

Norman Talbot and William Morris:

**On the occasion of Jean Talbot's presentation of Norman's Morris collection
to the Rare Books Collection of the Auchmuty Library**

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As part of my own research, I've been delving into the English proverbs, and also thinking of Norman's taste, born as he was in deepest rural Suffolk, for such earthy, zesty utterances. My favourite from Smith and Wilson's *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* is 'Neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring',¹ which means 'Neither one thing or another'. As Dryden has it,

Damn'd neuters, in their middle way of steering,
Are neither Fish nor Flesh nor good Red-Herring.²

Now unlike Dryden, in the Epilogue I've quoted from, Norman was no Tory; but like Dryden, he had no time for 'neuters' or 'Trimmers', those who are neither Whigs nor Tories, neither one thing or another. What was true of Norman's politics was true of his literary tastes as well. As a reader and critic, his approvals and his condemnations were emphatic: he knew that Blake and Coleridge, Keats and Shelley were good *Red Herrings*; but he wasn't convinced by Wordsworth, taking the line Robert Browning did in 'The Lost Leader'. Browning was the great poet of the Victorian era; Tennyson had his moments, but couldn't be trusted on the subject of Guinevere, Arthur's queen in *Idylls of the King*; for that you had to read William Morris's 'Defence of Guenevere'. In short, Norman as a poet and a critic was politically radical and *morally* radical as well. It was easy to agree with his pro-feminist stance on Tennyson's 'Guinevere' and on Morris's psychologically acute portrait of a Guinevere with only her own testimony to vindicate her.

Norman preferred only to lecture on writers who had his emphatic approval. This classification, although his tastes were broad, left a few for the rest of us. Before I came to Newcastle, thirty years ago, I'd been impressed and influenced by an article he'd written for *Poetry Australia* — arguing that poets, because they are always trying out new combinations of language and ideas, are, by profession, revolutionaries. Looking back, I suspect that this was Norman's counter-blast to T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The snobbish and conservative Eliot was one of the poets I was allowed, under sufferance, to lecture on; but I seldom went in to do so without Norman reminding me that 'T. S. Eliot' was an anagram for 'Toilets'. Norman called his lectures 'advertising'. They were techniques of persuading students to try a poet or novelist of the kind who were, as W. H. Auden says somewhere, 'doing us some good'.³ It's because Norman thought Morris could do us good that he came to focus on this Victorian socialist and printer, poet and novelist, artist and decorator — William Morris.

Because there is much to be said about Norman and Morris, I've chosen to focus on one high-water mark of Norman's engagement with this Victorian polymath, his 1994 edition of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The edition was published in the year after Norman retired, 1993. Norman went on researching and editing Morris after retirement, but his research for this edition must have been completed while he was still Associate Professor Talbot at the University of Newcastle. For those of us at the point of their career I've come to, it is an inspiration to know that high-level editorial projects can be completed while one is still in the University's employ, that they don't have to wait till we retire. In his introduction to *Water of the Wondrous Isles* Norman has recourse to the time-honoured, time-consuming methods of literary scholarship needed to assess the textual problems posed by a new edition, to trace the material production of a book, and to assess whether a book has been acclaimed, disparaged or neglected. He looks into the fair-copy manuscript which Morris was revising, but did not finish revising at the time of his

death; he looks through Morris's correspondence and the family memoirs, especially that of his daughter May; and he looks over the negligible reception that *Water of the Wondrous Isles* had, when posthumously published in 1896, and its critical reputation since. These investigations and analyses lead him to the convincing conclusion that *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is 'perhaps the crowning achievement of [Morris's] extraordinary life',⁴ but it has been generally and unjustly overlooked.

The second part of the introduction offers a critical re-interpretation of Morris's *Water of the Wondrous Isles*, with suggestions about the ecological and feminist, and the anti-imperial and egalitarian perspectives of the romance. It is an interpretation that justifies Norman's proposition that this work is 'perhaps' — an important concession to the reader — Morris's 'crowning achievement'. Before touching on this part of the introduction it is worth mentioning the scaffolding needed to erect the argument. To situate *Water of the Wondrous Isles* among Morris's other writing, Norman must be able to refer to enough of Morris's work — that's to say, all of it. To indicate gaps in the reception, he must be able to call upon enough of the criticism to date — that's to say, all but all of it. He must be able to situate Morris's romance in the history of romance and fantasy-writing over recent millennia. This is where the introduction is at its most illuminating:

Medieval courtly love or religious allegory did not much attract Morris. An expert translator and redactor of saga, epic and other traditional and popular narrative forms, he interweaves these with folk conventions in his last-decade stories.

