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Morris' "Childe Roland":
The Deformed not quite Transformed

The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine (January to December 1856) marks the commencement of William Morris' career as a published writer. Its first editor, Morris funded the project from his personal income and contributed poetry or prose to ten of the Magazine's twelve monthly numbers. But more than functioning as a vehicle for his own writing, the Magazine effected Morris' formal alliance with "official" Pre-Raphaelitism. Deliberately patterning their journal after The Germ (1850), Morris and his associates intended to take up where the earlier, short-lived Pre-Raphaelite journal had left off. Like The Germ, the Magazine was to be the expression of a body of kindred minds, rather than of a collection of individuals.¹ And as the seal of authenticity, Rossetti himself, with whom Morris had become friendly in the spring of 1856, was prevailed upon to contribute three poems--"The Burden of Ninevah," the second version of "The Blessed Damozel," and "Staff and Scrip."

It is in connection with this attempt to ally himself publicly with Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites that Morris' review of Browning's Men and Women assumes particular importance. The review would be remarkable if only because it is one of the two criticisms of contemporary literature Morris wrote in his lifetime. (The other is his shorter--and reluctant--1870 review of Rossetti's Poems in The Academy.) But the Browning review is specially significant because, like Browning's own Introductory Essay on Shelley, it tells us more about the poet Morris himself wanted to be than about the poet whose work it is ostensibly characterizing. Yet it is not merely the figure of Browning through and against which Morris defines himself. He appears to have recognized, or at least sensed, that Browning's personae were themselves a sequence of alternative prototypes of the Victorian Poet, each of which posed a challenge to his own identity as an artist.

On an elementary level, this approach to Browning is simply a matter of the order and emphasis Morris gives to the poems. Since Morris' own attitude towards the Church had undergone a radical change only the year before, it seems natural for him to admit having been

struck first by the three poems "to do with belief and doubt."² But in concentrating the opening pages of his essay on "Cleon," he also reveals his deeper anxieties as an ephebe poet. Browning's Cleon--the many-sided pagan, acutely self-conscious of the limits to creativity in "these latter days"--is closely akin to Morris himself, and the wide-eyed directness of Morris' prose is unable to mask his ambivalence to the figure. He deplores Cleon's "selfish" nature, but what he reacts most strongly against is not Cleon's pride, but his inclination towards "a most dreary aristocracy of intellect." Browning's persona carries to logical development the elitism implicit in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine itself--the literary expression of a close-knit circle of university students who called themselves "the Brotherhood" and envisioned the perpetuation of their undergraduate clique as a quasi-medieval commune. Thus Cleon's failure is comparable to the alienation from ordinary society that stood as a very real possibility for Morris, and Morris' patronizing "Poor Cleon!" is more a gesture of self-affirmation than a comment on Browning's poem.

On the other hand, for the same reason he fears Cleon Morris cannot restrain his sympathetic identification with Cleon's aesthetic. Specifically, he is drawn to Cleon's Keatsian awareness that the intense perception of beauty "can only make the fear of death bitterer than it otherwise would be." His longest extract from Browning's poem underlines this identification:

It is so horrible
I dare at times imagine to my need
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
Unlimited in capability
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,
To seek which, the joy-hunger forces us,
That, stung by straitness of our life, made
 strait
On purpose to make sweet the life at large,
Freed by the throbbing impulse we call
 death,
We burst there as the worm into the fly,
Who, while a worm still, wants his wings.
 But no!
Zeus has not yet revealed it; and, alas!
He must have done so, were it possible!

For Morris, the agonized sincerity with which these "fierce words are wrung from the calm proud man" is the emotional core of Browning's poem. A figure towards whom he is incapable of ironic distance, his Cleon gives voice to the desire for a transcendental intensity of experience that Morris again and again in the course of his life's work will force himself to redirect into the acceptance of a lesser aim--without ever wholly acquiescing to the limitations of his own alternative.³ Indeed, Cleon's expression of impossible desire could be the motto of The Earthly Paradise (1868-1870); except for the reference to Zeus, his very words could have been spoken by the quester Pharamond in Love is Enough (1872).

