

The Music of the Mind

Structure and Substance in William Morris's

The Water of the Wondrous Isles

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ONE EVENING, I left off writing this essay at a quarter to one in the morning and turned on my television to a sports network, to find the universities of Tennessee and Michigan playing a semi-finals game in the national women's fast-pitch softball tournament. The game should have ended an hour earlier; but the score was tied. These women had played an afternoon game that day as well. The pitcher for Tennessee was extraordinary: professional baseball pitchers work one game every four or five days and throw about 100 pitches; she worked the equivalent of three games in one day, throwing over 600 pitches. The play was stunning. Every athlete on the field was energised, focused, and unrelenting: the batters hit the ball sharply, the fielders reacted with astonishing speed and threw the ball with remarkable force and neither team was willing to give in. At 1.30 in the morning, Tennessee finally won – and I thought to myself, William Morris would have loved this. Here were two teams filled with Birdalones, the female protagonist in his last completed prose romance, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* – brave, hardy, untiring, unrelenting, performing physical tasks previously considered only a man's job, committed to the resilience necessary for such a marathon effort. They were all gorgeous, in their form-fitting, spandex uniforms, endowed with a sexuality that was evident but at this moment simply not to the point. They were a vision – Morris's vision – of what women could be and could do, if set free from their traditional roles to face up to whatever life demands.

This book, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, is itself a wonder. It is a

387-page fairy tale, featuring Birdalone, a solitary woman who had been stolen from her mother in the city of Utterhay at age two by a witch and taken through the forest of Evilshaw to a hut by the water. She is brought up there in total isolation, except for the lore she learns from Habundia, a forest spirit who physically appears her exact double. Birdalone is brave enough to escape, naked, into a world of which she knows nothing.

Fleeing from the witch, in a magical craft called the Sending Boat, she is taken to the Isle of Increase Unsought, where everything grows lushly without the necessity of labour. There she meets three enslaved women who have been stolen away from their three male counterparts by another witch, the sister of Birdalone's mistress. Birdalone escapes with their help and undertakes the labour of finding the three men. The Sending Boat takes her to a series of four islands and then to the Castle of the Quest on the mainland, where she eventually finds the men and falls in love with one of them, Arthur. While they are away, rescuing their women, she wanders away from their castle, although warned not to do so, and therefore must be rescued by them upon their return, which causes the death of one of them, Baudoin. Having shattered the peace of the community, with one man dead and another abandoning his intended because of her, she leaves, distraught. She arrives eventually in the City of the Five Crafts, reconnects with her mother, becomes an expert in embroidery, and lives peacefully for five years, until her mother dies. She then retraces the steps of her journey, revisiting the Castle of the Quest and all the islands in reverse order, returning, once again naked, to the witch's hut of her youth, only to find the witch dead, and Habundia, still looking like the adolescent Birdalone, now in need of her help. Eventually she is reunited with her lover Arthur, and what is left of the fellowship is reconstructed into a viable unit in the city of her birth, Utterhay. As is evident, her journey described is something just short of a complete circle, from the witch's hut to the City of the Five Crafts, and then a return journey first to the witch's hut, and then to her final residence in Utterhay, where she had begun life.¹

The Water of the Wondrous Isles is constructed in the huge sweep of a compelling circle. We know it from any number of well-known fairy tales: the hero, usually the youngest son, has to leave home, where he is not appreciated, to fight the dragon and win the princess; but then

he must return home, where he can finally be appreciated as a leading member of the community.² In one sense, he returns because it is the only way he can gain the recognition he previously lacked. But in another sense, his return fulfills a deep psychological need, equivalent to the force of cadential closure in western music. In music, this is accomplished in a somewhat more complex way by the use of what is called 'rounded binary form'. It requires the establishment of an A section that presents a recognizable theme or motif, and then a journey into a B section, related to the A section but markedly different, markedly 'foreign', and finally a return to the 'home' of the A section. Of the many musical forms that utilise this A-B-A rounded binary form, Minuet and Trio form is perhaps the most clearly insistent.

The Minuet presents an A section, which is then repeated, so that we may become familiar with it and understand it as 'home'. This is then followed by a B section, similar to the A section in character, but transported into some related key that makes us aware that we are decidedly not 'home'. That is followed by a section referred to as 'A prime' (A'), because it clearly repeats the material and the tonality of A while varying some of the material to allow for a sense of closure. The BA' is then repeated, so that we may know it as the closure of which we are always in need. The Minuet section is therefore a rounded binary form in and of itself: it has an A-B-A form.

