

SOCIALISM
and the LITERARY ARTISTRY
of WILLIAM MORRIS _____

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The Encouragement and Warning of History

William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*

In the spring of 1886, William Morris, with his colleague in the Socialist League, E. Belfort Bax, began to publish in the League's newspaper, *Commonweal*, a series of historical and explanatory articles about socialism under the general title of "Socialism from the Root Up." These were later collected and published as a thick volume, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*.¹ Midway in this serialization Morris inserted another series, a historical romance entitled *A Dream of John Ball*.² Appearing as it did in the pages of *Commonweal*, the romance can be seen as a set of illustrations, as it were, for "Socialism from the Root Up," a fairly scholarly animation of history "co-opting" history itself for the socialist cause. This chapter will trace the sources for *A Dream of John Ball*, note the changes Morris introduced into the traditional story, and make some observations about Morris's purposes.

The motto Morris had given the Socialist League was "Educate, Agitate, Organise," and the function of *Commonweal* was to help accomplish all three of these aims. In general, the materials published in *Commonweal* were commentaries on the news of the day, reports on socialist activities, and accounts of socialism and economics. Some articles were technical explanations of socialist theory; many were historical, following the example of H. M. Hyndman in seeking the roots of English socialism in peculiarly English traditions; and others followed the more internationalist line of Engels with news of the "movement" from all over the world and accounts of such crucial events as the Paris Commune and the Haymarket Riot. *Commonweal* also published literary works, most but not all of which were by Morris himself.

A common misinterpretation of Morris's relationship to socialism, particu-

1. Ernest Belfort Bax and William Morris, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893).

2. William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915); *A Dream of John Ball* appears in vol. 16, and all parenthetical in-text page references are to this volume and edition.

larly as regards his literary work, was that Morris was "naturally" an aesthete, whose interest in socialism is to be regretted. We no longer see his socialism as an aberration, an interlude between periods of exquisite aestheticism, but we have not yet arrived at a full understanding of the transition from *The Earthly Paradise* to *The Pilgrims of Hope*, that is, the transition from an art which enunciates its critique of everyday life by denial and that which carries an explicit critical burden. That transition was accomplished in the small group of literary works that were serialized in *Commonweal*, each of which was solidly enmeshed in Morris's work as a revolutionary socialist. Just as much of *News from Nowhere* was written as part of a debate within socialism—presenting Morris's arguments against anarchism—so *A Dream of John Ball*, the earlier piece, was clearly an effort to teach the value of history to socialists, in opposition to the position of historical inevitability taken by their opponents.

Morris and Bax were following Engels and Marx in the genre of polemical historical narrative with the articles of "Socialism from the Root Up." In their first installment Morris and Bax claimed that history is on the side of socialism:

Our adversaries are sometimes forward to remind us that the present system with which we are so discontented, has been made up by the growth of ages, and that our wills are impotent to change it; they do not see that in stating this fact they are condemning their own position. Our business is to recognise the coming change, to clear away obstacles to it, to accept it, and to be ready to organise it in detail. Our opponents, on the contrary, are trying consciously to stay that very evolution at the point which it has reached today; they are attempting to turn the transient into the eternal; therefore, for them history has no lessons, while to us it gives both encouragement and warning which we cannot afford to disregard.³

"Socialism from the Root Up" was an agitational as well as an educational document.⁴ Accounts of historical events can be a way in which the victors of historical struggles claim the support of reality itself for their arrangements, or a way in which their challengers seek to undermine those claims. Morris and Bax sought by retelling the history of England to change the conception of that history in the minds of their readers, to make the possibility of alternative interpretations of the past vivid, and thus to make the possibility of alternative futures vivid, also.

The second installment of "Socialism from the Root Up" included a description of the fourteenth-century English Peasants' Rebellion.

3. "Socialism from the Root Up," "Chapter 1—Ancient Society," *Commonweal*, 15 May 1886, 53.

4. "I think the duty of the League is educational entirely at present; and that that duty is all the more important since the SDF has entirely given up that side of things." William Morris to Joseph Lane, 30 March 1887, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 2:631.

By this time serfdom generally was beginning to yield to the change introduced by the guilds and free towns: the field serfs partly drifted into the towns and became affiliated to the guilds, and partly became free men, though living on lands whose tenure was unfree—copyholders, we should call them. This movement towards the break-up of serfdom is marked by the peasants' war in England led by Wat Tyler and John Ball in Kent, and John Lister (dyer) in East Anglia, which was the answer of the combined yeomen, emancipated and unemancipated serfs, to the attempt of the nobles to check the movement.⁵

It may have been this simple statement which set off Morris's imagination, drawing him back in another way to his favorite historical period, an epoch of history that he had already brought to life in hundreds of pages of more or less idealized poetry and prose, in scores of drawings and other designs.

"Socialism from the Root Up" would continue to appear regularly through its thirteenth chapter in the 30 October 1886 issue of *Commonweal*, approximately one chapter every other week, a rhythm broken only by the appearance of Morris's "An Old Story Retold," in the 18 September 1886 issue. The first episode of *A Dream of John Ball* then ran on the front page of the 13 November 1886 issue. Like "Socialism from the Root Up," it thereafter appeared on the interior pages of the newspaper, frequently the third. *A Dream of John Ball* occupied that position continuously without interruption by other serializations to its final episode on 22 January 1887. "Socialism from the Root Up" resumed immediately in the *Commonweal* issue for 5 February 1887. The serialized parts of *A Dream of John Ball* were, then, physically interchangeable with those of "Socialism from the Root Up" as pages in *Commonweal*. For a year its readers could open their paper knowing that they would find either the historical and technical work on socialism written by Morris and Bax, or, in the same place, the imaginative expansion of this material in Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*. There is more to education than the enumeration of facts and the marshaling of arguments. Particularly for the task that Morris had set himself, the overwhelming claims of the system which he opposed were such that simply to imagine vividly a world in which the nineteenth-century given was not necessarily the real was as much a contribution to knowledge as Bax's economic expertise. Much writing about contemporary conditions attributed them to some iron law of necessity. Morris attempted to show in his socialist prose romances that those conditions were not inevitable.

