A Church without God: William Morris’s ‘A night in a Cathedral’

by Helen Timo

One of the most passionate expressions of the young William Morris’s love of churches is to be found in a short prose tale of the 1850s which has received very little critical attention. Entitled ‘A Night in a Cathedral’, it appeared in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in May 1856. Although it was published anonymously, that this tale is from Morris’s pen is clear both from the style and the subject-matter. Moreover, both Temple Scott in *A Bibliography of the Works of William Morris* (London: Bell, 1897) and Aymer Vallance in *William Morris: His Art, His Writings, and His Public Life: A Record* (London: Bell, 1897) attribute the tale to Morris. Curiously, however, the tale is neither mentioned by J.W. Mackail in his *Life of William Morris* (first published in 1899), nor included in the first volume of Morris’s *Collected Works* which contains all Morris’s other *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* prose tales. Perhaps May Morris, who edited the *Collected Works*, felt that ‘A Night in a Cathedral’ was too immature or too overtly biographical to enhance her father’s literary reputation, but she may have simply overlooked the tale. In the absence of any conclusive evidence we can only speculate. This forgotten tale is most interesting for the tension which it depicts between the narrator’s passionate response to Amiens Cathedral as beautiful living history, and his chilling realization that there is no loving God at the heart of it. Although it is dangerous to identify the narrator too closely with Morris himself, since the tale is plainly a fiction designed to arouse pleasant shudders of anticipation in its readers, the very choice of
subject-matter sheds some light on Morris’s preoccupations at the time of its composition.

‘A Night in a Cathedral’ appears to be loosely based on biographical fact. The narrator visits Amiens Cathedral while on a walking tour of north-west France, just as Morris himself did in the summer vacations of 1854 and 1855. Awed by its beauty, the narrator returns to the cathedral after dinner to examine it more closely. As he wanders around the darkening building, we begin to notice an inner conflict between the responses required by his conventional Christian upbringing and his profound feelings of admiration for man. While it is still light enough to see the glorious rose windows and exquisite carving, the narrator feels ‘nothing graver than love’. He takes pride in the cathedral ‘as a glorious work of man, may, felt vain myself that I was a man also, like those who had planned and built this miracle of beauty’. However, this assertion of the narrator’s feeling of fellowship with the medieval craftsmen; this delight in man and his creative potential, is followed by an almost guilty recollection of what should be the thoughts of a Christian in the house of God ‘... I saw it as the house of God, and all my pride was bowed down, and I was filled full of awe and humility.’ As he passes through chapels filled with kneeling men and women, the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’ feels ‘some shame, or at the least, regret, that I was not praying with them.’ It would appear that this narrator, like Morris himself at this time, has ceased to visit churches and cathedrals for any but aesthetic reasons. It is the glorious architecture and the far off sound of voices chanting which most delight Morris’s narrator.

As the lights in the Cathedral are gradually extinguished, darkness hides the work of the men of the Middle Ages, living men and women desert the building and the narrator is plunged into a corresponding darkness of spirit. When he eventually rouses himself and attempts to leave the building, he discovers to his horror that all the doors had been locked. The eminent architect George Edmund Street, to whom Morris was articled in 1856, once underwent a similar experience. In 1841 Street had himself been articled to a Mr Owen Carter, an architect practising in Winchester. The young Street had spent much of
his time sketching and measuring Winchester Cathedral and had often worked until it was too dark to see properly. Street and the organist were frequently the only occupants of the great building. A.E. Street tells us in his Memoir of his father:

One evening, when the strains of the organ had made my father quite forgetful of the present, he suddenly awoke to the consciousness that the sound had ceased, and at the same moment heard the door clang and the key turn in the lock. He flew to the door, not relishing the idea of being imprisoned for the night, and by banging it managed to attract the attention of the verger. The old man seemed considerably astonished that my father should have been so anxious to attract his notice, and said, ‘Lor’ bless you, sir, if you’d rung one of the bells, we should have come soon enough.’