The Trio is presented in precisely the same format: there is a C section, repeated, and then a DC' section, repeated. But all of this material is lesser in texture than the Minuet (originally played by only a trio of instruments) and is usually in keys that we recognize as other than the home key of the Minuet's A section. Again, we feel a subconscious sense of longing for return. The C section is therefore a home away from home. And away from it we go, into the D section, making us long for the return to C, which is the closest thing to home we will find in the Trio. The Trio is therefore also a rounded binary form in and of itself: it too has an A-B-A form, this time coded as C-D-C.

The moment when we return to the beginning of the A section of the repeat of the Minuet is an emotionally substantial one: we are back in the original key, with the original material we remember so well from its multiple repetitions earlier on. We are delighted, warmed, reassured to be back in familiar territory. This time there is no need for

repetition, and we go immediately on to the B section, to return with a sense of accomplishment to the final A. Even without the repetitions, the second Minuet is a rounded binary form in and of itself – another A-B-A form.

Minuet and Trio Form

Minuet: // : A : // : B A' : //

Trio: // : C : // : D C' : //

Minuet: // A // B A' //

But there is yet another ABA, another rounded binary form, that embraces the movement as a whole – Minuet-Trio-Minuet. This complex need-within-a-need, home-longing-within-a-home-longing, compels our emotional attention. We find each of its sub-resolutions satisfying, with the return to the beginning of the end (the second Minuet's A section) bringing one kind of relief – and the end of the whole piece yet another kind in its particularly affecting resolution. It suggests that something fundamental in our nature, and therefore in the art that displays that nature, requires us to establish home, to go away from home, and then to return to home, where, as T. S. Eliot has put it so well in *Four Quartets*, we can 'know the place for the first time'.

Until she is 17 years old, Birdalone knows nothing of the world but the witch's hut. It is her A section, repeated and repeated until life seems made of nothing but that. While a teenager, she ventures into the Wood Perilous that surrounds the witch's hut and meets her wood spirit double, Habundia. This is her first B section. When she returns to the witch, the life in the hut is recognizable, but changed, different. This is her first A' section. That BA' is repeated a number of times.

When she eventually escapes and is carried by the magic of the Sending Boat to the Isle of Increase Unsought, she has reached a home away from home, a C section. But although this functions as a C section, it is simultaneously the A section of yet another progression. Two different senses of 'home-and-away' are now functioning at the same time. And so it continues, with Morris pasting one rounded binary form upon another, each new move away becoming in part the

establishing of a new home, from which another move will take us away. The long-term progression of the plot, therefore, with its circular re-encountering of place, is itself one huge binary form (Minuet-Trio-Minuet), at the same time subsuming a great many smaller ABAs, even as the Minuet and Trio are each themselves an ABA. The book is serial and linear in one sense, but circular and multi-concentric in another. Each new departure leaves us with a longing to return to the newly established 'home': when Birdalone wanders away from the Castle of the Quest, we long for her to return to the Castle of the Quest; and when she returns eventually to each of the islands, we recall the home-ness of the island that was established the first time around and are impressed by how she now 'knows it for the first time'. And Morris was able to maintain these multiple longings for home within longings for home for 387 pages. The structure alone is a masterwork.³

But this fairy tale transforms into a bildungsroman if we view the Wondrous Isles Birdalone visits as creations of her imagination, as dream visions, each one appropriate in a different way to her ability at that moment to perceive. It matters not whether Morris intended this to be the case. It only matters that he was in touch with the power of the fairy tale to show us the necessary maturation process of the central character. Having such a large scale work in which to develop this process allows him to spell out that personal development, and he is able to show us detail after detail that would be essential to Birdalone's growth. Let us see these island visits as representing the only ways in which she can conceive of life being, now that she is freed from the control of her witch mistress.

When she arrives at the Isle of Increase Unsought for the first time, she has never in her life seen any creatures other than the witch and Habundia – not a single man, and not a single human woman. This island represents what she conceives 'freedom' must be like. Having had to work every day of her life, part of 'freedom' would be all the luxury one could want with no labour required. Other creatures – her three new friends – would be beautiful, fascinating, and colourful. But reigning over all this splendour would have to be another witch – a witch related to her witch – because the concept of a communal society simply is not yet available to her imagination. She cannot yet imagine a world free of thralldom. She has come upon a temporary home-away-from-home, but it is not home. She must leave. The 'ending'

cannot be this simple.

The Sending Boat takes her from isle to isle. Yes, it is a magical creation of the evil force of her witch, but it is also a creation of her own subconscious, guiding her from step to step, and insisting she experience whatever the next isle has to offer. It will eventually deposit her on the 'mainland' – the land of real people, where her imagination need no longer create visionary islands.

The second island in her imagination's journey is the Isle of the Young and the Old. Knowing nothing of grownups, she naturally would next envision a possibly perfect world as peopled only by the very young, who have neither sinned nor suffered, and an overly eager elder figure, who, despite his obsequiousness and hospitable warmth, clearly represents a possible danger. This imaginary world also does not work. She has to leave. She has to consider what the life of adults might be like.

That is the attempt she makes in her visits to the next two islands. She peoples both with adults – but she turns them all into zombies. They sit in the dining halls of their respective castles in a trance: on the Isle of Queens they are women mourning a dead king, and on the Isle of Kings, the reverse. She can summon up what they would look like but not how they might act. From the Isle of Increase Unsought, she had learned that women without their men are stymied, imprisoned, impotent. That is how she portrays them for herself on the Isle of Queens. When she reverses it on the Isle of Kings, the result is no better, and perhaps yet more threatening. Another failure. She has to leave.

So far, nothing has worked. She is out of ideas. And that is why the next island of her imagination must be the Isle of Nothing. No people, no scenery, no buildings, no direction, no way out. Of all the dead ends, this is the deadest. Birdalone is surrounded there by a fog and cannot find her way back to the shore and the Sending Boat. No matter how far she roams, she finds herself always walking in *circles*. Here is the ultimate horror – a rounded binary form that allows for no progression, no resolution, no cadential closure. She escapes only by magic, burning a hair of Habundia's that provides directionality and leads her back to the shore. It is terrifying for her – and highly unsettling for the reader. You can imagine what a skilled film director would do with this scene.

She finally reaches the mainland, the 'real' world, where imagination stops and experience begins. I wish I could take you through each of the many scenes, to show you the careful way Morris adds experience upon experience, each one contributing to her growth. She learns how to interact with people. She learns how to fend off the amorous advances of almost every man she meets. She learns how to manipulate people. And because, when she meets Arthur, she experiences sexual and emotional longing not in the abstract (which had begun to happen all the way back at the witch's hut), but directed towards a real person, she learns how to concentrate on her own needs, even to the detriment of others. Earlier, she had learned how to fight against tyranny by appropriate disobedience; now she discovers how to break the rules to gain her own ends, even though it destroy the communal equanimity and order. As a result of her self-concerns, exacerbated by her long wait for the heroes to return triumphant with their ladies, she puts herself in such danger that one of the three men, Baudoin, must die. As a result, one of the three women loses her man, and another loses the love of her intended. In short, it's a mess.

Baudoin's death is precisely the mid-point of this work. From it, everything must be reversed and eventually played over again. The book is actually in the form of a huge chiasmus: every geographic move that happens happens again, in reverse order. But before Birdalone may journey back to her two first homes, she has yet to journey further. She has had the courage and character to give up Arthur and the safe place in which she could have lived. (Everyone had forgiven her; but she had not yet forgiven herself.) Having learned so much about life, she settles down to live in the City of the Five Crafts, in a good Morrisian sense, by using her art and her craft to become one of the city's finest embroiderers. She is reunited with her mother, with whom she spends five peaceful (but not yet entirely fulfilling) years. When her mother dies, Birdalone must turn around and begin her long journey back, altering the islands in her mind in accordance with the altered state of her own maturity.

Thus, this time around, the Isle of Nothing can be nothing like the Isle of Nothing of her earlier visit. Indeed, it is green and lush and peopled by delightful young folk who are building a meaningful life for themselves. This she could not have conceived of five years earlier. And this would be a fine place to live, if she had not the need to bring her life

full circle. It is a utopian vision, but not her final resting place. With a glimpse of what life could be like, she moves on. On her arrival at the Isle of Kings, she finds numerous young and beautiful women, who mistake her, since she is dressed in male garb, for the lord for whom they have been waiting. When they discover she is female, they turn malevolent. She now can see the error of this island: the sole purpose of a woman's life is *not* to wait eternally for a man to show up. On she goes.

She finds the Isle of Queens now populated by live, lustful men. Not yet being fully able to control men, she requires the help of one of them to fend off the violent advances of another. As recompense, he insists that she tell him the story of her life. This is psychologically the right moment for her to review it all in her mind, one last time, in preparation for the arduous of the final two islands and the potentially traumatic return to the witch's hut. Her reconstruction of the Isle of the Young and the Old also makes perfect sense. The old man has disappeared, because she is now sufficiently in control of her own life not to require the presence of an older generation. The youngsters have multiplied and are busy scratching out an existence, doing about as well as she might have done had she stayed there the first time through. She leaves before evening because 'she deemed it would not be restful to her to abide among all these restless children, with their ceaseless crying and yelping'.⁴ Childhood, then, has become noxious to her. She therefore makes this isle the shortest of her stays, and on she goes, to confront adulthood.

