



Frontispiece: Illustration for *The Sundering Flood*, Kelmscott edition (1897).

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William Morris's Late Romances: The Struggle Against Closure

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William Morris was not an ideal Socialist. Arrested in 1885 for preaching anarchism on a London street corner and haled before a magistrate, he identified himself not as a Socialist theoretician and member of the masses but as "a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe."¹ The last decades of Morris's career were characterized by what most people would consider a contradictory combination: Socialist didacticism, written into the pages of *Justice* and *Commonweal*, alongside of medievalist escapism, filling the pages of his prose romances. But that is not to say, as English utopians of a generation past did, that Morris's Socialism was a romanticized, merely literary ideology; on the contrary, he had seen too clearly the brutality which lay at the heart of contemporary society to foresee anything but violent revolution in England's future. Nor is it to say that Morris's late romances are nothing more than "therapeutic dreams,"² for, as this essay will show, they stem from the same deep well of Romantic trope that his best early work had drawn upon. Rather, it is to claim that Morris searched, during his last decades, for some synthesis that would bridge

the seeming gap between the Socialist, "the voice through which the poetry of mankind speaks," and the artist, free "to express [that poetry] in his own way."³ That synthesis Morris found in a concept crucial to Marx's vision of Socialism, as to his own: dialectic.

The method of antitheses was not new to Morris in 1877, when he became a Socialist. His greatest poem, *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876), had been framed by a symbol of vibrant, noble life on the one hand, and a symbol of consuming, apocalyptic destruction on the other, the Holy Tree and the Holy Fire, imaged in the engravings set at the beginning and end of the epic. According to Morris, the Tree and Fire "represent[ed] the opposing powers of good and evil" (XXII, 228).⁴ Numerous religions, Morris claimed, had attempted "to fuse the two symbols into one" and thus achieve a transcendence of antithesis; what that "one" might be, however, Morris never ventured to say, either in poems or lectures. I do not believe that Morris refused to name a symbol of transcendence simply because he did not know one; I would argue that he rejected the very assumption, essential both to ancient religions and to Socialism as well, that transcendence was the ultimate goal. To transcend dialectic, Morris believed, would be to leave behind the very conditions that make us human--our "hopes and fears," whether for art or for ourselves.

Socialism, however, did offer Morris a perspective more reflective and historical than his aesthetic one, which thereby let him view his own time as an objective entity. Unfortunately, it simultaneously tended to lead him, via Marx's doctrine of dialectical materialism, towards the uncongenial aesthetic of socialist realism. The paradox is best expressed by

Christopher Caudwell, himself an inheritor of the "socialist idealism" Morris helped to create: "A novel is self-determined and self-driving. . . contained within itself. . . [But] the solid little world of the novel is not real or historical; it is created within the author's mind. . . like a self-contained, walled-in peepshow. . . projected into the social world."⁵ Morris, in both his Socialist writings and his romances, searched for a world "reflecting society and yet completely self-determined"--an attitude that may appear "self-contradictory," yet which is characterized in both pursuits by a justified contempt for the restrictions of the literal. Hence his well-known outburst when, having written his first two romances, Morris received an inquiry about his sources from a solemn German scholar. "Doesn't the fool realize," Morris exploded, "that it's a romance, a work of fiction--that it's all LIES!"⁶ Morris's worlds may be no more than "projections" of reality, but they have the same palpable presence as the driven world of history. Morris insists that one must maintain sufficient distance from the story one is telling to perceive it as "LIES" as well as truth, suspended in an energizing dialectic; if one does not, then the dialogue collapses into propaganda or fairy tale. In the worst case, failure to acknowledge the crafted nature of historical tales leads to enthrallment by their misprisions of social or individual identity; only the most heroic effort can break such a spell.

It is for this reason above all that Morris cherishes the oral tradition. The spoken tale and the political speech are equally "LIES"--historicist constructs that reveal the speaker's "own way" towards the communal goal, and truths--the products of perceptions

that reify "the poetry of mankind." In fact, it is an uneasy balance. As many of the speeches of Morris's contemporaries demonstrate, "the poetry of mankind" can become awfully prosaic, failing either to rouse the spirit of its listeners or to articulate it. Correspondingly, as Morris's late romances show, if the teller does not succeed in blazing a new trail to poetry, the tale can become a trap for the teller, imprisoned in the "walled-in peepshow" of his/her lies. The oral narrative, and the very memory upon which that narrative is based, are simultaneously blessing and curse: they give cohesion to the race, yet they can submerge the people into stagnation. Not until Morris mastered the autobiographical tale would he achieve a balance between these antithetical forces.