In a similar manner, the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’ hurries from door to door of Amiens Cathedral in mounting panic. He pushes and examines each one in search of escape and finally becomes quite desperate ‘... I rushed to the west door; I shook it with all my force, I struck it with both my fists, I hurled my weight frantically against it, but no answer came, except hollow reverberations, after which the stillness deepened tenfold’. It is quite possible that Morris heard of Street’s youthful incarceration in Winchester Cathedral from the architect himself, with whom he was on good terms, and allowed his imagination to embroider upon the experience.

Another possible source of inspiration for ‘A Night in a Cathedral’, in view of Morris’s great admiration for the works of Charles Dickens, is The Chimes: A Goblin Story. The latter, which first appeared in Christmas 1843 as the second of The Christmas Books, opens with the words: ‘There are not many people... who would care to sleep in a church’. Like the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’. Dickens’s Toby Veck spends the night in a church. He is not shut in, however, but enters the church at the call of the spirits of the Chimes.

R.W. Dixon, reminiscing about his student days at Oxford, recalled the impassioned rendering once given by Morris of Claudio’s speech from Measure for Measure on the horror and mystery of death. That horror is a vivid reality to the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’. His imagination peoples the surrounding darkness with the participants in an appallingly
graphic dance of death: 'The skeletons rose from beneath the stones — thin, white ghosts glided before me; the fiends in the tympanum, and from under the feet of the saints, thronged into the church, and menaced me; the gargoyles followed them, and played uncouth antics all about me; on the floor, in the triforium, in the stalls — mowing and grimacing at me'. The arguments of reason are ineffectual in calming Morris's narrator. While he thinks of the cathedral as the abode of a remote and stern Deity, the narrator is afraid; it is only when he conceives of it as a building dedicated to the memory of great men and the celebration of human values that he feels some comfort. In an attempt to control the rising waves of hysteria, Morris's protagonist tries to pierce the darkness and make out the details of the architecture. He remembers having been particularly struck by the expression of heavenly repose on the faces of some of the figures carved in the aisles of the choir. However, the tormented narrator, a man of the sceptical nineteenth century, cannot share the serene, child-like faith held by the medieval man and depicted in his art. Morris's protagonist can only see 'foul and ugly faces, of demons and wicked men'.

Perilously close to hysteria, Morris's narrator tries to distract his mind by imagining that a mass is being performed in the cathedral. In an autobiographical letter to Andreas Scheu of 5 September 1883, Morris wrote that, during his Oxford years, he had fallen under the influence of the 'High Church or Puseyite school', and signs of this influence are evident in the description of the beauties of the Roman Catholic service given by the narrator of 'A Night in a Cathedral'. Notably it is the aesthetic appeal of the mass rather than its spiritual significance that is emphasized. The strains of the organ and the solemn yet joyful tones of the choir attract him. Mackail tells us that Morris used to belong to the Plainsong Society in his student days. The narrator of 'A Night in a Cathedral' bases his imaginary mass on his recollections of the Mozart Requiem, heard at Exeter Hall, which had opened in London's Strand in 1831. The fact that the narrator's rather vague conception of a Catholic mass should involve the music of Mozart confirms that the feelings of awe aroused in him by the ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church are fundamentally aesthetic in origin rather than spiritual. Morris's
protagonist is attracted by the trappings of Roman Catholicism rather than by the Roman Catholic faith itself and he is typical of his age in this respect. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), John Ruskin urges that Romanism be deprived of ‘the miserable influence which its pomp and picturesqueness have given it over the weak sentimentalism of the English people . . . .’ Ruskin is scornful of those who are ‘lured into the Romanist Church by the glitter of it, like larks into a trap by broken glass; to be blown into a change of religion by the whine of an organ-pipe stitched into a new creed by gold threads on priests’ petticoats; jangled into a change of conscience by the chimes of a belfry’. In the letter to Scheu, we learn that Morris’s Puseyite leanings were ‘corrected by the books of John Ruskin which were at the time a sort of revelation to me . . . .’

