Self-Revelation in Morris's Unfinished Novel

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In an unpublished story ... the description of his hero's boyhood has passages in it which are unmistakably drawn from his own experience. The dreams which mingle with the healthy life of a boy, the first beginnings of thought, of sentiment, of romance, are touched in these passages from knowledge and vivid recollection. Although, here as elsewhere, Mackail is unequivocal about the biographical significance of this fragmentary work, it is surprising that it has been largely overlooked by later biographers and writers. Perhaps the fact that Morris himself abandoned the venture has devalued it in their eyes — certainly it is a curious piece and a difficult enough subject — nevertheless it has about it an intensity and urgency that implies it was not merely prose with which Morris was wrestling when it was written in 1872.

Very briefly, the story centres on three main characters; John and Arthur are brothers aged seventeen and sixteen respectively, and Clara is their young neighbour. Arthur's physical weakness is adequately balanced by his personal charm and ease of expression; John, conversely, despite robust health, is shy and ill-at-ease in company. As Arthur's friendship with Clara develops into love, John becomes increasingly awkward and 'tongue-tied' — we suspect he also loves Clara, but he remains silent about his feelings for her and it is only in the last section, John's frantic letter to Arthur on hearing of the latter's plans to marry Clara, that John's love becomes obvious.

Penelope Fitzgerald in her introduction to the published version of the novel identifies Clara as Georgiana Burne-Jones. Other writers have also noted the resemblance — indeed it would be hard to miss the similarity given Morris's long, minutely detailed description of the girl — but Penelope Fitzgerald goes further, proposing that the two suitors function in the work as an exemplification of two supposed sides of Morris's own nature: volatile John, the unsuitable, unsuccessful Morris, and Arthur, a more controlled girl-winning version of the same person. Acknowledging Morris's love for Georgie at the time of its writing, she argues that through the work he is confronting the issue of his temper and its repression — always a problem for him — aggravated lately, she suggests, by his anger at Rossetti and his desire for Georgie. John's efforts at self-control, she feels, ultimately come to grief in the 'furious and destructive' final letter already referred to. Arthur, it follows, emerges as some sort of victor, but, in her argument, the real victory and the author's salvation would lie in strength of will and renunciation. In my view, however, it is this very self-control, so ruefully delineated by Morris, which is shown as having robbed John of any hope of winning Clara — for although he loves her, he will not or cannot speak on his own behalf. I see John, with his 'fierce restless look', as the hero of the tale and a clear representation of the youthful Morris. There is a characteristic earnestness about John quite lacking in Arthur; John exemplifies the same code of ethics as the young Morris, formulated here by Mackail in his description of the hero...
of *The Heir of Redclyffe* – a book with a significant influence on the Oxford ‘set’ in the mid-1850’s:

The young hero of the novel, with his overstrained conscientiousness, his chivalrous courtesy, his intense earnestness ... his high-strung notions of love, friendship and honour, his premature gravity, his almost deliquescent piety, was adopted by them as a pattern for actual life: and more strongly perhaps by Morris than by the rest...

But if John is like Morris of the 1850s, then surely Arthur represents the Edward Burne-Jones of the same time – the two brothers in fact bear the same relationship to one another as Morris and Ned in their ‘brotherhood’ of the Oxford days; even the fact that in the story John reads aloud to Arthur echoes the life-long habit of the two friends. While sharing all John’s romantic ideals and antiquarian sympathies, the ‘dreamy-eyed’ Arthur shows particular traits that were Ned’s alone: an extreme imaginative sensitivity that could result in either ‘ecstasies’ and day-dreams or ‘bogeys’ and nightmares, a predisposition to ill health, especially of a nervous origin, and an irresistible appeal to women. In relation to this it is somewhat surprising that Burne-Jones’s biographer fails to make the connection between Ned, of whom she writes “nearly every woman he met wanted to look after him”, and Arthur, to whom Clara (and her mother) respond with the same impulse. Of course in 1872 the relationship between Burne-Jones and Morris could hardly be described as one of rivalry – but I believe this tale deals only obliquely with Morris’s contemporary problems and is really set in 1857.

