

Morris and Traditional Storytelling

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It was Book Week down at the local Primary School: an evening of storytelling had been announced. As the lights dimmed there was a rustling sound from a brazen tree of bells that stood at one side of an empty stage. This generated an air of anticipation, as the storyteller bounded in, wearing a simple medieval-looking smock over his clothes. He carried a stick, or perhaps one could call it a staff. All this added up to a kind of ceremony, a separation of this special time from our time, a banishment of the ordinary. The tale he told was an incident from the Irish saga of Finn McCoul, full of repetitions and patterned prose, the kind of thing that might be tedious to read silently to oneself, but is excellent to hear, as one waits and watches for the remembered words to return. It was a story of magic, a wonder tale of strange transformations, delivered fluently – though not because it had been committed exactly to memory like the performance of an actor – and enlivened with constant little improvisations by the storyteller which grew out from the main theme (rather like Milman Parry's account of the methods of the Homeric bards). The story came to an end: a short ditty was recited, the tree of bells was shaken, the lights came up. I thought of Morris in his last years responding to a recital of early music by Arnold Dolmetsch, and felt that he would have liked to witness this performance too, the formal ceremony around the telling of an ancient story, the breaking from the bondage of the written text, and yet the delight in exploiting the new possibilities of oral narration.

In saying this I don't feel any need to justify the remark: I take it as given that

Morris devoted a considerable portion of his life to storytelling, from the nights in the dormitory at Marlborough to writing narrative poems for *The Defence of Guenevere* and *The Earthly Paradise*, which included retelling and resetting ancient stories in a new way. He translated the famous epics of other cultures, *The Aeneids of Virgil*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and the Icelandic sagas, wrote novels – if that is a correct description of *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* – and finally enriched the English repertoire of prose romances. And how he liked to read them out to an audience, even if this was only the patient and long-suffering Burne-Jones.¹ But can one make a connection to the experience of today?

In trying to establish a link between Morris and the modern revival of storytelling there is one piece of ground-clearing which does need attention. I should like to dissociate myself from the usual accounts of Morris's influence on twentieth-century writers. Whatever the retrospective claims of the authors, I for one am seriously embarrassed by C.S. Lewis's romances for children with their didactic neo-Christianity, and almost as much by the prolix yarn-spinning of J.R.R. Tolkien. If this is what Morris's influence amounts to, then we could have done with less of it. On the other hand, the Earthsea tetralogy of Ursula Le Guin, who makes no direct acknowledgement that I have seen, is far more worth reading as an example of a distillation of Morrisian romance at its best.

No. What I am concerned with here is the revival of the craft of story-telling in the last fifteen years and the place of this craft in education today. Of course, storytelling and in particular the reading aloud of stories has always been part of the scene in school. But more recently there has been the introduction of theatrical skills; people trained as actors, having witnessed the potentiality of the one-man or one-woman show, have learned how to create the presence needed for story-telling on a bare stage. Performance brings its own points of discussion, however; whether the story benefits by being acted out or not. Too much leaping about may distract the imagination. Some prefer the more hypnotic effect of the 'radio' voice. Certainly there is frequent use of simple music, as in a Yeats play. Laura Simms, Pomme Clayton, Abbi Patrix and Ben Haggarty are examples of the new school of storytellers.

I think that the Ruskin-Morris doctrine of the effect of 'handwork' as a good in itself applies here to the practice of storytelling, regardless of the content of the story. The darkened room, the presence of others, the incantatory pulse of the voice – all this liberates deeper levels of audience participation and comprehension than solitary dozing over a book. (I deliberately exaggerate to make a point; obviously in another place one would argue that literacy has its own heights and depths.) One begins to understand that – for Homer and the early poets of most cultural traditions – perhaps a written text was at best a mere record of such a performance, or an *aide-mémoire* to those who were accustomed to listen to stories. But if we add to the archetypal nature of the process of storytelling the particular subject-matter of fairy and folk-tale, of myth and saga, which, in their unfolding, seem to generate conscious and unconscious reverberations of meaning, then, it seems to me, we begin to approach a deeper state of being, and it becomes correct to use words like 'art' rather than 'entertainment' to describe what is going on. The storyteller tells more than he or she knows. For these reasons a latter-day William Morris might feel that we have recovered a 'medieval' art from desuetude, and so added another pleasure to soothe the agonies of humankind.

The place of stories in education is something to which Morris gave a good deal of attention; see, for example, the list of recommended books he sent to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which consists largely of storybooks.¹ And these are “real ancient imaginative works” by and large, which lend themselves to oral presentation. Notice too how the need for the storyteller to engage immediately with the audience and the audience’s expectations of enjoyment work against the academic apparatus which so often surrounds and bars off the written text of such ancient imaginative works. One thinks of Burne-Jones’ comment on the arrangement of the Kelmscott Chaucer: “I want particularly to draw your attention to the fact that there is no preface to Chaucer, and no introduction, and no essay on his position as a poet, and no notes, and no glossary; so that all is prepared for you to enjoy him thoroughly.”² Nevertheless, to be fair to the academics, the revival of storytelling takes place at a time when narrative art has been re-established as a subject of intellectual interest. No longer do we feel with earlier critics in this century that an interest in narrative is something to be apologised for.

I have singled out traditional storytelling as a growth point in education today, and seen it as part of the continuing exploration of ideas which stem from the work of William Morris – the next time you see storytelling advertised as part of Book Week or whatever, why not test this out?

NOTES

¹ Normal Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris* Vol. II (Princeton U.P., 1987), 514–8.

² Edward Burne-Jones, quoted in R.C.H. Briggs, ed., *The Work of William Morris* (The Times Bookshop, 1962), pp. 74–5.

Those who would like to find out more are directed to:

Tony Aylwin, *Traditional Storytelling and Education*, published by the School of Primary Education, University of Greenwich, London, 1992, contains a survey of good practice and a list of storytellers.

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