beauty. The aesthetic perfection of the symbol is the source, not the product, of the perfect eternal reality which is symbolized; Guenevere has rejected all icons but those created in the individual memory of the self out of one's own past. It is this act which leads Pater to call a moment like Guenevere's speech "the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy."<sup>4</sup>

"The Defence of Guenevere" as an artistic creation also relies on the completed icon of the individual past. The poem is not a creation *ex nihilo*, constructing a past as well as the present; it is a transformation of an existing history—Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Educated readers have judged Guenevere long before they listen to her defense; they know that she has slept with Launcelot. But by the same token they also know that this trial is meaningless; Launcelot will arrive "at good need" and carry her off to the convent. Like the mason whose church has long disappeared, Guenevere expresses nothing but joy during her defense; yet she cannot know of her rescue unless she somehow lives on beyond her verbal present into the present to which her salvation is a fact of history. Thus the defense becomes a parody of historic action, a verbal charade which has meaning only in the context of individual recreation that Guenevere establishes. The laws and icons which serve the community no longer affect Guenevere, who has transcended them in favor of a wholly self-generated iconography which creates its own future. Through Guenevere Morris has widened the focus of his basic paradox; the past "we cannot forget" is precisely that personal past which validates

<sup>4</sup>Review of *The Earthly Paradise*, *Westminster Review*, 90 (October, 1868), 300-312; in *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Peter Faulkner (London, 1973), p. 91. The last part of this review, of course, became the famous "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*.

Guenevere's rejection of the legalistic past of historic actions. Only by relinquishing the social past entirely can one transcend the temporal process and achieve the power to speak to all times.

The icon thus assumes its own paradoxical status: it is a symbol whose referents lie in the historic past of society in general, yet it is validated only through its transformation into a personal memory which mocks the pretensions of the community to rule. The power of the icon is thus wholly dependent on the individual will of the present. This power is graphically illustrated in "The Haystack in the Floods," where Jehane recognizes the ambush not only by seeing "thirty heads" ranged along a ditch, but also by seeing "That Judas, Godmar, and the three / Red running lions dismally / Grinn[ing] from his pennon" (I, 125). Robert, her lover, charges this emblematic enemy, shouting his battle-cry: "St. George for Marny!" But Robert's icon has been rejected by the present, and has become a parody of its former self: "no man of all his train / Gave back that cheery cry." Similarly, in "The Judgment of God" young Roger reveals the fallacy of his reasoning when he can no longer align himself with the icon of his family: "The blue owls on my father's hood / Were a little dimm'd as I turn'd away" (I, 96).

The full power of this personal heraldry is revealed in "King Arthur's Tomb," when Guenevere turns to Launcelot and finally condemns his desire to revive their relationship over the grave of her husband:

Banner of Arthur—with black-bended shield  
Sinister-wise across the fair gold ground!  
Here let me tell you what a knight you are,  
O sword and shield of Arthur! you are found  
A crooked sword." (I, 22)

Launcelot's sin lies in his refusal to play the emblematic role of shield for his king; he has rejected a system of icons which Guenevere still maintains through her memory. As a result, Launcelot is a man whose very capacity for memory and aesthetic recreation is deteriorating. As he rides towards Glastonbury, he tells over his memory of the night when Guenevere and he slept together; he recalls his own feelings of joy and fulfillment, but the scene itself gradually escapes him. With the coming of night, all colors had faded, until all was a "doubtful green" (I, 12); soon even that perception faded, and "there were no colours" (I, 13). By morning, when he could no longer even see Guenevere, Launcelot's capacity for aesthetic recreation has gone entirely, leaving only the querulous wonder whether "she was not in that place" (I, 13) at all. It is a revealing moment when Launcelot acknowledges that it is not Guenevere but her "name-letters" which make him "leap" (I, 13). Launcelot's rejection of his iconic role has denied him the power to retain that memory of the personal past which is essential to aesthetic immortality.