And again:

Morris's romances are an expansive English . . . form of the psychological fantasy, as in the German novella, where plot, setting and character offer radical analogies to inward self-knowledge. These late romances hive up wonder and relish into

unparaphrasable recognitions. They . . . celebrate, yet defy, the mortality of the individual and the brevity of social harmony. These ‘radical analogies’ can as readily be expressed in rhetorics derived from Freud or Jung as in the terms of *social* psychologists like Marx [my italics].⁵

The proof of the pudding which Norman delicately slices up in his introduction is in the tasting of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. I shall read two passages to show how Morris uses *settings*: first, to adumbrate ecological issues; but second, to bring to the surface of his psychological romance the ‘inward self-knowledge’ gained by the heroine on her quest, those ‘unparaphrasable recognitions’ which I too will have to gesture at. The heroine of the romance goes by the name of Birdalone. She is on a quest, a quest that is partly involuntary since she steals, from the witch who has raised her, a magical Sending Boat. The Sending Boat bears her to various meetings and encounters on the Wondrous Isles. Foremost of these is the Isle of Increase Unsought, another ridiculous name Norman convincingly decodes as the Isle of Tory Capitalist Imperialism. The artificiality of life on the isle makes Birdalone think of it as the ‘House of Death’. Before she has even departed on the Water, Birdalone has been befriended by a wood-spirit, Habundia. Birdalone believes that Habundia will give her aid, magical aid, in times of crisis. She is in dire need of help when her Boat brings her to the Isle of Nothing:

For flat was the isle, and scarce raised above the wash of the leeward ripple on a fair day; nor was it either timbered or bushed or grassed, and, so far as Birdalone might see, no one foot of it differed in aught from another. Natheless she deemed that she was bound to go ashore and seek out the adventure, or spoil her errand else.

Out of the boat she stepped then, and found the earth all paved of a middling gravel, and nought at all growing there, not even the smallest of herbs; and she stooped down and searched the gravel, and found neither worm nor beetle therein,

nay nor any one of the sharp and slimy creatures which are wont in such ground. A little further she went, and yet a little further, and no change there was in the land; and yet she went on and found nothing; and she wended her ways southward by the sun, and the day was windless.⁶

Birdalone forges on into the Isle of Nothing until noon, when suddenly the sun goes out ‘as a burnt-down candle’ — or as the onset of global dimming. She tries to find the way back to the shore, but only finds a crumb of the bread and cheese she had dropped on her foray into the centre of the Isle. Realising she must have gone ‘about in a ring, and come back again to where she first turned’, she resolves, bravely, to sleep for the night, and start again next morning.

But when she awoke, and saw what the new day was, her heart fell indeed, for now was she encompassed and shut in with a thick dark mist (though it seemed to be broad day), so that had there been aught to see she would not have seen it her own length away from her. So there she stood, hanging her head, and striving to think; but the master-thought of death drawing nigh scattered all other thoughts, or made them dim and feeble.

Long she stood there; but suddenly something came into her mind. She set her hand to the fair-broidered pouch which hung from . . . [her] loin-girdle, and drew out thence flint and steel and tinder, which matters, forsooth, had served her before in the boat to make fire withal. Then she set her hand to her head, and drew forth the tress of hair which Habundia had given her, and which was coiled up in the crown of her own abundant locks which decked her so gloriously; she drew two hairs from the said tress, and held them between her lips while she did up the tress in its place again, and then, pale and trembling, fell to striking a light, and when she had the tinder burning, she cried out: “O wood-mother, wood-mother! How then may we

meet again as thou didst promise me, if I die here in this empty waste? O wood-mother, if thou mightest but come hither for my deliverance!”

Then she burned the hairs one after another, and stood waiting, but nought befell a great while, and her heart sickened, and there she stood like a stone.

