The First Modern ‘Secondary World’ Fantasy: Morris’s Craftsmanship in *The Story of The Glittering Plain*

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This essay began as a rejoinder to Pauline Dewan’s ‘Circular Designs in Morris’s *The Story of the Glittering Plain*’. I do not wish to attack Dewan’s well-intentioned discussion of *Plain*, but to challenge confusions that give aid and comfort to those Morrisians who ignore, suppress or deny a major aspect of his achievement. I refer respectfully to the hard-headed and commonsensical (I did not say narrow and puritanical) enemies of Fantasy.

Readers of the *Journal* will be aware that recent wide surveys in all English-speaking nations have established that in each nation ‘the most important book of the twentieth century’ was agreed to be *The Lord of the Rings*, and that many other fantasy novels which characteristically create a ‘secondary world . . . artistic in desire and purpose’ occupied very high positions in the list. This is in spite of all that canonical English teaching, lofty or sneering reviewers and moralistic social engineers have done and still do to prohibit respect for or even tolerance of this genre. But not all Morrisians realise that Morris was the greatest and crucial inventor of secondary-world fantasy. Without Morris there could have been no Tolkien, and his own fantasies are among the finest ever written.

As his hopes eroded for an immediate new flowering of European culture in socialism, Morris turned his major efforts towards ‘making socialists’, and it was obvious to him that the making of beautiful books and the telling of enthralling stories were honourable and immensely satisfying means to this end. It has not been equally obvious to his followers, and still is not so. But it seems to me essential that Morrisians try to understand why the foremost culture-hero of our language should have laboured so many thousands of hours of the last decade of his life (including his last illness) to write, not Realistic Fiction or The Serious Novel, but ten ‘escapist’ fantasy novels, some of them very large. The term Morris used was ‘Romances’, of course. He was unfased by the naive jeer of ‘escapist’, and scorned to use the term ‘novel’, being unimpressed by novelties (though the title of *News from Nowhere*, being set in the future, plays on implications of that label).

His labour was not merely to get a yarn onto paper. Morris has misled many by his frequent offhandedness in deflecting attention away from his dedication to his verbal arts, and the skill, industry and fantastic erudition (I use the adjective advisedly) of his work. This, as it were, bluffing bluffness is disproved by his MSS. His neat, purposeful alterations show a tireless relish for verbal texture and
psychological authenticity, as well as a storyteller’s skill in decoying the imaginative reader, deployed in ways precisely suited to the unique powers and opportunities of Fantasy.

To construct a world rather than describe the one around us is not a task restricted to fantasy authors. Unless we are playing camera-eye games with our immediate context, we all do it. The most effortfully naturalistic novelists extrude something different from what they ingest. Morris as a historian was recreating the past, and as social commentator was re-envisioning the present and the extrapolatable future, though with a keen awareness of the difference between evidence, evidencible interpretation, and speculation. But a fantasist offers us a world that is different from what we think of as ‘the way things are’, usually in terms of the laws of nature, certainly in terms of its society and culture. As readers, we need information – and narrative inducements – to enable us to imagine, and enjoy the distancing strangeness of this new world.

A critic mis-recording the facts of Morris’s invented worlds can easily make the whole creation sound like an arbitrary and cerebral construction, but to do so is to mislead at a fundamental level. To err about a bit of social detail in Henry James – to say the heiress came at five in a carriage when the book says she walked from her hotel and arrived by half-past four – is trivial. A Morris world, however, is not merely evocative of some vanished social etiquette; it is organic, in the sense that its details interrelate like parts of a living being, and contribute to an overall meaning. He is a master of the mental mapping of a quest and the distances and difficulties that define it (unfortunately the only Morris map of a Morris romance we have is for the unfinished The Sundering Flood).

He keenly relished the self-consistency of his heroes’ journeys, and this is where Dewan is misleading. She says that Hallblithe ‘visits two islands in the course of his journey, and they seem to be diametrical opposites of one another’ (p. 15), and mis-describes the Glittering Plain as an island throughout. The Plain is a fertile alluvial plain, as the name implies, backed by mountains which are magically warded to defend the Plain. Beyond the mountains is a vast desert, an empty quarter of the same large continent as Cleveland by the Sea. Thus the land-wayfarers who begin the story meet Hallblithe as they enter the mountains, but only he can give them entrance to the Plain.