John Ball is a figure in Froissart's *Chronicles*, which includes an account of the origins of the rebellion. Froissart began with an explanation of serfdom

5. "Socialism from the Root Up," "Chapter II—Mediaeval Society," *Commonweal*, 22 May 1886, 61. Morris's reference to John Lister (dyer), who joined the rebellion with his arms still stained with woad, would, of course, have a personal meaning to Morris himself, whose dyeing experiments had often left him in a similar condition.

itself: "Ther was an usage in England, and yet is in diverse countreys, that the noble men hath great fraunches over the comons, and kepeth them in servage." This statement is then expanded and the nature of serfdom made specific: "That is to say, their tenautes ought by costome to labour the lordes landes, to gather and bring home theyr cornes, and some to threshe and to fanne, and by servage to make theyr hey, and to heaw their wood and bring it home." Froissart states that serfdom was more common in England than elsewhere, especially in the counties of Kent, Essex, Sussex, and Bedford. It was there that the rebellion began, with a complaint against serfdom and an appeal to natural law, as it were:

These unhappy people of these sayd countreys began to styrre, bycause they sayde they were kept in great servage; and in the begynning of the worlde they sayd ther were no bonde men. Wherefore they maynteyned that none ought to be bonde, without he dyd treason to his lorde, as Lucifer dyde to God.

Therefore, the serfs argued that as they were not criminals or rebels, they ought to receive wages for their work:

Saying, why shuld they than be kept so undre lyke bestes, the which they sayd they wold no lengar suffre, for they wolde be all one; and if they labored or dyd any thyng for theyr lordes, they wold have wages therfor as well as other.⁶

Froissart says that the English peasants were required to farm the lands of their feudal lords; harvest and store their grain; thresh it and make hay; hew and cart their lords' wood. He acknowledges that these feudal burdens were greater for them than those of peasants elsewhere. He then lays out their appeal to be paid for their labor, an appeal based on the common nature of humanity and the unnaturalness of class society.

After giving these causes of the rebellion and sketching the previous career of John Ball—a habitual agitator and troublemaker—Froissart follows a tradition dating back to the Greek historians by repeating the reasons for the rebellion in the guise of giving a sample of Ball's preaching. I will quote this, as Morris had read it, for Froissart's style in this dramatization is carried over into Morris's accounts of John Ball's speeches.

A ye good people, the maters gothe nat well to passe in Englande, nor shall nat do tyll every thyng be common; and that there be no villayns or gentrymen, but that we

6. John Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart*, trans. Sir John Bouchiers, Lord Berners (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 2:223–25. This use of Froissart was a habit of Morris from his earliest period, that of *The Defence of Guenevere*. As Carole Silver has noted, "Morris is fond of developing hints and implications from his source into major incidents or motifs in his own poems"; *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), 18.

may be all unyed togyder, and that the lordes be no greater maisters than we be. What have we deserved, or why shulde we be kept thus in servage? We be all come fro one father and one mother, Adam and Eve: wherby can they say or shewe that they be gretter lordes than we be? Savyng by that they cause us to wyn and labour for that they dispende. They ar clothed in velvet and chamlet furred with grise, and we be vested with pore clothe; they have their wynes, spyces, and good breed, and we have the drawyng out of the chaffe, and drinke water; they dwell in fayre houses, and we have the payne and traveyle, rayne, and wynde in the feldes; and by that that cometh of our labours they kepe and maynteyne their estates: we be called their bondmen, and without we do redilye them servyce, we be beaten; and we have no soverayne to whom we may complayne, nor that wyll here us nor do us right. Lette us go to the kyng, he is yonge, and shewe hym what servage we be in, and shewe hym howe we wyll have it otherwyse, or els we wyll provyde us of some remedy. And if we go togyder, all maner of people that be nowe in any bondage wyll folowe us, to the intent to be made fre; and whan the kyng seyth us, we shall have some remedy, other by fayrnesse or otherwyse.

Froissart's version of John Ball's speech again begins with the assertion that only a return to the natural order—abolishing feudal relations—is just. This is followed by a list of comparisons between the lives of the lords and those of the serfs: in clothing, drink, food, and housing. He points out that the wealth of the lords is derived from the poverty of the serfs, and he urges his listeners to go with him to the king to petition for an end to serfdom. Morris took these materials, which he had been familiar with since childhood, and formed them into a narrative to complement the drier historical account given in "Socialism from the Root Up."⁷

As Carole Silver reminds us, Morris was at pains to inform himself concerning the historical background of the events he recounted.⁸ He (and Bax) were working a vein that saw much activity in those years. Thorold Rogers and Engels, primarily, but many others also in England and on the Continent were attempting what we would now call revisionary history. (Kautsky's work on the Peasants' War in Germany was an extended historical narrative that closely parallels Morris's fictionalized history of the earlier English equivalent.) The English Peasants' Rebellion of 1381 was a dramatic, and particularly well

7. Another potential source for the figure of John Ball was Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles, beginning at Duke William the Norman, Commonlie Called the Conqueror and Descending by Degrees of Yeers to all the Kings and Queenes of England in their Orderlie Successions* (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 2:740.

