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Rejuvenating Our Sense of Wonder: The Last Romances of William Morris

'I can tell you a tale such as ye have never heard the like of, and which will move every heart of you.'

So passed the hours deep into the night at Wethermel, and folk went to sleep scarce trowing in the wonders that they had heard and seen.¹

Narratives of Wonder

William Morris's last romances, like the tale of the old Carline in *The Sundering Flood*, are stories designed to move the heart of the reader – to stir and delight us by the wonders they reveal. They are also stories which, since Morris first presented them to the world, have struggled for credibility. Appearing at the end of what is generally acknowledged to be a life of tireless endeavour and outstanding achievement in a range of fields, the last romances occupy an uncertain position: regarded alternatively by critics as a satisfying culmination of Morris's literary career, a tactical diversion from the harsh realities of socialist propaganda, or simply a bewildering regression into an impossibly beautiful past, these narratives continue to challenge and perplex readers, raising questions as to whether

¹ William Morris, *The Sundering Flood*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910–15), XXI, pp. 196, 245. Further references to the *Collected Works* will be abbreviated to *CW*.

they enhance or detract from Morris's reputation as an artist, a writer and a socialist. Within Morris scholarship they remain a minor interest whilst outside Morris circles they are still relatively unknown – and yet, as Norman Talbot emphasizes, these are works of 'extraordinary merits' for which 'there is never any need of special pleading'.² As such their continuing neglect in the wider field of nineteenth-century literary studies is disappointing, whilst their perceived idiosyncrasy within Morris scholarship is detrimental to the development of a full understanding and appreciation of Morris's aims and achievements, for as Margaret Grennan recognizes, 'to ignore them is to know one half or less of the man'.³

At the outset of the twenty-first century when, as Colin Franklin writes, 'the world becomes so un-Morris that he is needed and missed in earnest', the maintenance and expansion of Morris's reputation and the wider dissemination of his aims and ideas are timely, and the last romances have a crucial rather than peripheral role in this process.⁴ To dismiss them, as some have done, as the escapist fantasies of an ageing man, or as a final resurgence of literary Pre-Raphaelitism previously held in check by Morris's socialism, is both to misrepresent and devalue them. To understand them as a radical and constructive contribution to his aims as an artist, a writer and a socialist is, in contrast, to give them the attention they deserve as the remarkable literary achievement of Morris's final years.

It is through their predominant concern with the experience of wonder that we can begin to develop such an understanding and hence to reassess the value and significance of the last romances in our own age. The exuberant celebration of the wondrous and the wonderful in these narratives, together with the wondering disposition of their protagonists, is a feature which has received passing mention in commentaries but which has never been fully explored. May Morris and Norman Talbot, two of the most sensitive and perceptive readers of the romances, have however laid

2 Norman Talbot, 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris', *Southern Review* (Adelaide), 3 (1968–9), pp. 339–57 (p. 339).

3 Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945), p. 133.

4 Colin Franklin, *Printing and the Mind of Morris: Three Paths to the Kelmscott Press* (Cambridge: Rampant Lions Press, 1986), p. 36.

stronger emphasis on this quality than others. May Morris observes that it is always 'the remembrance of the Wonders of the World' that sustains the protagonists in their bleakest moments, whilst Norman Talbot argues that Morris's profound understanding that the successful story 'should nourish our sense of wonder' is demonstrated particularly in these final narratives, in which he 'offered his readers not only beauty but the rejuvenation of their sense of wonder'.⁵ This rejuvenation of our sense of wonder is the most significant achievement of William Morris's last romances. Contrary to those who would argue that it renders these narratives simplistic and unworldly, I propose that it is fundamental to our understanding of their contribution to his wider aesthetic and political vision, and essential for an appreciation of their continuing relevance for a twenty-first century readership.

The experience of wonder and the act of wondering are, however, increasingly neglected and devalued aspects of human existence, and if Morris's final narratives continue to be misunderstood and undervalued it is because the concept of wonder is also misunderstood and undervalued. In a new millennium the last romances thus offer us a crucial reminder of the importance of the human capacity for wonder, and show us how, by wondering, we can help to make the world a little less 'un-Morris'.