Plain is ill-served by Dewan’s summary of Hallblithe’s journey as ‘from Cleveland to the Isle of Ransom to the Glittering Plain and back to Ransom and then to Cleveland again’. The turning-point of his journey is when he goes up into the Mountains in the hope of finding an inland escape from the Plain, and almost dies before he meets the travellers. Had he not turned back with them he would have perished in the desert. The pattern the story imposes on our imagined map is a triple loop along parts of a quadrilateral.

This pattern shows the Earthly Paradise, or Fair Elfland, of the Plain as intimately related to (and almost perfectly insulated from human life by) the death-space of arid mountain-range and mouth-wide desert. The Isle of Ransom, Iceland-like in both its ecology and its social dualism of lethal violence and noble-minded formality, is subject to the Plain’s Undying King, and has a detached, predatory interest in the ordinary non-magical human world that frames the story. Not magical in essence like the Plain, the Isle yet retains a few shreds of eerie power
(like those of the Icelandic sagas) that Puny Fox can utilise near his ancestral land— if his luck holds.

Dewan asserts parallels between the mountains protecting the Plain and the ‘deep blue’ volcanic heights of the Isle of Ransom. No such parallels exist, except that mountains all look blue from a distance; ‘though they be blue they are not blue like the mountains of the Isle of Ransom’, Hallblithe says with his usual alertness (p. 247). Far from it: the mountains above the Plain are ‘pale and high’ (p. 247), ‘fallow’ (p. 280), ‘wan rocks under the sun’ (p. 283). The Ransom mountains are ‘coal-black’ (p. 228). Dewan does quote the description of wild rocky country on Ransom as ‘a wilderness of black sand and stones and ice-borne rocks’ (p. 228), but not the wind-blow mires, snow-capped peaks and other solidly Icelandic features of the landscape. She even, near the end of her essay, quotes Puny Fox’s description, ‘Belike thou seemst [error for ‘deemest’] it but dreary with its black rocks and black sand, and treeless windswept dales . . . ’ (p. 20). How then can she claim that the semi-tropical mountains that surround Hallblithe when he leaves the Plain, when ‘the sun shone down bright and hot on that wilderness’ (p. 279), ‘seem like deliberate echoes of the first journey’ (p. 16)?

But there would be no meaning in these parallels if they existed; they would merely fuzz the book’s superb clarity. In a secondary-world fantasy the physical ecology of the story is the story, just as much as the characters who fulfil its sentient roles (and of course any part of nature may be sentient too). It is reader alertness, in keeping with the story, that sees a connection between the fear and ignorance about death among the Plain’s inhabitants and the certain death that awaits mortals who walk unprepared into the desert and mountain waste that protects it. Not only is there no reason why the Isle of the Ravagers should resemble the Plain, contrast is more in keeping with the nature of the journey.

Similar false comparisons allow Dewan to assert that ‘The People encountered on each part of the journey resemble each other’. This ‘resemblance’ is, it turns out, that the giant-like, wild-looking Ravagers are red-haired, and the King’s Warden is a big surly man wearing red scarlet. Later she asserts that the Warden ‘sounds remarkably similar to Long hoary (sic)’ because they both point Hallblithe towards the King of the Glittering Plain. Their words in fact contrast: the one is warning, the other approving. Also, she misses the fact that the rejuvenated Long-hoary, now Sea-eagle again, is actually present at the later confrontation, and has enough residual courage to defy the Warden and the King’s rules. Especially in the field of fantasy, a critic should respect such major tests of the ethic of the individual and the Plain. If the fantasy has a ‘deep structure’, they are part of it.