8. "Morris carefully bases his fictional versions of events on the medieval and contemporary works of English historians. Supplementing Froissart's account of the rebellion with such sources as Holinshed's *Chronicles* and *The Chronicle of John Hardyng*, he turns to nineteenth-century historians for analysis and interpretation. He derives materials from Sir Henry Maine, Bishop Stubbs, Edward Freeman, John Richard Green, and Thorold Rogers, as well as from the more popular writings of Southey, Macaulay, and Cobbett." Carole Silver, *Romance of William Morris*, 124.

documented, instance of peasant resistance to medieval social relations. Wat Tyler's march on London, the confrontation with the young king, Richard II, the extensive nature of the rebellion and its sudden collapse, all served to give it emblematic status in such popular accounts as Froissart and Holinshed, and later in a rich literary and historical tradition. The formation of the rebellion—its causes and its failure—were all timely matters for consideration at the end of the nineteenth century when the social and labor relations that had succeeded feudalism were in their turn in crisis.

A Dream of John Ball animates the textual sources that Morris had at hand and turns them to his own purpose. In the first scene, the Dreamer—and it is important to keep in mind that this narrator is a persona for Morris himself, a vehicle for his dialectic—meets a group of villagers, one of whom, Will Green, takes the Dreamer/Morris persona to be an itinerant story-teller and like himself a member of John Ball's revolutionary Fellowship. This is confirmed for Will Green when the Dreamer "leant forward and whispered in my ear: '*John the Miller, that ground small, small, small,*' and stopped and winked at me, and from between my lips without my mind forming any meaning came the words, '*The king's son of heaven shall pay for all*'" (p. 220). This seems at first rather peculiar. What is the meaning of these spells? Now, in Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana* we find a copy of the letter that the historical John Ball circulated to incite and direct the fourteenth-century rebellion against feudalism. The fragment of English which is embedded in Walsingham's Latin chronicle begins with a paragraph of salutation and advice:

John Schep, som tyme Seynt Marie prest of Yorke, and now of Colchestre, greteth welle John Nameless, and Johan the Mullere, and Johan Cartere, and biddeth hem that thei ware of gyle in borugh, and standeth togiddir in Goddis name, and biddeth Peres Plouyman go to his werke, and chastise well Hobbe the robber, and taketh with you Johan Trewman, and all his fellows, and no mo (and loke seharpe you to on heued, and no mo).

The country folk—the laborers, the millers, the teamsters, the plowmen—are to unite against the "gyle" of the town, its lawyers and privileges. These instructions are followed by what even Holinshed found to be "dark" verses:

Johan the Muller hathe ygrowude smal, smal, smal;
The Kyngis sone of hevene shall pay for alle.
Be ware or ye be wo,
Knoweth your frende fro youre foo,
Haveth ynowe, and seythe 'Hoo:.'
And so welle and better, and fleth synne,

And sekth pees, and holde therynne.
'And so biddeth Johan Trewman and all his felawes.'⁹

Perhaps John Ball's remarkable letter was in fact what Morris took it to be, a set of instructions for the revolutionaries, including a sign and countersign so they might recognize one another. Morris's use of fourteenth-century documents at the beginning of a romance serialized in a newspaper intended for a mixed audience is a significant indication of his attitudes toward his politicized literary work of this period. Morris thought of *A Dream of John Ball* as serving an educational function for the readers of *Commonweal*. Giving them this piece of authentic historical information was at once a sign of and part of his duty as a revolutionary party leader.¹⁰ This is the context for a characteristic journalistic comment by Morris on the official festivities of Lord Mayor's Day that year: "When the poor begin to know that they are poor not by irremediable accident, but because they are robbed by a useless class who can be got rid of, the beginning of the end is at hand."¹¹ This was precisely the function of *A Dream of John Ball*, *Commonweal*, and the Socialist League itself: to bring knowledge about their situation and its history to "the poor." Part of that knowledge was information about the history of such educational and agitational work. Ball's verses were the fourteenth-century equivalent of Morris's own "Chants for Socialists," the slogans and sermons forerunners of *Commonweal*. A revolution, Morris was informing his readers, has a literary aspect—or at least an ideological one. Ball's function in Wat Tyler's Rebellion paralleled, and justified, Morris's own work as a propagandist, street corner orator, poet.¹²

Morris uses a fairly long interior scene in a tavern in chapter 2 of *A Dream of John Ball* as a device for conveying background information about the Fellowship, the wrongs of the people, and their resolve to bear it no longer. The tavern setting for this is particularly pleasing: "The walls were panelled roughly enough with oak boards to about six feet from the floor, and about three feet of plaster above that was wrought in a pattern of a rose stem running all round the room" (p. 221). It is an interior courtesy of Morris and Company. The narrator

9. Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), 2:33–34.

10. "The rebellion of 1381 had become an important event in the work of historians contemporary with Morris, particularly those whom he admired. . . . Talking of the system of slogans and catchwords [J. R. Green, in his *History of the English People*, 1878] writes: In the rude jingle of these lines began for England the literature of political controversy: they are the first predecessors of the pamphlets of Milton and Burke. . . . Thus it was an articulate uprising with real possibilities of victory." John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Lukacs (London: Methuen, 1971), 247.

11. "The Moral of Last Lord Mayor's Day," *Commonweal*, 20 November 1886, 265.

12. For other parts of his audience, the exchange of old English phrases brought the gratification of recognition of old texts, a verbal window, as it were, into something quite near the world of Malory so loved by the Pre-Raphaelites.

tells the villagers that he is from Essex, the center of the rebellion. They react with "a great shout . . . For I must tell you that I knew somehow, but I know not how, that . . .," whereupon Morris inserts the background of Wat Tyler's Rebellion: how the landowners had sought to tighten their hold on the peasants, how the peasants had risen against them, and how "at St. Albans they were wellnigh at blows with the Lord Abbot's soldiers."¹³ During dinner, the narrator's (read "Morris's") clumsiness with the medieval utensils is taken as a sign that he is an Oxford scholar (and not a countryman), which he acknowledges, and then it is more or less natural for him to pay for his supper by telling a story, in this case an Icelandic tale.

