



SOCIALISM and the LITERARY ARTISTRY of WILLIAM MORRIS

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Boffin in Paradise, or the Artistry of Reversal in *News from Nowhere*

There were not always novels in the past and there will not always have to be. . . . All this is to accustom you to the thought that we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force.

Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*¹

In the throes of the nineteenth-century fin de siècle, many writers experimented with the novel in response to the growing ambiguity of its status and purpose, and the loss of historical time as a novelistic medium. Even though such "modernist" authors frequently commented upon the processes of society through this experimentation, specific political goals seemed beyond the appropriate boundaries of what the novel ought to encompass. William Morris, like many modernist writers, attempted a new formulation of the genre. Unlike these artistic counterparts, however, he imbued his experimentation with a definite sociopolitical aim: a revolution, true to its etymological roots of a complete cycle of change altering the basis of both society and the art it produced. This experimentation becomes especially important in *News from Nowhere* (1891), Morris's utopian fantasy of England in its idyllically socialist future. To discover what this welding of aesthetics and politics into a single link might augur for the future of the novel and for Morris's own political vision, one must pause before an image in *News from Nowhere* whose innocence belies its heuristic importance for this question.

I looked over my shoulder, and saw something flash and gleam in the sunlight that lay across the hall; so I turned round, and at my ease saw a splendid figure slowly

1. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 224.

Boffin in Paradise

27

sauntering over the pavement; a man whose surcoat was embroidered most copiously as well as elegantly, so that the sun flashed back from him as if he had been clad in golden armour. The man himself was tall, dark-haired, and exceedingly handsome, and though his face was no less kindly in expression than that of the others, he moved with that somewhat haughty mien which great beauty is apt to give to both men and women. He came and sat down at our table with a smiling face, stretching out his long legs and hanging his arm over the chair in the slowly graceful way which tall and well-built people may use without affectation. He was a man in the prime of life, but looked as happy as a child who had just got a new toy.²

This paragraph describes the first impression the appearance of one "Boffin" makes upon the narrator of *News from Nowhere*. While Guest, the narrator, is rather startled to encounter "such a dignified-looking personage" named for the celebrated Dickensian character, he readily accepts the explanation that the title merely expresses a nuance of Nowherian humor "partly because he is a dustman, and partly because he will dress so showily" (*CW*, 16:22). This futuristic Golden Dustman possesses one weakness, however: he whiles away the utopian hours in *Nowhere* by writing "reactionary" novels and is very proud of getting "the local colour right, as he calls it." Confronted with this allusion to Boffin, we can dismiss it neither as a puzzling distraction, nor as a picturesque use of the nineteenth-century literary tradition. Although Boffin's entrance is certainly picturesque, his "dazzling" quality reveals the transformation that his character projects, a transformation that becomes much clearer when we compare the passage in *News from Nowhere* with Dickens's own description of Boffin in *Our Mutual Friend*:

a broad, round-shouldered, one-sided old fellow in mourning, coming comically ambling towards the corner, dressed in a pea overcoat, and carrying a large stick. He wore thick shoes, and thick leather gaiters, and thick gloves like a hedger's. Both as to his dress and to himself, he was of an overlapping rhinoceros build, with folds in his cheeks, and his forehead; and his eyelids, and his lips, and his ears; but with bright, eager, childishly-inquiring grey eyes, under his ragged eyebrows, and broad-brimmed hat.³

In the narrative of both Dickens and Morris, the reader initially perceives Boffin from a distance. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Boffin is a dark "fellow in mourning" who comically ambles along; in *News from Nowhere*, a gleaming "splendid figure slowly sauntering" whose brightness dazzles one's vision.

2. William Morris, *News from Nowhere Or An Epoch of Rest*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915), 16:20-21; subsequent parenthetical in-text references are to this edition and are cited as *CW*.

3. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, intro. E. Salter Davies (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 46; subsequent parenthetical in-text references are to this edition.

