

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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The Golden Chain

Essays on William Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism

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It is improbable that William Morris' early prose romances will ever gain the critical attention needed to secure one of those niches reserved for the "lesser-but-nevertheless-interesting" works of literary art. This is regrettable, for despite their shortcomings these tales demonstrate a burgeoning narrative gift coupled with a provocative examination of the dialectic between personality and history. Ostensibly romances, Morris' pieces for The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine transcend their limitations through depth of psychological acuity, symbolic coherence, freshness of formal experimentation, and range of thematic investigation. Although this does not necessarily qualify them for serious critical discussion, it does suggest that they deserve more than the usual cursory treatment given them as biographical documents or convenient expressions of the critic's pet motif. If they are flawed by inexperience, they are nonetheless integral works of art which ultimately derive their strength from the urgency which accompanies that inexperience. By linking his own doubts about the efficacy of his inclination towards an artistic career with his discovery of an historical period seemingly fraught with certainty of purpose, Morris constructs a series of initiation fables centered around that one act of completion which both fulfills and consumes life in a single psychological, if not chronological, moment. Drawing upon his conception of medieval society as an order of artists, priests, and men of war, he attempts to discover himself vicariously in relation to work, women, his capacity for commitment, and an emerging awareness of personal values. Thus, Morris becomes artist, lover, warrior, and priest confronting the demands of the most profound event in their lives. As

it stood, only in this very autumn-tide, if you knew the place, you would see the heaps made by the earth-covered ruins heaving the yellow corn into glorious waves, so that the place where my church used to be is as beautiful now as when it stood in all its splendour. (149)

After describing the delight he took in his homeland during the various seasons, he goes on to present an image which shows how natural beauty is intensified when carefully framed by the artist's eye:

...yet it was beautiful too in spring, when the brown earth began to grow green: beautiful in summer, when the blue sky looked so much bluer, if you could hem a piece of it in between the new white carving. (149)

In the next few lines the artist tells us that the experience he is about to relate is the only aspect of his life which has not passed into oblivion within the inexorable press of mutability. We are in essence told that here, as in the case of the sky, we will find another natural phenomenon which has been amplified by the creative endeavor which surrounds it.

Isolated in the world by the deaths of their mother and father, the master-mason and his sister have made their way by becoming craftsmen. As he prepares to begin carving, the speaker looks around the surrounding countryside, taking in briefly the three major professions which make up the social order of which he is an integral part. There is the great church and its accompanying abbey, the town from which he sees the "flash of helmets and spears" (150), and of course himself and Margaret who represent the artisan's life. As he continues to gaze, his perception focuses upon the flowers which speckle the land and which play a significant role in the developing symbolism. After describing a ring of poplar trees which surrounds the abbey, he continues with the field beyond:

Moreover, through the boughs and trunks of the poplars we caught glimpses of the great golden corn sea, waving, waving, waving, for leagues and leagues; and among the corn grew burning scarlet poppies, and blue corn-flowers; and the corn-flowers were so blue, that they gleamed, and seemed to burn with a steady light, as they grew beside the popples among the gold of the wheat. (150)

What stands out in this description is the tension between the ordered ring of poplars which rhythmically flash from "green to white, and white to green" and the unrestrained, almost surging, movement of the "corn sea" (150). By giving the corn-flowers an almost supernatural glow which seems to "burn with a steady light," he intensifies the contrast, suggesting that beyond the confines of civilized decorum there exists an enticingly ardent restlessness. As he goes on to describe the harmoniously brilliant abey garden he once again seems to indirectly note the tense but seductive intrusion of the "wild flowers":

I said that nothing grew on the trellises by the poplars but crimson roses, but I was not quite right, for in many places the wild flow-ers had crept into the garden from without; lush green briony, with green-white blossoms, that grows so fast, one could almost think that we see it grow, and deadly nightshade, La bella donna, oh! so beautiful; red berry, and purple, yellow-spiked flower, and deadly, cruel-looking, dark green leaf, all growing together in the glorious days of early autumn. (151)