We are not told which tale the "Oxford Clerk" relates in the tavern—some fierce Saga fragment, no doubt—but Morris gives some details of the "stave of Robin Hood" which is sung as a return:

It was concerning the struggle against tyranny for the freedom of life, how that the wild wood and the heath, despite of wind and weather, were better for a free man than the court and the cheaping-town; of the taking from the rich to give to the poor; of the life of a man doing his own will and not the will of another man commanding him for the commandment's sake. (p. 224)

This nineteenth-century urban glorification of the outdoor life contrasts strongly with the historical John Ball's complaints about agricultural working conditions. Where in the fourteenth century the progressive position was the tendency toward urbanization, Morris, in more than one of his roles, saw progress in de-urbanization, that glorification of country life best seen in his *News from Nowhere*.

Morris works another piece of authentic material from the rebellion into his romance by having the villagers sing John Ball's verses, including the catch about the Miller grinding "smal, smal, smal," ending with a choral shout that "John Ball hath rung our bell!" as the village church's bells summon them to the cross. Here again Morris takes a strange phrase from John Ball's letter, dramatizes it, and makes it meaningful. John Ball's speech at the cross stands alone as the third installment of the serial and the fourth chapter of the book. Morris recasts Froissart's set-piece as a nineteenth-century interpretation of Ball's doctrines. It begins with a summary of the rebellion to that moment (the day before the march on London), a summary largely taken from Froissart. Ball tells how he had been held prisoner by the archbishop and how the rebels had freed him and burned the archbishop's palace, then begins a decidedly Morrisian critique of orthodox morality:

13. Walsingham had kept his *Chronicle* at St. Albans. There was an "ancient building" at St. Albans, the cathedral, on behalf of which Morris had written a letter to the chapter in 1878.

for I say to you that earth and heaven are not two but one; and this one is that which ye know, and are each one of you a part of, to wit, the Holy Church, and in each one of you dwelleth the life of the Church, unless ye slay it. Ah, my brothers, what an evil doom is this, to be an outcast from the Church, to have none to love you and to speak with you, to be without fellowship! (p. 230)

One difficult task for a socialist organizer in the 1880s was dealing with the hold of the chapel over the working class. The aggressive atheism of international Marxism did not go over well with many of the coal miners, for example. Morris approaches this problem by claiming that socialism itself is the truly religious force in society. Thus the burden of the next part of Ball's sermon becomes an equation of socialist fellowship and Christian morality:

Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane. (p. 230)

Morris invents a late medieval heresy, claiming that earth itself is heaven and that hell is found in the hearts of the rich. "Therefore, I tell you that the proud, despiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he hath no fellow" (p. 231). Already, barely into his story, Morris makes its point explicit in an aside: the tale is about "how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name" (pp. 231-32). This dialectical moral will be the subject of the final dialogues in the church.

The priest confesses that while in prison he had momentarily regretted not having taken the Christian path of prayer and help for individuals instead of the socialist path of sacrifice for the good of all. It is not charity, for Morris's priest, that is the good; it is fellowship. If fellowship is that which is good, domination is clearly evil: "Yea, forsooth, once again I say as of old, the great treading down the little, and the strong beating down the weak, and cruel men fearing not, and kind men daring not, and wise men caring not" (p. 233). (Froissart had written: "We be called their bondmen, and without we do redilye them servyce, we be beaten; and we have no soverayne to whom we may complayne, nor that wyll here us nor do us right.") The speech of Morris's John Ball modulates from an ecstatic vision of fellowship to a savage indictment of the rich:

Forsooth, in the belly of every rich man dwelleth a devil of hell and when the man would give his goods to the poor, the devil within him gainsayeth it, . . . Forsooth,

too many rich men there are in this realm; and yet if there were but one, there would be one too many, . . . and ye shall lay their heads in the dust. (p. 234)

John Ball completes his condemnation of present evils with a vision of future bliss.

What else shall ye lack when ye lack masters? Ye shall not lack for the fields ye have tilled, nor the houses ye have built, nor the cloth ye have woven; all these shall be yours, and whatso ye will of all that the earth beareth; then shall no man mow the deep grass for another, while his own kine lack cow-meat; and he that soweth shall reap, and the reaper shall eat in the fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he hath won; and he that buildeth a house shall dwell in it with those that he biddeth of his free will; and the tithe barn shall garner the wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward and the rain-drift hideth the sheaves in August; and all shall be without money and without price. Faithfully and merrily then shall all men keep the holidays of the Church in peace of body and joy of heart. And man shall help man, and the saints in heaven shall be glad, because men no more fear each other; and the churl shall be ashamed, and shall hide his churlishness till it be gone, and he be no more a churl; and fellowship shall be established in heaven and on earth. (p. 237)

Morris's John Ball follows Froissart's in his listing of the tasks of labor and its rewards: fields tilled, hay mowed, housing and clothing provided for. And Morris adds a list of benefits to be expected from fellowship that are the reverse of the evils noted by Froissart's rebel priest. There are, however, two differences between the presentations: the centrality of the category of fellowship, introduced by Morris's character—surely a medievalization of the essence of socialism itself—and, oddly enough, the Christianity of the nineteenth-century phrasing, too obvious to be stated, perhaps, by the older chronicle, or perhaps needed for period color by the newer.