Thus, Morris's first sentence duplicates the flow of Dickens's narrative, yet reverses its content by replacing darkness with light, and the leisure of a comic "amble" with a dignified saunter. The next clause, describing Boffin's dress, has the same effect. Instead of his predecessor's thickly padded pea overcoat, complemented by thick shoes, thick gaiters, and thick gloves, the utopian Boffin swathes himself in a "surcoat" that is "embroidered most copiously as well as elegantly." The Dickensian Boffin sports the build of an "overlapping rhinoceros," with folds in his cheeks and forehead; the Morrisian Boffin is "tall, dark-haired, and exceedingly handsome," and moves with an unaffected and confident grace. Both authors end their respective descriptions with conditional "but" clauses that establish analogies between Boffin and the qualities of a child. For Dickens, Boffin's "bright, eager, childish-inquiring grey eyes" enliven his animal-like qualities, while for Morris, he was a man in the prime of life who "looked as happy as a child who had just got a new toy."

In fact, one could characterize this appearance of Boffin as the manifestation of a "dialectic reversal," or the paradoxical turning around of a phenomenon into its opposite.⁴ In *Marxism and Form*, Frederic Jameson identifies this reversal as the basic movement of dialectical thought and observes that its transformative qualities involve an

essentially critical, negative, rectifying moment . . . which forces upon us an abrupt self-consciousness with respect to our own critical instruments and literary categories. . . . Such a shock is constitutive of and inseparable from dialectical thinking, as the mark of an abrupt shift to a higher level of consciousness, to a larger context of being.⁵

This reversal also demands that we grasp the reality of what a thing is through the simultaneous awareness of what it is not.⁶

An instructive example of this phenomenon surfaces in the development of the Theater of the Absurd, whose practitioners depended so heavily upon the audience's socialized expectations of both theatrical content and form. Without this predisposition toward certain kinds of artistic values, no reversal could have occurred; more specifically, without the audience's awareness of the social and religious constructs they adopt to render human existence intelligible, no reversal of attitudes concerning mankind's purpose in the world would be possible. Ionesco's dictum that the "absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost," depends upon an anguished recollection of this vanished center for its subversive power. Further, "the means by which the dramatists of the Absurd express their

4. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 309.

5. *Ibid.*, 375.

6. *Ibid.*, 311.

critique—largely instinctive and unintended—of our disintegrating society are based on suddenly confronting their audiences with a grotesquely heightened and distorted picture of a world that has gone mad. This is a shock therapy that achieves what Brecht's doctrine of the 'alienation effect' postulated in theory but failed to achieve in practice."⁷ While Martin Esslin calls this confrontation "shock therapy" rather than "epistemological shock," the dynamics of both phenomena are similar. For example, Beckett's "wearish old man" Krapp, listening to the tape recorder revealing his own disembodied voices of past years, forms just such a "grotesquely heightened and distorted" image. Its shocking presentation attempts to reverse the audience's belief in a complacent and stable notion of the self to one which is alienated and protean.

Like Morris, the Theater of the Absurd uses an epistemological shock to achieve its dialectic reversal. Both seek to catapult humanity from an inauthentic existence that is unconscious and mechanical into an abrupt consciousness of its own self-deception. The Theater of the Absurd differs from Morris, however, in its lack of concern whether this "shock therapy" communicates some moral or social lesson; rather, it expresses a pattern of poetic imagery that rejects the literary, the empathetic, and the anthropomorphic.⁸ In terms of Boffin, the remarkable grammatical similarity between the passages of Morris and Dickens, and the precise physical opposition of the two figures suggests Morris's deeply held Marxist conviction that change involves a transformed content seeking its adequate expression in form. While Morris would emphatically agree with the Theater of the Absurd's refusal to accept art forms based on the continuation of invalid standards and concepts, he departs from them in grounding the reversal on certainty—of socialism's ultimate value and society's utopian metamorphosis.

If the figure of Boffin in *News from Nowhere* embodies Morris's goals for the transformation of nineteenth-century cultural and literary values, the question remains: transformed from what to what? Since our first introduction to Boffin in *Our Mutual Friend* occurs in the midst of a business deal enabling him to experience some "fine bold reading, some splendid book in a gorging Lord-Mayor's-Show of wollumes," we can assume that the social and political ramifications of this situation form the core of Morris's transvalued sensibilities. His collaborator in this enterprise is one Silas Wegg, a wooden-legged street vendor whom he regards with "haw" and "hadmiration." When Boffin asks, "'How can I get that reading, Wegg?" the response from Wegg is immediate: "'By,' tapping him on the breast with the head of his thick stick, 'paying a man truly qualified to do it, so much an hour (say two-pence) to come and do it'" (p. 50).

7. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1969), 360.

8. *Ibid.*, 354.

His greed thoroughly aroused, Wegg responds favorably to the request. He wonders, however, "was you thinking at all of poetry?"

"Would it come dearer?" Mr. Boffin asked.

"It would come dearer," Mr. Wegg returned. "For when a person comes to grind off poetry night after night, it is but right he should expect to be paid for its weakening effect on his mind." (p. 51)

Thus, the Dickensian Boffin seeks a transformation of his sensibilities through the commercial purchase of literary pleasure: "'This night, a literary man—with a wooden leg'—he bestowed an admiring look upon that decoration, as if it greatly enhanced the relish of Mr. Wegg's attainments—'will begin to lead me a new life!'" (p. 97).

Morris readily accepted Marx's designation of the consciousness of profit and loss as the distinguishing feature of modern capitalism, and such an ethic certainly characterizes the activities of Boffin in the world of nineteenth-century London. Despite the highly altruistic motives behind his pretended corruption by the one-hundred-thousand-pound Harmon legacy, Boffin nevertheless perceives his world in terms of contractual obligations rather than the collectively determined relationships of earlier societies. Despite his undeniable love for his daughter, Bella, in defense of whose honor the charade is conducted, the Dickensian Boffin becomes "prey to prosperity" by succumbing to that attitude which turns all connections of value to account and restricts humanity's artistic capabilities to the level of a commodity.

Rather than this reduction of art to money, the Boffin of *News from Nowhere* literally turns money into art. The "Golden Dustman" of his name refers to the gold embroidery on his coat, a fact which emphasizes the value of money only in terms of its aesthetic properties. When Guest attempts to pay for his ferry ride across the Thames, his companion replies: "As to your coins, they are curious, but not very old; they seem to be all of the reign of Victoria; you might give them to some scantily-furnished museum" (CW, 16:11). The quantification of society through the perspective of profit and loss has completely disappeared from the psyche of the Nowherian people, and money acquires value only by the merit of its artistic design. Thus, Morris's use of Boffin—one of the most famous images depicting the degrading effects of class-based wealth in nineteenth-century literature—not only raises the question of the novel's dependence on the attitudes and technology of commercialism, but also suggests why Morris so inseparably intertwines the transformation of society and the transformation of the novel as genre. Although Silas Wegg's greed for money seems relatively insignificant compared with the voraciousness of contemporary mass-marketing, writers in both milieus are aptly described by Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street*: "Your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost

of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising."⁹ Guest, the narrator of *News from Nowhere* and often the voice of Morris himself, corroborates this observation by admitting that "in the land whence I come, where the competition, which produced those literary works . . . is still the rule, most people are thoroughly unhappy" (CW 16:152). This deprecatory perspective on the novel is the main reason Boffin's utopian comrades gently chide him for his "weakness" of writing "reactionary," that is, realistic, novels.

Morris's ambivalence toward the novelistic tradition of the nineteenth century is illuminated by the fact that in Greek, the same word can mean "guest" and "alien." Since Morris's translations of Homer provide eloquent testimony to his fluency in Greek, one must conclude that his choice of the name "Guest" for the narrator of *News from Nowhere*, and its connotations of both exclusion from and inclusion within, can hardly exist as a random feature of the character who articulates society's socialist metamorphosis to the reading public. This ambiguous state of a coeval existence both within and without utopian society becomes clearer in light of several comments that Guest makes during the course of the narrative. Upon his first sight of the lovely Ellen, Guest responds: "Though she was very lightly clad, that was clearly from choice, not from poverty, though these were the first cottage-dwellers I had come across; for her gown was of silk, and on her wrists were bracelets that seemed to me of great value" (CW, 16:148). Guest, still trapped in his bourgeois perspective, instinctively perceives Ellen's worth in terms of monetary value. The pathos of this situation is emphasized during his reawakening in the "dingy" Hammersmith of industrial England: "I lay in my bed in my house . . . thinking about it all; and trying to consider if I was overwhelmed with despair at finding I had been dreaming a dream. . . . Or indeed was it a dream? If so, why was I so conscious all along that I was really seeing all that new life from the outside, still wrapped up in the prejudices, the anxieties, the distrust of this time of doubt and struggle" (CW, 16:210).

