Chapter VI

The Uses of History:
The Healing of the Nations

Although *A Dream of John Ball* is not properly a prose romance (it is rather more like a combination of *Past and Present* and *Piers Plowman*), it was the first significant work in prose undertaken by Morris in his mature years and seems to have started him in this new direction, being followed shortly by *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. *John Ball*, based on the 1381 Peasants' Revolt in Kent, seems to have been rather well received in its day and still enjoys a respectable critical acclaim. It is often praised for its simplicity and lucidity, and indeed it is admirably straightforward in accomplishing its purpose of arousing a consciousness of the historical evolution of freedom from tyranny, a freedom that the Dreamer, Morris, can only anticipate as he awakens to Victorian London. It was, as is well known, written as an expression of the socialist political convictions he held at that period, and the final chapters, tracing the course of economic development in England from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth, present, as may be expected, a Marxist view. Nonetheless, *John Ball* seems to represent the beginning of Morris's prose romances and, further, a beginning deeply rooted in the actual history of England. The English Peasants' Revolt was an event of considerable importance in the development of modern social thought, and it is characteristic of Morris that he should have been drawn to such a subject. Norman Cohn, in his *Pursuit of the Millennium*, sees in the pronouncements attributed to John Ball by the chroniclers Froissart and Walsingham the first recorded expression of millenarianism, that is, the belief that the entire earth is imminently to be transformed into an egalitarian paradise—in short, a utopia. If John Ball's famous sermon was indeed the first postulation of a golden age to come, it truly marked a revolution in thinking, perhaps the most significant in the history of modern thought.

In his next volume, *The House of the Wolfings*, Morris encompassed an even broader historical viewpoint and took for his subject what his daughter would call "the world-history that was enacted in the Plains and among the Great Mountains of mid-Europe" (XVII, xiv–xv). Since May Morris pointed out a number of years ago that *The Wolfings*

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and *The Roots* are seen historically as opposed to the later romances, which "lead us straight into the radiance of fairy-land" (XIV, xxv), it is hardly iconoclastic to emphasize this historicity. Morris's venture into this new genre, whether it be called romance, heroic fantasy, or whatever, was occasioned from the beginning by a strong consciousness of what was actual in the past, and, parallel to this, a strong desire to influence an actual future.

*The House of the Wolfings* (1888) is an illuminating introduction to the prose romances of Morris's mature years, not only because it was the first of the series, but also because it illustrates the major themes and patterns of these romances, showing clearly their origins in the sagas and epics that Morris had been translating in the preceding decades. Perhaps because it is an early essay in a new form, it also shows most obviously what have often been anathematized as weaknesses of Morris's romances (or of his work in general). In short, *The House of the Wolfings* is not the best of the romances, nor even one of the most interesting, but, as intellectual topography, it allows us to chart where Morris had been and where he was going. In this, the first of the mature romances, he deals with a historically recognizable, and, more important, a historically significant subject, clearly fixed in the time and space of this world (though hardly with excessive exactitude), and, because of its national (in the largest sense of the word) importance, worthy of epic treatment. The locale, not named by Morris, is one of the forested areas north of the Danube (also not named) inhabited by the Goths during the early years of the Roman Empire. May Morris refers to this region as the "wonderful land about the foot of the Italian Alps," by which Morris was fascinated (XIV, xxv). The time is deliberately inexact, but Morris tells us at the end of the tale that the Romans began about that period to "stay the spreading of their dominion, or even to draw in its boundaries somewhat" (XIV, 208). The tale concerns a Gothic tribe, the Men of the Mark, and their successful defense against Roman invasion of their homeland, situated in a great wooded plain. Morris's central theme is thus the triumph of liberty over tyrannical forces—a theme common to most of his romances.