Guenevere, on the other hand, retains that insistent reliance on the personalized icon which she displayed in her defense. It is an image out of her past which has converted her to a sense of sin, a curse "such as on the way / To Camelot I heard once from a churl, / That curled me up upon my jennet's neck / With bitter shame" (I, 16). That permanent faith in the iconic power of the memory enables Guenevere also to transform that sin into a means of achieving grace. When she sees Launcelot, she reminds him of their first meeting, which had occurred when Launcelot was being hailed as the conqueror of Lucius after the Italian campaign; but readers of Malory know that Launcelot never went to Italy, and it was Arthur himself who killed Lucius. We could, conceivably, rest with David Staines's assertion that "Morris freely changes details" for the sake of "a vividly poignant and dramatic moment."<sup>5</sup> But further reflection reveals that this false memory is crucial to Guenevere's triumph over her past sins. Memory is nothing more than an individual perspective on history; Launcelot, attempting to negate his historic role as Arthur's faithful supporter, inevitably loses his memory, but Guenevere, attempting to incorporate history into her memory, resurrects the true form of their past. It is in this memory, and nowhere in Malory's history, that Arthur has called Launcelot his "sword and shield" (I, 18); Guenevere's fictional memory creates the icon which leads Launcelot to his own salvation, and the heroine to her final iconic creation:

Banner and sword and shield, you dare not pray to die,  
Lest you meet Arthur in the other world,  
And knowing who you are, he pass you by. (I, 22)

Guenevere has, through the creation of an individual history and its attendant icons, separated herself off from the meaningless forms of social history and instead fused her aesthetic creation with an avowedly artistic iconography, that of Dido and Aeneas.<sup>6</sup>

Guenevere thus supersedes the role of the social historian in order to transform history into an eternal sequence of iconic events. This interior event, sealed by the transfer of Guenevere's memory from herself to Launcelot and his subsequent swoon and resurrection into grace, parallels the exterior event of the poem as a whole. Morris creates a verbal image of something that never happened, telescoping months into hours, two places into one, and accreting to his protagonists the deeds of others. Once this fictional history is accepted by the reader (as Launcelot accepts Guenevere's fiction by responding to it), Morris can use his verbal creation to work towards an experiential resolution. Morris has created a syllogism which is fallacious, for it rests on the false premise that Launcelot killed Lucius; yet

<sup>5</sup>"Morris' Treatment of His Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*," *SP*, 70 (1973), 454.

<sup>6</sup>See *The Aeneid*, VI (in Dryden's version, ll. 631-638).

the syllogism is validated by allowing the verbal creations of Guenevere to prove themselves by arousing emotions analogous to the lovers'. To put it in the rather crude terms Morris had available to him at the time,<sup>7</sup> the "fables" which are told by poet and character have a linguistic validity which Malory's "history," seeking acceptance as a form of truth which is axiomatic rather than syllogistic, fails to achieve; the poem is a tale which willing readers must help to create and strive to maintain against a world of social history that asserts only its self-sufficient validity. History assumes a one-way continuity between past and present; what has occurred has left an ineradicable mark on the lives of the readers. The fable, on the other hand, posits the anti-historical assumption that the reader can, through the creation of new forms of verbal description, in turn transform the past into a source of images which will justify not merely himself but his own present desires.

The consequences of this achieved distinction between history and fable are, for Morris, enormous. For thirty years Morris would play the role of teller of tales, recreating history in the subjective forms of art. He would be the first great historicist, welding the scattered fragments of the past embodied in the histories and myths of his predecessors into integral fables which resolve the dichotomy between past and present. "The past is past," and it is therefore always available for present recreation; "we cannot forget," and thus must always perform our individual acts of aesthetic recreation in order to avoid the tyranny of time. The ultimate theme of Morris' early work is not the individual personalities of an anonymous mason or a fabulous queen, but the artistic perspective which can transcend the historic individual and achieve the greater community of art.

<sup>7</sup>Compare the threat to Athamas in *Jason*:

folk who saw its name  
In old records, would turn the page, and blame  
The chronicler for telling empty lies,  
And mingling fables with his histories. (II, 24)