Here, within the essentially negative vision of *A Dream of John Ball*, we already see the essence of the positive dream that was not written out in full until 1890 in *News from Nowhere*. Morris's changes in Froissart's account of Ball's sermons are directed to the *Commonweal* audience. Where Froissart's John Ball complains about scarcity in the categories of food, shelter, and clothing, Morris's proclaims the possibility of abundance in each of these same categories. Froissart's John Ball asserts the unity of the peasants, a political unity for the achievement of political ends; Morris's priest calls for "fellowship" as a way to achieve economic liberation. If fellowship is the solution to the problems of medieval domination, clearly, for Morris, it was also the solution to the agony of nineteenth-century capitalist domination. The work of uniting the working class as an answer to the evils of the modern world was a task that Morris thought necessary from the time of his involvement in the Eastern Question Association

in his pre-socialist days.¹⁴ His writings in *Commonweal*, including his romances, were instrumental to that work.

Morris's careful handling of the historical materials is further illustrated in his description of a battle in chapters 5 and 6.¹⁵ The battle is with a group of local knights and, it is emphasized, their lawyers.¹⁶ One of the demands of the rebellion had been the execution of all lawyers. The labor shortage after the Great Plague had caused a loosening of feudal duties and a general rise in the wage levels. Lawyers, then, were used by the landowners to return wages and obligations to their pre-plague levels—thus the hatred of the peasantry for lawyers and legal records. The Edenic dream of a world that is transparently meaningful often finds expression in complaints about the opposite condition, a world whose meaning is obscured by such arrangements, for which lawyers are responsible. How satisfying, even retrospectively, to envision such an easy solution to the problem as simply killing the lawyers! Morris was much belittled by the Fabian socialists, as if he did not understand their goals; perhaps he understood them better than did the Fabians themselves, understood that bureaucratic solutions to economic problems become political problems, and thus thought it would be better, in a utopian way, to be free of all such folks and their works.

The chapter entitled "Betwixt The Living & The Dead" takes place, as do all the succeeding chapters, inside the village church. The Dreamer and the priest arrive there, look around, and settle themselves in for the long night ahead. They begin by talking of the battle's dead, viewing the bodies, and expressing their opinions about death itself. John Ball voices fairly conventional ideas about a judgmental afterlife, while the Dreamer expresses a materialist philosophy. After this discussion the Dreamer attempts to leave the church to return to Will Green's, but the priest restrains him: "For once more I deem of thee that thou has seen things which I have not seen, and could not have seen" (p. 267). This repeated expression by the priest is one of the centers of the text: rather than John Ball himself going into the future in order to learn the consequences of his rebellion, or the Dreamer simply visiting the past in order to learn the secrets of the origins of nineteenth-century conditions, John Ball receives a visit from "Morris," so that the past might have the secrets of the future communicated to

14. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 1:357-60. See also E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2d ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1977), ch. 5.

15. These constitute the fourth and fifth episodes of the *Commonweal* serialization, which appeared 4 and 11 December 1886.

16. There is another historical touch in this episode. Froissart mentions prominently in his account a knight, Sir John Newton, taken prisoner at Rochester by the rebels, who is used as an intermediary with the nobles. In Froissart the knight is an unwilling tool of the rebels. Morris makes him a collaborator, paralleling Morris's own position as a gentleman who has cast his lot in with that of the workers.

it, and the present might learn its similarities and differences from the past. The Morris persona "finds" that the fourteenth-century physical environment, including its man-made features, compares quite favorably with the degraded landscape of the late nineteenth century, but he also "finds," and communicates to the readers of *Commonweal*, that the past was as socially damaged as their own time. Somehow, the romantic and medievalizing Morris has become to some degree a historical realist. What Morris has seen that John Ball could not have seen is precisely the historical development of the forces against which Ball was struggling. That knowledge was not merely the gift of living in the nineteenth rather than in the fourteenth century, but it was also the consequence of the studies that had brought him to the point of writing tales such as *A Dream of John Ball* in his socialist newspaper.

"When I wrote my little book," Morris said, "I did it with the intention of bringing in the socialistic dialogues at the end rather than dealing with the literary and dramatic side of the story."¹⁷ Chapter 10, "Those Two Talk of the Days to Come," containing the first part of those "socialist dialogues," begins with a declaration from John Ball that his visitor is qualified to judge, not "if thou thinkest we are right to play the play like men, but whether playing like men we shall fail like men," qualified because Ball takes the visitor for "a scholar who hast read books; and withal, in some way that I cannot name, thou knowest more than we; as though with thee the world had lived longer than with us" (pp. 267-68). The reason for Ball's sense that the Dreamer is a visitor from the future—the fact that his guest is a scholar—is one more indication of Morris's faith in education as a form of revolutionary action. He presents himself to the members of the Socialist League, to the readers of *Commonweal*, as an educator, "a scholar," a possessor of essential information, chiefly historical. Ball's sense of the visitor's origins—his perception of the guest's extended perspective—is an essential device of the plot.

The conversation resumes (the socialistic dialogues begin) with John Ball asking the Dreamer about the outcome of the rebellion which the priest is about to lead. (Later, in *News from Nowhere*, similar material is handled with the same device in "How The Change Came," where a different Morris persona asks old Hammond to describe the process of the successful revolution which had destroyed capitalism. In chapter 10 of *A Dream of John Ball* the fact of the historical act is known to the questioner, but not its consequence; in chapter 17 of *News from Nowhere*, the result is known, but not the act of which it is a consequence.) Following this question by John Ball and until nearly the end of the story, we have no "literary and dramatic" apparatus, only "socialistic dialogues."

