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." 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.

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

assimilated system of values. Morris's socialist sensibility is revealed by his rejection of Victorian realist and naturalist fiction and his choice of an alternative genre, that of romance, as well as by his selection or avoidance of certain conventional contents and the ideology they imply. The genre, setting, characters, and plot structure of his last six prose fictions demonstrate socialism internalized.

As a "scientific socialist," Morris believed that the art and literature of a given society were integrally related to its economic structure. His repudiation of the most significant form of his era—the Victorian realist novel—was itself a challenge to bourgeois aesthetics. Form is ideology, and Morris, in writing romances, deliberately created works that one commentator has called "anti-novels." Moreover, the few Marxist and Anarchist pronouncements that were available to Morris regarding the appropriate form, content, and function of socialist literature coalesced with his own taste in determining his choice of genre.

Contrary to popular belief, Morris's socialist mentors did not particularly espouse aesthetic realism. As Terry Eagleton has demonstrated, Marx and Engels were not the fathers of the "socialist realism" of the 1920s and '30s. They praised individual nineteenth-century novels; Marx, for example, admired Balzac and applauded "the English realists"—including Thackeray, Charlotte Bronte, and Gaskell—as revealers of social and political truths. Yet, what he and Engels really valued was not the realist mode but the sense of contemporary history, the "typicality," and the attack on middle-class behavior and on social conventions the works of such novelists contained. Not coincidentally, Marx and Morris shared many of the same literary tastes; both loved folk ballads and tales, Greek drama, ancient epic, and the heightened fiction of the Dumas (père et fils), Scott, and Dickens. Engels and Morris shared an interest in medieval German literature. Most important, Peter Kropotkin, Morris's closest colleague among the theorists of "scientific socialism" and the only one with whom he had more than minimal contact, was actively antagonistic to the realist and naturalist literary movements of the time.

In An Appeal to the Young, translated and published in 1885 by H. M. Hyndman, Morris's close associate in the Social Democratic Federation, Kropotkin explained his position. Appealing to artists, he argued that the art of the


4. See the discussion in Marxism and Literary Criticism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 37–48, in which Eagleton demonstrates that "socialist realism" was derived from nineteenth-century Russian "revolutionary democratic" critics and received its support from Lenin.

present era “is commonplace . . . mediocrity reigns supreme.” The revolutionary ideal has vanished and been replaced by the false idol of realism:

failing an ideal, our art fancies that it has found one in realism when it painfully photographs in colors the dewdrop on the leaf of a plant, imitates the muscles in the leg of a cow, or describes minutely in prose and in verse the suffocating filth of a sewer, the boudoir of a whore of high degree.6

Kropotkin objected to realism as a mere reproduction of surfaces and as trivial and inhumane in content. He disliked naturalism, as did Engels,7 not only because he found it sordid but also because it assumed that proletarians, the hope of humanity, were social and hereditary victims rather than heroes. Naturalism doomed them to the sewer of Zola’s Germinal or the decadent career of Nana.

Agreeing with Kropotkin, Morris takes the argument a step further. He views realism itself as antiproletarian. In News from Nowhere, he describes even works in which “radical cobblers” have a part (a reference to Charles Kingsley’s Alton Locke) as “silly old novels”; he remarks that nineteenth-century fiction despised “everybody who could use his hands.”8 When Ellen, one of Morris’s alter-egos in News from Nowhere, speaks of “something loathsome” about Victorian novels despite their “cleverness, vigor, and capacity for story-telling” (CW, 16:151), she approaches the heart of the matter. That “something loathsome” is the bourgeois nature of conventional realism, its preoccupation with the chiefly self-created problems, excessive introspection, and foolish aspirations of a non-productive middle-class hero and heroine. To Morris, the core of the realist novel is unsound; its subject is “the troubles of a middle class couple in their struggle toward social uselessness,” and its method is the pointless study of social “anomalies and futilities.”9 Morris objects, as well, to something beyond the content, method, and class bias of realist fiction. Old Hammond, another of the Morris alter-egos in News, announces what it is:

6. Kropotkin’s Appeal was first published in De Revolte in 1880; the Hyndman translation was published in London by the Modern Press in 1885 and republished by the Freedom Press in 1889. My citation is from The Essential Kropotkin, ed. Emile Capouya and Keitha Tompkins (New York: Liveright, 1975), 19.


there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so; for, if there was any pretense of it, the author always took care . . . to disguise or exaggerate, or idealise . . . so that, for all the verisimilitude there was, he might just as well have dealt with the times of the Pharaohs. \(CW, 16:102\)

In effect, Morris finds Victorian realism essentially unrealistic.

