

What makes Morris's poetry distinctive?

An introduction to his poetry, from lyrics to narrative poems, by Florence Boos

I was pleased to be asked to present some thoughts on William Morris's poetry to a Morris Society audience, including those interested in other aspects of Morris's work such as his designs or political ideas who may be unaccustomed to reading nineteenth-century poetry. Writing poetry was basic to Morris's identity; he wrote verse at every stage of his life, from late adolescence until the year of his death. He published at least ten entire volumes of poems as well as additional ungathered lyrics, poetic translations, and poems inserted into longer prose narratives. Moreover the gifts he developed in composing poetry - a sense for rhythm and emotive language, dramatic skill at representing moments of crisis, versatility in anticipating audience response, and the ability to turn introspection into meta-reflection arguably helped shape the style of his later journalism, essays on art and socialism, and political romances such as *News from Nowhere*.

It is in his poetry, too, that Morris wrestled with what for him were the underlying metaphysical issues of life: how can human existence, so brief and so little remembered, have any enduring meaning? What can help compensate for failure, suffering, or the loss of love? And most important, faced with a potentially annihilating world, how can a lone individual resist or ameliorate the forces of destruction? The inevitably partial answers to these questions form the ethical framework of Morris's lyrics and narratives, as they motivated his private life and outward endeavors.

In what follows I will argue that Morris's poetry is distinctive for its variety; its narrative quality; and its embeddedness in history, or rather, in a set of beliefs about our relationship

with the past. All of these traits can initially seem alienating or intimidating to modern readers, but when fully internalised and understood they will be seen to constitute its strengths.

Variety and comprehensiveness

Versatile in this as in his other endeavors, Morris composed in several modes, even within a single poem. He wrote dramatic narratives and monologues, dreamlike symbolic lyrics, expressive personal poems, a dramatic masque, extended linked verse tales in a variety of stanza patterns (rhymed couplets, Spenserian stanzas, interspersed lyrics), a Scandinavian and contemporary epic, and what might be called socialist hymns. The foremost commentator on Victorian metrics, George Saintsbury, found his lyrics among the subtlest of the age. Some of his poems are intentionally ambiguous or

THE WEARINESS OF NOVEMBER.

me whine eyes weary? is thy heart too sich. * 4.45 To struggle any more with doubt, and shought Whose formless wit draws darkening now and thick A cross thee ein as smake tinged mist wreaths, brought Down a fair dale, to make it blind and nought? Att their so weary that no world shere seems & 12 Beyond these four wells hung with pain and dreams? wook out upon the real world, where the moon, Half way twist root and crown of these high trees, Turns the dead midnight into dreamy moon, Silont and full of wonders; for the breeze Died at the sunset, and no images, 1 4 4 No hopes of day are left in sky or earth s it not fair and of most wondrous worth? a Than looked, and seen November there; The changeless seed of change it seemed to be 124 Fair death of things, that living once, were fair; Bright sign of laneliness too great for me; Strange image of the dread eternity; 34 In whose void patience how can these have part, These outstretched feverish hunds this restless heart?

Left: November lyric from the Book of Verse, 1870. Below left: Title page from The Earthly Paradise, Kelmscott Press edition, 1896-97; first published 1868-70. Below right: Frontispiece from Sigurd the Volsung, Kelmscott Press edition, 1898; first published 1876.



CERTAIN GENTLEMEN AND MARINERS OF NORWAY, HAVING CONSIDERED ALL THAT THEY HAD HEARTHLY FARADISE, SET SAIL TO FIND FE, ANDSO AFTERMANY TROUBLES & THE LAPSE OF MANY YEARS CAMEOLD MEN TO SOME WEST, ERNLAND, OF WHICH THEY HAD NEVER BEFORE HEARD, THERE THEY DIED, WHEN THEY HAD DWELTTHERE CERTAIN YEARS. IN EXCEEDING HONOUR OF THE STRANGE PEOPLE SECURIOSES





embedded in foreign ways of thought; others are direct, clear, and contemporary. In the face of so many different styles and stages of his work, one may well ask, where to begin?

Since the next sections consider his narrative poems and 'existential' historicism, here it seems appropriate to mention the simplest of his poems, his lyrics. These share with other Victorian verses a sense of poetry as music, evoking a direct response through sound, cadence, rhythm, colour and symbol rather than logical connectives. Here, for example, is the November lyric of *The Earthly Paradise*, published in 1870 when its author was 37:

Are thine eyes weary? is thy heart too sick To struggle any more with doubt and thought, Whose formless veil draws darkening now and thick

Across thee, e'en as smoke-tinged mist-wreaths brought

Down a fair dale to make it blind and nought? Art thou so weary that no world there seems Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and

Look out upon the real world, where the moon, Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high

trees.

heart?

Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon, Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze Died at the sunset, and no images, No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth – Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?

Yea, I have looked and seen November there; The changeless seal of change it seemed to be, Fair death of things that, living once, were fair; Bright sign of loneliness too great for me, Strange image of the dread eternity, In whose void patience how can these have part, These outstretched feverish hands, this restless

A great deal could be said about this poem – its sources, its speaker, its form and images, its use of sounds to convey emotion, its careful repetitions and contrasts, or its relationship to the longer sequence, *The Earthly Paradise*, of which it is a part. But no reader needs to ponder these matters to understand its meaning – its evocation of enduring and total isolation. As in Morris's other lyrics, its art consists in its controlled simplicity.

Twenty-one years later Morris composed another lyric poem on a similarly sombre subject, this time directed toward a more public context: Alfred Linnell, Killed in Trafalgar Square November 20th, 1887: A Death Song. Written to be sung at the funeral of an innocent bystander killed by the police as these attacked peaceful protesters in Trafalgar Square, the poem presented Morris with the difficult task of commemorating the tragedy of Linnell's death yet nonetheless inspiring his audience with hope and resolve:

What cometh here from west to east awending? And who are these, the marchers stern and slow? We bear the message that the rich are sending Aback to those who bade them wake and know. Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay, But one and all if they would dusk the day.

We asked them for a life of toilsome earning, They bade us bide their leisure for our bread; We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning: We come back speechless, bearing back our

Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay, But one and all if they would dusk the day.

They will not learn; they have no ears to hearken. They turn their faces from the eyes of fate; Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken. But, lo! this dead man knocking at the gate. Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay, But one and all if they would dusk the day.

Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison; Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest; But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen Brings us our day of work to win the best. Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay, But one and all if they would dusk the day.

Once again Morris uses the cadenced patterning of emotive language to build up to the final claim of solidarity, 'Not one, not one, ... / But one and all.' The simple images (a march, voices denied speech, a dead man shut out of lighted halls, a storm followed by a cloudy dawn) were easily accessible by his audience and channeled anger (not acceptance) into a shared bond of strength.

Narrative poetry

Morris was best known in his day for his narrative poems, especially The Life and Death of Jason (1867), The Earthly Paradise (1868-70), and Sigurd the Volsung (1876). An attraction of Morris's narrative poetry is its psychological complexity, combined with grace of narration, moments of sudden realism, and an emphasis on music or melody. If modern audiences continued to appreciate long poems, these works would still be more widely esteemed and enjoyed. It is hard to convey the effects of Morris's narrative tales without quoting extended sections; and in any case, it is not the plot per se but the narrator's participation through choices of language and detail that add vividness and evoke empathy.

Morris's early narrative poetry is often remarkably visceral and direct. Consider, for example, *The Haystack in the Floods*, from Morris's early volume *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). The poem is set in France during the Hundred Year's War, and its narrator describes the death of two lovers, Robert and Jehane, who are entrapped by French guerillas as they attempt to escape over the border into safety. For the twenty-four-year old author, steeped in the patriotic narrative of Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, it seemed clear that the war's worst atrocities had been perpetrated by the French. At the poem's

end, Robert and Jehane die bravely in full awareness of their shared fate. Morris's account is both stark and empathetic:

For Robert – both his eyes were dry, He could not weep, but gloomily He seem'd to watch the rain; yea, too, His lips were firm; he tried once more To touch her lips; she reach'd out, sore And vain desire so tortured them, The poor grey lips, and now the hem Of his sleeve brush'd them.

With a start

Up Godmar rose, thrust them apart; From Robert's throat he loosed the bands Of silk and mail; with empty hands Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw The long bright blade without a flaw Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand In Robert's hair; she saw him bend Back Robert's head; she saw him send The thin steel down; the blow told well, Right backward the knight Robert fell, And moan'd as dogs do, being half dead, Unwitting, as I deem: so then Godmar turn'd grinning to his men, Who ran, some five or six, and beat His head to pieces at their feet.

Then Godmar turn'd again and said: "So, Jehane, the first fitte is read! Take note, my lady, that your way Lies backward to the Chatelet!" She shook her head and gazed awhile At her cold hands with a rueful smile, As though this thing had made her mad.

This was the parting that they had Beside the haystack in the floods.

The seemingly mundane but evocative image of a 'haystack in the floods' – concrete, bleak, and unrelieved – provides a fit setting for sadism and murder.