Morris's tale is a work of fiction, something like a historical novel, and it would therefore be pointless to seek an exact historical source for it. (Morris reacted with explosive scorn when a German professor, impressed with the realistic details of Morris's description of Germanic tribal life, questioned him about the Mark;² May Morris,
describing the incident, remarks that the poet "sometimes dreamed realities without having documentary evidence of them" [XIV, xxv].) Nevertheless, the setting as well as the circumstances of the battle between the Romans and the Men of the Mark suggest that Morris may have been inspired in part by the famous Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, an incident of surpassing importance in the development of German nationalism and, by extension, "Aryan" consciousness (and Morris, as we shall see, was very much caught up in the great nineteenth-century tide of enthusiasm for the "Aryan" tradition).3 This famous battle, often credited with preventing Rome from conquering Germany, took place A.D. 9; it is well known that Caesar Augustus was haunted thereafter by the memory of this military disaster that occurred when Arminius, a prince of the Cherusci (though actually a Roman citizen and knight as well), persuaded the Roman general Varus to march out of camp and then ambushed him in wooded country. Just where the slaughter took place and whether Arminius acted treacherously or courageously (or both) are still matters of conjecture, but the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest has always been regarded as a pivotal episode in the history of Europe. Further, the story has been employed since ancient times to personify the opposition between civilization and freedom, embodied, respectively, in Roman governor and native prince.4 As might be expected, the battle was a popular literary subject in Germany; in his play Die Hermannsschlacht, Heinrich von Kleist had used the incident in an unsuccessful attempt to arouse the German peoples to action in a war against Napoleon, the type of the foreign oppressor. Thus, the defeat of Varus by Arminius was traditionally interpreted typologically as representing the triumph of liberty over oppression. Morris must have had something of the same sort in mind when he wrote The House of the Wolfings; its relationship to northern history and German nationalism could be seen as roughly analogous to the relationship of the Song of Roland to European history and French nationalism. The events related in the Song of Roland are, of course, only verified by historical research in the loosest possible sense; its action bears almost no relationship to actual events. The House of the Wolfings, more closely paralleling actual events in its plot, is a vehicle for Morris’s interpretations of these events for his own time.

To Morris, Rome was the archetype of tyranny, "the great curse of


The ancient world”; the defeat of one of its marauding armies by the men of the great wood is a type and symbol of the overthrow of the false by the true throughout history. The Roman soldiers and their leaders are depicted by Morris as arrogant and ruthless, waging their wars for unworthy purposes of personal ambition. (In his cupidity and personal ambition, the Roman leader of The Wolfings is rather like some of the leaders in the Germanic campaigns described by Plutarch in his Life of Julius Caesar.) Interestingly, however, the bravery and prowess of the Romans as warriors win them the respect of the Goths, who revere above all courage in warfare. By contrast, the Men of the Mark are defending their homeland and ancient way of life (which includes, incidentally, the practice of human sacrifice—the inference being that whatever is done out of sincere adherence to ancestral beliefs and customs does not constitute cruelty or brutality).

Morris himself seems to shrink not at all from the most grisly details of battle; in this, The Wolfings is reminiscent of a number of his early Pre-Raphaelite poems and tales, such as “The Haystack in the Floods,” as well as the Iliad and the bloodier sagas. The gore, in other words, is a traditional part of the heroic literature of which The House of the Wolfings is an outgrowth; not reprehensible in itself, its rightness or wrongness results from the motives of the participants. Physical characteristics are used symbolically in The Wolfings, as elsewhere by Morris, to denote the spiritual states of the combatants. While the Goths are physically attractive, being predominantly red-haired or blonde with blue eyes, the Romans are “swarthy,” “brown-faced,” and so on. The foul-favored Hunnish invaders of The Roots of the Mountains repeat this pattern, as do the bestial despoilers of The Well at the World’s End. Morris is nearly always medievally conventional in thus symbolically characterizing his protagonists and antagonists.

The Goths are consistently idealized throughout The Wolfings. Even the combination of prose and verse, which has made the work seem difficult or even eccentric to some readers, is directed toward this idealization. Morris must have come across numerous examples of

5 Lemire, p. 161; for Morris’s attitude toward Roman armies, see his impassioned remarks on the overthrow of Rome by the “Fury of the North,” in “Art and Socialism,” Works, XXIII, 204; on human sacrifice see Works, XIV, 51, for the passage telling how the daughter of the war-duke of the Markmen was “nothing loth, but went right willingly” to her sacrifice.