There is a certain attractiveness in this wild uncultivated growth just as there is a certain foreboding in its "deadly nightshade" and "cruel-looking, dark green leaf." It is not surprising that amidst this ambiguous confrontation between civility and passion

there should exist a "conduit, with its sides carved with histories from the Bible, and there was on it too, as on the fountain in the cloister, much carving of flowers and strange beasts" (151). Between the histories and the strange beasts, between the rose and deadly nightshade, the artist's perception has presented him with a question: should he attempt to capture the dignified order of civilization or should he leap unequivocally into the wild freedom of those turbulent longings which energize his particular personality? Although Morris manages to avoid such a straightforward formulation, as the story progresses it becomes increasingly evident that before the artist is able to create, the problem must find a resolution.

After telling us about his sister, who is beneath him carving "flower-work, & the little quatrefoils that carry the signs of the zodiac and emblems of the months" (152)--two more images that present the conflict between natural time and human time--he returns to the problem at hand. He must carve Abraham on the Day of Judgment in order to complete his church. However, as he prepares to do so he notes:

I remember when I woke that morning my exultation at the thought of my Church being so nearly finished; I remember, too, how a kind of misgiving mingled with the exultation, which, try all I could, I was unable to shake off; I thought that it was a rebuke for my pride, well, perhaps it was. (152)

If my thesis is correct, the pride that he attributes to himself would correspond to Morris' decision not to give himself to the altruistic but nonetheless bourgeois life of the clergy, but to pursue instead the artistic expression of his own passion for beauty and temporal experience. Nor does the story disappoint us. While contemplating his commission, a portrayal of Abraham holding a blossoming tree and accepting the souls of the faithful "with their hands crossed over

their breasts" (152) into the fold, he suddenly realizes that his own vision is more vibrant:⁴

I...began to think of Abraham, yet I could not think of him sitting there, quiet and solemn, while the Judgment-Trumpet was being blown; I rather thought of him as he looked when he chased those kings so far; riding far ahead of any of his company, with his mail-hood off his head, and lying in grim folds down his back, with the strong west wind blowing his wild black hair far out behind him, with the wind rippling the long scarlet pennon of his lance; riding there amid the rocks and the sands alone; with the last gleam of the armour of the beaten kings disappearing behind the winding of the pass. (152-53)

It becomes apparent that his romantic fascination with excessive intensity has been sufficient to fling him into a deep reverie where he awakens among "a great sea of red corn-poppies" (153) not unlike the sea of wheat which captured his perception earlier in the same day. As he stands there trying to fathom his new surroundings someone touches his shoulder:

Looking round, I saw standing by me my friend Amyot, whom I love better than any one else in the world, but I thought in my dream that I was frightened when I saw him, for his face had changed so, it was so bright and almost transparent, and his eyes gleamed and shone as I had never seen them do before. Oh! he was so wondrously beautiful, so fearfully beautiful! (153-54)

The gleaming eyes and the expressions of extreme emotion suggest that he has turned inward to find those feelings that correspond in intensity to the more than natural beauty of the corn-flowers mentioned above--feelings which he needs in order to transcend his role as craftsman. By substituting a personal and painful love for the distant fatherly concern of the "quiet

and solemn" (153) Abraham, he begins his transformation. As the dream sequences slide from one into the other they express his longing for union with his friend. However, behind this longing there may be a hint of envy, as he metaphorically equates the life of battle with the excitement and forcefulness that his present occupation lacks. For example, at one point he finds himself lying in a boat beneath a large "cliff of dark basalt" in an "almost landlocked bay of the northern sea" (154). As he looks up he sees a castle with many towers, one of which is distinguished by a "great bunch of golden and blood-red wall-flowers" (154) growing in a cranny. Without warning his thoughts are interrupted:

I watched the wall-flowers and banner for long; when suddenly I heard a trumpet blow from the castle, and saw a rush of armed men on to the battlements, and there was a fierce fight, till at last it was ended, and one went to the banner and pulled it down, and cast it over the cliff into the sea, and it came down in long sweeps, with the wind making little ripples in it; slowly, slowly it came, till at last it fell over me and covered me from my feet till over my breast. (154)

The floating banner may be seen as a vicarious shroud which he wishes to earn through unwavering commitment to a cause which fails. Or it may simply be a means of identifying himself with the struggle taking place beyond his reach. In either case Amyot suddenly appears above the battlements holding the gold and red flowers (colors which Morris later, in "The Hollow Land," associates with struggle and failure in the world) which previously grew in the cranny. After looking down "very sorrowfully" (155), Amyot throws the flowers and they land in the water just behind the speaker's head. This act of recognition and perhaps symbolic marriage further indicates the artist's desire to become part of his friend's world. He regrets that he has no Holy Crusade.

Emerging from his reveries to find the "chips... flying bravely from the stone under" (155) his chisel, the speaker is once again interrupted. The seeming resolution is not wholly satisfactory. Even though he is able to work, inspired by the discovery in himself of strong emotion, i.e., separation from a close friend, his loss is not profound enough for a life's work. He finds that the symbolic marriage to Amyot which he attempted in his reverie was a desire to wed himself to the commitment which Amyot's life as a participant in the Holy Crusades represents:

Yes, I remember how five years ago I held his hand as we came together out of the cathedral of that great, far-off city, whose name I forget now; and then I remember the stamping of the horses' feet; I remember how his hand left mine at last, and then, some one looking back at me earnestly as they all rode on together-- looking back, with his hand on the saddle behind him, while the trumpets sang in long solemn peals as they all rode on together, with the glimmer of arms and the fluttering of banners, and the clinking of the rings of the mail, that sounded like the falling of many drops of water into the deep, still waters of some pool that the rocks nearly meet over; and the gleam and flash of the swords, and the glimmer of the lance-heads and the flutter of the rippled banners, that streamed out from them, swept past me, and were gone, and they seemed like a pageant in a dream, whose meaning we know not. (156)

The salient feeling here is as much one of being passed by as it is regret over departing from a loved one. The metaphor of battle once again haunts him as it did in his dream. Here, among the charged atmosphere of banners and glittering mail, lies his true desire to escape the domesticity which surrounds him.

The tale ends with Amyot's and Margaret's swift and unexplained deaths and the reoccurrence of the flower imagery so prominent earlier in the story:

I remember dwelling on the strange lines the autumn had made in red on one of the gold-green vine leaves, and watching one leaf of one of the over-blown roses, expecting it to fall every minute; but as I gazed, and felt disappointed that the rose leaf had not fallen yet, I felt my pain suddenly shoot through me, and I remembered what I had lost; and then came bitter, bitter dreams,--dreams which had once made me happy---...But now in every one was something unutterably miserable; they would not go away, they put out the steady glow of the golden haze, the sweet light of the sun through the vine leaves, the soft leaning of the full blown roses. (157)

This single moment suddenly transforms his life and the rest of his days are spent consummating it through his art:

It was just beneath the westernmost arch of the nave, there I carved their tomb: I was a long time carving it; I did not think I should be so long at first, and I said, 'I shall die when I have finished carving it,' thinking that would be a very short time. But so it happened after I had carved those two whom I loved, lying with clasped hands like husband and wife above their tomb, that I could not yet leave carving it; and so that I might be near them I became a monk, and used to sit in the choir and sing, thinking of the time when we should all be together again....and in process of time I raised a marble canopy that reached quite up to the top of the arch, and I painted it too as fair as I could, and carved it all about with many flowers and histories, and in them I carved the faces of those I had known on earth. (158)

It is clear that the artist has finally found the commitment which completes life. He works from his heart, loyal to that which he loved most even to the point of sacrificing all that remains to the memory of a profound moment. With the completion of the "last lily of the tomb" (158) comes the completion of the self. It is only by returning to the beginning of the tale that we realize how adequately the speaker has composed his consciousness.