In his later tales Morris often inserted internal witnesses – poets, singers, storytellers, or wisdom figures – to comment on the action and appeal directly to his audience. Victorian writers tended to address their audiences directly (perhaps the most famous example is the declaration of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: 'Reader, I married him'), but Morris is unusual in the importance he ascribes to the singer-witness. We have seen such an example in the November lyric, spoken by an unnamed voice which is presumably that of the author of the cycle's tales. Another example appears in the figure of Orpheus, who in The Life and Death of Jason sings of the meaning of the Argonauts' voyage, and in The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice, of his loss of Eurydice and defiance of the gods.

A further distinctive feature of Morris's poetry is its concrete interest in the crafts and occupations of ordinary people, the skilled activities needed for more realistic 'heroism'. Some of the more dramatic passages of *The Life and Death of Jason* may be found in its narration

Eracly Rose & Roseless Death I have I have beautening To some dread new come?? What chain is it brindelle What cores is weigh That the would is a darkening Amidness the homener Tent the soft must blindett

And death standets by

Dott it want is it going . This gone by for Ever ! The life that seemed round and, The longing Thought? How it turned to andries That constant endeavour, To bried love little borrend over To hold all it brought?

I beheld tole boles dang Great pain thence told ones; Thenkow till bearing great; I doseniet the cufolding from the string the Could Tile the dream past ele bearing The dark void did reach

Beaten back ever frutten hit pain that none to out to.

Did hope ever die ?

I know not hat little

By the light that love shows the

ho when we wase the tongled wood In haste and hurry to be there Hought seem its leaves Eblowoms From For all that they be fashioned fain. But looking up at last loe see The glimmer of the open light From oer the place where we would Then grow the very brambles brigg So moroamist our day of Strife When once see the light of life Gleam Mrough the taught of long William Morris FILETE ISON

MINEANDTHINE FROM A FLEMISH POEM OF THE Thine. FOURTEENTH CENTURY.



WO words about the world we see,
And nought but
MINE & THIME MINE & THINE they be.

Ah! might we drive them forth and wide them forth and wide With us should rest and peace abide; All free, nought

Mine and

owned of goods and gear, By men and women though it were. Common to all all wheat and wine Over the seas and up the Rhine. No manslayer then the wide world o'er When MINE and THINE are known no more.

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SOLD FOR THE BENEFIT OF LINNELL'S ORPHANS.

ALFRED LINNE



Killed in Trafalgar Square, NOVEMBER 20, 1887.

SONG. DEATH

BY MR. W. MORRIS.

Memorial Design by Mr. Walter Crane.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

Left: Lonely Love and Drawing Near the Light from Huntington Library MS. 6427, published in *Poems by* the Way, 1891 Above top: Mine and Thine from Poems by the Way, Above: Alfred Linnell: A Death Song, cover page designed by Walter Crane, 1887.

of the Argonauts' exhausting journey as they drag their ship through the snow northwards and overland from the Caspian to the Baltic Seas. In a different register, the heroine of the *Story of Cupid and Psyche* steps on a carpet, '[w]rought by the brown slim-fingered Indian's toil / Amidst the years of war and vain turmoil' (lines 337-338). Yuri Cowan has remarked that this trait intensified after Morris's encounter with the sagas, whose heroes appear as often in the role of craftspeople as they do as raiders or warriors, and in his essay *Early England* Morris describes the Vikings as 'shipwrights, housebuilders and armourers... almost every one [of whom] could settle a copy of verses on occasion.'

Perhaps Morris's most highly regarded single narrative poem is The Lovers of Gudrun, the medieval November tale from The Earthly Paradise. In this case the story's wisdom figure is not a poet but 'Guest', a visitor endowed with the gift of prophecy, and the narrator pauses to note details of Icelandic occupations and crafts, as well as the emotions of those who practise them. The poem contains many dramatic scenes, in one of which Bodli, husband of Gudrun and foster brother and friend of Kiartan, kills his friend at his wife's revengeful insistence. Morris attends carefully to oppositional viewpoints: the slaying would never have occurred had the passing shepherds who witness the attack not refrained from intervention, motivated in part by bitterness toward the region's wealthy landowners:

Then said the herdsman: "Sore
The troubles are that on the country-side
Shall fall, if this same meeting shall betide;
He is a great chief; let us warn him then!"
"Yea, yea!" his master said, "and all such men
As fate leads unto death, that we may be
"Twixt the two millstones ground right merrily,
And cursed as we cry out! thou art a fool,
Who needs must be the beaker and the stool
For great men's use; emptied of joys of life
For other's joy, then kicked by in the strife
When they are drunken; come, beside the way,
Let us lie close to see the merry play! ...