6 Paul Thompson calls House of the Wolfings “the worst of all” the romances with its “vacuous narrative and silly rambling speeches . . . alternated with unsettling sections in verse” (Work of William Morris, p. 158). See also E. P. Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, pp. 677–78.
traditional narratives, sagas and chronicles as well as folktales, that employ both prose and verse. Lord Raglan, in *The Hero*, points out that it is the most important parts of such narratives that appear in verse form; Morris similarly employs "rhyme and measure" for the speeches of his characters on ceremonial occasions or when they express feelings or ideas of great import. In other words, the verse represents an elevated form of communication. Further, all characters in the tale seem to be capable of framing their thoughts in verse at appropriate moments. Morris may have been trying to suggest that the democratic dignity of Germanic tribal life actually caused each individual to develop into a poet. For he believed strongly that art should be created by all members of society, thus becoming an integral part of the life of the people, not the exclusive province of an elite group isolated from the organic body of society. His ideal, expressed in his lectures on art, was “art made by the people and for the people, a joy to the maker and the user” (XXII, 80). The ability to burst into song is a symbolic by-product of the primeval freedom of tribal life.

The overthrow of the Roman invaders by the Men of the Mark, then, is a symbolic incident—a parable for modern times, denoting the timeless pattern of human events in which tyranny arises in order to be vanquished. Whether a Hegelian dialectical view of history can be read into this is another question, but it is certain that Morris means his readers to be conscious of history, and history not only extending from Roman times to the nineteenth century, but aeons stretching back into a hazy primordium. To this end Morris employs what might be described as a three-fold time level: a historical perspective characteristic of all the prose romances (and the translations and mature narrative poems as well). First, the narrator is quite frankly addressing himself directly to a Victorian audience; there is no use of the “lost manuscript” device dear to nineteenth-century writers. This contemporaneity is particularly striking in the opening pages of *The Wolfings*, where Morris compares the width of a river to the “Thames at Sheene when the flood-tide is at its highest” and the architecture of the House of the Wolfings to a “church of later days that has a nave and aisles,” and explains that the Men of the Mark had an equivalent to a modern jury (XIV, 3, 6, 7). Thus Morris interprets the deeds of the past for an audience of his contemporaries, fulfilling the ancient role of the bards who sang *Beowulf* or the *Iliad*. Like these ancient bards,

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7 Lord Raglan, pp. 239–42.
8 Morris continued to stud the romances with contemporary geographical comparisons; for examples see *Water of the Wondrous Isles*, *Works*, XX, 193, and *Sundering Flood*, *Works*, XXI, 2, 11. His verse prologue to *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* is addressed to “English Folk” who “speak the English Tongue” (*Works*, VII, 289–90).
he too remains outside the action, even effacing himself to the point of frequently reiterating such phrases as “the tale tells” and the like.

Bearing in mind this complex of time perspectives, we may better be able to appreciate Morris’s reasons for using the pseudoarchaic language that he developed for these romances. It has been pointed out that the prose style of the romances grew out of Morris’s earlier renderings of the sagas, in which he closely imitated Norse vocabulary and syntax; Morris was probably influenced as well by the well-known Victorian “Teutonizers” of English, E. A. Freeman, F. J. Furnivall, R. C. Trench, and William Barnes. Critics have been irritated by the language of the romances; most of these objections seem to me, however, to stem from differences in taste rather than any objective criteria, for the language is neither difficult to read nor hard to understand. The truth is that the distinctive style Morris developed for his romances is not peculiar or eccentric but a sensible and original response to a literary problem. He was faced with the same difficulty all translators and writers of historical fiction must face: how to convey the essence of a civilization different from one’s own in language intelligible to contemporary readers. The complexity of this problem is abundantly apparent from reading a few prefaces to modern English translations of any classic; attempts to solve it have been made in a variety of ways. Morris’s solution was to invent a diction that was foreign to Victorian England yet understandable to sympathetic readers; he is obviously trying to suggest his conception of the style of Gothic language spoken by the Wolfings in an age when writing was almost unknown among them and, in consequence, no record could be kept of their language.