Next Dewan asserts that these ‘parallel journeys’ (one towards the King and the Plain, the other away!) relate to ‘deliberate parallels between the two islands themselves’. If so, this would be a grievous fault in structure, but it is not so. Her first claim is that the rocks of the Glittering Plain are black ‘like the rocks of the Isle of Ransom’ (p. 17). The quotation is accurate, but describes a skerry a mile off-shore, not the Plain, which has few rocks and little darkness. Her second claim is hardly telling: shepherds on the Isle and the Plain both tend sheep! Weirdest of all is the assertion that ‘in both Hallblithe meets with the same strange reaction when he calls the land of the Glittering Plain by its other name – the Acre (or House) of the Undying’ (pp. 235 & 253). This is simply untrue. Acre and House
do not mean the same thing. On the Isle Long-hoary tells him to use the phrase
THE HOUSE OF THE UNDYING (meaning the dwelling of the Undying King)
whenever anyone in the Hall says anything to him, so the dangerous Ravagers will
leave him unmolested. It works. When, on the Plain, he asks three young women
whether the land is also called The Acre of the Undying, it is the idea of death that
frightens them: in their immortal paradise it has become literally unthinkable. Other
Plains-people react to the word ‘death’ in precisely this way (p. 295).

The only ‘parallel’ Dewan adduces between Ransom and the Plain which appears
in the book is that the Undying King rules both. However, the story’s social climax
is when the Ravagers defy him, to ‘show ourselves great-hearted, in that we fear
not the wrath of our master’ (p. 312). Instead they celebrate Hallblithe ‘the rebel’,
and make alliance with his people. As when Janet seizes Tarn Lin in the ballad,
this is the crucial moment when our mortal life severs itself from the intrinsically
magical, deathless Elfland. Much intense beauty may be lost with the magic, and
the Ravagers have cast away their dream of immortality, but they think well of
their own courage for making that decision.

Dewan obscures the ironies involved as Hallblithe is decoyed to the Plain:

If this island [i.e. the Plain] is the midpoint of Hallblithe’s journey at large, the
grove of the King’s daughter is the midpoint of the journey within the island.
This grove is the site where Hallblithe believes his wishes are to be granted. And
this centre is buried deep within many different levels and types of enclosure:
the King’s daughter is introduced to Hallblithe through the frame of a tale read
from a scroll, and she is hidden within a grove. This grove is itself encompassed
by an island, which is further surrounded by the sea, and is approached by
another island. Such levels of enclosure suggest concealment within multiple
barriers (p. 17).

There is, of course, no island, and the King’s daughter is not ‘introduced’ to
Hallblithe at all. There is no ‘tale’: the scroll the damsel reads to Hallblithe is
instructions about his path to where he can see ‘thy love foredoomed’ (p. 264).
The barriers to getting in are fake, the real constraints are to prevent his escape:
the Princess and her doting papa have arranged everything to draw Hallblithe to
her. The kidnapping, the lying and roguery of the Ravagers, and especially of Puny
Fox and his grandfather, are conscious instruments of this entrapping, as are the
words of the King. The damsel, an unconscious instrument, afterwards tries to
help Hallblithe in his attempt to escape from the Plain. Far from being ‘escapist’
whishful thinking about an Earthly Paradise, Plain celebrates the rejection of escape,
the return to mortality. The hero is not the three wayfarers or Sea-eagle, who glory
in their new immortality, but the death-raven Hallblithe; the heroine is not a
nameless complaisant girl of the Plain, who has forgotten her mortal life and its
seasons, or the spoiled Undying Princess, but the suspicious, sharp-tongued
Hostage.

A fantasist must be more circumstantial and self-consistent than the naturalistic
writer. An invented landscape or community must make sense, or at least convince
us that more information will make sense of it. When, in a novel said to be set in
this world or its historical past, necessary elements are not mentioned (like the
smells and organic content of the ‘dust-heaps’ of Our Mutual Friend) we, the audience, imaginatively supply them; if an event or action does not make sense (like Isabel Archer’s acceptance of Gilbert Osmond’s proposal in Portrait of a Lady) we are likely to excuse it with, ‘Inexplicable! But isn’t that just like life?’ A fantasy writer as craftsmanlike as Morris sees that as weaseling out of the job of secondary creation. The story must work as a story, providing imaginative challenge, and must satisfy its own inward structure, which usually relates to revivifiable and subvertible patterns of myth or folktale that humans have already been attracted by. Above all the story should nourish our sense of wonder, should invite our mind to accommodate strange, vivid, impossible events and actors.

