William Morris and the Uses of Nostalgia: Memory in the Early and Late Poetry

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William Morris's first volume of verse, *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858), features heavily stylized representations of a medieval past that, in typically Pre-Raphaelite fashion, tends to merge with fantasy and myth.[1] For all its vivid pageantry, the collection renders both history and legend faraway and unreal. Often couching his descriptions of long-ago eras in conventional ballad forms and archaic language, Morris associates the linguistic and thematic preservation of time gone by with cryptic stasis; his condensed and repetitive stanzas, many of which fracture or immobilize the sequential trajectory of plot, do just as much as his temporally distant settings to make his poems dreamlike and enigmatic. Thus, in *The Defence of Guenevere*, focusing on the remote past may mean withdrawing from present reality. Nostalgic escapism appears to preclude engagement with topical issues.

In this essay, I juxtapose a representative selection from this volume with one of Morris's overtly political poems of the 1880s. By considering these two works' similar formal traits (particularly their refrains), which illuminate their

ABSTRACT: The stylized medievalism of William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858)—often expressed in cryptically condensed and iterative ballad stanzas—appears to reflect asocial and escapist nostalgia. Memory, however, is politicized in the *Chants for Socialists* that Morris wrote during the 1880s and early 1890s. These poems' conventional and repetitive forms underscore the communal nature of identity, and their commemoration of the dead awakens activist fervor. Yet readings of two representative poems reveal vital continuities between Morris's early and late poetry; after all, the *Chants* are also at times nostalgic in their admiration of pre-capitalist communities and their urge to cultivate imaginative solidarity with past eras. And paradoxically, in *The Defence of Guenevere*, self-justifying poetic beauty that uses retrospection to resist the demands of an industrializing society can itself lay claim to political utility.
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attitudes toward memory, I evaluate Morris's views on the social role of verse. The contrasting modes of his early and late poetry, it turns out, are mutually informative where this topic is concerned and need not be at odds.

John Hollander believes that "refrains are, and have, memories—of their prior strophes or stretches of text, of their own pre-occurrences, and of their own genealogies in earlier texts" (138). To investigate formally-inflected remembrance in *The Defence of Guenevere*, then, I turn to one of Morris's best-known refrains. "Two Red Roses across the Moon" tells of a knight who triumphs in battle and wins the heart of an embowered lady. Its title, which repeats at the end of each stanza, encapsulates Morris's nostalgic proclivities—both in its medievalist overtones (according to Morris, this phrase describes the knight's coat of arms) and in its formal links to early English ballads, in which the refrain often seems unrelated to the storyline. Indeed, "Two Red Roses" displays this volume's signature tendency to offer striking quasi-symbolic images that apparently do little to elucidate narrative and character, generating what one contemporary reviewer calls "luminous indistinctness" (Garnett 227):

> There was a lady lived in a hall,
> Large in the eyes, and slim and tall;
> And ever she sung from noon to noon,
> *Two red roses across the moon.*
>
> There was a knight came riding by
> In early spring, when the roads were dry;
> And he heard that lady sing at the noon,
> *Two red roses across the moon.*
>
> Yet none the more he stopped at all,
> But he rode a-gallop past the hall;
> And left that lady singing at noon,
> *Two red roses across the moon.*
>
> Because, forsooth, the battle was set,
> And the scarlet and blue had got to be met,
> He rode on the spur till the next warm noon;—
> *Two red roses across the moon.*
>
> But the battle was scattered from hill to hill,
> From the windmill to the watermill;
> And he said to himself, as it neared the noon,
> *Two red roses across the moon.*
>
> You scarce could see for the scarlet and blue,
> A golden helm or a golden shoe;

So he cried, as the fight grew thick at the noon,
Two red roses across the moon!

Verily then the gold bore through
The huddled spears of the scarlet and blue;
And they cried, as they cut them down at the noon,
Two red roses across the moon!

I trow he stopped when he rode again
By the hall, though draggled sore with the rain;
And his lips were pinched to kiss at the noon
Two red roses across the moon.

Under the may she stooped to the crown,
All was gold, there was nothing of brown;
And the horns blew up in the hall at noon,
Two red roses across the moon. (*Defence* 223–25)

This poem's narrative begins in the most flatly uninflected manner possible: "There was a lady. ... There was a knight." These two come together chiefly because their status as stock characters means that their union is predestined. "*Two red roses across the moon,*" which adorns the end of each stanza with an italicized alliterative flourish as well as an eye-catching image, makes repetitive patterns of sound, text, and color more conspicuous than plot or protagonists. In place of dialogic exchanges or logical transitions, "Two Red Roses" provides chantlike monotony (as exemplified in the "noon / moon" rhyme) and atemporal eternity ("*ever* she sung. ... *Two red roses*"). And dividing the quatrains into couplets in order to accommodate "noon / moon" allows both formal sameness and formal discontinuity—the frequent stops and re-starts produced by two-line units—to overshadow and disrupt the storyline. This memorably compact and iterative poem cues readers to recall riddling language that underscores notable narrative omissions (narrative predictability notwithstanding). The violent climax, for instance, offers pleasing assonance and consonance ("b*att*le was sc*att*ered") and shimmering colors ("the scarlet and blue, / A golden helm or a golden shoe"), but does not explain who these combatants are and why they are fighting. Even the subject and object of "*they* cut *them* down" are ambiguous. Likewise, the refrain exhibits the regressive indeterminacy of medieval nostalgia by furnishing Morris's characters with dimly evocative heraldic iconography in place of distinguishing traits or clear motives.[2] Archaic imagistic trappings—the roses, the figures of the knight and lady, the battle scene that becomes a mosaic—create a surreal atmosphere in which familiar yet disorienting details impede and stand in for plot progression.

Paradoxically, locating his poems in the historical past appears to erode historical specificity for Morris, whose protagonists in *The Defence of Guenevere* (surrounded though they are by medieval contextual signifiers) tend to be blurrily generic and to possess little by way of inner life. Their exploits are often based on, or are nebulous enough to resemble, well-known tales. Such echoes of familiar content, especially when couched in prefabricated balladic forms, link temporal distance to departicularized impersonality and seem to sever Morris's poetry from lived experience. Thematic and formal nostalgia in "Two Red Roses" renders the past inert and mannered, and the plot sketchy and fragmented.

Yet this poem's refrain does take on concrete referents. Aside from the coat of arms, it is the lady's song; it is a substitute for blood in the battle scene; it is a war cry; it is a wedding fanfare; it is a sign that passion has eclipsed virginal isolation; perhaps it is even the lady's mouth set in her pale face, or the lovers' lips meeting. As it accumulates associations, it advances the storyline after all— albeit in an oblique and circular manner, and largely because its repetitiveness makes any subtle alteration prominent.[3] It comes to comprise the very narrative causality that it threatens to thwart or obscure. When the knight uses this protean phrase to hearten his troops, "so" replaces the more common "and" in that stanza's third line, showing that the refrain can influence the action rather than simply featuring in lists of events. Simultaneously occluding and encapsulating plot, "*Two red roses across the moon*" does the same for the knight's character. It is the only phrase he speaks aloud; readers are not told outright of his obsession with the lady, but each stanza's inevitable return to her song reveals his need to return to her. And in a rhythmic context rife with double offbeats that imitate the sound of the knight's galloping horse ("lived in a hall," "large in the eyes," "sing at the noon"), the three consecutive stressed syllables of "*Two red ro-*" slow the meter and indicate his urge to linger. At first distracting from his quest as it signals the nostalgic desire to delay or turn back, the haunting refrain that he internalizes ultimately helps to motivate that quest.

Because it can sound either like an arbitrary intrusion ("He rode on the spur till the next warm noon;— / *Two red roses across the moon*") or like a smooth continuation of the poem's syntax ("And he heard that lady sing at the noon, / *Two red roses across the moon*"), this refrain both obstructs and drives plot-making and characterization. If it were entirely autonomous and disconnected from the story, it would decisively elevate stasis and recurrence over teleology. Morris, though, also gives iterative form the power to constitute and reconfigure plot. A similar pattern surfaces in the pages below, with the claim that self-justifying beauty can be a political instrument.

Ballad is historically a folk form. But in *The Defence of Guenevere*, Morris stylizes and rarefies it, sometimes making it opaque and abstruse or divorcing it from human emotion. As the century progresses, some Victorians embrace this alienated poetic mode; it does not, however, satisfy Morris. In 1879, four years before becoming a socialist, he muses that, "as to poetry, I don't know, and I don't know. The verse would come easy enough if I had only a subject which would fill my heart and mind: but to write verse for the sake of writing is a crime in a man of my years and experience" (*Letters* 524). Without a cause behind it, poetry—especially poetry that is frequently rendered luminously indistinct by its nostalgic themes and forms—can feel trivial and self-indulgent. As Morris grows more politically conscious, he seems to fear inhabiting an aesthetic in which gorgeously evasive images may eclipse morals and plots—a worry that reflects increasing Victorian skepticism about the social usefulness of short lyrical poetry in a novel-dominated age.[4] After *The Defence of Guenevere* meets with a cool reception, he stops publishing verse for almost a decade. When he returns to it, he does so with *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), a long narrative work.

But Morris does use brief poems as vehicles for topical commentary. During the 1880s and early 1890s, he writes a series of political verses that are collected as *Chants for Socialists* (1885, with several subsequent reprintings). As the title implies, these often-balladic *Chants* employ the shared heritage of folk forms to imitate the unified voice of the masses. Many replace the singular "I" with a universalizing "we" that encompasses and unites workers of different eras; their speakers' depersonalized nature is directly linked to their socialist message, permitting Morris to balance individual authorship with textual communitarianism.[5] A desire to include all oppressed people in the narrative of popular uprising underlies the *Chants*' tendency to keep their characters' identities and situations somewhat vague. These poems were read from pulpits, recited at socialist meetings, and sung to familiar tunes at rallies. They are often compact, iterative, formally conventional, hypnotically rhythmic, backward-looking, impersonal, mnemonic, and non-specific in the service not of hazy fantasy but of emphatic instruction, collaborative voicing, and emotional fellowship that cues action. Elizabeth K. Helsinger proposes that the rousing *Chants* "retune bodies and hearts to the collective rhythms of a productive social life yet to be" by accessing "the shared temporality of ballad and song" (*Thought of Song* 153–54).[6]

It might appear counterintuitive to challenge entrenched systems via orderly and orthodox forms. Yet Elizabeth Carolyn Miller remarks on the Victorian "imperative to preserve collective tradition from the assaults of capitalist modernity" by writing ballads, a reappropriation of nostalgia that

also broadens the audience for socialist propaganda by making demands
for radical change seem reassuringly familiar (178). What's more, the same
repetitive and incantatory formal tactics that threaten to produce inert medie-
valized indistinctness in Morris's early poems associate his *Chants* speakers with
onward-marching determination and with inspiring connections to previous
generations of like-minded singers. A fulfilled laborer, says Morris, relies on
tradition: "Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own
thoughts, but the thoughts of the men of past ages guide his hands; and, as a
part of the human race, he creates" (*Signs of Change* 144). Thus, using balladic
forms makes engaging with literary history a populist political act. It turns the
poet into an artisan who calls on the powerful conventions of his craft, and
whose remembrances prevent him from becoming a slavish automaton. This
poet uses his memory-inflected visions to summon comrades past and to shape
the future, not to view days gone by through a dreamy mist.

 "A Death Song," though it was written too late to appear in the original
1885 version of *Chants for Socialists*, was subsequently included in this collection.
It commemorates Alfred Linnell, who was trampled to death by a policeman's
horse during an 1887 protest; it was issued as a leaflet and sung en masse at
his funeral. Although this poem differs from many other *Chants* in its use of
pentameter and its focus on a particular occurrence, its quatrain-plus-refrain
structure and its method of generalizing specific memories provide revealing
points of comparison with "Two Red Roses across the Moon":

> What cometh here from west to east awending?
> And who are these, the marchers stern and slow?
> We bear the message that the rich are sending
> Aback to those who bade them wake and know.
> *Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,*
> *But one and all if they would dusk the day.*
>
> We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,
> They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;
> We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning:
> We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.
> *Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,*
> *But one and all if they would dusk the day.*
>
> They will not learn; they have no ears to hearken.
> They turn their faces from the eyes of fate;
> Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken.
> But, lo! this dead man knocking at the gate.
> *Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,*
> *But one and all if they would dusk the day.*

> Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison;
> Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest;
> But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen
> Brings us our day of work to win the best.
> *Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,*
> *But one and all if they would dusk the day.* (*Chants* 75–76)

This poem's refrain, written to be uttered by many voices in unison, uses consecutive caesurae ("Not one, not one, nor thousands") to emphasize the expansion of selfhood. Identity is not evacuated or made inscrutable, as it often is in *The Defence of Guenevere*; it instead becomes communal, as Morris underscores the deep-rooted solidarity of the "we" and the broad relevance of Linnell's fate. Repetition, far from being cryptic or static, gathers rhetorical force as it turns "not *one*" into "*one* and all." "*Two red roses across the moon*" can sound like an arbitrary impediment to plot. Here, however, the inevitable reappearance of the "not one" couplet mirrors the narrative of socialism's inevitable triumph (reflected in the transformation of "slay" into "day") and the unstoppable progress of a people who persevere despite all obstacles. "A Death Song" is set in *ababcc* stanzas (in contrast to "Two Red Roses," which is rhymed *aabb*), which makes its refrain more a culminating summation of the quatrains than a disorienting interruption.

In several ways, this poem's formal and thematic concern with remembrance typifies the *Chants*. Morris's refrain nostalgically invokes the politicized balladry mentioned above. In *The Defence of Guenevere*, the past remains largely two-dimensional; it might seem that Morris's focus on the present and future in his socialist verse—even when that verse features well-worn stanza forms—requires a turn away from thematic engagement with history, which may harden into decorative immobility and undermine plotted teleology. Instead of disowning retrospection, however, the *Chants* attempt to make the past useful in the here and now.

"A Death Song" undertakes this task with reference to the recent past and in an elegiac mode. Beginning its final stanza with "here lies," this funeral poem almost functions as Linnell's gravestone inscription. It seeks to bring about measurable change by preserving this man in memory, associating the recollection of violent death not with an obscure chivalric conflict but with the hopeful framework of martyrdom for a larger cause; "A Death Song" may be dirge-like, but it ends with a heartening image of sunrise that is anticipated in the opening line's movement "from west to east."[7] Recounting previous events ("We *asked* them") sparks action in the present ("We *come* back"). Remembrance, as it transcends individual selfhood, cultivates a galvanizing continuity and imaginative sympathy with the past rather than a trance-like estrangement from it.

In his divergent attitudes toward memory, then, Morris appears to outline two very different roles for poetry: it can help society progress, or it can retreat to a palace of art. Further consideration of the *Chants*' attitude toward history as well as toward elegiac commemoration, however, will clarify the common ground between Morris the weaver of fantasies and Morris the energetic activist. After all, even in his early poetry, writing ballad stanzas can be seen as a subtly political act. And his deliberately imperfect medieval reminiscences can do more than supply a series of ladies and knights, flowing hair and shining swords, archaic phrases and escapist yearnings; they can also shape his socialist aesthetics.[8]

Morris tends to convert the Middle Ages into a model of fulfilled labor and of art's vital place in the lives of the people—an idealized pre-capitalist time in which cooperation and group identity took precedence over competitive egoism. His radical utopianism and yen for revolutionary justice are thus driven by the same "historicism as nostalgia" that apparently produces asocial detachment from both past and present in *The Defence of Guenevere* (Livesey 29). The *Chants* do at times figure the past as benighted, which prompts them to correct its injustices; when they instead figure it as enlightened or inspiring, they tap into Morris's romanticizing medievalism.[9] "The Voice of Toil" (1884), for example, speaks of a time "when Earth was younger. … / In hope we strove, and our hands were strong" (lines 5–6). "The Day is Coming" (1883) longs to reclaim "the woodland beauty, and the happy fields we till; / And the homes of ancient stories, the tombs of the mighty dead" (lines 24–25). A backward glance offers a look ahead at a life that could be re-attained, as well as a means of advancing toward that life by awakening reformist fervor. In this context, the doublings-back of refrain hint at a return to past values. In fact, "Down among the Dead Men" (1885) at one point uses its refrain to praise the Linnell-like "unforgotten dead" in order to strengthen the invigorating bonds of present-day comradeship (line 26). Humanity's shared aspirations unite bygone eras and the here and now, making retrospection future-oriented. It is fitting that in "The Message of the March Wind" (1885), an "old tune" helps spur "uprising to deeds" (lines 70, 72); historical, elegiac, and formal memories engender not dreamy enervation but zealous energy.