Morris and Georgie were friends for more than a year before he had even met Jane, his future wife. Georgie was first introduced to him in 1855, when she was fifteen, before she and Ned had begun their courtship. The meeting was a brief one and a year passed before Morris met her again. Ned had been courting her for only three months when he proposed and it was just at this time that Morris arrived in London. Once there he “fell into Edward’s habit of spending several evenings a week at the manse.”

The first of these visits was apparently to give Georgie an engagement present; Georgie (writing some forty years later) recounts the visit as follows:

Morris came up from Oxford to see Edward at this crisis, [he had in fact moved in with Ned the day before the latter proposed] and in his usual generous way of accepting what a friend had done, called to see me. He brought Turner’s ‘Rivers of France’ in his hand, and I thanked him and he wrote my name in it, but we were not much the nearer for this meeting. The poet who wrote the poem of Guendolen seemed one person and the man I saw before me another – my eyes were holden that I could not yet see.

The implication that it was not on her account that he made the visit is strange, and her recollection of it is somewhat at variance with the entries in her mother’s diary; here, Morris’s first visit was noted as occurring a few days after Georgie’s sixteenth birthday, in July; he came to tea, and in the summer starlight he “sat with Georgie on the balcony till 11 o’clock.” If this was the occasion on which Morris presented Georgie with Turner’s *Rivers of France*, it seems odd that her account sounds so cool; and, after all, “the poet who wrote the poem of Guendolen” was soon busy illuminating it for her. Georgie, in *Memorials*, seems to have felt the need to put distance between herself and Morris in writing of the four years of her engagement. When she mentions him at all during this time it tends to be as ‘the great man of his circle’, but other sources show that there was much intimacy between Morris and
Georgie’s family of a youthful and playful kind, and much to-ing and fro-ing between Red Lion Square and the MacDonald residence. Among other gifts from Morris to Georgie and her sisters in the year 1856 was a copy of the *Arabian Nights* – a book specifically referred to in the novel: “John sat, reading to him out of a new green-coated book – (Lane’s *Arabian Nights*, to wit)” and later, as John says to Clara:

“Father’s given Arthur such a good new *Arabian Nights* – not like the old one, you know – a new translation. Would you like to have a volume?”

“Oh, I should!” she said. “I do so love tales...” *(Novel, p.45)*

It would be interesting to know if Morris’s gift was a green-coated edition. The novel is full of seemingly pointed references to particular events, conversations and objects which I suspect had special meaning for Georgiana Burne-Jones – part of the odd feeling about the novel is our sense that we are not party to the necessary background information, out attention is sharply focussed on we-don’t-know-what. As if to reinforce the fact that he is ‘reliving the past’ for Georgie and himself, on the page following the reference to the *Arabian Nights* Morris has Clara say:

“It’s strange we should both have remembered that time so distinctly, isn’t it? and be talking about it like old people. I wonder if perhaps in years to come we shall remember this afternoon...” *(Novel, p.46)*

Margaret Fleming in her article ‘Nothing but landscape and sentiment’ has shown that Leafer farm and the other places described in the novel are real places near Godstowe, and the evidence she cites plainly establishes the relationship in place and time between the material of the novel and Morris’s life. Morris and Burne-Jones were both at Oxford in the summer of 1857; Georgie and her sister were staying at the MacLaren’s house, and “invitations followed for Edward and Morris to call on the family at home.” As work on the Union murals proceeded, Georgie spent ten idyllic weeks here; her cursory reference to this period in *Memorials* gives no hint of the “romantic days” in the company of “Edward reading from Malory or Morris reading from his ‘Guenevere’ poems, with general music-making and merriment.” While there is much ‘merriment’ in the novel, there is also the stressful undercurrent of John’s growing love. If the time, the place, and the identity of the three main characters are now certain, the biographical implications of the novel are clear: Morris, in 1857, found himself in love with his best friend’s ‘girl’. A young man so imbued with the ideals of brotherhood and self-sacrifice, one so shy and self-conscious, one whose love for his friend was so profound, would surely have found this a source of great distress. Morris, like John would have abandoned any thought of approaching Georgie on his own behalf; like John he would have resorted to silence and self-reproach. In the novel, the reason for John’s silence is expressed in his final letter:

“You see, I am so anxious that the only two people I love in the world, or ever shall love, should be quite happy, quite without a cloud on their love.” *(Novel, p.74)*

Even accepting the parallels between the novel and real events and figures in Morris’s life, it could perhaps be argued that he is simply idealizing and ‘embroidering’ his nostalgic recollections in order to legitimize his ‘present’ feelings for Georgie; however, if the cause was not apparent to his friends, there is evidence that in 1856-7 Morris was “not his usual self”; Mackail states:

For the two years or so during which he worked hard at painting, he was moody and irritable; he brooded much by himself, and lost for the time a good deal of his old sweetness and affectionateness of manner.
Mackail implies that Morris's frustrated efforts at painting and his subjugation in this matter to the will of Rossetti is the cause of this change; Jan Marsh, in her article 'William Morris's Painting and Drawing,' specifically rejects this view:

He did not...relinquish his aspirations to be an artist, despite his biographer's statement that he gave up painting after a bout of depression...Red House contained a studio for him to work in, and in the Census of 1861 he entered his occupation as "B.A. Artist"...Moreover, figure painting still absorbed most of his time...16

The subject of Morris's Oxford mural, Mackail continues, was one for which he felt a singular and almost a morbid attraction, that of the unsuccessful man and despised lover. The motive was the same which he had treated in prose a year before in the ‘Oxford and Cambridge Magazine’ with many details which were directly taken from his own life. It was entitled "How Sir Palomydes loved La Belle Iseult with exceeding great love out of measure, and how she loved not him again but rather Sir Tristam".17

The Palomydes theme of unreturned or impossible love appears repeatedly in Morris's works of the late 1850s and is reiterated in this excerpt from 'Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery'; here Galahad speaks of Palomydes:

...Is he not able still to hold his breath
With thoughts of Iseult? doth he not grow pale
With weary striving, to seem best of all
To her, "as she is best," he saith? to fail
Is nothing to him, he can never fall.

For unto such a man love-sorrow is
So dear a thing unto his constant heart,
That even if he never win one kiss,
Or touch from Iseult, it will never part.18

Such "weary striving to seem best of all" brings to mind Morris's lifelong succession of gifts to Georgie - the very best work of his own hands. In his remarks on lines from a contemporary prose work Mackail clearly infers that love "and the wild restless passions that went with it" was a great "disturbing force" in Morris's life at his time;19 but if, as I am suggesting, love-sorrow for Georgie is the source of the disturbance, Mackail, her son-in-law, was hardly in a position to say so.

While it seems that Morris found it difficult to express strong emotions in direct speech, he was well able to pour forth his strongest feelings through the written word. In the novel the main characters appear to share this inhibition and no less than six letters are the vehicle of their deeper interaction; throughout his life Morris dealt with matters close to his heart in many letters to his closest friends. But, surprisingly, for the years 1856 and 1857 only seven letters or fragments of letters are available to us, and of these only three are personal. Almost certainly Georgie was responsible for later destroying letters from Morris which one assumes she felt were too revealing - often only fragments survive as passages in Mackail's biography. Ina Taylor notes:

When Morris's daughter May appealed to Georgie for letters to use in a work about her father, Georgie replied: "I turn to my archives and find that the letters from your father that I have kept only begin in 1876," a clear indication of the ambiguous
nature of their friendship before that period, for Georgie, like her mother, was a compulsive hoarder.