The deadly double-bind is confronted in Morris's very first romance, *A Dream of John Ball* (1886). In this, one of his best-known Socialist pieces, Morris "awakens" into a dream of 1381, the year of the Kentish uprising; he spends the night conversing with John Ball--himself a dreamer, because he envisions a world of Fellowship supplanting centuries' worth of class and custom, yet a realist who knows he will wake from that dream only on the scaffold. When dawn comes Morris finds himself back in his "familiar bed," listening to "the frightful noise of the 'hooters,' one after another, that call the workmen to the factories" (CW, XVI, 287-8). On the one side is "the glamour of the dream-tide," now reduced to "day-dream"; on the other is the "cold and grey and surly" light of dawn, "a real thing" (285). It is the man in Morris's memory whose dream abides, not the resident of the Great Wen; yet if John Ball's dream is to be realized, we must look beyond our own time

into the "tales of old time" on the one side, and the "times to come" (286) on the other.

Morris perceives both a promise and a threat in this dialectic. On the one hand, there is the objective struggle towards material progress, which never attains its ideal; on the other, there is the dream which, by seeking to establish an alternative model, threatens to supplant reality: on one side failure, on the other phantasm. In the failure of the two modes to connect lies the potential for tragedy, reified in Morris's "peepshow" of the future, *News from Nowhere* (1891). Once again Morris's persona is a dreamer, like John Ball dreaming of a future that has fulfilled the "longing" of the past (Morris's own present). But their conjunction can be achieved only for a single extended moment, "a day of it." Nowhere has successfully transformed its inheritance--Parliament has been turned into a Dung Market, for example; but its people settle for self-congratulation rather than seek further progress: "Once a year, on May-day, we . . . have music and dancing. . . where of old time. . . the men and women lived packed amongst the filth" (XVI, 66). On May-day young girls sing old revolutionary songs, totally "unconscious of their real meaning." When they cry, "How glorious life is!" the claim rings hollow. Strongly implied in such exchanges is the inability of this new world to define itself other than by inversion of the old; the people of Nowhere have not triumphed over the past, they have become enmeshed in it.

That absorption of the present by its past is typical of the people's relations with nature and one another as well; they are uniformly characterized by a subjectivity that masquerades as objectivity. The nar-

rator wonders, for example, why his guide sounds melancholy over the approach of winter:

If you look upon the course of the year as a beautiful and interesting drama. . . you should be as much pleased and interested with the winter. . . as with this wonderful summer luxury. (206-7)

But the guide deliberately misinterprets the dreamer's speech, seizing upon the trope of the drama:

I can't look upon it as if I were sitting in a theatre seeing the play going on before me, myself taking no part. . . I am part of it all, and feel the pain as well as the pleasure in my own person. (*Ibid.*)

And it is the same with any reference to life as something which can be observed, rather than experienced--the presumption that one can achieve aesthetic distance from any segment of the material world is hotly denied:

Your books. . . were well enough for times [past, but]. . . it is the world we live in which interests us: the world of which we are a part. (150-1)

So powerful is the subjective experience that Morris's utopia truly does verge on being "nowhere," a realm whose inhabitants exist on the verge of that personal nonentity Wordsworth called "the abyss of idealism."⁷ Perhaps the purest example of Nowhere's hegemony over its inhabitants, a hegemony the people have consciously chosen and continually endorse, is the fatal love-triangle reported near the beginning of Morris's tale, but not elucidated until near the end. Two rivals have fought over a girl, and one has accidentally killed the other; the survivor "is so upset that he is like to kill himself; and if he does, the girl will do as much." The guide comments on the situation, fraught with a "sentiment and sensibility" called "criminal" earlier in *Nowhere* (58):

I cannot for the life of me see why he shouldn't get over it before long. Besides, it was the right man that was killed [the rejected suitor, who started the fight] and not the wrong. . . Of course he *must* soon look upon the affair from a reasonable point of view. (166-7)

When people fail to see themselves as actors and spectators, subjectivized projections of their milieux but simultaneously objective projectors, society as we know it disintegrates. Having given up their individuality in favor of the universal, prescribed code of "reasonableness," such people give up their right to individual hopes, individual passions, individual lives; they lay down what life is left them almost wearily--"thinking of nothing," save that "beginning again, even in a small way, is a kind of pain" (190). It is therefore inevitable that the dreamer should find himself ultimately expelled from Nowhere; in his insistence on a permanent, ongoing dialectical process he represents a threat to that sense of permanent resolution which the people of Nowhere cultivate. At the end, they literally cannot see his point of view, or his identity as the last individual.