The last island figment of her imagination should now be predictable. The land that had been her immature vision of what a perfect, free, luxurious life might be, in which everything grows without the need of labour, is transformed into a wilderness that recalls for us the original Isle of Nothing.⁵ It leaves her in the same kind of mental bind, with a different but resonant result. She finds the Sending Boat has disappeared, leaving her literally stranded. Once again to fight off despair she relies on the burning of a hair of Habundia, which she has kept with her all these years in case of extreme need. But this time, 'nothing' happens: she sees no guiding light, senses no Habundian presence. Instead, she looks to herself to summon the ability to persevere. Shedding all her worldly possessions and all her clothes, she gives herself to the water, saying, '[1] Who wotteth what Weird may do, [2] or

where the waters may bear me? [3] And there is no stronger swimmer than I (p. 313). And there you have it – the utterance of her hard-gained maturity: [1] She does not try to outguess fate; [2] she knows she will be able to cope with whatever may come; and [3] she can rely with confidence on her own hardiness and skill. In other words, she is ready to go home.

She arrives on the shore of the witch's hut naked, just as she had left it. It is somewhat equivalent to the arrival at the beginning of the second Minuet section. We are home; but there is yet more to do before we are done. The matured Birdalone who returns is a significantly different person from the ingenue who left it. She finds the witch dead. In one sense, this is simply part of the plot: the witch has died before Birdalone's return. But in another, more interesting sense, this is a psychological triumph: whatever the witch represented to Birdalone before is now dead and gone. Essentially, Birdalone has killed the witch, by maturing, by gaining control of herself, by freeing herself from all the oppressions and limitations of her childhood.

She meets Habundia in the wood again. Birdalone has aged, but Habundia still looks exactly like the 17-year-old thrall she used to tutor. Again in one sense this is simply part of the plot: Habundia's appearance did not age. But more interestingly, this is a psychological triumph: Birdalone needs to see how young she used to be in order to judge how mature she has become. When Habundia enters the witch's hut, a place, being indoors, in which she has no power, she faints and must be revived by a kiss from Birdalone. The student has become the teacher. The child has become the mother.

This easily *could* have been the end of the book. But Birdalone has yet other cadential cadences to effect. She must find and rescue, with Habundia's help, the raving wildman her lover Arthur has become, to bring him back to sanity and usefulness. She then must reconvene the community shattered by her self-centeredness a half a book ago, by reuniting the remnants of the original group, not on the shore by the witch's hut, but all the way back through the forest, in Utterhay, the city in which she was born. The community is restored, and the grandest of all the circular, chiasmic movements is brought to closure. All the binary forms still left open are now resolved.

Morris has accomplished something quite remarkable: he has combined the psychological force of the fairy tale with the inundative

detail of the full extension of a novel to present the compelling maturation process of a young woman striving to find her way in a predominantly male world. We can see better, perhaps, why Yeats said of Morris's prose romances that they were 'the only books I was ever to read slowly that I might not come too quickly to the end'.⁶

NOTES

1. Morris used circularity a number of times in these late prose romances. See Pauline Dewan, 'Circular Designs in Morris's *The Story of the Glittering Plain*', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 12: 4 (1998), pp. 15–20.
2. For a penetrating look at the natural cycles that make up the structure of romance in general, see Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). For a yet more formalist approach, see Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, revised by Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).
3. There is still a relative lack of critical attention paid to the late romances, aside from the work of Carole Silver, Richard Mathews, and Amanda Hodgson. The best works currently available are the following: Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Frederick Kirchoff, ed., *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris* (New York: The William Morris Society, 1976); Richard Mathews, *An Introductory Guide to the Utopian and Fantasy Writing of William Morris* (London: William Morris Centre, 1976); Richard Mathews, *Worlds Beyond the World: The Fantastic Vision of William Morris* (San Bernardino, CA: The Borgo Press, 1978); Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982); Norman Talbot, 'Introduction' to William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994); William Butler Yeats, Review of *The Well at the World's End*, *Bookman* (November 1896), pp. 37–38.
4. William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, ed. Norman Talbot (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 310. Future page references to

this edition given in the text.

5. Morris insisted that his late romances were purely literary and not intended as a furthering of his social commentary. When a reviewer of his *Wood Beyond the World* insisted that book was a socialist allegory, Morris responded: 'I had not the least intention of thrusting an allegory into *The Wood Beyond the World*: it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with nothing didactic about it. If I have to write or speak on social problems, I always try to be as direct as I possibly can be'. Quote from Philip Henderson, ed., *The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), p. 371. Despite this disclaimer, Morris clearly retained his long-held view of what the world could be as he wrote these tales of how the world should be. For a short but excellent look at how Morris's social views play out in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, see Richard Mathews' *Worlds Beyond the World*, cited above, pp. 51–57.
6. William Butler Yeats, *Autobiography* (London: Collier-MacMillan Ltd., 1965), p. 94.