Morris' treatment of "Cleon" typifies his approach to Men and Women. In his comments on the love poems, with their "intense, unmixed love," he seems to be reshaping Browning in the image of Rossetti. When he tells us that "Paracelsus," "with its wonderful rhythm, its tender sadness, its noble thoughts, must have been very easy to write, surely!" we are reminded of Morris' own facility at verse-making. But these are not points to belabor. More significant is his general attitude towards Browning's historical figures, for this element in the review is immediately relevant to most of the poetry and short fiction Morris also contributed to the Magazine and to the poetry he published two years later in The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (1858).

His response to "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" is particularly telling: "What a joy it is to have these men brought up before us; made alive again, though they have passed away from the earth so long ago; made alive, seeming indeed not as they might very likely have seemed to us, the lesser men, had we lived in their times; but rescued from the judgment of the world...and shown to us as they really were." "Think of Andrea del Sarto sitting there in Florence, looking over to Fiesole," he urges us. And apparently this meditation over the personae of Browning's monologues, as if they were real men (and we, modestly, "lesser"), was the response they elicited in Morris. As in his account of "Cleon," the effect is to eliminate the possibility of irony or aesthetic distance.

Doubtless this uncritical immediacy is an inappropriate response to Browning, for whom the function of the dramatic monologue in poems like "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" seems to have been

placing an historical distance between himself and the problems of artistic creation. But Morris' response is very much the appropriate one to his own dramatic monologues in The Defence of Guenevere. It strikes me that most of the problems recent critics have had with the title poem of the collection stem from the dramatic immediacy that Morris had gained at the cost of aesthetic distance.⁴ (Browning deliberately gives us enough information about his personae to enable us to construct an independent and therefore ironic judgment of their actions and beliefs; Morris withholds information, and as a result we have nothing on which to base our response to the poem but Guenevere's immediate, traumatized consciousness.)

But it is not entirely accurate to say that Morris writes his own poetry much the same way he misreads Browning's. His egregious misinterpretation of the poem he "loves best" in the collection--"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"--is belied by the analogue to Childe Roland's quest that appears among the prose romances he contributed to the Magazine. Cleon and Childe Roland are, respectively, the images of the poet-aesthete he fears he could become and the poet-hero he thinks he wishes to be. But the naive moralizing of his remarks on Cleon is mild stuff compared to his version of "Childe Roland":

it may in some sort be an allegory, for in a certain sense everything is so, or almost everything that is done on this earth. But that is not its first meaning; neither, as some people think, was it written for the sake of the fearful pictures merely...for the poet's real design was to show us a brave man doing his duty, making his way on to his point through all dreadful things. What do all these horrors matter to him? he must go on, they cannot stop him; he will be slain certainly, who knows by what unheard-of death; yet he can leave all this in God's hands, and go forward, for it will all come right at the end.

Morris' equivocating resistance to allegory is characteristic: he is fascinated by the medieval world view in which "in a certain sense everything" is allegorical. On the other hand, he distrusts a literary

mode uncomfortable with primary meaning. But it is difficult to read his "primary" interpretation of "Childe Roland" without a smile. "Duty," "God's hands," and a hero who "passes straight from our eyes to the place where the true and brave live for ever" have very little to do with the disquieting perplexities of Browning's poem, in which it is precisely what happens to Childe Roland after the final stanza that is left uncertain.⁵

Morris' reading is so determinedly off-base that it calls into question why, according to his own testimony, he bothered to "love" the poem. His explicit disavowals of allegory and "fearful pictures" are suspicious. But I am more inclined to suspect that it was his guilty fascination with the ambiguity itself of the poem that he felt a need to deny. In any case, the ambiguities Morris willfully ignores in his interpretation of Childe Roland's quest--and his naive confidence in the ultimate triumph of Browning's quester--were not so easily laid to rest. The artist-heroes of the two most deeply felt of the early prose romances--"The Story of the Unknown Church" and "The Hollow Land"--are more complex figures than the Childe Roland Morris rewards with "an end so glorious, that the former life, whatever it was, was well worth living with that to crown it." Moreover, the apparent directness of the two narratives fails to conceal Morris' profound uncertainty toward spiritual and artistic values, much the same way the blatant inadequacy of his review of "Childe Roland" faces us with the very questions Morris struggled ineffectually to ignore.