Yet, among the five "literary men" who constitute News from Nowhere's community of authors,\(^1\) two are writing works which resemble Victorian novels. Robert the weaver's "sort of antiquarian book about the peaceable and private history . . . of the end of the nineteenth century" \(CW, 16:20\) is justified, in part, by the fact that his primary intention is to give his audience a picture of England before the revolution. But what of Boffin, the Golden Dustman, who, according to Dick (Nowhere's cultured but anti-intellectual "non-literary man" \(CW, 16:206\)), "will spend his time in writing reactionary novels, and is very proud of getting the local colour right" \(CW, 16:22\)? Boffin's novels and the Nowherians' discussions of literature suggest that the debate about the value of realism is still very much alive in the society of the future. Clara wonders why the people of her society still "find the dreadful times of the past so interesting" \(CW, 16:102\) as subject matter for the arts; Ellen's grandfather, Nowhere's official grumbler, complains that in his world, a "good old book like Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair'" \(CW, 16:158\) can no longer be produced. 

Vanity Fair is paradigmatic of the flaws of realist fiction and Morris's attack on Thackeray's novel is part of his explanation of what is wrong with its genre.\(^2\) Morris sees realism as grounded in competition, as requiring unhappiness, and as necessitating the use of the language of conventional sentiment. Novels like Thackeray's demand "good solid unlimited competition . . . [as] the condition under which they were written" \(CW, 16:149\); they are the products of societies in which "most people are thoroughly unhappy" \(CW, 16:152\). Boffin's realist novels (parallels to Thackeray's) depend for their accurate "local colour" upon his using as models figures from forgotten and reactionary places "where people are unhappy, and consequently interesting to a story-teller" \(CW, 16:22\). Both Boffin's and Thackeray's works center on emotions that the people of Nowhere perceive as destructive and antisocial. In the world of the future, people are no longer "conventionally sensitive or sentimental" \(CW, 16:58\) and "whatever

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10. The five are Robert, Boffin, Old Hammond, William Guest, and a nameless figure encountered on the journey up the Thames. When Guest and his friends come ashore at Bisham, they find most of its people haymaking; however, among the few remaining inside the communal house is a man who has chosen to stay at home to get on with some literary work.

11. In her Introductions, May Morris notes that, unlike such other authors as Swinburne, Morris did not include Thackeray's Vanity Fair in his list of great books published by the Pall Mall Gazette (2:653–54). She also cites an early letter of Morris's in which he refers to Thackeray's style as "precious bad" (1:115).
sentiment there is is . . . real and general,” rather than confined to persons who are “very specially refined” (CW, 16:59). Thus, there is little place in life or literature for the “sham sorrow[s]” nursed by “the ridiculous characters in . . . queer old novels” (CW, 16:198).

This does not mean that literature has died. It has merely changed its form. Nowherians have selected genres that are accessible to all, graceful, pleasant, full of incident, and appropriate in mood to their function in communal life. The people of the future prefer “tales” to realist novels. Painted on the walls of the Hall at Bloomsbury are scenes from the folk tales of the Brothers Grimm “which in yesterday’s world only about a half a dozen people in the country knew anything about.” In Nowhere, “everybody knows the tales” (CW, 16:100) and enjoys them. Even children who do not read much else, read “story books” (CW, 16:31), while adults too spend evenings “telling stories” (CW, 16:140). While the oral tradition has been reborn, written tales still survive and flourish. Nowhere’s “popular culture” is truly popular, for it comprises tales from folklore, myth, legend, and primary epic as well as romances that derive from these sources.