Although the next piece, "A Dream," seems less directly concerned with the problem Jung names "individuation," its thematic motifs are similar in kind. After an ominous opening which establishes the tale's dream location the narrator begins to relate a love story which looks like another Victorian fable based on that old dichotomy, love and duty. However, Morris adds a new twist. The conflict turns out to be not between love and duty but between which is the greater motivating factor behind heroic deeds: 'Ella, are you sorry I am going?' 'Yea,' she said, 'and nay, for you will shout my name among the sword-flashes, and you will fight for me.' 'Yes,' he said, 'for love and duty, dearest.' 'For duty? ah! I think, Lawrence, if it were not for me, you would stay at home and watch the clouds, or sit under the linden trees singing dismal love ditties of your own making, dear knight: truly, if you turn out a great warrior, I too shall live in fame, for I am certainly the making of your desire to fight.' (161)

Lawrence immediately replies that duty is a higher love as it proceeds from love of God and Ella counters with, "Still duty, duty'...'you lay, Lawrence, as many people do, most stress on the point where you are weakest" (161). Not unlike Mabel in "Frank's Sealed Letter," it is the woman who challenges the protagonist's conviction. As the story develops, Ella forces Lawrence into doing a "wild, mad thing" (161) to prove his love. Rather than go to war as he should, he takes on a test of his passion, which in this case

involves spending a night in the "cavern of the red pike" (162) from which no one has ever returned. Before Lawrence departs he makes it clear that even though he accepts the conditions of Ella's demand he nevertheless regrets his inability to demonstrate his commitment to duty: "I, too, will add a prayer, but will ask it very humbly, namely, that He will give me another chance or more to fight in His cause, another life to live instead of this failure" (163). After a long, lavishly detailed description of the night, Lawrence crosses the river, sacrifices his life, and day later Ella follows.

The rest of the story deals with those few luminous moments, spanning centuries, when the two lovers reappear on earth before selected witnesses. It seems significant that in two of their visitations they find the respective fulfillments of their previous lives. In the first, Ella appears as a homely, somewhat rough nun tending the sick in a time of plague. Almost as if she is doing penance, she takes the form of a woman dedicated to a life of altruistic duty:

I went from bed to bed in the hospital of the pest-laden city with my soothing draughts and medicines. And there went with me a holy woman [Ella], her face pale with much watching; yet I think even without those same desolate lonely watchings her face would still have been pale. She was not beautiful, her face being somewhat peevish-looking; apt, she seemed, to be made angry by trifles, and even on her errand of mercy, she spoke roughly to those she tended; no, she was not beautiful, yet I could not help gazing at her, for her eyes were very beautiful and looked out from her ugly face as a fair maiden might look from a grim prison, between the window-bars of it. (166)

As she goes from bed to bed she comes upon a man stabbed by robbers. When she kneels down to tend him the physician (who is one of the witnesses)

exclaims: "'O Christ! As the sun went down on that dim-misty day...How I was struck dumb, nay, almost blinded by that change; for there...instead of the unloving nurse, knelt a wonderfully beautiful maiden, clothed all in white, and with long golden hair down her back. Tenderly she gazed at the wounded man...he no longer the grim, strong wounded man, but fair, and in the first bloom of youth" (166). They speak briefly to each other and the vision disappears. However, as if spiritually activated, the wind strikes up out over the sea and blows the pestilent mist back into the bogs from which it came. In the second of the visions, Lawrence finds himself identified with a knight, "the brave man who had saved us all, leading us so mightily in that battle a few days back" (168). As the queen prepares to honor him she expresses the gratitude of her people for his efforts: "'How many widows bless thee, how many orphans pray for thee, how many happy ones that would be widows and orphans but for thee, sing to their children, sing to their sisters, of thy flashing sword, and the heart that guides it!'" (171). Immediately following the conclusion of her speech, the knight becomes Lawrence and the queen becomes Ella. His wish has been granted; he has engaged in battle and quit himself nobly; he has atoned for his failure. The story ends with Lawrence and Ella meeting for a final time in the dream room where the witnesses have been recounting their experiences. As they come together they simultaneously fade away into "a heap of snow-white ashes" (174). Morris associates this moment of final consummation with a major seasonal climax. Here, it is appropriately New Year's Eve and as the two lovers are metaphorically consumed by their long-awaited reunification the bells toll the end of one year and the beginning of another. They, too, like the artist in "The Unknown Church," have finally found their salvation through a fulfillment of purpose after a long period of life-in-death.