The Victorian reader, then, is made aware of a time perspective at the outset: he is looking back at his own ancestors of nineteen centuries ago facing a crossroads in history, and he is seeing their traditional heroic tribal ways and values triumph over the threatening Roman slave state. (It is interesting that Morris’s high opinion of Germanic tribal traditions has been vindicated by some modern historians, who credit these traditions with important influences for individual freedom on the development of Western political institutions.) What is explicit in News from Nowhere and A Dream of John Ball is here only implied: nineteenth-century European man is also at a crossroads: only by heroic self-sacrifice like that of Thiodolph can he save the future.

But time-perspective in the prose romances is more complicated than in *News from Nowhere* and *John Ball*. Morris’s Men of the Mark are conscious at all times of a heroic age in the dim reaches of their own past—so much so that this heroic past is as real to them as the present. The gods, the dwarfs, and the heroes of this legendary era are the subjects of their art work and permeate their thinking and their speech. The Goths’ life of present deeds lived amid the atmosphere of the past thus effects a confluence of time. The deeds of Thiodolph and the other heroes of the Mark in successfully staving off the Romans are in reality the acting-out of an age-old pattern, and the Men of the Mark represent all mankind. Their tribal history is a paradigm of the cultural development of man, developing from a nomadic hunting society into an agricultural people, learning the use and manufacture of iron implements: “they came adown the river; on its waters on rafts, by its shores in wains or bestriding their horses or their kine, or afoot, till they had a mind to abide; and there as it fell they stayed their travel, and spread from each side of the river, and fought with the wood and its wild things, that they might make to themselves a dwelling-place on the face of the earth” (XIV, 3). Thus the reason for presenting and interpreting this historical pattern for Victorian England: this society too must rise to the challenge and renew itself by heroic dedication to the common good. Morris wrote elsewhere: “In short, history, the new sense of modern times, the great compensation for the losses of the centuries, is now teaching us worthily, and making us feel that the past is not dead, but is living in us, and will be alive in the future which we are now helping to make.” To what extent *The House of the Wolfings* was inspired by Marxist ideology is a point of some disagreement, although it is tempting to see Rome as standing for the corrupt and enslaving capitalist system. Even so, the tale does not require a Marxist interpretation to make its point—and this point is much the same as that of *John Ball*.

The lesson of *The Wolfings*, then, has to do with individual heroism. The experience of Thiodolph in this, his last battle, illustrates well Morris’s conception of the nature of heroism. For he is one in a long line of characteristic Morrisian heroes—a line that includes most notably Sigurd, Beowulf, Bellerophon, Aeneas. Following the writing of the early Pre-Raphaelite poems and stories and up to the time of the prose romances, Morris had been reworking traditional materials—writing translations, or, more accurately, redactions, of Greek myth and legend as well as Germanic saga and epic. The selective

manner in which he chose to treat this material is in itself revealing—and I have dealt with this subject to some extent in earlier chapters. Now, in the late eighties, with the prose romances, Morris is beginning to extrapolate more freely from the patterns and themes of this traditional material. The most striking pattern, which occurs many times throughout the works of Morris, is that of the great hero who saves his people, always at risk of personal cost and sacrifice. Thiodolph, of course, must give his life in the endeavor. But he has a choice—in fact, the same choice faced by Achilles: he can become a great hero and die gloriously, or he can repudiate his heroic destiny and live ignominiously. In both cases the choice is possible because of the intervention of a supernatural woman; in Achilles’ case his divine mother, Thetis, in Thiodolph’s, his Valkyrie wife, Wood-Sun, who gives him a magical, though curse-ridden, dwarf-wrought hauberk. This hauberk has the contradictory qualities of protecting the life of the wearer while simultaneously dazzling his senses so that he will disgrace himself as a warrior. The hauberk is thus a fitting symbol of the heroic dilemma—recalling the girdle worn, to his shame, by Gawain in his encounter with the Green Knight. Morris’s heroes must choose freely to accept the personal consequences of their destinies. But Thiodolph’s choice also shares in the issues involving the wanderers of The Earthly Paradise. As I have argued in my earlier discussion of that poem, Morris’s larger inferences are that the selfish and regressive choice made by the wanderers in deserting their homeland and seeking the earthly paradise of eternal life is wrong because it is a paradoxical denial of life, which continually demands of mankind heroic self-sacrifice. Wood-Sun holds out to Thiodolph a vision of unending love—a paradisaical ecstasy for which he is at first willing to sacrifice his people:

“No ill for thee, beloved, or for me in the hauberk lies; No sundering grief is in it, no lonely miseries. But we shall abide together, and that new life I gave, For a long while yet henceforward we twain its joy shall have.”