These are great men – good, let them hack and hew

Their noble bodies for our poor delight!"

My own favourites among Morris's narrative poems include the *Earthly Paradise* tales *The Love of Alcestis*, a wistful portrayal of largely undeserved attachment, and *Bellerophon in Lycia*, which transforms a classical story of monster-killing into an allegory of the struggle to overcome fear. Before Bellerophon can find the monster, several men have perished merely from viewing him, but Bellerophon arrives to find a tiny shrivelled skin. Quickly grasping the situation, he shudders with recognition as he views the bodies of his dead predecessors; in the words of a witness:

by then the day
Showed how my fellows on the pavement lay
Dead, yet without a wound it seemed;
... then the new-comer sighed
And said: 'Belike it was of fear they died,
Yet wish them not alive again, for they
Had found death fearful on another day...

The collapse of time / existential historicism

Whereas later poetry seeks to disguise or remove the author's overt voice, Victorian poetry often foregrounds or heightens it. This has the merit that the writer speaks directly to the reader, as it were vaulting across time. Morris himself especially loved such leaps, as in his poems he frequently speaks directly and with deep personal emotion to historical figures such as Chaucer, the Icelandic saga-hero Grettir, or even to his own characters. A late-twentieth century school of criticism has proclaimed 'the death of the author' (Roland Barthes); Morris would not have entirely disagreed with such a view, since he liked to imagine anonymous singers or writers of the past or even ventriloquise them, but there is a sense in which his imagined singers, speakers, and 'own' voice embody a resurrection of the author - conceived as actually existing persons speaking to actually existing persons across time and space through the frail medium of language.

One can remain sceptical about the realism of this approach, but it inspires some unusual thought experiments on Morris's part. The faith that through empathetic historical recreation we can most closely approach human communion reappears many times in Morris's writings. An arresting instance occurs in *Gunnar's Howe above the House at Lithend*, in which Morris's speaker contemplates the bleak grave of a tormented hero in the *Njàls saga*. After he has been ambushed and murdered in his home, visitors to his grave by night witness a vision of the hero's spirit singing:

... I name him that Gunnar of old, who erst in

the haymaking tide Felt all the land fragrant and fresh, as amidst of the edges he died. Too swiftly fame fadeth away, if ye tremble not lest once again The grey mound should open and show him glad-eyed without grudging or pain. Little labour methinks to behold him but the tale-teller laboured in vain. Little labour for ears that may hearken to hear his death-conquering song, Till the heart swells to think of the gladness undying that overcame wrong. O young is the world yet meseemeth, and the hope of it flourishing green, When the words of a man unremembered so bridge all the days that have been, As we look round about on the land that these nine hundred years he hath seen.

Thus if his contemporaries admired Morris for the flow of his stories, easily read aloud and emotionally evocative, they also embody a serious philosophy of existence. This might be described as a totum simul perspective - the belief that all history occurs at once, and we who are now living are implicated in it. This view is both terrifying and consoling: terrifying because deeply rooted, obliterating evil seems likely to recur, and again recur, even if there may be temporary and relative 'golden ages'; and consoling because we have a part and a duty within this process to act heroically for the good. Moreover we are not alone in this effort but surrounded by the community of all who have similarly acted from time immemorial into the indefinitely extending future. In short, history (and for Morris history was the emotional life of the past as embodied in its art and literature) gives hope.

One might respond, 'But this isn't quite the message of News from Nowhere!' Yes, but although there is hope at the end of *Nowhere* that the inhabitants of the future will make Guest's vision into a reality rather than a dream, it's not certain that they will do so - or why would Guest need to appeal to them? - and moreover we have a long way to go before this transformation can happen. One might say that Morris's poetry is generally poised at the moments before the change, when his speakers (himself or others) must face a rather large abyss - partly internal, partly self-caused, and partly the workings of fate - and fight their way out of this abyss to something better. Viewed in this context, it is obvious why to dismiss as escapist Morris's poems with historical or legendary settings entirely misreads their significance, and also why the sensibility which underlies his poetry also led Morris to radical views in both art and politics.

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Further suggested reading: The Defence of Guenevere; from The Earthly Paradise: the lyrics of the months, The Story of Cupid and Psyche, The Story of Ogier, The Lovers of Gudrun, the Bellerophon tales, and The Hill of Venus; Love Is Enough, especially songs of The Music; Book 3 of Sigurd the Volsung; Pooms by the Way:The Pilgrims of Hope, Chants for Socialists. Morris's poems may all be found at the William Morris Archive, morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu.