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THE LIVING LANGUAGE OF WILLIAM MORRIS

1

From the first publication of the late prose romances of William Morris, reviewers reacted violently against their prose style. E. P. Thompson, in perhaps the most important work on Morris of recent years, quotes the *Pall Mall Gazette*, with its clumsy and inept parody of *The Roots of the Mountains* — a parody which in fact fails to perceive the fundamental quality of Morris's prose.¹ Similar objections remain and are frequently repeated, even by those who are most anxious to justify William Morris. Philip Henderson, for example, speaks in his Introduction to the *Letters* of the "artificially archaic prose" of these "long prose romances", which are "very nearly unreadable to-day",² thus echoing the attitude of the *Pall Mall Gazette* both as regards style and matter. One of the most recent writers on Morris, Paul Thompson,³ goes even further, refusing any value or relevance to most of the late romances and taking particular exception to the language. On the other hand, those who find praise and comprehension for the late prose romances, such as Shaw, Yeats, Saintsbury, May Morris, Page Arnot, C. S. Lewis, A. L. Morton, Lionel Munby,⁴ in general accept the style as appropriate to the purpose. This may suggest that in fact what some critics find objectionable is the purport of Morris's writing; the style, being the appropriate, essential vehicle for the thought, and thus necessarily as much out of the common run as the thought itself, came in for immediate condemnation as the

¹ Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London, 1955. p. 786, footnote.

² Philip Henderson (ed.), *The Letters of W. Morris*, London, 1950, p. lxii.

³ Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*, London, 1967, p. 158, seq.

⁴ See esp. G. B. Shaw, "Morris As I Knew Him", in May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, London, 1936, Vol. II; W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London, 1926; George Saintsbury, *The History of English Prose Rhythm*, London, second impression, 1922; May Morris, in *W. Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, and Introductions to individual romances in *Collected Works of W. Morris*, ed. May Morris; Page Arnot, *W. Morris, The Man and the Myth*, London, 1964; C. S. Lewis, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, London, 1939; A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, London, 1952; Lionel Munby, "W. Morris' Romances and the Society of the Future", *Zeitschrift f. Anglistik u. Amerikanistik*, Berlin, XI, 1962.

easiest and most obvious way of condemning the thought along with it.

In any case, the bulk of Morris's prose writing is so considerable, and what he said of such importance to his own and to future times, that it is necessary to devote some attention to the English prose style whereby he expressed himself.

One of Morris's most consistent and informed admirers was George Saintsbury.⁵ Saintsbury's appreciation was based on his detailed analysis of Morris's language and form in the context of his, Saintsbury's, profound and apparently limitless knowledge of English poetry and prose. He contrasts the prose of the late romances with the intentionally poetic prose of De Quincey or Pater, "both of whom deliberately endeavour to put non-metre on a level with metre". Though Morris's prose is "written by a poet who was a quite exceptional master of metre", yet "there is less that is decidedly metrical about it" than there is in De Quincey or Pater. "The medium 'comes', as the gardeners say 'true' . . . It is a real *mimesis* of its original, and not a mere stealing, copying, or 'faking' of an imitation of another kind". "It is part also of the 'truth' of the revival that there are few distinctly purple passages . . . The rhythm is simply narrative or conversational with the due tone and colour of romance thrown in." "It is quite pure and continuous prose, though exquisitely, however quietly, musical"⁶

The writer of one of the best and most thorough recent examinations of English prose, Ian A. Gordon, in his study *The Movement of English Prose*, published in London in 1966, devotes less consideration to Morris than did Saintsbury. In his final analysis, Gordon distinguishes by the end of the 18th century *three styles* which "have remained the basis for virtually all later writers". These were the "speech-based prose"—the central tradition—"to which the present-day reader can return with little fear of meeting archaism or obsolescence", secondly, the "prose of neo-Quintilian rhetoric, which was to provide the model for most 'serious' writing in the nineteenth century". This "demands a parity of background between writer and reader", and "has remained the source of much prose of dubious acceptability". The third variety is "the prose which I have called romantic, though its limits extend well beyond any normal definition of the romantic period. In contradistinction to the other two styles, it is marked by the continuous use of syntactical and metaphoric devices, designed to excite an affective response". "Of the three it has in the past century and a half been subjected to the greatest degree of variation and experiment. The process is still going on, with the result that the criteria by which one may judge romantic prose are still not easy to determine".⁷

We are thus faced at the outset with one major difficulty—the decision as to what, if any, accepted variety of English prose William Morris wrote, and this difficulty arises from the ambiguity of the whole theoretical position with regard to English prose style. However, this is not the only difficulty. We cannot study the prose of Morris's late romances (which has

⁵ See *The History of English Prose Rhythm*, London, 2nd imp., 1922.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 433–436.

⁷ Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

most commonly been subjected to criticism) apart from the prose which he wrote in other contexts. On the contrary, if we are to arrive at a just opinion of the prose of the romances, we must compare it to the other varieties of prose employed by Morris in the course of his maturing as a writer.

I would suggest that the absence of such a comparison is perhaps the only lack in Swannell's excellent study, *William Morris and Old Norse Literature*, in which he demonstrates that the prose of the romances derives "transmuted" from the style which Morris worked out to translate the sagas.⁸ I tentatively suggest the following categories of prose style which can be found in Morris's published work. Firstly we have the utilitarian, that of the most general workaday communication, to be found in letters and notes dealing with purely practical matters, perhaps in some letters to the press; secondly, the informal, friendly, frequently humorous, unguarded style, expressive of immediate and often emotional reaction, to be found in his letters to family and friends, recorded conversation, diaries, odd scraps of notes. We may expect this to approximate to the first category of Gordon, the tradition lying closest to common speech. Thirdly we have prose of intellectual content, intended either to convey abstract information exactly, or else to convince. This we may expect to find in his more serious or formal personal letters, letters to acquaintances or unknown persons, letters to the press, his lectures and articles on art and on socialism, his manifestos, and the expository parts of his prose fiction. Fourthly, the language of his translations, especially of the sagas, may be considered separately, and finally we have the prose which he intended to fulfil the highest purpose of art and to achieve the complete synthesis of form and content, the prose which we find in his late romances, but which also occurs in parts of his lectures and even, in places, in his letters. Perhaps by examining samples of these various kinds, we may arrive at some general conclusions about the nature of Morris's prose.

It will also be necessary to consider Morris's prose as it developed in the course of his life. For a man whose early letters make such interesting reading, and among whose early creative works were the prose romances published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Morris was exceedingly diffident and modest about his own prose. He considered that the writing of poetry came naturally to him (this must not be confused with the mistaken idea that his poetry was written without effort or thought.)⁹ His first serious attempt to write a prose which he was willing to place on an aesthetic level, as an equivalent to poetry, came with his struggles to achieve a vehicle for the translations of the Icelandic sagas which he began with Magnússon in 1868. As Magnússon says of this prose style, "It is not 'pseudo-Middle-English', as some critics have thought. It is his own, the result of an endeavour by a scholar and a man of genius to

⁸ J. N. Swannell, *W. Morris and Old Norse Literature*, W. Morris Society, London, 1961, p. 20.

⁹ Cf. my critical review, "Some Remarks on E. P. Thompson's Opinion of the Poetry of W. Morris", *Philologica Pragensia*, No. 3, Prague, 1960.

bring about such harmony between the Teutonic element in English and the language of the Icelandic saga as the not very abundant means at his command would allow... That Morris's style generally has affected written English will hardly be denied".¹⁰ J. N. Swannell, in the sympathetic study of Morris's language just mentioned, arrives at the conclusion that Morris's style of translation is a hindrance, rather than a help to the modern reader, but that "the labour of translation... was not wasted. Morris steeped himself in the literature and language of Old Norse, and was able to transmute it into the strange and wonderful prose romances of his later years, where the style—so much a part of Morris, yet so utterly at variance with the spirit of the sagas—finds its true home".¹¹ Now, while it is true that the language of the prose romances owes much to the discipline of the saga translations, this is not the whole story. Morris had been fighting to develop what he considered to be an adequate prose style at least since the creatively critical years at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, as we may see from his letter of 1872 to Mrs. Alfred Baldwin: "Herewith I send by book-post my abortive novel... since you wish to read it, I am sorry 'tis such a rough copy, which roughness sufficiently indicates my impatience at having to deal with prose".¹²

In fact, the prose of the late romances, which must be considered as forming a large part of the artistic achievement of these works, was not merely the result of his saga translations. It was the culmination of all the levels of all his prose writing throughout his life.

This prose was as much a part of him and as natural to him as his own particular ways of thinking. Even the most utilitarian of his letters rarely stays on the level of mere communication; here he is for example in 1861 writing to the Rev. F. G. Guy, his former tutor, a request for a list of clergymen who might patronize his new Firm, dealing in passing a typical Morrisian blow: "You see we are, or consider ourselves to be, the only really artistic firm of the kind, the others being only glass painters in point of fact... or else that curious nondescript mixture of clerical tailor and decorator that flourishes in Southampton Street, Strand; whereas we shall do—most things".¹³ The final phrase is also typical in its flung-away piece of modesty and understatement, which calls to mind Shaw's remark: "Morris was a very great literary artist: his stories and essays and letters no less than his poems are tissues of words as fine as the carpet on the ceiling; but he was quite often at a loss for a critical word in dealing with some uncongenial modern thing. On such occasions I would hand him the appropriate adjective and he would grab at it with a gasp of relief. It was like giving a penny to a millionaire who had bought a newspaper and found his pockets empty".¹⁴ Perhaps it was not only with regard to uncongenial modern things that this block occurred;

¹⁰ From Magnússon's own account, specially written for May Morris and published by her in the Intro. to *Grettir the Strong, Works*, Vol. VII, p. xviii.

¹¹ Swannell, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹² *Letters*, p. 46—47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ G. B. Shaw, "Morris As I Knew Him", p. xii.

we find it, too, sometimes, when he is writing about things which, either artistically or personally, are very near the bone: "The separate parcel, paged 1 to 6, was a desperate dash at the middle of the story to try to give it life when I felt it failing: it begins with the letter of the elder brother to the younger on getting his letter telling him how he was going to bid for the girl in marriage," comes from the above-quoted letter of 1871 on his abortive novel,¹⁵ and many similar almost evasive under-statements can be gleaned from letters and records of conversation. One of the most poignant of his letters, quite, perhaps, without any literary form apart from the bare bones of statement, typical in their practicality, he writes to Ford Madox Brown, whose wife had been attending Mrs. Morris in her first confinement: "My dear Brown, Kid having appeared, Mrs. Brown kindly says she will stay till Monday, when you are to come to fetch her, please. I send a list of trains in evening to Abbey Wood met by bus, viz., from London Bridge, 2.20 p.m., 6.0 p.m., and 7.15 p.m. Janey and kid (girl) are both very well."¹⁶ There was of course not the slightest trace of off-handedness in Morris's actual attitude to his family, which the casual language might suggest, but deep feeling, whether about life or art, especially when it had to be expressed in prose, tended to reduce Morris to inarticulateness. I would suggest that this block sprang at least in part from his recognition of the inadequacy of contemporary, current language. We may recall his condemnation of Wagnerian opera—"the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedle-deeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express".¹⁷ Rather than use the outworn currency of "educated" speech, he preferred in self-defence an offhand slang.¹⁸

But when Morris found himself in a situation where his deepest feelings as well as his profoundest thoughts had to be fully communicated,¹⁹ then he forced himself to find a language at once sufficiently simple and sufficiently sophisticated to express his meaning and to reach his audience. This is the language of his socialist lectures, his socialist romances, and his fantastic romances, which, I should like to show, is basically one language, allowing for the different purpose of the literary kinds in question.

2

We can see that this interpenetration of the most business-like communications, hard-fact statements, feeling for the beauty of inanimate things, insistence on desirable propriety in things for daily use, historical

¹⁵ Cf. *supra*, n. 12.

¹⁶ *Letters*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Letter to H. Buxton Forman, Nov., 1873, *Letters*, p. 61.

¹⁸ In fact, this was rather a tendency of the "Brotherhood" as a whole. The beautiful girls who became models for Rossetti and others were "stunners".

¹⁹ Fully communicated, because he intended his words to lead to informed action on the part of his hearers.

perspective, love of adventure, and flair for what was important and fundamental, along with the assumption of a sympathetic hearer which was the basis of Morris's friendships and personal relationships, can be traced throughout the whole fabric of the letters, from the earliest to the latest, from the most personal and unselfconscious to the most public and deliberate.

In 1849, aged 15, he wrote to his sister Emma about his visits to Avebury and Silbury Hill:

"On Tuesday morning I was told of this so I thought I would go there again, I did and then I was able to understand how they [the stones] had been fixed; I think the biggest stone I could see had about 16 feet out of the ground in height and about 10 feet thick and 12 feet broad the circle and entrenchment altogether is about half a mile... after we had scrambled through this meadow we ascended Silbury Hill it is not very high but yet I should think it must have taken an immense long time to have got it together I brought away a little white snail shell as a memento of the place and have got it in my pocket book I came back at $\frac{1}{2}$ past 5 the distance was altogether about 14 miles I had been out 3 hours $\frac{1}{2}$ of course Monday and Tuesday were whole holidays. As [you] are going to send me the cheese perhaps you would get Sarah to make me a good large cake and I should also like some biscuits and will you also send me some paper and postage stamps also my silk-worms eggs and if you could get an Italian pen box for that big box is too big for school..."²⁰ which after all contains a large proportion of the human elements and motifs which form the specific individuality of the prose romances; however greatly these are enriched by the study and knowledge and thought and human relationships of almost half a century, the quality of life, the vitality, remain constant, and certainly something of the prose rhythm, too.

I have selected two further examples from the prose of mere communication, one of 1877 and a later one of 1888. The first, a purely business letter to Thomas Wardle, the dyer, about engaging a French brocader, passes from the severely practical, with details of the contract, to: "The tapestry is a bright dream indeed... I have had it in my head lately, because there is a great sale on in Paris... much too splendid for anybody save the biggest pots to buy. Meantime much may be done in carpets: I saw yesterday a piece of ancient Persian... that fairly threw me on my back: I had no idea that such wonders could be done in carpets..."²¹ We need not doubt here that the characteristically Morrisian turns of phrase: "bright dream indeed", "great sale", "save the biggest pots", "Meantime much may be done", "fairly threw me on my back"—where we may presume most of his contemporaries would have expressed themselves differently—were used without any deliberation, that this in fact was the way he naturally expressed himself. To trace the precise origins of this language, in the letters just quoted so obviously the echo of the writer's speech, is perhaps impossible, since they must lie deep in the speech traditions of his own family and in his own most familiar early reading,

²⁰ *Letters*, p. 4-5.

²¹ *Letters*, p. 89.

based ultimately on the Bible, probably Bunyan, and certainly Scott,²² whom he read at a very early age, and later strongly influenced by Ruskin, whom he loved to read aloud.²³

Even at its most utilitarian, when Morris was replying to perhaps troublesome queries, this bare style was at the same time a loaded one, with the sheer weight of information it conveyed, nothing put in deliberately for effect, but the fullness of statement demanding a certain way of expression:

“The book which I have in the press in called *The House of the Wolfings*. It is the story of the life of the Gothic tribes on their way through Middle Europe, and their first meeting with the Romans in war. It is meant to illustrate the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes: I mean apart from the artistic side of things that is its moral—if it has one. It is written partly in prose and partly in verse: but the verse is always spoken by the actors in the tale, though they do not always talk verse; much of it is in the Sagas, though it cannot be said to be performed on their model.”²⁴ This paragraph from a letter to T. J. Wise of 1888 contains more information about the purpose and sources of the *House of the Wolfings* than much criticism. In fact, it tells us all we need to know of the writer’s purpose.

The same stylistic characteristics persist throughout his life in those intimate letters, written certainly without deliberate desire for effect, but with the need to convey his immediate experiences to those who knew and loved him best. In 1887, from the midst of his exhausting propaganda and agitation for socialism, he writes to his wife from Scotland: “. . . On Saturday we went to Coatbridge and held an open air meeting there; ’tis an iron working place where at night the flaring furnaces put out the moon and stars: the men are seldom out of work there; but work 7 days a week in this Devil’s Den: Sunday working not seeming to hurt the Scottish conscience though Sunday playing does. There we were in rivalry with the Salvation Army and a cheap-jack, but had a good meeting only disturbed by a drunken Irish man, who insisted with many oaths on our telling him the difference between a Home-Ruler and a non-Home-Ruler, and swore by Christ that he would teach us Socialism he would: but the crowd soon put him down. All this we did by star and furnace light, which was strange and even dreadful.”²⁵

Here there is no lack of keeping between the humorous observation, irony, trenchant thought, and image of moon, star and furnace, while the rhythm and word-order, if not exactly that of speech, is certainly not “literary” language, certainly does not belong to or indeed have anything in common with the second category of Gordon, and while its images are doubtless indebted to the romantic tradition, it is still closest to the first

²² Cf. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of W. Morris*, one-vol. ed., London, 1922, account of early childhood, and also W. Morris, *The Lesser Arts of Life, Works*, Vol. XXIII, p. 85.

²³ Cf. Morris, *Works* XXII, Intro. by May Morris, p. xxvii.

²⁴ *Letters*, p. 302.

²⁵ *Letters*, p. 270–271.

category, the category based on speech, however more distinguished it is than the rubbed-down coin of normal daily intercourse.²⁶

We can see something of the development of Morris's prose if we compare a distinctly purple patch from his early letters with later passages dealing with similar experience. In 1855 he wrote to his intimate student friend Cornell Price from Normandy a long letter describing his travels:

"So gloriously the trees are grouped, all manner of trees, but more especially the graceful poplars and aspens, of all kinds; and the hedgeless fields of grain, and beautiful herbs that they grow for forage whose names I don't know, the most beautiful fields I ever saw yet, looking as if they belonged to no man, as they were planted not to be cut down in the end, and to be stored in barns and eaten by the cattle, but that rather they were planted for their beauty only, that they might grow always among the trees, mingled with the flowers, purple thistles, and blue corn-flowers, and red poppies, growing together with the corn round the roots of the fruit trees, in their shadows, and sweeping up to the brows of the long low hills till they reached the sky, changing sometimes into long fields of vines, or delicate, lush green forage; and they all looked as if they would grow there for ever, as if they had always grown there, without change of seasons, knowing no other time than the early August."²⁷

While this is undisciplined "Pre-Raphaelitism" in its enthusiasm, nevertheless it contains not only typical features of observation and emphasis, but also typical stylistic features such as inversion, rhythmically cumulative sentences and phrases, the delicate melodic line.²⁸ We may contrast it, however, with a considerably later letter of his mature years, written in 1878 to Mrs. Burne-Jones from Verona:

"'Tis a piping hot day, not a cloud in the sky. I have just been into Sta Anastasia,, which is hard by: a very beautiful church, but appeals less to the heart than the head, and somehow doesn't satisfy that: also though 'tis meant to be exceedingly Gothic and pointed, it is thoroughly neo-classical in feeling... Many times I think of the first time I ever went abroad, and to Rouen, and what a wonder of glory that was to me when I first came upon the front of the Cathedral rising above the flower-market... Even the inside of St. Mark's gave one rather deep

²⁶ Morris throughout his writings shows a preference for the contraction "'tis". Perhaps this is one of the details leading to the charge of artificiality, literariness. But is it not rather a persistent echo of dialect usage from boyhood? A variant which Morris felt was closer to the roots of English?

²⁷ *Letters*, p. 12.

²⁸ The melodic development strongly recalls a passage from *The House of the Wolfings* describing Hall-Sun sitting by the hall door: "She had been working in the acres, and her hand was yet on the hoe she had been using, and but for her face her body was of one resting after toil: her dark blue gown was ungirded, her dark hair loose and floating, the flowers that had wreathed it, now faded, lying strewn upon the grass before her: her feet bare for coolness' sake, her left hand lying loose and open upon her knee.

Yet though her body otherwise looked thus listless, in her face was no listlessness, nor rest: her eyes were alert and clear, shining like two stars in the heavens of dawntide; her lips were set close, her brow knit, as of one striving to shape thoughts hard to understand into words that all might understand." (*Works*, XIV, p. 75.)

satisfaction, and rest for the eyes, than that strange exaltation of spirits, which I remember of old in France, and which the mountains give me yet."²⁹

Here, mere description has been subordinated to communication, and this in turn has disciplined not only image but also style. Even more typical of the development of Morris's prose is a still later letter to Philip Webb of 1891 from Laon:

"...I did not see the inside of the cloisters, because I quarrelled with the sacristan who wanted to sell me photos as soon as I came into the church, telling him I didn't want photos of restored churches: so he said he was going away until next Saturday. The outside of the cloisters are in the street and have little dwellings of folk in them, so they are unrestored: nothing could be more beautiful: we saw them this morning with the market people sitting up against them, like old times."³⁰

In this whole letter we see the mental discipline of selection of what is essential, combined with Morris's self-critical wry humour (we can imagine the course of his quarrel with the sacristan) and the immediate consolation he can find in the humanity of the "little dwellings of folk" and of the "market people" in their traditional place.

Still more suggestive of the elements which made up Morris's style is the very disciplined, taut prose, which he could use most readily when he knew that the recipient was in sympathy, was in fact waiting for what he had to say:

"Now for local news: the waters are out a little, owing to the melting snow. It is a cold rather windy day, but not unpleasant, brilliantly sunny at first; now cloudy with gleams of sun at times. It froze last night; but took to a sharp shower in the morning. As to the house, it seems in good order. The green-room has had its rotten woodwork removed, and smells mouldy no longer; the whole house is clean and neat,"³¹ he wrote in February, 1892, from Kelmscott to his daughter Jennie.

Even when his last illness had broken down his great strength, the letters he wrote with his last effort of will betray nothing of the prolixity we might associate with illness and increasing age. They confine themselves strictly to the bare bones of communication—even the most intimate.³² The sparsity and economy of style, saying nothing but what had to be communicated, which is to be found in his very earliest letters, had overcome the immature tendency to romantic lushness present in some of his writings of his student years, and had become second nature. It is on this sparseness and economy, however wonderfully transformed, that the prose of the romances is based.

3

When we come to the prose which was to be a vehicle of conviction, we again find a distinct connection between the early and late

²⁹ *Letters*, p. 124.

³⁰ *Letters*, p. 345-346.

³¹ *Letters*, p. 347.

³² Last letters to Philip Webb and to his daughter Jennie, *Letters*, p. 385.

methods—whether it lies in selection of vocabulary, selection of concepts, structure of sentences, turn of thought of whole paragraphs, the sense of fun which is interwoven with the whole texture, and the unconquerable seriousness inherent in the whole mental process lying behind it, either for purposes of family discussion or public indignation. In November, 1855, he wrote from Oxford a very important letter to his mother which marks a decision fundamental to his whole career: he is explaining formally his decision to give up Holy Orders, and at the same time feels he has been too abrupt in personal contact:

“... You said then, you remember, and said very truly, that it was an evil thing to be an idle objectless man; I am fully determined not to incur this reproach, I was so then, though I did not tell you at the time all I thought of... I wish now to be an architect... I think I can imagine some of your objections, reasonable ones too, to this profession—I hope I shall be able to relieve them. First I suppose you think that you have as it were thrown away money on my kind of apprenticeship for the Ministry; let your mind be easy on this score; for, in the first place, an University education fits a man about as much for being a ship-captain as a Pastor of souls: besides your money has by no means been thrown away, if the love of friends faithful and true, friends first seen and loved here, if this love is something priceless, and not to be bought again anywhere and by any means.”³³

Even at this period, when his principles were still in process of formation, we see the love of the concrete and the cast of mind which conceives the world in terms of man's work and so assumes that education is in fact an apprenticeship, this in turn enabling him to perceive and rate at their actual value the pretences of Oxford. So, thirty years later, thinking back again to those Oxford years which meant so much to him, and yet which never blinded him to the truth of the end and function of Oxford in the Establishment world, he wrote to the *Daily News*:

“I have just read your too true article on the vulgarization of Oxford and I wish to ask if it is too late to appeal to the mercy of the ‘Dons’ to spare the few specimens of ancient town architecture which they have not yet had time to destroy, such, for example, as the little plaster houses in front of Trinity College or the beautiful houses left on the north side of Holywell Street. These are in their way as important as the more majestic buildings to which all the world makes pilgrimage... The present theory of the use to which Oxford should be put appears to be that it should be used as a huge upper public school for fitting lads of the upper and middle class for their laborious future of living on other people's labour. For my part I do not think this a lofty conception of the function of a University; but if it be the only admissible one nowadays, it is at least clear that it does not need the history and art of our forefathers which Oxford still holds to develop it. London, Manchester, Birmingham, or perhaps a rising city of Australia would be a fitter place for the experiment, which it seems to me is too rough a one for Oxford. In sober truth,

³³ *Letters*, p. 15.

what speciality has Oxford if it is not the genius loci which our modern commercial dons are doing their best to destroy?"³⁴

The criticism of society has become sharper, the irony more pointed, but the questions at issue and their graphic representation have not changed their direct and uncompromising basic nature.

4

In spite of his various diatribes against the unfamiliarity or difficulty of writing in prose, Morris certainly never made the mistake of thinking that prose was a less worthy medium than verse. On the contrary, all his prose utterances, whether oral or written, from the least to the most formal, were subjected, as I have tried to show by the selection offered here, to an aesthetic selective process which was second nature, in that its functioning at the lowest level was apparently unconscious, that is to say, he would express himself with this characteristic selection of vocabulary and syntax even under the greatest emotional stress, whether private or public—for Morris's public emotions, regarding what he considered to be the common weal, were no less direct and unaffected than were his innermost private feelings.

However, we know that two developments in his life obliged him to come to grips with this prose style in the endeavour to forge it into a deliberate weapon of artistic power. The first development was his work with Magnússon on the Icelandic translations (1868 on), the second, his struggle to express his ideas on art and on socialism when he entered practical politics. The first, which was an attempt to render ideas and a way of life which for that time were foreign to the whole Victorian cultural and social background, resulted as far as the translations go, in an exotic and not readily acceptable language. The current tendency in English translation is to demand a level of language which stresses the nearness, the common experience to that of everyday modern life of whatever is being translated, emphasising the relevance to today and here in whatever is ancient or foreign. It is true that much of the usual 19th-century run-of-the-mill translations perpetrated in the second of Gordon's styles actually set up yet another block between the present-day reader and the original. And yet the argument for the plain, throw-away modern style is not the only one. C. S. Lewis, in addressing a Conference of Classical Teachers in Cambridge in 1956 condemned the current tendency to regard "archaism and poetic diction" as "cardinal sins". "It was almost, he complained, as if there were a set of people who did not want the modern man to know there had once been a language different from our own."³⁵ The only real danger implied in Morris's style in the Icelandic translations was surely that anyone else might think he could

³⁴ *Letters*, p. 243.

³⁵ Quoted in the *Scottish Educational Journal*, 15th August, 1958.

use this style as well as Morris.³⁶ How difficult it was to “copy” Morris is shown by the inept imitation of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, quoted by Thompson and mentioned above.

The first influence of his Icelandic studies on his general prose style can, I think, be found in Morris's *Icelandic Journals* and in the letters he wrote from Iceland. Here Morris endeavours to reduce his prose to the simplicity and starkness of outline which he considered appropriate to the subject:

“... a great mass of dark grey mountains worked into pyramids and shelves, looking as if they had been built and half-ruined; they were striped with snow high up, and wreaths of cloud dragged across them here and there, and above them were two peaks and a jagged ridge of pure white snow,” is a good example.³⁷ This style passes with the greatest of ease from simple narrative, including the ludicrous incidents inevitably bound up with travel in a foreign country, to the heightening of content necessary to express the most impressive scenes and the emotion they conveyed:

“On our right is a mass of jagged bare mountains, all beset with clouds, that, drifting away now and then show dreadful inaccessible ravines and closed up valleys with no trace of grass about them among the toothed peaks and rent walls; I think it was the most horrible sight of mountains I had the whole journey long... just over this gap is the site of the fabulous or doubtful Thorisdale of the Grettis-Saga; and certainly the sight of it threw a new light on the way in which the story-teller meant his tale to be looked on.”³⁸

It seems that the characteristic of this style is not only that each word is musically appropriate to a particular sentence, each sentence harmoniously set in a particular paragraph, but also that each term is the exact equivalent of a concrete thing seen or experienced, each sentence the equivalent of a particular thought, the paragraph a definite conclusion reached and stated. The prose is experimental, in the sense that it does or attempts to do what no-one else had at that time precisely done,³⁹ but it is the very reverse of impressionistic or diffuse. Its relationship to the rhythm of speech lies in its smooth flow, and in its immediacy to the mood of the writer. It is however controlled throughout by the underlying thought. At a time like the present, when the prose of English

³⁶ The only moderately successful parody or pastiche of Morris's style I have seen is a Times Literary Supplement article by Marghanita Laski, “Nowhere Belongs to Me” (T.L.S., March 10th, 1966, p. 189-190), which is a plea for having Lending Libraries supported by public funds induced to serve study (including children's study) rather than supplying lush fiction, and whose point is achieved because the writer does not imitate merely the language, but also the structure of *News from Nowhere*, and even the turns of thought. This article I have thought worth mentioning just because the sympathetic, though ironical, parody illustrates my point that Morris's style cannot exist in a vacuum without fundamental relation to his matter.

³⁷ *Journals of Travel in Iceland, 1871 and 1873, Works, Vol. VIII, p. 19.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁹ i.e. to render precisely the historical content and aesthetic core of Iceland and the sagas.

novelists tends towards a loose rendering of an alleged stream of consciousness (whether first or third person narrative), the underlying discipline of Morris's prose style may well seem unusual, but this is not necessarily a reason to condemn it.

When Morris came to describe the Thingmead, which embodied for him the whole revelation of human possibilities that Iceland and its sagas and ancient society meant, he wrote:

"My heart beats, so please you, as we near the brow of the pass, and all the infinite wonder, which came upon me when I came up on the deck of the 'Diana' to see Iceland for the first time, comes on me again now, for this is the heart of Iceland that we are going to see: nor was the reality of the sight unworthy; the pass showed long and winding from the brow, with jagged dark hills showing over the nearer banks of it as you went on, and betwixt⁴⁰ them was an open space with a great unseen but imagined plain between you and the great lake that you saw glittering far away under huge peaked hills of bright blue with grey-green sky above them, Hengill the highest of them from the hot-spring on whose flank rose into the air a wavering column of snow-white steam."⁴¹ A few pages later we have: "Once again that thin thread of insight and imagination, which comes so seldom to us, and is such a joy when it comes, did not fail me at this first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland."⁴² In this passage the seizing of the exact impression at the time has taken precedence over the severe selection of material and even over the strict aesthetic selection of language; it was later that the impressions provided by such experiences were to be reshaped in the prose romances into even more disciplined form; but the bones, not only of observation, but also of language, are already there in the *Icelandic Journals*, as can be seen even from the incomplete hurried jottings at the end of the second *Journal*:

"...stead on little knoll with grass garth on one side and in front four trees, birch and sorb in one, six in other, quite trees. So across river making for Oxadal (Baegisa, poet's place) where valley forks; very narrow valley, flat at bottom, grassy going up on east in one long steep slope into mountains topped and crested with pillar and gable rocks and much cloven by ghylls; on the other side a very steep high lithe that gradually gets lower as it goes south, but behind it is slipped a screen of mountains high and precipitous, a thin saw ridge thinnest at north, and splintered into broken palings, one very marked and excessive, widening and heightening into a dragon's back peak at the south end..."⁴³

How this style could be made to hold the maximum communication of

⁴⁰ Again: is "betwixt" in fact a "Wardour Street" import? Or was it not rather the real language of Morris's childhood? Could not a good case be made out for the rehabilitation of local dialect uses in creative English narrative prose, as a counter-blow to the ever-deadlier level of conformity to the Science Fiction—James Bond level which the contemporary English reader is supposed, presumably by publishers, to appreciate?

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

emotion and experience we can see from one of the key passages in *The House of the Wolfings*, where Thiodolf muses about the life of his kindred and about his duties to them and their relationship to the magic spells of the Wood-Sun:

"He woke with a start in no long time; the night was deep, the wind had fallen utterly, and all sounds were stilled save the voice of the brook, and now and again the cry of the watchers of the Goths. The moon was high and bright, and the little pool beside him glittered with all its ripples; for it was full now and trickling over the lip of his dam. So he arose from the stone and did off his war-gear, casting Throng-plough down into the grass beside him, for he had been minded to bathe him, but the slumber was still on him, and he stood musing while the stream grew stronger and pushed off first one of his turfs and then another, and then softly thrust all away and ran with a gush down the dale, filling all the little bights by the way for a minute or two; he laughed softly thereat, and stayed the undoing of his kirtle, and so laid himself down on the grass beside the stone looking down the dale, and fell at once into a dreamless sleep."⁴⁴

Now here we are entitled to ask what is achieved by the prose style. Suppose we were to rewrite it in "modernese".

"After a short time he woke with a start... all sounds were hushed except the voice of the brook... So he rose from the stone and took off his armour, throwing his sword down on the grass beside him, for he had been intending to bathe, but still feeling sleepy, and he stood musing while the stream grew stronger and pushed off first one of his turfs and then another, and then softly thrust them all away and ran with a gush down the dale... he laughed softly at this and stopped unfastening his tunic and lay down..."

In fact, only a few phrases of the actual vocabulary are contrary to general usage, and the older-fashioned or exotic expressions are defensible on the grounds of context—"wargear" is surely more fitting for this particular period than "armour" with its feudal overtones; "did off" is perhaps a rather precious archaism, but "he had been minded" is acceptable, at least to the Northern reader, in place of the "French and fine" expression "he had intended".

Words or phrases such as "thereat", he "stayed the undoing of his kirtle" are more like the sort of thing parodists of Morris have seized upon. But like everything else, they have to be seen in their context of the carefully worked out and built-up paragraph, which in the way of much else in the romances is attempting, not to recreate a former age by pastiche, but to render exactly a psychological state of mind and convey a moral significance against a temporally and geographically only lightly defined background. Morris's achievement in the romances is that his characters think and feel with sharp immediacy all that is momentarily happening, and this is conveyed to the reader by the concrete nature of the prose, every word of which is related to a concrete thing or happening which the writer has seen or imagined. The physical observation behind

⁴⁴ *Works*, Vol. XIV, p. 106-107.

the rendering of the moment is used to show the progress of psychological development. For the apparently trivial incident of the breaking down of the little dam is decisive for Thiodolf's final rejection of the help of magic to attain his personal safety. It is this style, intimately wedded to the concrete, which nevertheless so precisely expresses the non-concrete.