Human Wonders

Wonder is a multifaceted concept. We can experience a sense of wonder when we encounter something admirable or unusual, we can direct our sense of wonder at an object or a person, we can conceive other people or objects as wonderful, and we can engage consciously in the act of wondering. These

5 *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), I, p. 514 (further references to this work will be abbreviated to *AWS*); Norman Talbot, 'The First Modern "Secondary World" Fantasy: Morris's Craftsmanship in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, 13.2 (Spring 1999), pp. 3–11 (pp. 7, 10).

are essentially related elements of the same process, for as Mark Kingwell identifies, wonder 'exposes a threefold structure' involving a 'wonderer', the 'wonderful' and a 'wondering'.⁶ The experience of wonder is thus neither escapist nor passive – on the contrary it is, as Cornelis Verhoeven argues, a 'vital experience', an 'enthusiastic contemplation' in which we engage more fully with the realities of our existence.⁷ In the last romances Morris's protagonists are, like Thomas Carlyle's Teufelsdröck, 'wonder-loving and wonder-seeking' men and women; vital and enthusiastic, they are motivated primarily by the 'zest for living' that characterizes the attitude of wonder.⁸ Indeed it is their pursuit of and receptivity to wonder that constitutes the primary momentum of these narratives, a momentum which always brings these characters more fully and actively into the world rather than taking them out of it. Morris's final protagonists are in fact one of the best examples he offers us of what it means to live the 'eager life', the life he claims as the birthright of all men and women at the end of his lecture 'The Aims of Art.'⁹ But Morris also understood that the consequences of a wondering disposition are not confined to the pleasure and fulfilment of the individual life. He recognized that an attitude of wonder can profoundly influence the way people respond to each other and to the world in which they live, and thus have a highly beneficial role in social reconstruction and environmental regeneration.

In his last romances Morris offers his most compelling exposition of the advantages to be gained by integrating the experience and the attitude of wonder more fully and actively into human life, beginning with the enrichment of our relationships with other people. The protagonists of these narratives frequently respond with delighted wonder to the presence of others, a response memorably expressed in the meetings between Osberne and Elfhild on either side of the eponymous river in *The Sundering*

6 Mark Kingwell, 'Husserl's Sense of Wonder', *Philosophical Forum*, 31 (2000), pp. 85–107 (p. 97).

7 Cornelis Verhoeven, *The Philosophy of Wonder*, trans. Mary Foran (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 37, 186.

8 *The Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 16 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), VI, p. 127; Verhoeven, p. 182.

9 *CW*, XXIII, p. 97.

Flood. At their very first encounter Elfhild 'starts back astonished' on seeing Osberne, crying 'O thou beauteous creature, what art thou?'; similarly amazed at the appearance of Elfhild, Osberne in turn demands: 'Tell me what thou art. Art thou of the Faery? For thou art too well shapen to be of the Dwarfkin.' Elfhild continues 'wondering at him' throughout their subsequent conversation, and when they next meet Osberne has lost none of his mutual joy and surprise at the appearance of Elfhild, finding her always 'a wonder and delight' to behold. Both characters simultaneously evoke and express a sense of profound admiration and pleasure in their meetings, exchanging appreciative compliments over the 'gurgling and rushing and talking' of the Sundering Flood which lends its own vibrant dynamic to their enthusiastic discussions.¹⁰ Indeed, their wondering interactions offer a notably less self-conscious version of the first meeting between the more mature Christopher and Goldilind in Morris's earlier romance *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*. On this occasion the mutual admiration of the characters expresses itself rather in the 'speechlessness' and 'paralysis' identified by Mary Baine Campbell as characteristic physical effects of a state of wonderment, rather than the animated movements of Elfhild who 'clapped her hands together and laughed' in her delight at Osberne.¹¹ In contrast, Goldilind stands 'staring in wonder' at Christopher whilst he stands 'gazing' back at her, a shared and silent immobility in which each attempts to comprehend the appearance of the other. When Christopher is finally able to speak, he admits frankly to Goldilind: 'Though I be young I have seen fair women not a few, but beside any of them thou art a wonder.'¹²

It is easy to dismiss such exchanges as the predictable interactions of characters possessed of an impossible fairytale beauty, but Morris does not allow such a dismissal: Christopher is, after all, described as 'such an youngling as most might have been in the world, had not man's malice been,

10 *CW*, XXI, pp. 32–3, 45.

11 Mary Baine Campbell, *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 4; *CW*, XXI, p. 33.

12 *CW*, XVII, pp. 176, 179.

and the mischief of grudging and the marring of grasping'.¹³ Furthermore, a superficial interpretation of such exchanges as the stuff of fantasy fails to acknowledge Morris's understanding that such wondering is the key to a respectful engagement with one's fellow man – a point made more recently by Luce Irigaray who identifies man's need 'to leave an interval between himself and the other, to look toward, to contemplate – *to wonder*' as the basis of appreciative human interaction. In such wondering exchanges, Irigaray suggests, 'the "object" of wonder or attraction' remains 'impossible to de-limit, im-pose, identify', rendering our wondering an essentially non-possessive, non-reductive act, for in its 'attracting me toward', Irigaray explains, 'wonder keeps me from taking and assimilating directly to myself'.¹⁴ Such non-possessive, non-reductive wonder is, for both Morris and Irigaray, an important element of physical attraction and sexual desire. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, when Arthur and Birdalone are reunited and finally free to consummate their relationship, they approach each other 'breathless with wonder and joy and longing', whilst in *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* the energies of wonder and desire similarly interact within Christopher on the day of his marriage to Goldilind as he both gazes on her 'in wonderment' and 'yearned towards her in his bowels', an intensely visceral experience in which the integrated experiences of wonder and sexual attraction are felt deep within the organs of the body.¹⁵ But as Marguerite La Caze rightly asserts, 'the response of wonder cannot be confined to the relation between the sexes' – or, for that matter, to the experience of sexual attraction – 'but should be extended to all our relations with others', and in his last romances Morris does not restrict his protagonists' sense of wonder to those they physically desire.¹⁶ In *The Sundering Flood*, Osberne's relationship with his mentor Steelhead begins significantly with his wondering appreciation of his new friend. 'Somewhat startled' at the sudden emergence of Steelhead in the land in which his sheep have gone

13 *CW*, XVII, p. 147.

14 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), pp. 73, 81, 75.

15 *CW*, XX, p. 351; *CW*, XVII, pp. 207, 206.

16 Marguerite La Caze, 'The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity', *Hypatia*, 17 (2002), pp. 1–19 (p. 8).

astray, Osberne waits 'in no little wonder' for Steelhead to return from gathering the strayed animals, admitting to his new companion, 'I was fain to see thee again; for thou art goodly and fair to behold, and I am fain to remember thee'.¹⁷ It is with just such forthright and generous admiration that Aurea and Viridis greet Birdalone when she first lands on the Isle of Increase Unsought in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Aurea approaches Birdalone 'with wonder in her eyes' and subsequently declares, 'now I look upon thee, how fair a woman thou art!' – a compliment readily reiterated by Viridis, who 'looked a while on Birdalone' before kissing her and declaring: 'I would thou wert happier, for thou art beauteous, and all but the evil must love thee'.¹⁸ As in Osberne's unselfconscious appreciation of Steelhead, Viridis and Aurea express their admiration of Birdalone simply and spontaneously, unconstrained in their wonderment by any strain of jealousy or the antipathy it necessarily incurs.

The wonder-dominated inter-personal exchanges in the last romances confirm La Caze's claim that wonder encourages a mutual appreciation between individuals which opens the space for generosity, and 'in generosity, we recognize the worth of others', argues La Caze, meaning that 'respect, veneration and magnanimity follow wonder'.¹⁹ Furthermore, as Iris Young argues, 'a respectful stance of wonder toward other people' can be an eminently practical means of deepening and enhancing our relationships with others, allowing us 'new insight about their needs, interests, perceptions, or values'.²⁰ The cultivation of an attitude of wonder hereby assumes an ethical dimension, for by deepening our understanding of others, our wondering can beneficially influence the manner in which we behave towards them. Through the enthusiastic interactions of their protagonists, Morris's last romances thus continue to offer us a valid and persuasive vision of what 'a respectful stance of wonder toward other people' might achieve in terms of the reconstruction of human relationships on more generous and appreciative terms.

17 *CW*, XXI, p. 26.

18 *CW*, XX, pp. 54, 55, 56.

19 La Caze, p. 12.

20 Iris Marion Young, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought', *Constellations*, 3 (1996–7), pp. 340–63 (p. 358).

Topographies of Wonder

The respect and veneration generated by wonder are, Morris recognized, essential not only to the way people respond to and treat each other, but also to the ways in which they respond to and treat the natural environment. The last romances are filled with spectacular topographies which readily elicit awe and admiration, and their very titles are richly suggestive of a world composed of marginal and marvellous places – of glittering plains, woods beyond the world and wondrous isles. But Morris is less concerned overall in these narratives with such manifestly extraordinary places than he is with the wonderment generated by the prospects and details of more familiar landscapes. There are unforgettable expressions of such wonderment in each of the last romances, such as when Birdalone ‘cried aloud with joy to see the lovely land before her’ as she approaches the City of the Five Crafts in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, or when Walter’s spirit wavers ‘for very surprise of joy’ in delighted response to the ‘lovely land’ which surrounds the magical wood in *The Wood Beyond the World*.²¹ One of the most expressive and affective demonstrations of such elation, however, occurs when Ralph leaves his homeland at the beginning of *The Well at the World’s End*. Pausing to look at ‘the down-country before him’, listening to the wind that ‘played a strange tune on the innumerable stems of the bents and the hard-stalked blossoms, to which the bees sang counterpoint’, Ralph’s pleasure and excitement grow until ‘the heart arose within him, and he drew the sword from the scabbard, and waved it about his head, and shook it toward the south, and cried out, “Now, welcome world, and be thou blessed from one end to the other, from the ocean sea to the uttermost mountains!”’²² In his close observation of this distinctly English topography, Ralph experiences a state of heightened sensory awareness, receptive simultaneously to the green expanse of the perspective and the minutiae of physical detail, both interpenetrated by a natural polyphony. Sights, sounds and textures combine to provoke in him a wondering exultation in which he conceives his own life as an integral element of the natural environment and recognizes his share in its vibrancy and vitality.

21 *CW*, XX, p. 264; *CW*, XVII, p. 26.

22 *CW*, XVIII, pp. 19–20.

Each of these responses articulates what Howard Parsons describes as ‘the excitement of visual experience and wide vistas: the pure wonder of just seeing and revelling in the colours and forms of the world spread out before one’, and Morris’s own capacity to respond in this way to the colours and forms of the natural world is evident throughout his lectures and letters.²³ As in Ralph’s receptivity to the wind and the beauty of the stems and blossoms amidst the broad perspective, even the simplest and commonest features of the landscape are repeatedly celebrated by Morris as wondrous in their own right – ‘the grass is green green green!’, he wrote excitedly to Jenny in a letter of 1894, ‘the fields all over dandelions’ – and even the English weather could provoke in him a reverential awe: ‘it was a miracle of a day here’, he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones from Kelmscott Manor in October 1890, ‘the sort of day when you really can do nothing but stand and stare at it.’²⁴ There is a definite strain of Romanticism in Morris’s response to the natural world, an attitude which recalls Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s expressed intention in their *Lyrical Ballads* of ‘awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom’, and directing it to ‘the loveliness and the wonders of the world.’²⁵ But there is also a clear understanding in Morris’s writing that it is by finding wonder in the natural world, as in each other, that we can regenerate our relationship with it on a social as well as personal level. He consistently criticized the spread of commercialism in the nineteenth century for distorting this relationship: ‘What have you done with Lancashire?’, he asked his Manchester audience in his lecture ‘Art, Wealth and Riches’, ‘it does not seem to be above ground. I think you must have been poor indeed to have been compelled to bury it. Were not the brown moors and the meadows, the clear streams and the sunny skies, wealth?’ But the hope of reclamation consistently underlies Morris’s complaints. Lancashire, like so many other areas of England, might have been buried ‘mountains deep under fantastic folly and hideous squalor’,

23 Howard Parsons, ‘Man Today – Problems, Values and Fulfilment’, *Revolutionary World*, 4–5 (1973), pp. 1–208 (pp. 197–8).

24 *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984–96), IV, p. 154; III, p. 21. Further references to the *Collected Letters* will be abbreviated to *CL*.

25 *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971–2001), VII, Part 2, p. 7.