The elements of the story must all work too. In Plain it is significant that Hallblithe’s Cleveland folk have no traditions about the Glittering Plain, either as myth, legend or travellers’ tale, or even about the vikings on the Isle of Ransom (who know quite a lot about them). Hallblithe, as focaliser, knows as little as we, so we work with him to make sense of both, at a narrative and a cultural level. More important, they are parts of the larger mystery of the quest that makes up the first half of the book, of why Hallblithe is led, by kidnapping, desertion, instruction, and high-quality seamanship, all the way from Cleveland to the Plain. As soon as, at the midpoint of the book, he understands the reason, he comments wryly, ‘Behold me, then, that my quest beginneth again amidst the tangle of lies wherein I have been entrapped’ (p. 266). Then we tread the maze outward with him from the Princess and her pretty book, and the story begins to unwind.

The truest poetry is the most feigning, because a fantasy does not pretend to be history. It is honestly fictional. Life is not in fact shaped like a romance, or a novel, any more than it is like a sonnet or a tapestry, a water-colour or a symphony. It may seem a little like a film (if we take away the focus, the definition and the interpretive selection of images that film-buffs most value), except that films operate on the surface of human experience and can only imply their characters’ inner life.

Traditional stories have beginnings, middles and ends; as Morris’s Oxford and Cambridge Magazine fiction shows, too much ambiguity in the presentation of any of these structural necessities enfeebles the whole. Life, on the other hand, is all middle, and to assert a beginning or end is to falsify or sentimentalise. We value stories for the way they equip us for their created world, then lead us in and on, and then satisfy by their closure the expectations they have aroused. History and its descendant, reportage – the presentations Realistic Fiction counterfeits – cannot offer this, no matter how electrifying their subject-matter. In terms of Greek aesthetics, even if true, they only become good or beautiful by scrupulous (or unscrupulous) selection, and an arrangement of the selected details to imitate stories. Such arrangement is the subterfuge of the ‘Art Novel’, the portentous side of Serious Fiction; post-modern Serious Fiction rightly mocks reverence for the material, or the arrangement techniques, or both.

It is obvious that Plain is the kind of fantasy that relates to folktale, as in Propp’s morphology, where the patterns of narrative action define the characters, rather than characters determining fate. But Morris, a modern, mostly urban-dwelling romancer, did not pretend to write folktales; his implications about motivation and judgment subvert all our folktale-based assumptions. He honours the structural
needs of the tale, but refuses to be content with two-dimensional stock characters as his actors.

For example, the story must have a quest-hero to make the there-and-back-again journey, and Hallblithe is a totally loyal, admirable, brave and archetypally beautiful young hero — so Morris has fun making him into the sinister ‘skeleton at the feast’ for all those well-intentioned happy, sexy, half-awake people of the Glittering Plain. As the only weaponed man in the peaceful land, he becomes the Raven totem that Puny Fox had teased him about: his longing, resentment and sorrow are as anomalous there as Guest’s careworn face was in Nowhere.

Hallblithe as fulfillment of both folktale and modern psychological expectations confuses Dewan. She refers to ‘the comfortable life he enjoys in the midst of the Glittering Plain’ (p. 16), though what she quotes (p. 18) is very different: ‘he wearied and longed for death, but would not die . . .’ (Plain p. 271). The ambassador of life and love to a culture that has forgotten death looks very like Hamlet at the wedding-feast! In the mountains his hard work as archetype is rewarded when two birds that are his family emblem lead him and his new companions to the access cave. Magic? If so it is a very natural, not to say sardonic, magic. Ravens have a legitimate interest in dead bodies, and the humans are almost dead.

Folktale also requires a ‘heroine’, and the Hostage is beautiful and brave enough to act out that role, but she is kept off-stage until the last ten pages. When she appears she is forthright, and also wary, testing Hallblithe in case he is merely a Ravager wearing her lover’s image.