Part of a surviving fragment of Morris's correspondence from the years in question (dated July 1856) runs:

One won't get much enjoyment out of life at this rate, I know well, but that don't matter:
I have no right to ask for it at all events - love and work, these two things only...

Surely love would mean "enjoyment of life" also, unless of the Sir Palomydes type; of this letter Jack Lindsay was prompted to write, "he may have felt some attraction of which we know nothing."  

By the end of 1857 Ned had returned to London, while Morris remained at Oxford; here in September he first saw Jane Burden, soon to become his 'ideal beloved' and, in April 1859, his wife. Ned's marriage to George finally took place in 1860. For Morris the following years of activity and prosperity were among the happiest of his life; but love was to wane into disappointment.

After a period of growing estrangement between husband and wife, Janey and Rossetti formed their well-known attachment and, notwithstanding Morris's enlightened tolerance of the affair, by 1871 he was once more on his own. The Burne-Jones's marriage fared even worse, Ned having not only deserted Georgie in an emotional sense but very nearly physically as well: Ned had fallen in love with the Greek beauty Mary Zambaco and was on the point of fleeing abroad with her - with Morris's assistance - when, typically, his nerve gave way at the point of departure and he had to make his way ignominiously back to his wife and children. Despite this, Ned continued his affair with Mary and, far from attempting to mend the breach of faith with Georgie, he subsequently adopted a policy of unequivocal surrender to his amorous urges in a series of romantic involvements. Georgie's relationship to her husband came to resemble that of mother and child; she carefully protected his reputation, nurturing his talent and nursing him through his various illnesses, physical and psychological; but the great strength and loyalty of her nature must have been sorely tried - one can only guess at the depth of her hurt.

Bearing all this in mind it is hardly to be wondered at that Morris's youthful love should be re-awakened -

For you alone unchanged now seem to be
A real thing left of the days sweet to me  

and that there could now be real hope that his love might be returned. The chivalrous young Morris of the late 1850s, like John in the novel, could never have advanced his own happiness over that of others. In fact for a 'brother' these two would surely gladly sacrifice their own welfare: "for love's sake, love he cast aside"; but, by 1872, Morris had reached a different place by a hard road. His contemporary poems offer evidence of his hope to persuade Georgie to become his lover and that he had now come to think that the only chance of happiness for either of them was to emulate (in John's words):

the strong lucky people who come near enough to the fire to thrust in their hands
and snatch the gold out of it (and who) cannot heed... the wailing or the silent misery of those who are... weak with the horrible fever of longing that can never be satisfied.  (Novel, p.73)

Against this background the novel can be seen - and increasingly so as it proceeds -
as an appeal to Georgie, in which he (now) proves the depth, duration and worthiness of his love for her. If she felt it was merely some sort of compensation for the loss of Jane’s affections, here was his tale, with events she well remembered, to remind her of his strange moodiness when he first knew her and to reveal its cause. It ought to be stressed of course that there is every reason to suppose that Georgie read the manuscript and it is absolutely certain that she received and read the final letter already referred to.

Clearly the introductory chapters of the work are of a different flavour from the narrative that follows; here, in a disconcertingly brief spell of writing, the reader is confronted with a range of social and ethical considerations. Morris had been obliged to ponder the issues of the public and private morality that had more or less been forced on him in the preceding few years – and perhaps his thinking had also been influenced by his recent sojourn in ‘medieval’ Iceland. In setting out the background of the brothers’ story through the history of parson Risley and his affairs, what emerges quite clearly is Morris’s concern to show the evil that results when natural freedom and honest passions are blocked, perverted or usurped by social constraints and ‘empty’ conventions. As a young man, Risley forsakes his lover, Eleanor, to marry for wealth and the living at Ormslade; in a gesture which would turn her freely-given love into mere prostitution, he offers her money as ‘compensation’, later dismissing their affair as “what lots of young men do.” The wife he never loved dies giving birth to a third child, but not before reading the letters which reveal her husband’s heartlessness towards both Eleanor and herself. In choosing the socially respectable path, Risley has destroyed the lives of two women and become himself embittered and neurotic. Victorian men like Rossetti and Burne-Jones could take lovers at the risk of scarcely more than disapproval or gossip, but for the women involved the stakes were higher; in a way that prefigures his later socialist writings, Morris here exposes and discredits the prevailing hypocrisy and double standard in sexual matters. The betrayed Eleanor contemplates suicide, but chooses life – not as a prostitute (the other option for ‘ruined’ women) but with her godfather, who unlike her family, will not reject her, as he “knows and cares so little about the ways of society that...he looks upon marriage as quite as shocking as anything else.” (Novel, p.11)