After John Ball guesses that the Dreamer is a messenger from the future or

17. Thompson, *William Morris*, 837.

from "the Master of the Fellowship and the King's Son of Heaven," the Morris persona acknowledges that he knows what will happen to the rebellion, but says, modestly, "if I know more than thou, I do far less; therefore thou art my captain and I thy minstrel"—a statement of mere fact, at least insofar as Morris was the teller of John Ball's tale in the pages of *Commonweal*. This does not keep him from quickly revealing the priest's fate: "Surely thou goest to thy death." The visitor further informs John Ball that his rebellion will succeed at first, but then has to add that it will be eventually defeated through trickery and lack of leadership. This see-saw of encouraging and disappointing news from the future continues as the Dreamer assures John Ball that the goals of the rebellion nonetheless will be achieved: slavery and villeinage will end. This is a major victory, The Victory, from John Ball's point of view. That which now exists, almost always seems inevitable and eternal. To struggle against it takes courage; to win must seem miraculous. Morris reminds his readers that if the waning of feudalism seems "natural" to us, it was not so at the time.¹⁸ No sooner has Ball rejoiced at the prospect of the end of feudalism than the Morris persona tells him of the rise of commercial capitalism and of how "few shall be the free men that shall hold a rood of land whom the word of their lord may not turn adrift straightway" (p. 271). When John Ball cannot at first grasp this and thinks that he has been told that villeinage will be replaced by universal slavery, Morris uses Ball's confusion as the occasion to explain the difference between legal and "wage-slavery." John Ball does not think much of this difference: "The man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man." The Morris persona agrees: "'Thou sayest sooth,' said I" (p. 273). The problem that John Ball has difficulty in grasping is that the movement of history, as conceived by Morris, is not unilinear. The ending of feudalism does not bring economic liberation: it brings capitalism.¹⁹ Engels, writing about medieval peasant rebellions in general, had stated:

This sally beyond both the present and even the future could be nothing but violent and fantastic, and of necessity fell back into the narrow limits set by the contemporary situation. The attack on private property, the demand for common ownership was bound to resolve into a primitive organisation of charity; vague Christian equality could at best resolve into civic "equality before the law"; elimination of all authorities finally culminates in the establishment of republican governments

18. "Nor could the English tenantry of the 1370s be as certain as ourselves that villeinage would eventually 'wither away.'" R. B. Dobson, "Introduction," in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), lxi.

19. According to Goode, in this Morris was following Marx's teaching. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Lukacs (London: Methuen, 1971), 249.

elected by the people. The anticipation of communism nurtured by fantasy became in reality an anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions.²⁰

The priest's speculations about wage-slavery continue into chapter 11, "Hard It Is For The Old World To See The New." He thinks that police power will be necessary to make people work under such a system:

And there again shall ye need more soldiers and more constables till the land is eaten up by them; nor shall the lords and masters even be able to bear the burden of it; nor will their gains be so great, since that which each man may do in a day is not right great when all is said. (p. 274)

The visitor replies by raising the specter of the "police power" of starvation, stating that the commercial system will cause famine in the midst of plenty so that the workers will fight one another in order to secure inadequately paid work.²¹ The honest priest sees this as a paradox, and takes comfort in the hope of depopulation, but the narrator must take that consolation from him also.

"Alas, poor man!" I said; "nor mayst thou imagine how foul and wretched it may be for many of the folk; and yet I tell thee that men shall increase and multiply, till where there is one man in the land now, there shall be twenty in those days—yea, in some places ten times twenty." (pp. 275-76)

As this was not exactly the result that John Ball had expected from his efforts, the Dreamer asks him if he thinks that the rebellion is worthwhile in the light of such a future. Their dialogue has now extended into the darkest part of the night. The priest tells the Dreamer that he believes his efforts justified if in the distant future people will once more follow his example and rebel against domination. The Dreamer is able to assure Ball that although the people will be so oppressed that

20. F. Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850; Moscow, 1956), 60, quoted in R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), 402.

21. There is a footnote to the text of the romance at this point which underlines its relationship to "Socialism from the Root Up": "Forestaller, one who buys up goods when they are cheap, and so raises the price for his own benefit: forestalls the due and real demand and supply; regrater, one who both buys and sells in the same market, or within five miles thereof, buys, say a ton of cheese at 10 a.m. and sells it at 5 p.m. a penny a pound dearer without moving from his chair. For us Socialists the word monopolist will cover both species of thief.—Ed." These terms had already been explained for regular readers of *Commonweal* in the 12 June 1886 issue, where Morris and Bax regret that the old England is gone: "Medieval England is gone, the manners and ways of thought of the people are utterly changed; they are called English, but they are another people from that which dwelt in England when forestalling and regrating were misdemeanors." Morris apparently realized in the six months that elapsed between the reference and its dramatization that the terms needed some explanation. Nonetheless, this repetition is a significant indication of the close relationship between the two texts.

they will not be able to rebel for a long time, he trusts that eventually that moment will come.

The final chapter of the book merges two installments from the *Commonweal* serialization, those of 15 and 22 January 1887. It begins with another question from John Ball: How can there be many rich people as well as many poor people in the society of his future (that of the Dreamer's present)? The Dreamer/Morris explains to him, and the *Commonweal* audience (and to later-day critics who would believe Morris naive about such things), the wonders of automation and modern nineteenth-century transportation technology. John Ball grows hopeful once more: "There should be all plenty in the land, and not one poor man therein, unless of his own free will he choose to lack and be poor, as a man in religion or such like" (p. 281). John Ball's socialism, *unlike Morris's own*, is utopian, not scientific. Morris's narrator therefore disabuses Ball of this particular illusion, pointing out that men who own nothing but their own labor power cannot be rich, and that all the surplus value of their work will be appropriated by those who do not work, at which point the next to the last installment in the serial ends with the priest appealing to the utopia of technology: "'Yea,' he said; 'but how could I deem that such things could be when those days should become wherein men could make things work for them?'" (p. 282). The next week *Commonweal* carried the Dreamer's disheartening reply: "Many men shall be as poor and wretched always, year by year, as they are with thee when there is a famine in the land; nor shall any have plenty and surety of livelihood save those that shall sit by and look on while others labour; and these, I tell thee, shall be a many" (p. 282). And what is more, he says, the poor will not rebel because the sheer numbers of idle that the system will be able to float will allow a limited upward mobility that will bribe some and delude others into thinking they might be able to become one of the robbers rather than remain among the robbed. (This is probably a reference to the nineteenth-century ideology of hard work and just rewards.)