[XIV, 23]

Thiodolph’s internal conflict parallels the external warfare between Roman and Goth; when he conquers the temptation of the hauberk, the tide of battle changes and the Gothic victory is assured. It is fitting that Thiodolph’s corpse should be treated with the greatest reverence by his people, for he has sacrificed more than they can know. Even so, he is revered as one who will return to lead his people in a future hour of need—this is the mark of the greatest heroes.

The hauberk’s potency includes the ability to make its wearer lose
consciousness of time; in this respect it is closely related to Thiodolph's love for Wood-Sun, whose love also confers oblivion to time. Thus Thiodolph, when he has fallen unconscious in the midst of battle, dreams of times past. But this is a regressive rejection of the demands of time: Thiodolph's subsequent action in giving his life for his people is in fact the renewal and fulfilling of the past—of time. Hence the importance of the well-developed historical depth of *The Wolfings*. The hero, by accepting his destiny, saves his people through his heroic sacrifice, which symbolically renews the past and brings back the lost golden age. This, as we have seen, is a pattern that is at the very basis of *The Earthly Paradise* and *Sigurd the Volsung*; Morris will continue to play upon it in subsequent romances.

It is plain, then, that in *The Wolfings* the supernatural woman, in her opposition to the heroic values of this primitive society, becomes the focus of a choice between escapism and action. Morris would always opt for action; but in subsequent romances the sacrifice would not be so complete or so tragic. After *The Wolfings* the prose tales truly become romances, in the sense of ending happily. But they are constructed out of the same themes and situations. This is clear in Morris's next prose romance, *The Roots of the Mountains*, which in several respects is a sequel to *The House of the Wolfings*.

With *The Roots of the Mountains*, we are once again in the region of the Italian Alps, at a somewhat later time, again deliberately left vague, but most probably around the middle of the fifth century A.D. when waves of Hunnish invaders swept through central Europe. The tribal migrations that figure importantly in the background of the story (during which the related tribes of the Wolf were separated) may have been based on those that actually took place in the late fourth century because of pressure from the east by Huns. At this time the Romans gave the Germanic tribes land between the Danube and the Balkan range, where, their tribal organization left intact, they lived under their own laws as federates of the Roman empire.

At any rate, in *The Roots* Morris shows us once more a pre-Christian Gothic people defending their homes and lives against marauding tyrants—this time, the Dusky Men, the ugly and bestial Huns. As in *The Wolfings*, their way of life is idealized in a way that reminds one of the utopian society of the future depicted in *News from Nowhere*:

Thus then lived this folk in much plenty and ease of life, though not delicately nor desiring things out of measure. They wrought with their hands and weariest themselves; and they rested from their toil and feasted and were merry: tomorrow was not a burden to them, nor yesterday a thing which they would fain forget; life shamed them not, nor did death make them afraid.

As for the Dale wherein they dwelt, it was indeed most fair and lovely, and
they deemed it the Blessing of the Earth, and they trod its flowery grass beside its rippled streams amidst its green tree-boughs proudly and joyfully with goodly bodies and merry hearts. [XV, 11]