By the time Morris begins to write "Gertha's Lov-ers" he has, for the most part, moved away from the

dream format towards a more conventional narrative voice. However, he still presents characters and events which work out the paradigmatic pattern of discovery of purpose, actualization of potential, and rapid deterioration. This removal of himself from the center of the ritualistic stage which he has constructed does not necessarily imply less involvement; it does however foreshadow a shift into the ostensible objectivity of a developing vision of history.

II. Dialogue With History

The next five romances, "Frank's Sealed Letter," "Gertha's Lovers," "Svend and His Brethren," "Lindenberg Pool," and "The Hollow Land," all to a greater or lesser extent confirm Spatt's contention that "the first half of Morris' career is especially marked by this constant effort to define the past and discover its relation to the present."⁵ In these romances the past is specifically the acts of self-sacrifice and devotion which Morris sees permeating medieval legend and the present is his continuing quest to incorporate that dedication into his own future. One aspect of this confrontation between past and present is illustrated in "Frank's Sealed Letter" and "Lindenberg Pool." Both these pieces contain a nineteenth-century narrator who to a greater or lesser degree incorporates the emotions, situations, and fictional structures associated in the earlier tales with medieval life. Although they represent a limited attempt on Morris' part to join his medieval "code" and modern life, they play only a passing role in his dialogue with history. As Wickert points out, the inadvertent slips in the artistry of these works leads one to suspect that their primary purpose involves a cathartic expression of psychical biography rather than an objective solution to Morris' intellectual dilemma. Thus, as Lindsay notes:

We can realize the importance for him of the Ruskinian vision of the medieval world as one where men worked out their salvation by devotion

to the art and work in which they expressed their full and undivided selves. Morris had to achieve in himself this medieval condition before he could safely confront the modern world in all its divisive and treacherous involvements. He could not merely discourse about creative happiness and discriminately admire its products, as Ruskin could; he had to actualise that creativity in his own life and all his activities.⁶

"Gertha's Lovers" presents just such a "vision of the medieval world," coupled with the first formulations of an effective, that is personally ameliorative, theory of history.

As the story opens we are given an image of a fisherman's daughter who represents all the courage and nobility of her people:

His wife was dead these five years, and his daughter alone lived with him; yet she, though of such lowly parentage, was very beautiful; nor merely so, but grand and queenlike also; such a woman as might inspire a whole people to any deed of wise daring for her love... So now Gertha was singing rough spirit-stirring songs of the deeds of old, and thinking of them too with all her heart as she sang. (176-78)

As she works and sings the king, Olaf, rides by with his cynical and somewhat purposeless friend, Leuchnar. As the tale develops we discover that Leuchnar is a man of great knowledge who no longer shares the naïve dedication which makes his countrymen noble. Unfortunately, however, he falls in love with Gertha just as she simultaneously falls in love with Olaf. While developing the emotional trauma which accompanies this triangle, Morris reveals some deeper insights into Leuchnar's personality:

He [Olaf] tried hard to throw himself into Leuchnar's heart, to think of the loneliness of the man, and his wonderful power of concentrating

every thought, every least spark of passion, on some one thing; he remembered how in the years past he had clutched so eagerly at knowledge; how that knowledge had overmastered him, and made him more and more lonely year by year; made him despise others because they did not KNOW.

(185)

After Gertha refuses to be queen the country goes to war and Olaf dies in battle. What Morris chooses to stress in the last section, Gertha's and Leuchmar's mutual discovery of purpose, reveals his continuing preoccupation with the consummate act. Gertha temporarily becomes queen and with the aid of Olaf's spirit inspires her subjects to perform superhuman acts of courage and self-sacrifice. Even Leuchmar triumphantly ends his life by offering it to the cause which Gertha now represents. Both characters actualize their potential, Gertha in symbolic terms and Leuchmar in psychological terms. What emerges is Morris' sense of history as a series of events which find resolution only when they become focused by the passionate strength of individual lives. Thus, Gertha and Leuchmar, pressed by the internal circumstances of their respective loves and the external circumstances of events, find completion. As a result the world that surrounds them becomes purged and revitalized. Once again Morris has discovered the "objective correlative" for his own moral stance, i.e., the necessity of concentrating "every thought, every least spark of passion on some one thing" (185).

This vision of history and duty reappears in "Svend and His Brethren." The romance opens by describing a land which has been taken as Morris' spiritual portrait of Victorian England:

Should not then their king be proud of such a people, who seemed to help so in carrying on the world to its consummate perfection, which they even hoped their grandchildren would see?

Alas! alas! they were slaves--king and priest,

noble, burgher, just as much as the meanest tasked serf, perhaps more even than he, for they were so willingly, but he unwillingly enough.

They could do everything but justice, and truth, and mercy; therefore God's judgements hung over their heads, not fallen yet, but surely to fall one time or other. (227)

This nation's only goal is the enslavement of the peoples around them. Morris juxtaposes this description against the portrait of a small nation set in the mountains whose people are both free and good. As the inevitable conflict develops it becomes apparent that the only manner in which this small nation can survive must be through the intercession of a woman. To remove the curse incurred by their ancestors for burning a church full of women, a woman must offer herself as a sacrifice. In what we may now recognize as a typically Morrisian gesture, Cissela, a nobleman's daughter, takes the burden on herself: "Father, how can I help our people? Do they want deaths? I will die. Do they want happiness? I will live miserably through years and years, nor ever pray for death" (230). By marrying the invading king, a man she does not love, she forestalls the imminent defeat and resigns herself to death-in-life. The man whom she does love, Siur, also resigns himself and becomes a craftsman who devotes his life, as we shall see, to memorializing their love. Just like the beautiful chapel in his homeland (and the unknown church in the earlier romance), Siur's art becomes great because his hand follows "his loving heart" (231).

The second section opens with Siur remarking upon the close resemblance between Svend, Cissela's son, and his mother. Nor is the resemblance merely physical:

A gallant dream it was he [Svend] dreamed; for he saw himself with his brothers and friends about him, seated on a throne, the justest king

in all the earth, his people the lovingest of all people: he saw the ambassadors of the restored nations, that had been unjustly dealt with long ago; everywhere love, peace if possible, justice and truth at all events. (235-36)

He too has inherited his mother's people's love for truth and justice along with her conviction that they must be attained at any cost. By the time Svend and his brothers reach maturity Cissela has died and Siur has built her an elaborate tomb. Nor is this his only commemoration:

Siur stood in his own great hall....and saw a fair sight, the work of his own hands. For, fronting him, against the wall were seven thrones, and behind them a cloth of samite of purple wrought with golden stars....and opposite each throne was a glittering suit of armour wrought wonderfully in bright steel, except that on the breast of each suit was a face worked marvelously in enamel, the face of Cissela in a glory of golden hair...on the crest of each helm was wrought the phoenix. (240)

He works into his art not only the single, most significant factor in his life, Cissela, but also an imperative to her sons to act with conviction and purpose. That these sons collectively represent Morris' growing conception of what he wishes to become, as well as his sense of those accomplishments which made the medieval world so vital, is readily apparent when we look at their description:

In the council chamber sat Svend and his six brethren; he chief of all in the wielding of sword or axe, in the government of people, in drawing the love of men and women to him; perfect in face and body, in wisdom and strength was Svend: next to him sat Robert, cunning in working of marble, or wood, or brass; all

things could he make to look as if they lived, from the sweep of an angel's wings down to the slipping of a little field-mouse from under the sheaves in the harvest-time. Then there was Harald, who knew concerning all the stars of heaven and flowers of earth: Richard, who drew men's hearts from their bodies, with the words that swung to and fro in his glorious rhymes: William, to whom the air of heaven seemed a servant when the harp-strings quivered underneath his fingers: there were the two sailor-brothers, who the year before, young though they were, had come back from a long, perilous voyage, with news of an island they had found long and long away to the west. (238-39)

By comparing the attributes delineated here with Morris' own final achievements we can see how effective his conception of medieval man was in the navigation of his future. Svend, however, unlike the other protagonists of these tales, does not begin and consume his life simultaneously. He breaks away from the doomed society and, like the phoenix on Siur's crest, builds a new one from its ashes. The last the reader hears of him, he has earned from his subjects, presumably through his justice and mercy, the appellation "Svend the wonderful king" (243).

In perhaps the most startling and certainly one of the best of these romances, "The Hollow Land," Morris tackles the more sinister side of a life of conviction, i.e., the act that although seemingly honorable turns out to be evil and ignoble. Suddenly the dialogue with history grows significantly more baffling. Morris realizes that perhaps our evil choices as well as our good may be foci for the precipitation of events. Florian, the protagonist of this tale, has taken part in his brother's revenge against Swanhilda, an evil queen. By doing so with firm certainty he unwittingly commits himself to a life-long quest aimed at unravelling "God's judgments" (287). The first consequence of his act is

defeat in the world. As he fights with the forces of Red Harald, Swanhilda's son, he is confronted by the possibility that killing her was wrong:

Then I wept, and so went to him weeping; and he said: 'Thou seest, brother, that we must die, and I think by some horrible and unheard-of death; & the House of the Lilies is just dying too; and now I repent me of Swanhilda's death; now I know that it was a poor cowardly piece of revenge instead of a brave act of justice; thus has God shown us the right.' (273)

Unlike his brother, however, Florian does not commit suicide; pushed back to a cliff, and completely defeated, he falls. On waking he finds himself in a strange and beautiful land immersed in a "cool green light" (275). There he discovers a lovely young woman who has been waiting for him since her birth. However, before he can achieve her love and life in the semi-paradisiacal Hollow Land he must learn his mistake:

She said with straightened brow and scornful mouth: 'So! bravely done! must I then, though I am a woman, call you a liar for saying God is unjust? You to punish her, had not God then punished her already?'⁸ How many times when she woke in the dead night do you suppose she missed seeing King Urrayne's pale face and hacked head lying on the pillow by her side.' (279)

After they come upon a woman dressed in scarlet and gold, who is weeping (and who is most likely the image of Swanhilda), Florian is torn from the peace of this purple and green retreat and reborn on earth. Before he can return to the Hollow Land he must find Red Harald and atone for his crime with an act of mercy.

When he comes upon Red Harald the latter is covering a castle wall with large yellow and scarlet paintings which depict the main characters and events

involved in his mother's death. Florian immediately accosts him in a belligerent manner:

I asked why he was painting in my castle. Thereupon, with that same grim smile widening his mouth as heretofore, he said: 'I paint God's judgements.' And as he spoke, he rattled the sword in his scabbard. But I said: 'Well then, you paint them very badly....' 'You have got no clothes on, and may go to the devil! What do you know about God's judgements?' 'Well, they are not all yellow and red at all events; you ought to know better.' He screamed out: 'O you fool! yellow and red! Gold & blood; what do they make?' 'Well,' I said; 'What?' 'HELL!' And coming close up to me, he struck me with his open hand in the face, so that the colour with which his hand was smeared was dabbed about my face. (284)

The color symbolism has by now solidified into a pattern. Gold and red, Swanhilda's and Red Harald's colors, suggest the world motivated by greed, hate, and violence, and green and blue represent the ordered peace and beauty of the "second best of the places God has made" (280), the Hollow Land or regenerated earth. Red Harald's smearing of Florian's face with the colors of hell leads to another fight which concludes with Florian's painting the former's face in kind. This ritualistic painting seems to represent a mutual identification of each by the other as harbingers of hell on earth. And indeed, it is their unending cycle of revenge and bloodshed which has devastated their civilization's potential for good. As Florian admires his handiwork he suddenly feels compassion for the dying man and nurses him back to health. The circle is broken and they both settle down to transforming the world back from hell into heaven: "And as the years went on and we grew old and grey we painted purple pictures and green ones instead of the scarlet and yellow, so that the walls looked altered; and always we painted God's

judgment" (287). It is as if Morris has resolved his problem by recognizing that whatever he achieves must ultimately help to create a more perfect and peaceful world. By showing us an image that incorporates both the green and the gold, morality and passion, he points to his solidifying artistic values.

For the author of these romances, history will only become progressive when the individual can channel his determination, perseverance, and passion in such a way that events lead to the creation and preservation of beauty in the world. Before Morris, as before his protagonists, there "lay a great space of flowers" (290).

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1. Max A. Wickert, "Form and Archetype in William Morris, 1855-1870," Dissertation, Yale University 1965, p. 33; John Hollow, "William Morris and the Judgment of God." PMLA, 86 (1971), 446-51.
2. William Morris, The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends, ed. Phillip Henderson (London: Longmans, 1950), pp. 15-16.
3. J. W. Mackail seems to imply this preoccupation in his The Life of William Morris (London: Longmans, 1899), I, 78-86.
4. I am indebted to Dr. Carole Silver for pointing out to me that this Abraham is found in Morris' description of Amiens in "The Churches of North France," Collected Works, I, 365.
5. Hartley S. Spatt, "William Morris: The Languages of History and Myth," Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University 1975, p. 3.
6. Jack Lindsay, William Morris: His Life and Work (London: Constable, 1975), p. 64.
7. See Lindsay, p. 64.
8. The material in italics has been deleted in Collected Works. I include it because it seems necessary for the sense. See The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, No. 10 (October 1856), p. 634.

HEROIC DISINTEGRATION:

Morris' Medievalism and the Disappearance of the Self

Frederick Kirchhoff

The abrupt shift in manner and subject between William Morris' 1850s writing and the narrative poetry he wrote when he resumed his literary career in the mid-1860s is among the puzzles of his development. Terse symbolism gives way to leisurely storytelling. Dramatic monologues are replaced by elaborately mediated narrative structures intended--it would seem--to forestall the possibility of psychological confrontation. Doubtless there are biological explanations for the profound differences between The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine romances (1856) and The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (1858) and the longer narratives he began publishing nearly a decade later, The Life and Death of Jason (1867) and The Earthly Paradise (1868-70). These years saw Morris' marriage, the building and desertion of Red House, and the formation of "the Firm"--all profound influences on his work. But a more useful explanation for the transformation of Morris' literary style lies in the early writing itself. Powerful as they are, his romances and poetry of the 1850s failed Morris because they did not accomplish what he intended them to accomplish. They did not provide him with an identity. Indeed, they threatened him with a spectre of non-being the strategies of his later writing sought with varying success to conceal.

Sex and violence, the characteristic themes of this early work, have long been favorite modes of adolescent self-expression. I take it for granted that Morris used the medieval setting and characters of his early work to project an identity forbidden him by his own time and place in history--specifically, to give freer reign to the promptings