Morris, like Guest, is irrevocably a man of his time and thus unable to actualize fully the dream whose possibilities he so fervently imagined. In terms of the novel, however, he does reach a higher point on his revolutionary spiral through an experimental engagement of realism and romance. Creating the social and political imagination he believed that his predecessors lacked, Morris hoped that such an interaction would eventually create the "due" art and literature of "healthy bodily conditions, a sound and all round development of the senses, joined to the due social ethics which the destruction of all slavery will give us."¹⁰

9. George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, 3 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1891), 1:8-9.

10. William Morris, "The Society of the Future," in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), 2:465.

The realism that constitutes the first term of the dialectic assumes a subversive role and refuses to perpetuate the illusions Morris perceived as the basis of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism. Old Hammond, Dick's great-grandfather and custodian of books in the British Museum, comments on the fallacious premises of bourgeois realism when he observes that

in the nineteenth-century, when there was so little art and so much talk about it, there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so; for, if there was any pretense of it, the authors always took care . . . to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealise, and some way or another make it strange; so that, for all the verisimilitude there was, he might just as well have dealt with the times of the Pharaohs. (*CW*, 16:102)

More specifically, the blinded vision of bourgeois realism, while it made some attempt to depict the plight of the poor and oppressed, ultimately submerged its portrayal in the social melioration of the happy ending. Through its artifice, "we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily in an island of bliss on other people's troubles" which occurs only "after a long series of sham troubles (or mostly sham) of their own making, illustrated by dreary introspective nonsense about their feelings and aspirations" (*CW*, 16:151).

For Morris, realism does not involve either illusion or blindness. Instead, as Frederick Engels characterizes it, realism conjures a searing truthfulness which, "by conscientiously describing the real mutual relations . . . breaks down the conventionalized illusions dominating them, shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, causes doubt about the eternal validity of the existing order."¹¹ This characterization certainly depicts the thrust of Old Hammond's harrowing account of the socialist struggle for England: his plain and direct discourse, thick with details of the phenomenal world, give it a substantiality and objectivity that makes it seem "real" to the listener or reader. Guest, in fact, defines Hammond's language as a "scientific disquisition" that convinces him of the truth that socialism actually overcame the culture of capitalism and produced the utopian society of Nowhere. Turning this shattering power to his own use, Morris attempts to undermine the sensibilities of his readers and to create a disillusioned perspective allowing the vision of socialism to take root.

As a socialist who intended to supplant "discontent with hope of change that involves reconstruction," however, Morris realized the limits of this subversive realism.¹² Without another, more creative perspective to fill the void, one can only lament with Guest the coldness of a life "where I was, so to say, stripped bare of every habitual thought and way of acting" (*CW*, 16:103). Morris uses

romance, the second term of the dialectic, to transcend this critical emptiness, and through it, furnishes socialism with a reconstructive direction. John Stevens defines the essential quality of romance as that of "experience liberated"; the essential romance experiences, he writes, "are idealistic. The quality which is 'liberated' or 'disengaged' from all our vulgar communities is expressive of a supreme claim (in a medieval world where realities are spiritual and transcendental), or of a supreme aspiration (in a modern world where man's own feelings are the final realities)."¹³ It is just this ability of romance to liberate experience from the bourgeois ethic that makes romance so necessary in order to achieve the goals of reconstructive socialism.

The fact that Morris encircles Hammond's realistic account and prosaic, analytical style with Guest's lyrical pastoralism and lush first-person narration illustrates the importance he assigns to romance. For example, after Hammond lectures Guest on "the lack of incentive to labor in a communist society," the next chapter immediately plunges the reader into a scene whose ambience is molded by the wall-pictures of "queer old-world myths and imaginations," or fairy tales representing "the child-like part of us that produces works of imagination" (*CW*, 16:102). For Morris, this creative power exists as the essential space of imaginative freedom, which nurtures the utopian vision and allows it to grow within humanity. Even the chapter titles reinforce this juxtaposition. In the chapters which Guest narrates, the titles are descriptive of places, actions, or persons—"A Morning Bath," "Children on the Road," "Going Up the River"; in the chapters that Old Hammond narrates, the titles are didactic and reminiscent of a scholastic treatise—"Concerning Love," "Questions and Answers," "Concerning the Arrangement of Life." The former connote vision and experience, the latter, erudite detachment and precisely ordered thought.