The isolated Dale is remote from Roman civilization, the moral inferiority of which Morris suggests by referring to it in inverted Biblical language as “the Plain and its Cities” (XV, 20). (As a matter of fact, the moral superiority of the German tribes over the Romans of the fifth century was attested by Salvian; Morris at least had precedent for his judgment.) Although Morris indicates so only obliquely, the tribes of the Wolf who are reunited in their common cause against the Huns are actually descendants of the Wolfings of The House of the Wolfings. For we learn that the tribes now known as the Woodlanders of Burgdale and the Men of Shadowy Vale came by separate ways into the mountains as they fled their ancient home “Midst the Mid-Earth’s mighty Woodland of old” (XV, 288), displaced by an enormous horde of foes. The banner of the tribes of the Wolf, like that of the earlier Wolfings, carries “the image of the Wolf with red gaping jaws” (XV, 294). This Wolf is much more than merely a totem. The wolf has traditionally been a symbol of Germanic military societies and thus suggests symbolically the dedication to action that is so vital, in Morris’s view, to the renewal of the world. Mircea Eliade suggests that the military associations of the wolf constitute a survival from early initiation practices among Germanic peoples, in which the donning of wolfskins plays a part. According to Eliade, the shape-changing episode in the Volsunga Saga when Sigmund and Sinfiotli put on wolfskins and become wolves is likewise such a survival in literary form. Now, initiation is a ritual embodying the concept of rebirth (of which we shall have more to say in the next chapter), and so the Wolf is an animal having ritual associations with the concept of renewal on individual and tribal levels. On a cosmological level, the image on the banner is an emblem of the Ragnarok when, according to Snorri’s Edda, Fenrir’s Wolf will burst his bonds and advance with huge gaping mouth, his upper jaw reaching the sky and his lower jaw on the earth. The very title of Morris’s romance is a gnomic allusion to the manner in which Fenrir’s Wolf was bound: again according to the Edda, the roots of the mountains are one of the six things out of which the fetter called Gleipnir was fashioned by the dwarfs. That these six things, including the beards of women, the breath of fish, and so on, are unheard of is adduced as proof that they were so used. We might reason that when Fenrir’s Wolf shall break his fetters, these six things,
no longer being required as bonds, will again be seen on earth.\textsuperscript{12} Hence the title refers to what shall once more be experienced by man at the Ragnarok, or Apocalypse. The Wolf, peculiarly Teutonic in its symbolic connections, is a wonderfully appropriate emblem for Morris’s tribes, and the reunification of the Wolfings’ descendants constitutes not only a renewal of the glorious past—a rebirth and a return to origins—but is a type of the future world-renewal, when all things fragmentary come together as one and are transmuted into a new creation.

Thus the children of the Wolf, together with their kindred tribes of Gothic descent, numbering twelve tribes in all (enumerated and described in chapters 31 and 32), stand once more for mankind as a whole, much as the Israelites of the Old Testament have come in Christian theology to stand for generic man. The Armageddon-like battle of Silverburg, which is the climax of the tale, suggests the apocalyptic overturning of evil foretold in the book of Revelation, and the reign of peace and prosperity that follows is, indeed, a foretaste of the millennium, described by Isaiah: “now at last was the hour drawing nigh which they dreamed of, but had scarce dared to hope for, when the lost way should be found, and the crooked made straight, and that which had been broken should be mended” (XV, 223). (Morris consistently describes his visions of secular paradise in the Biblical imagery and phraseology which came naturally to middle-class Victorians from their cumulative experience of family prayers, church attendance with readings and responses, school chapels, and so forth. Morris was doubtless already well grounded in the King James version of the Bible when he decided as a young man to go into the church.)

For the central figure in these stirring deeds Morris created one of his most striking heroes, Face-of-God (also called Goldmane) of the House of the Face. With his golden hair and beauty of countenance, he fulfils Mallarmé’s physical description of the hero in *Les Dieux Antiques* (1880): “Tous ont de beaux visages, et des boucles d’or flottant aux épaules.”\textsuperscript{13} Face-of-God’s abandonment of his betrothed, The Bride, of the House of the Steer, for Sun-Beam, of the Wolfings, also conforms to Mallarmé’s pattern, a pattern that includes such Morrisian heroes as Sigurd and Kiartan (of “The Lovers of Gudrun”). Throughout the tale, which, incidentally, is as devoid of supernatural

\textsuperscript{12} Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, pp. 81–83; *Prose Edda*, pp. 87, 57. The phrase rendered here as “roots of a mountain” is in some translations given as “roots of stones.” See Anderson, p. 384, for “roots of the mountains.” “Roots of mountains” occurs also in Paul Henri Mallet’s *Northern Antiquities*, trans. Bishop Percy (Edinburgh, 1809), II, 661.

characters and happenings as anything Morris ever wrote, Face-of-God gains stature as a living incarnation of the symbolic hero of legend and myth. Like all Morris’s heroes, Face-of-God is loved by all women, his physical attraction being an outward and visible sign of his sexual potency, an essential concomitant of the life-principle of renewal represented by the hero. He is, furthermore, naturally recognized by all men as a leader, his magnetism resulting from his mystical destiny as a hero-savior. His power and perfection show forth the ultimate potentiality of all mankind, and his name suggests the true role of man in Morris’s vision of the cosmos.