But in awhile, lo! there came as it were a shadow amidst the mist, or rather lying thereon, faint and colourless, and it was of the shape of the wood-mother, with girt-up gown and bow in hand. Birdalone cried aloud with joy, and hastened toward the semblance, but came to it no nigher, and still she went, and the semblance still escaped her, and she followed on and on; and this lasted long, and faster and faster must she follow lest it vanish, and she gathered her skirts into her girdle, and fell to running fleet-foot after the fleeing shadow, which she loved dearly even amidst the jaws of death; and all her fleetness of foot had Birdalone to put forth in following up the chase; but even to die in the pain would she not miss that dear shadow.

But suddenly, as she ran, the mist was all gone from before her, the sun shone hot and cloudless; there was no shadow or shape of Habundia there, nought but the blue lake and the ugly lip of that hideous desert, with the Sending Boat lying a half score yards from her feet; and behind her stood up, as it were a wall, the mist from out of which she had come.

Forsooth Birdalone was too breathless to cry out her joy, but her heart went nigh to breaking therewith, and lovely indeed to her was the rippled water and the blue sky; and she knew that her wood-mother had sped a sending to her help, and she fell a-weeping where she stood, for love of her wise mother . . .⁷

Heart-lifting enough; yet some may be disturbed by nature's child, Birdalone, wearing a tress of hair not her own. Arabella Farley, another character in another 1890s novel, wears a switch of

false hair to artificially improve her appearance, much to the distress of her husband, Jude the Obscure.

It is part of the quester's cycle that Birdalone should return to the Isle of Nothing, and find it changed since her last visit, perhaps changed *because of* her last visit. Scanning the Water from the Sending Boat, she thinks 'to see the ill-favoured blotch of the Isle of Nothing on the bosom of the blue waters'. But the Isle is green, and Birdalone sees that, though 'it was shapen even as the Isle of Nothing had been aforetime',

now the grass grew thick down to the lip of the water, and all about from the water up were many little slim trees, and some of them with the May-tide blossom yet on them, as though it were a fair and great orchard that she was nearing; and moreover, beyond all that she saw the thatched roofs of houses rising up.⁸

I don't want to go into the detail of all the agricultural arrangements of the Isle, now that it has ceased to be the Isle of Nothing, and has been successfully settled by a commune of two young 'queans' (that is to say, working countrywomen) and 'carles' (that is to say, working countrymen). Morris, whose Oxfordshire country home, Kelmscott, is built next to one of the great tithe barns of medieval England, was like Norman; he had more interest in country matters than do I; and I want to concentrate on other 'country matters', that is to say, on the social comedy of the relations between Birdalone, the queans and the carles. The queans welcome another young woman to the Isle, and though they are young mothers, with more experience of the duties of motherhood than Birdalone, they seem to look up to her as someone who bears superior wisdom. They ask her how long she'll stay, hoping it will be forever. I described the carles as country *workers*, but in truth it is the queans who do most of the work, of milking and hospitality. The young carles spend most of their time stroking Birdalone's hands and saying they, too, hope she'll stay; but they're good-natured enough to give over when she says she'd

rather not have all their attentions. The queans it is who both work and look to the future — who have in mind what needs to be done for their children's future on the island. Although her heart has yearned towards their companionship, Birdalone tells the young women 'it will no better be but that I depart on the morrow' — a commitment they accept without further question. When her friends accompany her to her Boat next morning, they give her provisions from the orchard and dairy, and bid her farewell,

but as they walked back to the house, they spake amongst themselves that this must be some goddess (for of Holy Church they knew nought) who had come to visit them in her loveliness; and in after times, when this folk waxed a many, and tilled all the isle and made ships and spread to other lands and became great, they yet had a memory of Birdalone as their own very lady and goddess, who had come from the fertile and wise lands to bless them, when first they began to engender on that isle, and had broken bread with them, and slept under their roof, and then departed in a wonderful fashion, as might be looked for of a goddess.⁹

Just as the queans and carles' goddess Birdalone is an invention of their imagination, their hospitality and their essential if limited goodness, so a reader realises — and it's a recognition hard to put into words without making it a philosophical commonplace — that Habundia's magical tress of hair is Birdalone's hair, and that what the wood-goddess has given her is what Birdalone has given the wood: 'O Lady! we receive but what we give,/ And in our lives alone does nature live'.¹⁰

There is a comic sweetness of accumulated experience 'hive[d] up', as Norman puts it, in the romances Morris wrote in the last decade of his life. If ripeness is not quite all, it certainly helps some writers towards a 'crowning achievement'. Norman produced his most penetrative Morris criticism in the last decade or so of his life. Perhaps there is a symbiotic relationship, like

that between a Romantic poet and Romantic nature, between what a critic brings to an author and what he gets out of that author. What I am prepared to say, with my critic's hat on, is that there is a sweetness, a ripeness and a comic sense — comedy blended with pathos, and with 'unparaphrasable recognitions' — in the fine poetry Norman wrote in his last fifteen to twenty years. For an example, think of the Madame Butterfly sequence that makes up Part III in *Four Zoas of Australia*.¹¹ I recommend all three to you — Morris's romances, Norman's criticism of Morris's romances, and Norman's poetry. They're all three 'good Red-Herring'.

NOTES

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, ed. William George Smith and F. P. Wilson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 264.

² John Dryden, *The Duke of Guise: A Tragedy*, 'Epilogue', ll. 39–40. The entire epilogue reads:
Much Time and Trouble this poor Play has cost;
And, Faith, I doubted once the Cause was lost.
Yet no one Man was meant; nor Great, nor Small;
Our Poets, like frank Gamesters, threw at All.
They took no single Aim: —
But, like bold Boys, true to their Prince and hearty,
Huzza'd, and fir'd Broad-sides at the whole Party.
Duels are Crimes; but when the Cause is right,
In Battel, every Man is bound to fight.
For what shou'd hinder Me to sell my Skin
Dear as I cou'd, if once my hand were in?
Se Defendendo never was a Sin.
'Tis a fine World, my Masters, right or wrong,
The Whiggs must talk, and Tories hold their Tongue.
They must do all they can —
But We, Forsooth, must bear a Christian mind,
And fight, like Boys, with One Hand ty'd behind;
Nay, and when one Boy's down, 'twere wond'rous wise,
To cry, Box fair, and give him time to rise.
When Fortune favours, none but Fools will dally:
Wou'd any of you Sparks, if Nan, or Mally
Tipt you th'inviting Wink, stand shall I, shall I?
A Trimmer cry'd, (that heard me tell this Story)
Fie, Mistress Cooke! Faith you're too rank a Tory!
Wish not Whiggs hang'd, but pity their hard Cases;
You Women love to see Men make wry Faces.

Pray, Sir, said I, don't think me such a Jew
 I say no more, but give the Dev'l his due.
 Lenitives, says he, suit best with our Condition.
 Jack Ketch, says I, 's an excellent Physician.
 I love no Bloud — Nor I, Sir, as I breath,
 But hanging is a fine dry kind of Death.
 We Trimmers are for holding all things even:
 Yes — just like him that hung 'twixt Hell and Heaven.
 Have we not had Mens Lives enow already?
 Yes sure: — but you're for holding all things stedly:
 Now since the Weight hangs all on one side, Brother,
 You Trimmers shou'd, to poize it, hang on t'other.
 Damn'd Neuters, in their middle way of steering,
 Are neither Fish, nor Flesh, nor good Red-Herring:
 Not Whiggs, nor Tories they; nor this, nor that;
 Not Birds, nor Beasts; but just a kind of Bat:
 A Twilight Animal; true to neither Cause,
 With Tory Wings, but Whiggish Teeth and Claws.

³ 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud', l. 6, in W. H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 166.

⁴ Norman Talbot, 'Introduction'; in William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, ed. Talbot (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. vi.

⁵ Talbot, 'Introduction', p. xi.

⁶ Morris, *Water of the Wondrous Isles*, pp. 98–99.

⁷ Morris, pp. 100–01

⁸ Morris, pp. 291–92.

⁹ Morris, pp. 296–97.

¹⁰ Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode', ll. 47–48.

¹¹ 'The Pinkerton Haiku: An Internal Dialogue', in Norman Talbot, *Four Zoas of Australia* (Sydney: Paper Bark Press, 1992), pp. 73–83.