Thus, bypassing Victorian bourgeois realism, Morris himself writes romances that Nowherians would enjoy. He chooses a “truthful” genre that is popular, rooted in folklore, “typical” in content, rich in incident, and free of middle-class conventions and ideologies. Morris’s natural predilection for non-realism in general and romance in particular may have been reinforced by Kropotkin’s plea to writers: “Tell us what a rational life would be, if it did not encounter at every step the follies and ignominies of our present social order.”

Morris’s method is to demonstrate “rational life” in realms and eras outside those of the “present social order” of Victorian England, and to present figures who have not been damaged, as he believed he was, by “sham societies.” Thus, he depicts the future reborn after revolution in News from Nowhere, the heroic age of “upper barbarism” and primary epic in The House of the Wolfings and The Roots of the Mountains, and the later Middle Ages in the last romances. The world Morris portrays in these final works is virtually modeled on the medieval England he described in his lecture on “The Hopes of Civilization.” It is composed of:

the many chases and great woods, the stretches of common tillage and common pasture quite unenclosed; . . . the little towns, well bechurched, often walled; the villages just where they are now . . . but better and more populous . . . the beautiful manor-houses, some of them castles once and survivals from an earlier period;

13. For a discussion of “upper barbarism” see Silver, Romance of William Morris, 128–32; Morris associates that period of social development with the creation of primary or folk epic.
A preindustrial world, it is one in which the alienation caused by capitalism has not yet occurred. Even the archaic language of the romances serves a socialist purpose. Engels had praised Carlyle's style as "a direct and violent reaction against the modern bourgeois English Pecksniff variety," and might well have said the same of Morris's language. Morris's compounds, archaisms, and neologisms are akin, in their Germanic roots, to Carlyle's. Like the settings of the later romances, their language removes the reader from the sights and sounds of Victorian commercial society.

Depicting medieval commerce, the romances do not shun the middle class of the Middle Ages, though they deny or obliquely criticize Victorian political, economic, and social values. The lust for lordship or imperial power, the drive toward profit-seeking and unfair competition, the prevalence of selfish individualism and non-cooperation, all are traits Morris equates with capitalism and either banishes from or punishes in the worlds he creates.

In terms of theme and subject matter, however, Morris's omissions are as significant as his inclusions. For example, although the romances are quests, their objects are not the pursuit of treasure, land, or dominion over others. Instead, these novels are accounts of the human quest for maturity, love, and a just social order. *The Glittering Plain* depicts Hallblithe's search, through realms of guile and false promise, for his kidnapped bride, the Hostage. *The Wood beyond the World* describes Golden Walter's misguided pursuit of the wrong lover, the Lady, his rescue by a more appropriate woman, the Maid, and their adventures in founding a new and better realm. *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, a version of the medieval English romance, *Havelok the Dane*, explores the adventures of the two figures named in its title as they strive to regain their rightful inheritances and to redeem and unite their lands. *The Well at the World's End* chronicles the journey of Ralph and Ursula to the source of the water of life and the use of the power they gain for social liberation. *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* traces Birdalone's voyage to personal freedom and her struggles to free others, while the unfinished tale of *The Sundering Flood* outlines Osberne and Elfhild's search for each other and movement toward personal union and communal action.

Significantly, only Morris's villains waste their time getting and spending; unlike traditional heroes of romance, Morris's protagonists are prone to refuse kingship and power. Ralph, in *The Well at the World's End*, rejects the chance of kingship in Goldburg, refuses to rule in Utterbol, and accepts only titular

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lordship in the Land of Abundance. Osberne, in *The Sundering Flood*, twice refuses to permit his grateful allies to elevate him to knighthood. Child Christopher, whose kingdom has been usurped, accepts rule only after his restoration has been ratified by a folkmote. Walter, in *The Wood beyond the World*, wins his kingdom by passing a ritualized, proto-socialist test; he chooses the tokens of battle for his people instead of the emblems of pride and luxury. Both Christopher and Walter devote their kingly power to freeing prisoners and thralls, aiding the poor, and battling the forces of guile and greed.