Face-of-God’s destiny is symbolically apparent from the first. Morris introduces him to the reader as he stands alone in the afternoon sun, the gold of his hair resembling the yellow rays of the sun (XV, 12). Face-of-God, in fact, is an incarnation of the ancient symbol of his house, the House of the Face: “there in the hewn stone was set forth that same image with the rayed head that was on the outside wall, and he was smiting the dragon and slaying him; but here inside the house all this was stained in fair and lively colours, and the sun-like rays round the head of the image were of beaten gold” (XV, 15).14 The monster against whom he will lead his people is no literal dragon but the insidious power of tyranny and oppression made manifest in a corrupt society of men—here, that of the Hunnish nomads. Face-of-God, in leading his people, a chosen people, to glorious victory, combines in his person not only their present and future but the legendary history of the Goths as well. As Folk-might, the brother of Sun-Beam, says of him: “He fared in the fight as if he had been our Father the Warrior: he is a great chieftain” (XV, 369).

Morris’s early prose romances, then, are founded in a complex of millennial motifs, primarily that of a great and conclusive battle between the forces of evil and a chosen people led by a legendary hero, a battle that at once validates the past (history) and assures the future. Mircea Eliade, in Myth and Reality, comments on such millennial themes in terms that are illuminating to the understanding of Morris’s work. The revolutionary fervor that gripped nineteenth-century Europe, beginning with the French Revolution, he points out, was marked by a widely held underlying belief that, through the process of cataclysmic revolt, a return to noble and virtuous origins was being effected. Hence the enthusiasm of that century for history (particularly in the form of national historiographies), which is, after all, a way of establishing those origins. This is the deeper significance of Morris’s “Aryan” enthusiasm. Eliade writes: “‘Aryan’ represented

14 See also XV, 8.
at once the 'primordial' Ancestor and the noble 'hero,' the latter laden with all the virtues that still haunted those who had not managed to reconcile themselves to the ideal of the societies that emerged from the revolutions of 1789 and 1848. The 'Aryan' was the exemplary model that must be imitated in order to recover racial 'purity,' physical strength, nobility, the heroic 'ethics' of the glorious and creative 'beginnings.'

The extent of Morris's Aryanism is generally unnoticed in current writings about him, probably in reaction to the ghastly consequences of these beliefs having been carried to their logical, if insane, conclusions in this century. But the fact is that nineteenth-century Aryanism was not only generated by the wider currents of the European nationalistic movements of the period but was given its intellectual impulse by the quite respectable proponents of Social Darwinism and is thus not to be merely deplored as a discredited fanaticism.

What we might call nationalistic racism not only surfaces in Morris's writings but has much to do with the types of furnishings made popular by Morris & Co. The so-called Gothic revival in architecture and furnishings had begun toward the end of the seventeenth century largely because of the need of the newly created aristocracies of Jacobean England to establish their ancestries and to legitimize or validate their position as a ruling class—in place of the saints' images found decorating genuine medieval buildings, effigies of Queen Elizabeth and other good Protestants appeared in the dwelling places of the mighty, but the style of buildings and furnishings was meant to confer upon their owners the authority of noble origins. Thus one important motive behind the pre-Victorian Gothic revival was the need to establish origins, to legitimize the present by affirming a connection with the past. Morris, on the other hand, was not interested in creating, maintaining, or bolstering an aristocracy, though many of the decorating commissions undertaken by his firm served just this subtle purpose; he simply saw the Gothic style as indigenous to the common English people—hence the Morris firm popularized the humble rush-seated chairs of the rustic countryside. The rococo lines of High Victorian furniture were French inspired; such a provenance would of itself make it unacceptable to one of his Teutonic sympathies. Morris sincerely regretted that England had been deflected by the Norman conquest from what should have been