If the narrator of "The Story of the Unknown Church" has passed "to the place where the true and brave live for ever," there is nothing to indicate this in his narrative. In a recent article in Victorian Poetry,⁶ Hartley Spratt observes the Gothic "shock value" of the opening lines of the romance: "I was the master-mason of a church built more than six hundred years ago." But whatever Morris' intentions, his strategy creates a problem the romance itself is unable to solve. Its narrator seems to be speaking from a purgatorial no place--in the compulsive manner of a Yeatsian Dreaming Back. But since any locus we supply his speaking voice implies a judgment of the events he narrates, our uncertainty about the narrator becomes a general uncertainty about the romance as a whole. Seen from this perspective, his art itself, his church and

the canopied tomb he carves for his sister Margaret and her lover (and his own friend) Amyot, is not so much an achievement as a substitute for the erotic fulfillment he has never known. His life dwindles into a solipsistic celebration of death; his life's work is a monument that is itself soon forgotten ("unknown") in time. And what's left oddly enough, is nature. "The Story of the Unknown Church" is a collage of brilliantly colored forms--"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 poppies among the gold of the wheat" (l.150). The reiterated "burn" is characteristic of the narrator's vision. (I am reminded that it was in a review of Morris' early work that Pater first expressed his injunction "to burn always with this hard gem-like flame.") He recollects a natural world whose very intensity seems on the verge of self-destruction. Finally, it is the landscape itself that mediates between past and present. The church is gone, but "if you knew the place, you would see the heaps made by the earth-covered ruins heaving with 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." Thus the whole question of human accomplishment is rendered irrelevant. And not only are the motives behind artistic creation left suspect, but also the rewards of "doing one's duty."

If "The Story of the Unknown Church" suggests a more difficult notion of the artist-hero than Morris espouses in his review of "Childe Roland," the romance is at best indirectly related to the poem. But "The Hollow Land," with its explicit focus on a purgatorial afterlife, is another matter. Florian's first-person narrative is the most starkly fantastic in Morris' work. The first chapter ("Struggling in the World") recounts his brother Arnald's insult at the hands of Swanhilda and his revenge, years later on a Christmas Eve, when she is taken by the House of the Lilies and put brutally to death. Defying retaliation, the House gathers to defend itself, but--as if in an unconscious admission of guilt--responds to the challenge of the King and Swanhilda's son Red Harald by leaving the city and resuming a nomadic life in the hills. In the second chapter ("Failing in the World") the House of the

Lilies, reduced to cattle stealing, is attacked by Red Harald and in an uncanny loss of courage give up arms. Left fighting alone in a shifting landscape, Arnald and then Florian plunge over a cliff into "the Hollow Land." In the final chapter ("Leaving the World") Florian awakens in an earthly paradise where he meets his love Margaret. They live together idyllically, until they come upon a woman in scarlet, sobbing, whose presence in the Hollow Land Margaret cannot explain. The story breaks without transition, and Florian finds himself awakening "on a horrible grey November day" in the same spot to which he first fell. But now he has aged, and his helmet has rusted and is filled with "a lump of slimy earth with worms coiled up in it" (l. 281). Plunging into a stream, he is rescued in Dantesque fashion by a man in scarlet raiment "with upright stripes of yellow and black all over it," who spears his shoulder with a barbed fish-spear. Again he passes into dream and awakens naked before his family castle, now fallen into ruin. Here he again encounters the man in scarlet, who is painting figures of Harald, Arnald, Swanhilda, Florian and a beautiful woman Florian cannot identify (presumably Margaret) as "God's judgments" in yellow and red--"Gold and Blood"--on the interior walls. They fight; the stranger is wounded; Florian nurses him back to health; he teaches Florian to paint and together they continue the sequence of red and yellow frescoes. After many years, the cortege of a dead king passes. Without explanation, Florian calls, "O Harald, let us go!" and they set forth for the Hollow Land. The woman in scarlet appears again, and Harald elects to stay behind with her, but Florian regains Margaret and together they enter into "a hollow city in the Hollow Land."