As for villains, all kinds of people deceive Hallblithe. Puny Fox befools and misguides him with great enthusiasm, and the Long-hoary has obeyed orders to inveigle him to the Plain, ‘For what cause we had the charge I know not, nor do I greatly heed’ (p. 249). Yet both turn out to be loyal comrades. The infuriatingly soft Nowherians on the Plain can hardly be called villains, and even the surly Warden is only doing what he is told.

The Undying King is the true villain. His daughter, suffering from her teenage crush on a handsome young mortal, or rather on his picture, is only guilty of a spoiled child’s whining to Daddy to make Daddy fetch her the original. It is psychologically tenable that a powerful Daddy may sometimes be manipulated by his pretty daughter, but that does not excuse Daddy. It is villainous to use the awesome might of his Arcadian Elfland to kidnap a young engaged woman and sell her into slavery, merely because a Princess fancies her fiancé. He cares nothing for the happiness of mortals, and yet with smiling unchallengeable hypocrisy he asserts to Hallblithe, ‘meseemeth great joy awaiteth thee, I will fulfil thy desire to the uttermost’ (p. 261).

But a fantasy novel is connected with fable and symbolic (or even allegorical) traditions as well as folktale. Morris’s fantasies are full of richly articulated social precisions. Here the King’s archetypal posture as the adored father of his subjects relates to both Elfland and Empire:

His face shone like a star; it was exceeding beauteous, and as kind as the even of May in the gardens of the happy, when the scent of eglantine fills the air.

When he spoke his voice was so sweet that all hearts were ravished, and none
might gainsay him. ‘... in this land no man hath a lack which he may not satisfy without taking aught from any other. I deem not that thine heart may conceive a desire which I shall not fulfil for thee, or crave a gift which I shall not give thee’ (pp. 260-1).

Morris was proof against such public declarations of universal benevolence, whether from Empress, Prime Minister or Archbishop. The King was lying not only to Hallblithe but also to his own subjects, though they are mostly too tranquillised to realise. Women (especially) obviously conceive many desires about Hallblithe that the King will not and cannot fulfil. The Sea-eagle, who is specifically addressed here, ardently longs to help Hallblithe escape, yet is frustrated by the King’s rules.

The peaceful life of the king’s subjects on the Plain is a little like the country-house life of the aristocracy in Morris’s England. All are welcome to be as benevolent as they wish, but they never see the far-off rapine and slaughter of the Ravagers who are the other face of their ruler’s power, keeping their shore safe from invasion and their prosperity intact. Few aristocrats saw the actual life of the poor in Britain, and even fewer the lives of that country’s serfs in the far-flung colonies. Those that saw were mostly those desensitised by training, much as were the dwellers on the Plain. It is of course possible for Realistic Fiction to contain such fabulist elements, but to that extent it is closer to fantasy.

Fantasy is characterised by a basically comic structure. That is, it is shaped towards a closure that satisfies the story’s energies, and achieves the potential of major characters and situations. The closure offers marriages, reconciliations, self-acceptance or similar regenerative events, usually avoiding too idealistic a view of humanity. Hallblithe’s people have their limitations, but he loves them, and love conquers all. Punishment of folly, vice, or even evil is casual, unserious. Plain is typical. The Undying King’s most mobile subjects, the Ravagers, have defied him; Puny Fox, the viking most likely (as a talented member of the Sea-eagle’s house) to have benefitted from his patronage, has preferred to be adopted into Hallblithe’s mortal tribe. However, the King’s active rule, on the Plain, is unshaken, his subjects there still adore him, and his daughter is over her infatuation. He is surely too proud to grieve much at being cut off from mortal humanity.

In our life, a ‘happy ending’ depends on where the narration stops (at the honeymoon or the dementia ward, so to speak). The intelligentsia of the Serious Novel persuasion prefer tragic endings, where the central characters are cast down, but their stories, and especially their egos, are privileged above the social and natural worlds around them. The fantasy structure restores its heroes to a happy ending within the social and natural worlds, while acknowledging that in nature all mortals, like all the proud little culture of Cleveland, must go the way of the Hostage’s finger-gold-ring:

‘I put it for thee one autumntide in the snake’s hole by the river, amidst the roots of an old thorn-tree, that the snake might brood it, and make the gold greater; but when the winter was over and we came to look for it, lo! there was neither ring, nor snake, nor thorn-tree: for the flood had washed it all away’ (p. 316).
Nature and mortality are like that, but the ring is worth far more in its narrative function, guaranteeing the identity and mutual love of Hallblithe and the Hostage, than ever it could have been as mere gold. The children had believed in a superstition, but their belief served them better than mere fact: a bond is better than a bank.