By this point in the story the symbolic dawn is advancing in the church, "the colours coming into the pictures on wall and in window" (p. 284). John Ball asks, finally, the question for which the entire story was written: Is there a remedy to class domination, and if so, "what that remedy shall be?" The Dreamer realizes that the dream is ebbing with the dawn, so he speaks quickly. He takes the progress of the light itself as a figure of the future of class conflict (the Morris who was writing the story having become convinced that "class antagonism is really the key to the solution of the social question");²² the Dreamer compares John Ball's revolt to the light of the moon, the oppression of industrial capitalism to the dark before the dawn, and the cold light of early morning to the realization of the truth of class oppression and the moment when, at its worst, that oppression can at last be remedied:

22. Kelvin, ed., *Letters*, 2:766.

The time shall come, John Ball, when that dream of thine that this shall one day be, shall be a thing that men shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about, as even with thee they talk of the villeins becoming tenants paying their lord quit-rent; therefore, hast thou done well to hope it; and, if thou heedest this also, as I suppose thou heedest it little, thy name shall abide by thy hope in those days to come, and thou shalt not be forgotten. (p. 285.)

When the priest presses him for details, all that the Dreamer can tell him is that at first there will be difficulties and confusion, but at last "the Day will come." At that moment full daylight reaches the church, and John Ball and the Dreamer fade from one another: "Thou hast been a dream to me as I to thee," says John Ball, and then "Farewell, friend" (p. 286).

In the final scene of the romance, which mirrors the first, the Dreamer is lying in bed, "the south-westerly gale rattling the Venetian blinds and making their hold-fasts squeak" (p. 287). It is dawn not in fourteenth-century Kent but in nineteenth-century London. The dreamer, now awakened, goes to the window and looks at the degraded landscape, thinking of escaping to the countryside, where "I might of my own will carry on a day-dream of the friends I had made in the dream of night and against my will" (p. 288). But then he hears the factory whistles calling the workmen to the factories; that momentary reversion to Pre-Raphaelite ideals fades, and the Dreamer dresses, ready for his "day's 'work' as I call it, but which many a man besides John Ruskin (though not many in his position) would call 'play'" (p. 288).

The sufficiency of the Dreamer's answer to John Ball's plea for historical justification is vital to the relationship of the story to Morris's own historical context at the time it was written. Thus, E. P. Thompson sees that:

the problem . . . is whether "John Ball's" struggle and death is not a mockery in the light of the centuries of capitalism to come. The answer is twofold: first, "John Ball," symbol of the oppressed struggling for objectives incompatible with the necessities of history, has no alternatives; he can only achieve the dignity of manhood by rebellion—"to strive was my pleasure and my life." Second, his life is given deeper meaning by its foreshadowed consummation in "The Change Beyond The Change," in which his aspirations, and those of the nameless millions he represents, will be at length fulfilled.²³

In Thompson's view, then, the Dreamer's answer to John Ball's plea for historical justification is sufficient, and in the story itself John Ball seems to accept that answer. It is nothing to him if he must die, and although it is disappointing that the rebellion will not end domination, the promise that eventually "the Day will come" is enough to make the effort worthwhile. But what is it, exactly, that the Dreamer tells John Ball about the future? He is explicit enough about the

23. Thompson, *William Morris*, 837.

disadvantages of capitalism, but all he actually says about the end of that system is that it "shall be a thing that men shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about."

By the time Morris wrote *A Dream of John Ball*, on the one hand a large trade union movement was determined to win as many economic gains as possible, and on the other a small number of workers and middle-class intellectuals were intent on more radical change.²⁴ Morris, as a leader of the Socialist League, saw the power of the economic system of his time, believed in the necessity for an end to that system, and hoped that he and his fellows would be able to accomplish something toward that end. Part of his efforts in that direction were expended in writing the articles of "Socialism from the Root Up" for *Commonweal*, narrating the history of the working class, and analyzing that history for his readers. This technical exposition was supplemented by the dramatizations of history in his romance about the Peasants' Rebellion. Politically, Morris was working with hardly anything to offer except hope itself; that is what he offered to the readers of *Commonweal* in *A Dream of John Ball*, and therefore that was all the Dreamer had to offer John Ball within the story.

The story Morris chose to tell in order to illustrate the history and economics of "Socialism from the Root Up" was the story of a failed rebellion. The wider historical context of *A Dream of John Ball* as a didactic work was that of an era of stillborn rebellions, failed revolutions, preeminently the Paris Commune, but certainly going back as far as the Continental revolutions of 1848 and the English Chartist rebellion. When Morris wrote *A Dream of John Ball*, the propaganda of the Socialist League was "Utopian in form, but in actual effect and tone defeatist."²⁵ It was "utopian" in that it offered a refusal of the reality of the times, but "defeatist" in that all that it had to offer was that refusal.