Morris's use of romance highlights its status as "the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from the reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of . . . utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place."¹⁴ The subtitle of Morris's novel, "an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance," suggests that he intended to use the visionary dilation that romance provides as a central part of his transformation of values. For John Ruskin, one of Morris's most important mentors, art makes visible to us realities that could neither be described by science nor retained by memory; for Morris, romance creates alternatives to existing society that could neither be envisaged by realism

11. Frederick Engels, letter to Minna Kautsky, 26 November 1885, in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, ed. Leo Baxandall Stefan Morawski (New York: International General, 1973), 114.

12. Morris, "Art under Plutocracy," *CW*, 23:189.

13. John Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (New York: W. W. Norton, The Norton Library, 1973), 28.

14. Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 104.

nor experienced in capitalist society. Through its gift of those "waste places" where the imagination can cavort without constraint, romance allows Morris "the pleasure of the eyes without any of that sense of incongruity, that dread of approaching ruin, which had always beset me hitherto when I had been amongst the beautiful works of art of the past, mingled with the lovely nature of the present" (*CW* 16:140-41).

The narrative and social fruits of Morris's experimentation engender what Mikhail Bakhtin calls an "intentional novelistic hybrid," that is, an artistically organized system that has as its goal the "carving-out of a living image of another language."¹⁵ The word "hybrid" lends an especially relevant context to Morris's transvaluation of literature and culture, for it connotes a cross-breeding and an evolution of structure in order to meet a changing environment, a process essential to the implementation of socialism's goals. In the narrative of *News from Nowhere*, the languages of realism and romance fertilize each other and germinate a new breed of novel whose formal elements draw upon, yet transcend, their predecessors. An examination of this process in *News from Nowhere* in terms of two of the nineteenth-century novel's most important features—an individualist perspective and a highly plotted structure—yields rich insights into Morris's literary experimentation with specific social and political goals.

Morris moves beyond the nineteenth-century novel's privatistic communication of individual author with individual reader through the collectivism of utopian story-telling, and its emphasis on the narrative imagination as a common human experience. The practice of story-telling enables mankind to experience a genuinely shared community, for its theme, as George Lukács observes, "is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community. And rightly so, for the completeness, the roundness of the value system creates a whole which is too organic for any part of it to become so enclosed within itself, so dependent upon itself, as to find itself as an interiority—i.e., to become a personality."¹⁶ A lovely example of this dynamic occurs in Morris's description of the summer softness of a Nowherian evening:

We had quite a little feast that evening, partly in my honour, and partly, I suspect, though nothing was said about it, in honour of Dick and Clara coming together again. The wine was of the best; the hall was redolent of rich summer flowers; and after supper we not only had music (Annie, to my mind surpassing the others for sweetness and clearness of voice, as well as for feeling and meaning) but, at last we even got to telling stories, and sat there listening, with no other light but that of the summer moon streaming through the beautiful traceries of the windows, as if we

15. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 361.

16. George Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 66.

had belonged to a time long passed when books were scarce and the art of reading somewhat rare. (*CW*, 16:140)

That story-telling is free and depends on neither the attitudes nor the technology of capitalism so vividly portrayed by the Dickensian Boffin certainly demonstrates its affinity with Morris's socialist ethic. But, even more importantly, story-telling promotes that "sound and all round development of the senses" which is so central to Morris's revaluation of values. In fact, the passage just cited utilizes the totality of the senses in its portrayal of story-telling: the feast, which serves as the context for the stories, involves tasting; the voices of the story-tellers, hearing; the redolence of the flowers, smelling; the light of the moon, seeing; the physical closeness of the participants, touching. This radically concrete quality of story-telling overcomes what some critics have called the distancing frame of the novel as genre. Thackeray's model of the author as stage manager and manipulator of the character-puppets (and by implication, the reader), in many ways exemplifies the alienation that Morris perceived as permeating all levels of the nineteenth-century novel. Contrasted to this distancing narrative frame, one could describe story-telling as "part of the de-alienating, re-personalizing process to which Morris is committed."¹⁷ In the fair of vanity which is bourgeois society, the potential for endowing life with a more holistic quality remains profoundly limited. However, for the socialist utopia of *Nowhere*, there are no fairs but only feasts—those communal celebrations of a revolutionary people whose narrative expression is story-telling.