Although Morris describes evil societies in considerable detail, he seldom portrays workers or peasants as ignoble figures. While medieval merchants and their communities—commercial centers called “cheaping towns”—are sometimes depicted as negative forces, Morris’s “ordinary folk” are hearty, loyal, and natively intelligent—the “rough-handed and bold set of good fellows” of his lecture on “The Hopes of Civilization.”16 Faced with evil societies, they may choose to become outlaws, an act Morris views as a legitimate response to tyranny. The Men of the Dry Tree (in the *Well*) steal from the rich to give to the poor; Jack O’ the Tufts and his seven sons (in *Child Christopher*) are the forces of social justice. To be Robin Hoods in a fellowship of merry men is an admirable alternative to serving an unjust state. Other “ordinary folk” may be debased by thralldom—a condition Morris had long considered analogous to the state of the English working class; yet, like the people of Utterbol (in the *Well*), once they free themselves they cease to practice the unhealthy guile that had marked them as slaves. Unlike equivalent figures in medieval romances and Victorian realist novels, Morris’s proletarians share the same culture, speak the same language, and express the same ideas as virtuous middle-class and aristocratic figures. The romances do depict class oppression, but the great social gap that Morris believed made a Victorian worker and his master differ in all respects does not exist.17

Moreover, the individualism that Marxism considers excessive—a preoccupation with self that is manifested in deliberate isolation or extensive introspection—is either obliquely absent from or openly criticized by the romances. Life is naturally communal and, in the good societies Morris depicts, homesteads, villages, manors, and free towns, mutual aid and almost instinctive cooperation are the norm. In *The Sundering Flood*, Osberne and his fellow Dalesmen choose to help the knights who serve a free town against a despotic baron both because the cause is just and because the knights request neighborly aid.

However, the conventions of romance require that a hero leave the group and

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undergo a period of painful and solitary initiation. Even during this period or during the alienation from fellowship caused by personal grief, Morris's heroes do not brood or nurse the "sham sorrow" Morris condemned as a convention of the realist novel. The death of a lover or beloved is accompanied by grief, pain, and the desire for solitude—factors clearly visible in the accounts of Ralph's agony over the slaying of the Lady of Abundance (in the Well) and Aurea's misery about the death of Baudoin, her Golden Knight, in The Water of the Wondrous Isles. There are no sentimental or conventional death scenes. Indeed, excessive grief is seen as destructive, and survivors usually live to love again. The only Morris hero who rejects society because he suffers from love is Arthur in the Water. He is punished for his self-involvement by physical and mental illness. For the other Morris heroes, solitude is merely a preparation for fellowship to come.

Eliminating concepts antithetical to socialism, ridding romance of bourgeois realist conventions, Morris emphasizes instead the drama of the class struggle and the triumph of such values as work, love, and fellowship. For Morris, history, of which romance is a transmutation, is the history of class conflict, and Kropotkin's admonition to "figure forth to us the heroic struggles of the people against their oppressors"18 is to be followed. Morris's two most striking examples of class warfare in the last romances concern the oppression of the proletariat by powerful, predominantly middle-class groups. In the City of the Sundering Flood (in the romance of the same name), the Lesser Craft Guilds and ordinary workers, helped by outside forces from the free towns, rise against and overthrow a powerful oligarchy composed of the rich merchants of the Greater Guilds, the barons, and an idle king. The City is metamorphosed into a free town of the variety that Morris, Engels, and Kropotkin considered the great achievement of the medieval communal spirit. Social change purifies Utterhay (in the Water) and Utterbol (in the Well). The only place Morris deems unreclaimable is The Burg of the Four Friths (in the Well), where a middle-class despotism prevails. An ugly, militaristic city-state that exploits its female thralls and murders their men, the Burg is overthrown by open revolution. Its inhabitants are ejected and a new society, composed of the freed slaves and their allies, is created within its walls.

The class struggle is central to The Well at the World's End and The Sundering Flood, providing each romance with much of its incident and structuring its form. In other romances it is more obliquely depicted through accounts of the rebellions of thralls against their evil masters (as seen, for example, in the behavior of the Maid in The Wood beyond the World) and Birdalone and the three captive maidens in The Water of the Wondrous Isles) or in the battles of outlaws against tyrants and oppressors (as in Child Christopher).