Morris denounces the tyrannical face of Victorian masculinity, and the strength and stature of the main female characters is portrayed in terms of their rejection of tainted values. Risley’s ‘death-in-life’ in his all-male household is perfectly symbolized by the hideous frozen rage of the stuffed animals that bedeck the place; and the ‘poison’ seems to have spread to the surrounding village with its “heavily-walking men (and)...anxious-looking women...a place to crush passion...or rather to nurse and foster it with brooding.” (Novel, p.4)

By contrast, the all-female household at Mrs Mason’s farm is a source of spiritual nourishment to the boys. Even the names Morris assigns the two establishments help signify the group of associations each represents: the Rectory – erect, correct, rectify – potent but constraining, Leaser farm – lease, let, release – here the feminine gifts of milk and acceptance flow freely and mingle with the promise of erotic love. The images of calm, well-ordered daily activity at Leaser evoke an earlier ‘pre-Christian’ word, where religion has more to do with the cycles of natural life than privilege or position. Mr Mason, the former master, despised Risley and his sham religion. “Ah, he was always a liberal man, was Mr Mason” (Novel, p.25) and the reader learns
that his liberality extended to fathering a child out of wedlock. In countering the parson’s hypocritical censure, Mrs Mason disarmingly rejoins:

“Mr Risley, if my husband likes to make love to every girl in the village, he has a full right to it, if I let him. And let me tell you... that if he was to do what he would be hanged for, he would be a better man than you, who haven’t the spirit to do either right or wrong.” (Novel, p.25)

Morris undoubtedly hoped to foster such a fearless flouting of convention in Georgie; but well aware of her vulnerability, and the threat of ‘social annihilation’ she would face in giving herself to him, through his novel Morris sought to prove to Georgie the ultimate worthlessness of the morality of those who would condemn her.

In accepting this reading of the novel, and all that it implies, one is faced with a very different picture of Morris in the early 1870s from the commonly held view of a somewhat comic figure, too engrossed in his work to pay much heed to his wife’s infidelity and, in any case, largely indifferent to women; instead we see a deeply thoughtful and ardent man, a nature in which the capacity to experience private passion is balanced with sensitivity and sympathy – a great-heartedness that enabled him to think in social and not simply personal terms.

If Morris had continued with his novel, the story could well have proceeded along the following lines: John will leave for London, but return in fifteen or so years (bringing the characters closer to their real ages in 1872), to find Clara and Arthur unhappy in a loveless marriage. Encouraged by Mrs Mason – who all along had doubts “as to whether John would not have made the better lover” (Novel, p.63) – and in defiance of his father, who will threaten to disinherit him, John will cast aside restraint and make his appeal to Clara. The two will form a “genuine union of passion and affection”, the wholesome, quickening influence of their real love breaking Risley’s gloomy ‘spell’ and freeing the village and its people.

NOTES

2 Mackail, Vol. I, p. 41
8 Entry for 31st July 1856 in the diary of Hannah MacDonald. (Information kindly supplied by Ina Taylor.)
10 Marsh, p. 21.
13 Taylor, p. 47.


Taylor, p. 122.


Quoted in Lindsay, p. 183.

In Iceland divorce, for example, was a matter of mutual consent, whereas in England the process was difficult, expensive, and especially unfair to women.