But *A Dream of John Ball* is utopian in another sense, and I will conclude this chapter with some reflections on that aspect of the romance. The narrative structure of *A Dream of John Ball* is elegantly complicated throughout the fourteenth-century sequences by the ambiguity of the dream motif. At times it seems clear that "Morris" is dreaming of John Ball, but at other times it almost appears to be the case that John Ball himself is having a typically fourteenth-century "vision" of this conversation with a visitor from the future. The two between them produce a historical analysis of the rebellion not limited to the historicism to which the form of the narrative might otherwise have been subject. These intricacies are summed up in the romance's title, a dream about John Ball, a dream of John Ball, the dream of John Ball and of all visionaries.²⁶ Carole Silver writes of Morris that:

24. A. L. Morton and George Tate, *The British Labour Movement* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956), "The Revival of Socialism," 155-84.

25. Thompson, *William Morris*, 515.

26. Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," 251.

Because he feels that ameliorating the evils of his society is not enough, but that his world must be entirely reconstructed, Morris does not propose concrete solutions to Victorian social problems or pragmatic alternatives to its way of life. Instead, drawing upon history and myth, he creates worlds that are criticisms of his own. Even those works based on history, like *A Dream of John Ball*, are intended to be mythic. Going beyond the realm of conscious ideology, they depict ideal worlds which appeal to the universal, nonrational desire for the rebuilding of a lost terrestrial Eden and the restoration of a golden age.²⁷

The dream is always a moment antithetical to social reality; it is the not-real and thus tied to the real as utopia was the twin of Henry VIII's England. The passages of *A Dream of John Ball* that establish this antithesis are those which frame the story, the beginning and end in Morris's own nineteenth-century England. This dream form matters. It is in dreams that we refuse those parts of reality that we dislike, constructing, each one of us, a utopia of gratification. The dream is the last defense of the individual against a social world that is threatening, punishing, or merely insufficiently rewarding. Morris begins *A Dream of John Ball* with the comment that "Sometimes I am rewarded for fretting myself so much about present matters by a quite unasked for pleasant dream. I mean when I am asleep. This dream is as it were a present of an architectural peep-show. . . . I have seen in the dreams of night clearer than I can force myself to see . . . in dreams of the day" (pp. 215-16).

Morris set out in *A Dream of John Ball* to bring to the readers of *Commonweal* "the encouragement and warning of history," to give an account of the Peasants' Rebellion—a failed revolt against feudalism—in order to give hope for what he wished to be an eventually successful transformation of capitalism. His use of historical materials, particularly Froissart's dramatization of John Ball's speeches, took those materials out of the realm of traditional history and placed them in his own time, as a call for that better world which he would see in the "pleasant" future of *News from Nowhere*. This very effort introduced a fragment of that world into the pages of *Commonweal* as an artistic vision, *A Dream of John Ball*. The aesthetic dimension is the manifestation of utopia in the waking world. A literary utopia makes a private dream public and by doing so acts to change the public world in two ways: it provides a gratifying world of the imagination, and it provides a critique of those aspects of the "real" world which superfluously deny gratification.

On the literal level of the narrative of *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris played on general notions about dreams and uses our suspension of disbelief—anything can happen in a dream—to make the transition from nineteenth-century London to fourteenth-century Kent: "the unhedged tillage and a certain unwonted trimness

27. Silver, *Romance of William Morris*, 109.

and handiness about the enclosures of the garden and orchards, puzzled me for a minute or two . . . I was of course used to the hedged tillage and tumble-down bankrupt-looking surroundings of our modern agriculture" (p. 217). We might pause here, at the end of these considerations, over that initial comparison of hedged and unhedged tillage, apparently simply a statement of historical fact, but reverberating from Morris's literary work to his artistic style. Morris's characteristic artistic production, in whatever medium, was the border or frame, a boundary between art and life, perhaps a wall to keep the world of industrialism away from the delicate designs of Burne-Jones. The unhedged fourteenth-century fields proclaim their utopian nature by this absence of boundaries. Protected within the frames of dream and art, the earthly paradise of fourteenth-century Kent glows in the dulling pages of a nineteenth-century radical newspaper: an escape from those "six counties covered with smoke," and a promise.

CAROLE G. SILVER

Socialism Internalized

The Last Romances of William Morris

In 1892, after reading an ingenious if fanciful *Spectator* review of *The Wood beyond the World* which analyzed that romance as an allegory of Capital and Labor, Morris wrote the journal a rebuttal in which he announced: "I had not the least intention of thrusting an allegory into 'The Wood beyond the World'; it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with nothing didactic about it."¹ Commenting that when he wrote on social problems, he tried to be as direct and clear as possible, Morris indicated that this romance—and, by implication, all his others—was not intended as either socialist or allegorical.

Since the 1890s, scholars and critics have been trying to prove that Morris did not mean what he said. The list of romances written between 1890 and 1896 is lengthy: *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood beyond the World*, *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, and *The Sundering Flood*; most scholars now agree that these are not allegories as Morris would have defined the term. Unlike *Pilgrim's Progress*, they do not utilize narrative primarily to promote a thesis nor do they incarnate abstract ideas as characters and settings. Instead, critics suggest that Morris's romances are parabolic, or romances of types or, at the least, obliquely symbolic.²

The political orientation of the romances is not as immediately apparent, however, for Marxist doctrines and historical interpretations are less overt in them than in *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, written in the late 1880s when Morris was most active in the English Marxist movement. Yet they are subtly but richly colored by socialism; Marxism is implicit as an

1. May Morris, *The Introductions to the Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. Joseph Riggs Dunlap, 2 vols. (New York: Oriole Editions, 1973), 2:499.

2. See, for example, Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982); Richard Mathews, *Worlds Beyond the World: The Fantastic Vision of William Morris* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1978); and Charlotte H. Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978).