The rendering of supreme moments of feeling or of decision could not of course be sustained throughout a whole book nor would this be aesthetically desirable. But the style can also add significance and grace to the most everyday matters:

"The kine and the goats must she milk, and plough and sow and reap the acre-land according to the seasons, and lead the beasts to the woodland pastures when their own were flooded or burned; she must gather the fruits of the orchard, and the hazel nuts up the woodlands, and beat the walnut-trees in September. She must make the butter and the cheese, grind the wheat in the quern, make and bake the bread, and in all ways earn her livelihood hard enough."⁴⁵

This atmosphere was not exclusive to the fantastic romances. With an under-tone of dramatic character-drawing we find the following passage in a speech of Mary Pinch in *The Tables Turned*:

"... So up we came; and when all's said, we had better have lain down and died in the grey cottage clean and empty. I dream of it yet at whiles: clean, but no longer empty; the crockery on the dresser, the flitch hanging from the rafters, the pot on the fire, the smell of new bread about; and the children fat and ruddy tumbling about in the sun; and my lad coming in at the door stooping his head a little; for our door is low, and he was a tall handsome chap in those days.—But what's the use of talking? I've said enough: I didn't steal the loaves—and if I had a done, where was the harm?"⁴⁶

In both cases, in spite of inversions and occasional unaccustomed dialect phrase, the rhythm is an easy conversational one, far removed from any sort of concealed metrical jog-trot, and based on speech rhythms.

5

In his lectures, Morris made use of the prose of argument and logic, but also gained effect by image and surprise. The shrewd humour which is never far away in his letters, the irony which is as inherent in his use of language as in his attitude of mind—an irony which springs from the supreme seriousness of his own purpose and view of life, contrasted with and devastated as this seriousness was at every turn by the grim or absurd reality—make themselves felt both through the images he uses and the language in which he expresses them. A good example is the article on "Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century".⁴⁷ Describing the approach to Medehamstead, he pictures the arrival: "You travel by railway, get to

⁴⁵ *The Water of the Wondrous Isles, Works, Vol. XX, p. 11.*

⁴⁶ *W. Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist, Vol. II, p. 535.*

⁴⁷ Published in *Time*, November, 1890; *Works, Vol. XXII, Lectures on Art and Industry, p. 375, seq.*

your dull hotel by night, get up in the morning and breakfast in company with one or two men of the usual middle-class types, who even as they drink their tea and eat their eggs and glance at the sheet of lies, inanity, and ignorance, called a newspaper, by their sides, are obviously doing their business to come." And when the great church suddenly appears, it is in the middle of the "wilderness of small, dull houses built of a sickly-coloured yellow brick pretending to look like stone, and not even able to blush a faint brown blush at the imposture, and roofed with thin, cold, purple-coloured slates. They cry out to you at the first glance, workmen's houses". . . Leaving the town the traveller comes to the fields, with "a long causeway with a hint of Roman work in it".

"It runs along the river through a dead flat of black, peaty-looking country where long rows of men and women are working with an over-looker near them, giving us uncomfortable suggestions of the land on the other side of the Atlantic as it was; and you half expect as you get near some of these groups to find them black and woolly haired; but they are white as we call it, burned and grimed to dirty brown though; fair-sized and strong-looking enough, both men and women; but the women roughened and spoilt, with no remains of gracefulness, or softness of face or figure; the men heavy and depressed-looking; all that are not young, bent and beaten, and twisted and starved and weathered out of shape; in short, English field-labourers. You turn your face away with a sigh toward the town again, and see towering over its mean houses and the sluggish river and the endless reclaimed fen the flank of that huge building, whose front you saw just now, plainer and severer than the front, but harmonious and majestic still. A long roof tops it and a low, square tower rises from its midst. The day is getting on now, and the wind setting from the north-west is driving the smoke from the railway-works round the long roof and besmirching it somewhat; but still it looks out over the huddle of houses and the black fen with its bent rows of potato-howers, like some relic of another world. What does it mean? Over there the railway-works with their monotonous hideousness of dwelling-houses for the artisans; here the gangs of the field-labourers; twelve shillings a week for ever and ever, and the workhouse for all day of judgment, of rewards and punishments; on each side and all around the nineteenth century, and rising solemnly in the midst of it, that token of the 'dark ages', their hope in the past, grown now a warning for our future."

Nowhere is Morris's prose so lofty as to leave no place for humour; we have seen this in the letters; humour occurs plentifully in the *Icelandic Journals*, in occasional delicate touches in the romances; while in the lectures it is part and parcel of the realistic, down-to-earth style which is prepared to seize on whatever will most graphically convey his meaning to his hearers. In "The Society of the Future"⁴⁸ he asks: "But again, what is simplicity?" and trenchantly continues:

"Do you think by chance that I mean a row of yellow-brick, blue-slatted houses, or a phalangstere like an improved Peabody lodging-house; and the dinner-bell ringing one into a row of white basins of broth with

⁴⁸ 1888; published by May Morris in *W. Morris, etc.*, Vol. II, p. 459.

a piece of bread cut nice and square by each, with boiler-made tea and ill-boiled rice-pudding to follow? No; that's the philanthropist's ideal, not mine; and here I only note it to repudiate it, and to say, Vicarious life once more, and therefore no pleasure. No, I say; find out what you yourselves find pleasant, and do it. You won't be alone in your desires; you will get plenty to help you in carrying them out, and you will develop social life in developing your own special tendencies."