It is Morris's politicization of aesthetics that uncovers the most telling continuities between *The Defence of Guenevere* and *Chants for Socialists*. Despite his concern about writing "for the sake of writing," he does not insist that art must be didactic; human happiness is intrinsically valuable, and art is both a

source and an emblem of it (*Letters* 524).[10] Morris explains that one ought to love beauty both "for its own sake" and because it is "a symbol of a decent and reasonable life" (*Art and Socialism* 106). Symmetrical stanza patterns can signify concord, harmony, and balance, and well-ordered loveliness betokens "societal commonweal in which social iniquities would be erased" (Weinroth 64). Indeed, Holbrook Jackson characterizes all Morris's poetry as propaganda because "everything he created was a lure to Utopia, an invitation to follow him into a new world" (302). Poems that bring joy to writers and readers both adumbrate and attempt to re-establish a humanistic civilization in which all work is purposeful, people are free from unjust burdens, and everyone therefore has leisure time to enjoy artistic creations simply because they are beautiful.[11] Repetition in "Two Red Roses" constitutes the very plotmaking it resists; similarly, the utility of art can derive partly from its indifference to utility.

In pointing out the usefulness of beauty, Morris ties it to memory. He remarks in 1891 that, through historical retrospection, the work of skilled creators can invoke a politically charged "idea of Art which once was common to the whole people" (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 306). Unlike the exploited modern laborer, Morris in *The Defence of Guenevere* can devote his whole intellect to making something exquisite, in part by reminiscing about a nobler world in which this process was not unusual. Furthermore, fashioning a static poetic realm that seeks to arrest or preserve time, particularly in highly conventional stanzas, may itself constitute a tacit protest against the demands of an accelerating and industrializing Victorian society. Thus the escapist nostalgia of the medievalist volume is politically significant, both on its own merits and because the historical era in which *Guenevere* takes refuge is one that Morris would later use (in the *Chants* and elsewhere) to conceptualize the future of liberated craftsmanship that is the rightful inheritance of every worker. Wistful yearning for a pre-capitalist society can breed active engagement with contemporary culture; "historical distance," which makes it possible to reimagine time gone by, "paradoxically serves as a way for the reader to relate to … the past" (Lindskog 470) in a manner that "redirect[s] our intentions for the future" (Latham, Introduction viii).[12]

Of course, Morris was not a socialist in 1858, and *The Defence of Guenevere* does not represent activism in disguise. But scholarship will benefit from considering both the divergences and the compelling affinities between the poet's belated balladic medievalism and his overtly political perspective on beauty and memory.

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NOTES

1. On the unreality of the past in Morris, see Pater and Spatt.

2. My reading of this poem draws on Elizabeth K. Helsinger's discussion of color, heraldry, nostalgia, and narrative (*Pre-Raphaelite Arts* 4, 67–71, 77–79). McGann, Hassett, and Kelvin scrutinize the self-reflexive, impersonal, and anti-narrative qualities of Morris's imagery.

3. I am indebted to Silver (13–14), Furse Jackson (30–31), Armstrong (245), and Lourie (9) for their astute interpretations of the refrain. Sadoff analyzes Morris's shifting poetic iterations (110 and *passim*).

4. As Boos says, Morris "regarded clarity as an imperative" in his verse once he became a socialist (251).

5. Janowitz assesses Morris's communal subjectivities (11–13, 20–23, 30–33).

6. Related claims appear in Waters (128–33, 138–40), Kocmanova (241), and Vaninskaya (64). Glasier (xiii, 5) and Salmon (37) consider the mnemonic nature of the *Chants*; Helsinger examines, as I do, the "trans-temporal fellowship" they create (*Thought of Song* 158).

7. Hanson also treats the topic of communalized violence (137).

8. The fact that Morris juxtaposes medieval and political selections in *Poems by the Way* (1891) implies that he saw continuities between them. Sussman (104) and Maltz (137–40) evaluate Morris's socialist aesthetics; Herbert (313–15) does so through the lens of memory.

9. See also Livesey (11–12, 26, 155).

10. I question the contrast Holland draws between "propagandistic instrumentality" and "aesthetic autonomy" (8).

11. This paragraph echoes points I make in a forthcoming article in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, co-authored with Sabine Roeser and Caroline Nevejan.

12. According to Gaunt, the Round Table helped spark Morris's interest in justice and equality (227). See also Latham, "The Pre-Raphaelite Tongue."

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