The syntactical ambiguity surrounding the person of the narrator also emphasizes Morris's reinvention of the collective. In the introductory chapter, a fellow activist of the Socialist League relates his dream of a journey through *Nowhere* to the apparent narrator. "But," says he, "I think it would be better if I told them in the first person, as if it were myself who had gone through them." To whom does the "I" of this phrase refer—our friend or his companion? In this passage, one cannot syntactically separate the two, and thus the "I" of the narrator seems to imply the pluralistic "we" of those struggling to achieve justice, and to reflect the ethic of a literal socialism, that is, the joining together of the particular into a larger collectivity.

Jameson notes that only this emergence of a post-individualist social world and its reinvention of the collective can concretely achieve the "decentering" of the individual subject called for by the Marxist diagnosis of society.¹⁸ For Morris, only the sensuality and freedom of utopian story-telling can effect such a transformation. Its communal dynamic seeks to "restore the coordinates of a

17. Michael Wilding, *Political Fictions* (London, Boston, Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 55.

18. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 104.

face to face storytelling institution which has been effectively disintegrated by the printed book and even more definitively by the commodification of literature and culture."¹⁹ The dissolution of the novel in utopian story-telling reflects a larger fulfillment of Morris's socialist praxis: its complete union of theory and practice causes the backward and forward movement of socialism's revolutionary spiral to cease, creating the "epoch of rest" which is the utopian society of Nowhere.

The second element of the nineteenth-century novel which Morris seeks to transform is a highly plotted structure intimately yoked to the "reactionary" novels for which the utopian Boffin possesses such a definite predilection. This pejorative label stems from a plot structure suggesting the inevitability of conflict, power and competition. In many ways, the most appropriate metaphor for its highly structured character is that of the machine, or, as Morris puts it, "a geared contrivance for the transfer of power from one character to another. In a plotted novel, it is by way of plot that characters mesh. (And we might also note that the passive gear may rotate in the same direction as the active one, or in the opposite direction: complicity or conflict.)"²⁰ The observation of Ellen's grandfather that "good sound unlimited competition was the condition under which they were written,—if we didn't know that from the record of history, we should know it from the books themselves," mirrors Morris's own view that the machinations of plot in the novel possess intimate links to the ethics of capitalism (*CW*, 16:149). He himself bridges the chasm between the geared Victorian plot and the complete absence of such contrivance in the utopian story through the dialectic of realism and romance. *News from Nowhere* has very little plot in the traditional sense of the word; it exhibits a dearth of activity, and even fewer situations motivated by the temptations of social ambition. What it does have, and that in abundance, is a creative tension produced by the engagement of romantic and realistic modes and the vision that such a relationship produces. The transformation of perspectives rather than the transfer of power provides the "controlled propulsion" of Morris's narrative.

Ironically, it is just this competitive power of the nineteenth-century plot that reveals the positive dimension of Boffin's hobby. The inclusion of the adjective "good" in the statement by Ellen's grandfather points to a more profound motivation underlying Boffin's devotion to such allegedly decadent forms of fiction. The danger of an "epoch of rest" is that its serenity will turn into political and spiritual inertia, and its tolerance into an inability to act. Although Nowherian citizens contend that the novels engendered by their past perpetuate oppressive economic and social structures, they nevertheless perceive the "spirit of adventure in them, and signs of a capacity to extract good out of evil which our

literature quite lacks now" (*CW*, 16:150). These novels exude an energy and a vital zest for all that life offers—qualities central to the ultimate success of Morris's proletarian revolution. Recognizing the possibility that Nowherian society might grow too complacent in its utopian perfection, thereby losing its social vision, Morris ingeniously creates Boffin's "curious" habit as a preventive measure against such a tragic loss.