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its development into a "great homogeneous Teutonic people infused usefully with a mixture of Celtic blood" (XXIII, 41).17 His opinions about racial purity and the importance of heredity might be inferred from passages in *The Roots* and *The Wood beyond the World*. Sun-Beam tells Face-of-God of the disastrous consequences of intermarriage between some tribes of the Wolf and the original inhabitants of Silverdale: "So we took their offer and became their friends; and some of our Houses wedded wives of the strangers, and gave them their women to wife. Therein they did amiss; for the blended Folk as the generations passed became softer than our blood, and many were untrustly and greedy and tyrannous, and the days of the whoredom fell upon us, and when we deemed ourselves the mightiest then were we the nearest to our fall" (XV, 111). In *The Wood beyond the World*, the Maid, playing the part of the goddess of the Bear tribe, advises the Bears upon the treatment of aliens: "ye shall make them become children of the Bears, if they be goodly enough and worthy, and they shall be my children as ye be; otherwise, if they be ill-favoured and weakling, let them live and be thralls to you, but not join with you, man to woman" (XVII, 109–10). Morris's seeming advocacy, in these passages just quoted, of breeding humans for racial or national superiority may strike one as at variance with his political beliefs of this period, encompassing as they did the principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. But the fact is that Social Darwinism was embraced by political leftists before it was seized upon by the Right as justification for its repudiation of democracy and humanitarianism. Further, as several writers have suggested, there is an intrinsic connection between National Socialism and Marxism-Leninism arising from the millennial eschatology on which both are based. Norman Cohn writes:

Beneath the pseudo-scientific terminology one can in each case recognize a phantasy of which almost every element is to be found in phantasies which were already current in medieval Europe. The final, decisive battle of the Elect (be they the "Aryan race" or the "proletariat") against the hosts of evil (be they the Jews or the "bourgeoisie"); a dispensation in which the Elect are to be most amply compensated for all their sufferings by the joys of total domination or of total community or of both together; a world purified of all evil and in which history is to find its consummation—these ancient imaginings are with us still.18

It is quite natural, therefore, that Morris should have immediately

17 See also "Early England," in Lemire, pp. 158–78.
18 Fest, pp. 55–56 (on Hitler's belief in his messianic role, see pp. 209 ff.); Cohn, p. 308 (Cohn's provocative conclusions relative to the connection between medieval revolutionary messianism and modern totalitarian movements have been considerably de-
followed *The Roots of the Mountains* with *News from Nowhere*, the socialist-inspired utopian vision which most readers have considered to be one of his finest works. For *News from Nowhere* is a prolonged description of the millennial ideal, the perfect state of society that will follow the great revolution. Straightforward as this book is, there has never been a consensus among readers and critics on how it should be taken. Philip Henderson expresses one view:

It would be an insult to Morris's intelligence to suppose that he really believed in the possibility of such a society, where the only work that appears to be going on is a little haymaking at Kelmscott. And yet one frequently finds *News From Nowhere* seriously discussed as though it were a blueprint for a communist future. It should be obvious enough that here Morris was merely abolishing everything he disliked in the nineteenth century and replacing it by everything he nostalgically longed for. In reality it is an Arts and Crafts Utopia with very little relation to anything that we know as communism...  

But when *News from Nowhere* is seen in relation to the prose romances, it becomes clear that it is both a blueprint for the future and a nostalgic idyll—and more besides. Further, it has everything to do with communism—it may not be a literal blueprint, but it is a poetic expression of that ideal of a noble and regenerated mankind which had impelled Morris into the socialist movement. In other words, both the writing of *News from Nowhere* and his dedication to socialism arose from his abiding faith in man's intrinsic goodness. In this idyll of the golden age, man, untrammeled by the corrupting yoke of a tyrannous class of profiteers, has found again his noble origin. It is this goal, that of the return to origins, which is the true impetus of the development of national histories and historiography. It is thus wholly fitting that Morris should envision this paradisaical state in his own England. Having begun this early phase of the romances with England's past in *A Dream of John Ball*, he ended it with a projection into England's future.

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Henderson, p. 328.