In all the romances work is a prime virtue, and willingness and skill in labor

18. Essential Kropotkin, 23.
are the traits of characters portrayed as "good." Communities unsustained by labor such as the Glittering Plain (in the romance of the same name) or the Isle of Increase Unsought (in the Water) are devoid of virtue. When Morris's heroes are not questing or struggling with oppressors, they are hunting, building, or making useful things. His own skillful work rescues Hallblithe of The Glittering Plain. He escapes a false paradise of sloth only because he has the ability and perseverance to build a boat. Osberne of The Sundering Flood learns courage through his labor as a herdsman and, through the tutelage of his guardian spirit, becomes a skillful craftsman. Birdalone, the female hero of the Water, grows and prospers in her self-imposed exile by becoming a superb craftswoman—the head or Master of the Guild of Embroiderers. Unlike Victorian realist novels, Morris's romances venerate rather than despise all those who can "use their hands."

Moreover, the romances repeatedly demonstrate the value of association and equality, stressing the importance of fellowship and of the unselfish spirit that brings it to fruition. Morris had attacked the Victorian realist novel for its emphasis on selfish erotic passion; thus, the lovers in his romances never follow that pattern denounced in News of living "happily in an island of bliss on other people's troubles" (CW, 16: 151). Each romance takes the lovers it depicts beyond private passion into fellowship. After all their trials, Hallblithe and the Hostage (of the Glittering Plain) do not return alone to Cleveland by the Sea. Instead, they bring with them a new member for the gens and ten maidens whom they have freed from thralldom. Walter and the Maid, the heroes of the Wood, rebuild a kingdom and help create a new society of fellowship. For Ralph and Ursula, in the Well, the end of personal love is the cleansing of corrupt communities and a successful battle against the invaders of Ralph's homeland. When Birdalone and Arthur are finally united (in the Water), they share only a brief period of unwedded bliss before seeking their friends in order to "knit up the links of the fellowship once more" (20:364). Their aim is the reformation of Utterhay, and their companions, Viridis and the Green Knight, give up a kingdom to join them in making the free town free.

In Morris's final romances erotic passion is itself informed by socialist thought. Relationships are interclass and free of economic considerations. Golden Walter, the son of a great merchant, weds the Maid, a thrall of unknown parentage. Ursula, the yeoman's daughter, is the bride of Ralph, son of a minor king. Birdalone, the child of a widow reduced to beggary, unites with a noble knight, Arthur, while her friend, Aurea, a "lady of high degree," finds happiness with Robert Gerardson, a freeman's son. Only ignorant or evil characters question lineage and they are always silenced. When marriage occurs, it is
often a voluntary private union that does not need the sanction of religion or law. Never is it the bourgeois institution that Engels condemned as an “official cloak of prostitution” and Morris denigrated as an arrangement designed to protect individual property and to resist such external forces as fellowship.\textsuperscript{20}

Since love is not tied to property and women ideally are not tokens of exchange, “free unions” among lovers meet with approval. In a conventional Victorian novel, the love of Ralph and the Lady of Abundance would be treated as adultery; in the terms established in a Morrisian romance, the relationship is acceptable because it is loving. Birdalone and Arthur simply make love to “wed” each other, while the nature of the union of Osberne and Elfhild, in \textit{The Sundering Flood}, is never even discussed. Lovers love and unite and for Morris that union is enough.

In effect, Morris’s last romances simply and undidactically praise lovers, workers, outlaws, and all who practice association and equality. Without overtly preaching, these works clearly proclaim the worth of joyful labor, cooperation, and mutual aid, and the possibility of harmonizing personal and communal needs. At the same time, they repudiate capitalist ideology and the literary form that bears it. Like the works of literature Morris praised in his lecture on “The Society of the Future,” his final prose fictions “tell their tales to our senses and leave them alone to moralize the tale so told.”\textsuperscript{21} Through their internalized Marxism and direct sensory appeal, they constitute a new literary genre, the socialist romance.


\textsuperscript{21} Political Writings of William Morris, 200.