Morris’s lifelong preoccupation with the idea of the church as the product and expression of the community which built it and gathered in it, is illustrated in this tale by the narrator’s attempt to summon up, with the aid of imagination, the cathedral’s builders and its earliest congregations. As in ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, which had appeared in the January issue of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Morris here reveals his fascination with the figure of the medieval master mason. The narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’ envisions another man like Walter of the January tale, ‘the architect himself . . . the chief designer of this grandeur and beauty, but himself a workman like the rest, a master mason’. Even at this early period in his life, Morris’s ideas on artistic creation are egalitarian. However, there is a barrier between Morris’s narrator and the craftsmen of the Middle Ages similar to that which separates the Dreamer and the hedge-priest in Morris’s later romance *A Dream of John Ball*. The imaginary master mason is reverently carving a statue of the Virgin and its beauty is the product not merely of his superb craftsmanship, but also of his intense and unquestioning Christian faith. It is the same faith which the narrator saw on the carved faces of the figures in the choir aisles. Since the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’ cannot share the unquestioning piety of the men and women of the thirteenth century, his dream of the past turns into a nightmare. The ‘stern knights and sad priests rose from their graves,
skeletons with armour and robes dangling and folding about them, making the night hideous beyond endurance'. It is at this point that the narrator loses self-control entirely and, after a frantic and futile assault on the cathedral's west door, bursts into tears. The tears are followed by 'a quieter kind of despair' and the narrator falls into a kind of trance in which he sees 'visions' which seem to be reflections of his mental anguish and feelings of isolation and of alienation from the rest of mankind. Perhaps the most interesting feature of his dream is his feeling of being in the presence of a power:

... in the presence of awful, cold beauty, — inexpressibly lovely, but with no love for me. It was as if some old friend had proved false, or as if I had hitherto mistaken my own nature, and aimed at that which was too high for me. How miserable, how degraded I felt! I could see the beauty, but could not feel it, — at least not as I had felt it of old, when it was almost unmixed delight to me . . . .

Morris's narrator seems to me to be grappling with the problem of loss of religious faith. The 'awful, cold beauty' which he can no longer feel, is that of God who has come to seem appallingly remote from men and women and the fruitful earth. Perilous as it is to draw comparisons between writers and their characters; assuming that authors voice their own inner conflicts through the medium of fiction, we cannot help suspecting that much of what Morris has written in 'A Night in a Cathedral' verges on the autobiographical. We know that Morris decided against taking Holy Orders in the later months of 1855, and this tale must date from 1855 or early 1856. The narrator's feeling that he has aimed at something 'too high' for him may very well express Morris's own conviction that he was not suited to a career in the Church. We also know that Morris's characteristically abrupt announcement of his decision to his family was received with disappointment and consternation. In a letter dated 11 November 1855, Morris wrote to his mother '... I remember speaking somewhat roughly to you when we had conversation last on this matter ...' There had obviously been pain and bewilderment on both sides. Perhaps it is to these biographical facts that the reader should go for an explanation of the images of alienation and of isolation from
fellow men used by the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’. When he is eventually released from the cathedral, Morris’s narrator has mastered his childhood fear of darkness and death. However, the great emphasis which Morris places on his protagonist’s feelings of depression and on the dreariness of the slow dawn, seems to suggest that something yet more profound has happened to the young man during his enforced sojourn in the empty cathedral. I contend that Morris’s narrator has found Amiens Cathedral to be empty in a spiritual as well as a physical sense. He leaves the great building ‘listlessly, too far exhausted to feel much joy at my deliverance’. Morris’s protagonist departs into a grey and cheerless world in search of some new faith to take the place of that which he appears to have lost. Much the same problem seems to have faced Morris himself in the late 1850s. However, the seeds of the faith in fellowship and humanity which were to flower in his later life can be discerned in the love and the worship of the men of the past and their great cathedral, manifested by the narrator of ‘A Night in a Cathedral’. Amiens Cathedral may be a church without God, but its stones are alive with the spirits of men.

FOOTNOTES


10 *Letters*, p.16.