Through the artistry of reversal in *News from Nowhere*, a vision emerges in the concreteness of a utopian Boffin—a vision that Morris ultimately enlarges to include all dimensions of society. We find this vision not only when comparing the figures of Boffin in Morris and Dickens, but also when comparing the voyages their respective novels depict. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the reader journeys up the Thames in "a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance," which ferries its passengers into the horrors of an industrialized society; in *News from Nowhere*, the reader travels in "a pretty boat, not too light to hold us and our belongings comfortably, and handsomely ornamented." Dickens's nineteenth-century river voyage literally forces its oppressed to become fishers of corpses rather than men, while Morris's journey up the utopian Thames imbues its participants with the "excited pleasures of anticipation of a holiday." A journey through the waters of *Our Mutual Friend* sucks readers down into the miasma of society, and we become "allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered." In stark contrast, Guest's journey upriver infuses him with "a deep content, as different as possible from languid acquiescence," so that he is, "as it were, really new-born" (*CW*, 16:164). Thus, the context of these respective journeys parallels the dialectic reversal embodied by the figure of Boffin: through his wedding of aesthetics and politics, Morris replaces dark with light, despair with hope, capitalist decay with utopian regeneration. Leading us into the heart of Morris's transvaluation of literature and culture, Boffin in paradise represents narrative form as radical practice, offering us a paradigm of a just world. Morris seeks to endow the reader's imagination with this paradigm and to enable its implementation in the realm of the actual.

19. *Ibid.*, 155.

20. David Goldknopf, *The Life of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 107.

openness of all her folk, and the simplicity of a community reconciled in work, in play, and even sometimes in sexual love. And having understood the community that results, he must depart from it, never to return.

He has also lost something more personal, his own created place and his soul-mate in one (which entails losing his childhood and his achieved self in one). In Nowhere his work and faith and life are valued—except by name—and make perfect heroic sense. In Nowhere his young and passionate muse is grateful and supportive; she understands him, often, even before he speaks. In Nowhere his love of Ellen, mankind, and the Thames Valley makes him a kind of *genius loci*. As the pair row the Upper Thames, names fall away and the places are offered to Ellen as if new-created—as if Guest is creating them! It is not surprising that as the value of the experience increases, so his forebodings increase, until he is expelled from the *locus amoenus*, the heart of his paradise.

As we, along with the original reader of *News*, still encoded in the text, share Guest's loving and humble discovery and become guests in Nowhere, we also share Nowhere's sympathetic and protective attitude to Guest—and to the author so amusingly visible behind him. Morris has invited us to laugh at him, especially in the opening pages, but his presence is also highly purposeful. The integrity of *News* becomes so much a matter of the reader's own concern, as a co-enthusiast with Morris, that the failure and return of Guest guarantees the triumph of both the book and Nowhere itself, for which our imaginations are all working.

LYMAN TOWER SARGENT

William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition

Any discussion of the relationship of William Morris and anarchism must begin by recognizing that Morris vehemently rejected the connection, opposed the contemporary anarchists in England, and called himself a Marxist or communist. Much of the recent literature on Morris's political ideas—and it is substantial—insists that we stop there. Such authors argue that Morris was a self-proclaimed communist who opposed anarchism; therefore, there can be no relationship between the two.¹

Admitting that these descriptions of Morris's position are generally correct, I argue that Morris was more of an anarchist theorist than perhaps even he recognized. However, I am not going back to an earlier school of Morris interpretation that tried to depict him as essentially apolitical or alternatively argued that the political activity that took up so much of the last years of his life was an aberration. I accept the importance of political activity in Morris's life; I accept that he saw himself as a Marxist or a communist; and I accept that he fought with the anarchists over the control of the journal *Commonweal* and the Socialist League.² Anarchism has two forms, collectivist and individualist. The parallels between Morris and anarchism are all to a form of collectivist anarchism usually labeled communist anarchism and most commonly identified with Kropotkin. Morris displayed no affinities with a second form of collectivist anarchism, called anarcho-syndicalism, which stresses trade union activity, and Morris ridiculed individualism; therefore, I shall only discuss communist anarchism here.

1. For variations of this position, see Paul Meier, *William Morris the Marxist Dreamer*, trans. Frank Gubb, 2 vols. (Hassocks, England: Harvester, 1978); A. L. Morton, "Introduction," in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 11–30; and E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

2. Evidence on the relationship between Morris and the London anarchists can be found in "William Morris's Socialist Diary," ed. Florence Boos, *History Workshop* no. 13 (Spring 1982): 1–75; John W. Hulse, "William Morris: Pilgrim of Hope," in *Revolutionists in London: A Study of Five Unorthodox Socialists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 77–110; Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); and John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: [The Lost History of the British Anarchists]* (London: Paladin, 1978).