This is prose without humbug, thrust into form by the ideas behind it. Day by day, especially after he had become a practical politician, Morris was obliged to listen to and read language which only too often proliferated in order to conceal the lack of honest thought behind it. His purpose in creating all the levels of his prose style was to express exactly and drive home his meaning. Behind it lie the Bible, Bunyan, almost certainly Thoreau—missing, oddly, in Morris's selection of important books,⁴⁹ but in whom we can find not only the germ of more than one of Morris's ideas, but also the characteristic blending of perception of beauty in simplicity, with trenchant, ironice utterance:

"Morning air! If men will not drink of this at the fountain-head of the day, why, then, we must even bottle up some and sell it in the shops, for the benefit of those who have lost their subscription ticket to morning time in this world."⁵⁰

It is from Scott, of whom Morris had an intimate and almost life-long knowledge ("I should like to say that I yield to no one, not even Ruskin, in my love and admiration for Scott"⁵¹) that we may surmise he could have learnt to distinguish between the blown-up "big bow-wow" and the genuine, between the style (Gordon's second category) which Scott felt obliged to use as a "literary man", and the true and pure language spoken by his most truthful and human characters. When we remember Morris, a youthful Ivanhoe prancing down the glades of Epping Forest in his miniature suit of armour, we can imagine his mind busy even then with the contrast between the language of the Saxons and that of the hated Norman yoke.

6

Nor did Morris's style end in a blind alley. On the one hand, the bringing back to the English literary language of words and turns of phrase which had been lost or forgotten was not necessarily a forlorn hope. Later generations may take a different view from our own:

"A profusion of words used in an ephemeral slang sense is evidence, then, that the writer addresses himself merely to the uneducated and thoughtless of his own day; the revival of bygone meanings, on the other hand, and an archaic turn given to the language is the mark rather of authors who are ambitious of a hearing from more than one age. The

⁴⁹ Cf. Intro., *Works*, Vol. XXII, p. xiii—xvi.

⁵⁰ Not Morris, but Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*. (London, Chapman and Hall, 1931, p. 120.)

⁵¹ Intro., *Works*, Vol. XXII, p. xvi.

secretions of time bring round a word many reputable meanings, of which the oldest is like to be the deepest in grain. It is a counsel of perfection—some will say, of vainglorious pedantry—but that shaft flies furthest which is drawn to the head, and he who desires to be understood in the twenty-fourth century will not be careless of the meanings that his words inherit from the fourteenth.”⁵²

Walter Raleigh's reminder, not specifically dealing with Morris, recalls the warning of C. S. Lewis quoted earlier. It is premature, to say the least, to condemn the style of William Morris because he experimented with words and turns of phrase inherent in the genius of the language, rejected with contumely though they may have been by the ungenerous and infertile pedantry of some “serious” men of letters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

On the other hand, E. E. Stokes has suggested that Morris exercised a definite influence—if perhaps only an indirect one—on the development of one of the masters of modern English style: “Shaw's admiration of Morris's prose style, so unlike the ‘worn-out Macauleyese’ of conventional Victorian prose, may have inspired Shaw to forge his own fresh and original prose style.”⁵³ To follow up this suggestion would be tempting, but outside the scope of the present examination. In passing, however, if we call to mind the passages in the plays where Shaw successfully and dramatically stepped from ironic social comedy to heights of lyric and prophetic utterance—we might instance the concluding reverie of Peter Keegan in *John Bull's Other Island*—we can see that Shaw admirably understood the lesson that behind the loftiest prose utterance must lie the concrete reference, the real experience, the precise word in its precise relationship.

To sum up we may say that while Morris's prose belongs in a sense to Gordon's third category, “romantic prose”, in that it is “marked by the continuous use of syntactical and metaphoric devices, designed to excite an affective response”,⁵⁴ nevertheless it is in its essence based on the living speech which he used in his daily life and daily thought, and in this sense related indissolubly to the main tradition of English prose.

⁵² Walter Raleigh, *Style*, 1923, 14th impression, p. 32–33.

⁵³ E. E. Stokes, junr., “Morris and Bernard Shaw”, *Journal*, W. Morris Society, I, 1, Winter, 1961, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Gordon, op. cit., p. 152.

Ž I V Ý J A Z Y K W I L L I A M A M O R R I S E

Kritický pohled na prozaický styl, kterým na sklonku svého života velký romantický básník William Morris psal některé kratší i delší romance, byl vždy ostrý a často odmitavý, jak v době vzniku romancí, tak také v novější době. Autorka studie vidí v nepřátelském postoji některých kritiků spíše neochotu přijmout názory a myšlenky, které básník v těchto romancích chtěl vyjádřit a pro jejichž vyjádření našel osobitý prozaický styl.

Autorka studie shledává, že není možné zkoumat styl a jazyk prozaických romancí, aniž byly zároveň zkoumány jiné Morrisovy prozaické projevy. Pokusila se o definici různých kategorií prozaického stylu W. Morrise v různých obdobích jeho tvůrčího života a dospěla k závěru, že styl pozdních prozaických romancí není jen výsledkem vlivu islandských ság, které Morris přeložil, ale souhrnem celého jeho uměleckého a životního vývoje. Zejména je styl romancí ovlivněn cílevědomým hledáním adekvátního jazyka pro tlumočení Morrisových socialistických názorů, hledáním, které vyústilo v osobitý styl přednášek a statí o socialismu a umění, jež Morris psal od sedmdesátých let minulého století. Základním faktorem při vytvoření tohoto stylu byla skutečnost, že Morris chtěl veřejnost přesvědčit o správnosti svých názorů a donutit ji k činu. Další prvek vidíme v jednoduchém jazyku Morrisových zápisníků z islandských cest.

Rozborem ukázek z prozaických romancí a z jiné tvorby autorka chce ukázat, že „archaismus“, který je Morrisovi vytýkán, je naopak zcela organicky spjat s koncepcí romancí, jejichž cílem není oživení starých časů, nýbrž prosazení určitého morálního pohledu na život jednotlivců i společnosti.

V závěru autorka soudí, že prozaický styl W. Morrise nebyl bez vlivu na další vývoj moderní anglické prózy a že v podstatě jeho kořeny tkví v živém jazyku každodenní mluvy, že je spjat s hlavní tradicí anglické prózy.