"The Hollow Land" is Morris' revision of "Childe Roland." The misdeeds of the hero's peers alluded to in Browning's poem become Arnald's needless (and impious) revenge on the self-tortured Swanhilda. The complex figure of Childe Roland is strategically divided into the opposition of Florian (the failed quester) and Red Harald (his demonic accuser). The history of the House of the Lilies parallels the general failure of chivalric idealism recounted in the poem. Its failure--the inability to perceive that Swanhilda's remorse obviated the necessity for revenge--lacks a direct corollary. But Florian's doubts--"Had our house been the devil's servants all along?"--are akin to Childe Roland's.

However it is the landscape of Chapter II that links Morris' romance most clearly with Browning's. The moor with its "rim of hills, not very high" resembles the setting of the "Dark Tower" itself. There are even "two hills" comparable to the "two hills.../Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight" of the poem. And, as in the poem, this elusive, constantly changing landscape is a function of the protagonist's psychology. To one of Florian's fellow knights, "this earth here, the rocks, the sun, the sky" are "mere glamour"; their sinister transformations, "some devil's trap." Like Browning's poem, the romance uses this landscape to isolate the hero in a gesture of fatalistic self-assertion. His brother lost, nearly all of his men fled, Florian charges with a small band into the host of the enemy, raising the war cry of the House of the Lilies. His last words, slipping down the precipice into the Hollow Land, are "I will hold out to the last."

Given this parallel, the final chapter of the romance appears to be exactly what's missing in the poem--and what Morris himself took glibly for granted in the review: it explores what happens to Childe Roland after he blows that defiant blast of his horn that concludes his quest. Moreover, it is also the vision of an afterlife Cleon--who is not, after all, that different from Childe Roland--could not bring himself to espouse. The first stage in Florian's purgation awakens in him the awareness of a life his brutal version of the chivalric code has precluded. Yet in its "innocent" manifestation, the earthly paradise cannot as yet encompass the experience of emotional loss represented by the woman in scarlet (herself a revision of Swanhilda). Hence, the process of renewal through art he undergoes with Red Harald--here, a kind of doppelgänger--in Hell. (The geographical identification is Harald's.) Somehow converting his experience into artistic form prepares him to undertake his quest to rediscover the Hollow Land. Reaching the gateway to the heavenly city, Margaret and Florian discover their own figures, "winged and garlanded," carved on the arch. They enter because they have (literally) become facets of the architecture. And yet there is no one inside--only an Elysian "great space of flowers" akin to the "scarlet poppies, and blue corn-flowers" of "The Story of the Unknown Church." Morris needs the archetype of the heavenly city to complete Florian's quest, but he cannot bring himself to fill it with heavenly beings.

Thus Florian neither "passes straight" nor into "the place where the true and the brave live for ever." The story has too many loose ends to be a satisfactory allegory, but it is obviously a lot more allegorical than Morris' reading of Browning's poem or of his own later prose romances. Significantly, it also relies very much on the "fearful pictures" he seemed to disavow in his interpretation of "Childe Roland." With its threefold division into chapters and "fyttes," the romance pretends to a logic the actual details of its plot elude. Attempting to explain what happens as a consequence of--or at least after--Florian's final gesture of martial self-assertion, it merely complicates the problem with a sequence of unclarified suggestions. Morris' account of his own hero's fate is no more successful than his misreading of Childe Roland's. What emerges, by an unexpected logic, is a sense that the artist's work is a form of purgation for past sin. From this we need not draw the conclusion that artists are necessarily guilt-ridden; rather, that art is only necessary because here, as in "The Story of the Unknown Church," human beings fail to live up to their human potential.⁷

Thus, it seems that the distrust of high art underlying News from Nowhere (1890) and--more important to us in this context--the deliberate restriction of the artist's role to that of "The idle singer of an empty day" in The Earthly Paradise can be traced to Morris' earliest writings. But I must resist the temptation to dwell on a provocative implication. At present, the point to be made is that whatever Morris said about "Childe Roland," when he came to write his own romances he was not able to reproduce the simple solutions he attributed to Browning.

The last paragraphs of his review of Men and Women move from Browning's poems in particular to the general problem of the Victorian artist misunderstood by his contemporaries: "It was so with Tennyson...it is so with Ruskin....The story of the Pre-Raphaelites, we all know that; only here, thank Heaven! the public has chosen to judge for itself somewhat, though to this day their noblest pictures are the least popular." Morris' chief fear--at least in 1856--turns out to be a failure to be understood by his audience. As a result of "the accusation against Browning of carelessness, and consequent roughness in rhythm, and obscurity in language and thought...people, as a rule, do not read

him." "Carelessness," perhaps yes, but "roughness" and "obscurity" are not qualities we associate with the poetry Morris published in the years following The Defence of Guenevere. If the influence of Browning is strong on his early work, the example of Browning had a very different effect on his later development. Florian's crime was to underestimate the potency of Swanhilda's remorse; his purgatory--stressed by the recurrent figure of the woman in scarlet--emphasizes his need to recognize the validity of her emotional self-torment. Yet in terms of the narrative, the appearances of the woman in scarlet are strangely irrelevant. Florian expiates for a state of mind the alternative to which Morris himself cannot integrate with the romance. Revising Browning, Morris was unable to construct a narrative alternative to the ambiguity of "Childe Roland." Instead, he merely reiterates the ambiguities he sought to solve.

And so it becomes clearer why Morris, despite his admiration for Browning, ultimately rejected his model. Try as he might, Morris could not reduce what intrigued him about Browning to a "primary" simplicity. On the other hand, Browning's estrangement from "the people" who refuse to read his poetry on account of his reputation for "obscurity" was an equally forceful lesson. Consequently, in The Life and Death of Jason (1867) and The Earthly Paradise (1868-1870) Morris developed a manner of straightforward, deliberately uncomplex narration very different from Browning's. But in so doing, he also repudiated an element of his own poetic personality it took him a long time to rediscover.

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FOOTNOTES

¹This community of intention should not be underestimated. It is precisely the presupposition of an established bond between the artist and his small but like-thinking audience that defines the special nature of the project.

²The Collected Works of William Morris, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915), 1:326. Hereafter cited within the text by volume and page number.

³See, for example, C. S. Lewis, "William Morris," in Rehabilitations (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 37-55.

⁴For a review of these problems and a bibliography of recent criticism, see Dennis R. Balch, "Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb,'" VP, 13, No. 3 and 4, Fall-Winter 1975, 61-70.

⁵I deliberately avoid offering my own interpretation of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Anyone in disagreement with my contention that the poem is problematic I refer to Harold Bloom's third attempt to come to terms with its significance (Poetry and Repression, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 198-204).

⁶"William Morris and the Uses of the Past," VP, 13, No. 3 and 4, Fall-Winter 1975, 2.

⁷Sharon Dillon has called my attention to Jung's analogous use of art in treating middle-aged patients attempting to rediscover elements of their personality repressed by earlier socialization. (See "The Aims of Psychotherapy," in The Practice of Psychotherapy, 2nd ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966, pp. 47-52.)