Fantasy is like that too, more natural and less deceptive than any story masquerading as history could be. Morris’s Plain is a beautiful, richly-crafted tale, both celebrating and brilliantly subverting aspects of folk tradition, as well as our dreams of escape from death, and of finding and heroically rescuing our One True Love. The story’s secondary world corresponds to the structure of our imagination, not the surface of our life, and to enjoy it is analogous to a direct experience of the primary world, ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’. Morris would not have referred to God, but he would have understood Coleridge very well, knowing how ‘natural’ the story-telling drive is.

The apparent familiarity or lifelikeness of the worlds presented by Realistic Fiction is, Marxists have argued, an illusion produced by bourgeois ideology. We need art’s strangeness, a glimpse from an angle that makes our world unfamiliar, to cut through this illusion of stasis. Coleridge too said that the secondary imagination destroys illusion because ‘It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create . . . it is essentially vital’, but he thought of the staleness of habit and the troughs of human temperament as the causes that the world goes dead for us. ‘Joy’ was the agent of recovery for him.

Morris, both radical socialist and romantic imagination, offered his readers not only beauty but the rejuvenation of their sense of wonder, and wonder is a principle that combines strangeness with joy. ‘The sense of wonder’ is the watchword of modern secondary world fantasy, and Morris’s astonishing achievement is the beginning of this, arguably the twentieth century’s most important new movement in fiction.

NOTES

2 Since the Journal has a largely British readership, the example from the UK may suffice to summarise this emphatic psephographical unanimity. All surveys took place during 1997; the survey of British readership was undertaken by Waterstone’s book chain in conjunction with TV’s Channel 4. Each voter was asked to name the five ‘greatest books of this century’, and from well over 25,000 responses a list of the top 100 books was compiled. All the British top ten had in common their radical anti-organisational drive, if little else. Two smaller British surveys, conducted in response to this by the Folio Society and SFX, the science fiction media magazine, both confirmed Tolkien’s pre-eminence, as did similar responsive surveys in other English-speaking countries where roughly parallel polls had been conducted.
This article uses the term ‘Fantasy’ of such fictions. Morris would have been furious that ‘Romance’ has been captured by a quite different and highly formulaic genre of love-stories. I realise that ‘Realistic’ begs many questions, but this is not the place to discuss them; please regard its use here as unironic. However, there seems no way to refer to the ‘Art Novel’ or ‘Serious Novel’ which excludes irony.

Take *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, of which Morris was writing out a Fair Copy for the printers on his deathbed. In the British Library’s Manuscript Room, as volume XXX of the May Morris bequest, is held a complete draft MS, 438 pages long (No. 45,322), beside the Fair Copy, 201 pages (No. 45,323), with over 1200 verbal and narrative changes, which takes us to page 174 of the 387 page text we think of as the book. There are also two earlier abandoned MSS, one in verse and one, the earliest, *The Widow’s House by the Great Water*, markedly different.

I use this term to indicate the ostranenie, or defamiliarisation of the material, of Shklovsky, as opposed to the Verfremdungseffekt, or alienation of the audience, of Brecht.


They may well have influenced the Eloi of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895). Wells admired Morris, and certainly saw the 1891 edition of *Plain*, the first Kelmscott Press book ever. Wells had the sort of mind that would have compared the citizens of Nowhere in their epoch of rest, presented without much irony, to the subjects of the Undying King.

S. T. Coleridge, (George Watson ed.), *Biographia Literaria*, (London: Everyman 1975), p. 167, uses these words of the ‘primary imagination’, the way we experience the world of nature when fully responsive. He calls the writer’s work secondary imagination, ‘an echo . . . identical with the primary in . . . kind . . .’