Nowhere has totally fulfilled its dreams, and as a result has nowhere to go. Like the men of the Renaissance Morris condemned over and over in his lectures, so blinded by the glories of classical art that they could create only perfect imitations, the people of Nowhere have achieved a world outside of time and change. To seek to transcend the world's imperfections is a grand ideal; but it is disastrous to succeed. As Morris declared in "The Prospects of Architecture," art must be "fed not by knowledge but by hope" (XXII, 136). When hope disappears, the "era of rest" that ensues is but a simulacrum of death. As Morris would put it some years later,

What all men are to-day sure is that an end turns out only to have been some halting-place on the road, which when we have reached it shows us the road stretching along toward the new perspective blue in the distance.⁸

The "News" Morris brings back from his mythical realm is not that people occasionally attain their hearts' desires; it is that the attainment is a trap. As a Socialist, Morris needed to believe in the potentiality of a material utopia; as an artist, he could not help but recognize its potentiality for spiritual imprisonment. It is for this reason most of all that Morris gradually turned away from Socialist romances to the historical romance--from propaganda to "LIES."

II

The House of the Wolfings and *The Roots of the Mountains* were written during the same four-year period which saw Morris compose *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*. On the surface, the two sets of works have nothing in common. The latter are avowedly Socialist, conversational, and contemporary, whereas the romances are none of the above; their language, with its deliberate archaisms and alternations of prose and poetry, would have been quite illegible to the readers of *Commonweal*. Yet the underlying subject of all four works is consistent: the working out of the dialectical process, and the fate of the individual caught up within that process.

Morris's "new perspective" embodies a series of antitheses common to the two books: the dialectic of Wolf and Dale, Markmen and invaders, ritual speech and colloquial rejoinders, "words spoken in days long ago" versus a "tale now fashioned" (XV, 123; XIV, 188);

and the even more intriguing dialectic between two very different ways of reading--not merely the differing languages of Wardour Street and Camden Town, or the differing expectations we bring to political prose and poetic romance, but a dialectic between logic and vision, which Morris dedicates the rest of his literary career to resolving.

The House of the Wolfings centers on the problems associated with "the merging of the individual in the community." Thiodolf, hero of the Wolfings, must give up his life and love to save his people; he must choose between "death in life,/Or life in death victorious" (XIV, 165). The Valkyrie who loves him begs him to wear a magic hauberck, and save himself, lest

A few bones white in their war-gear that have no help or thought
Shall be Thiodolf the mighty, so nigh, so dear--and nought. (108)

Wood-Sun's perspective is the converse of Dick's in *News from Nowhere*; each sees life in but one form, rather than as a vibratory fusion of individual and community identity. Thiodolf responds by affirming his part in the larger "tale of the Wolfings," in which he will live "ever reborn and yet reborn" (109). And Hall-Sun, their daughter, is granted the final word on the delights of process and interchange:

Many a deed had he done as he lay in the dark of the mound;
As the seed-wheat plotteth of spring, laid under the face of the ground. . .

That the turbid cold flood hideth from the constant hope of the years. (164)

Linked to the land in a visionary symbiosis, the people of the Mark can view themselves as living forever in the cycle of the seasons--"between the plough-stilts. . . smiting down the ripe wheat. . . wending the windless woods

in the first frosts" (105-6)--what the narrator calls being "wedded to the seasons" (29). The only alternative to this "eternal recurrence of lovely changes" (XXII, 11) is to armor oneself against process; Thiodolf puts on the magic armor, which protects him against death, and finds that it also protects against life: "he felt as if he also were stiffening into stone" (XIV, 150). Only by taking off the armor can Thiodolf risk his individual life for the sake of his people's existence, and gain new life in "the tale now fashioned. . . [so] that we that have lived in the story shall be born again and again" (188).

But at the same time *The House of the Wolfings* presents the darker side of oral tradition. The tribal elders fear that if the Wolfings are defeated by the invading Roman legions they will be forced into exile, where they will "call new places by old names, and worship new Gods with the ancient worship" (30); they will then be prisoners of their tradition and their narratives, no longer "plotters" of them. And when the invasion takes place, these fears seem to come true; describing his people's burned-out house, a messenger laments: "O wide were grown the windows, and the roof exceeding high!" (141). Only the final triumph of the Wolfings, gained through Thiodolf's sacrifice, prevents this usurpation of the people's imaginative existence.

But it is a triumph which must be repeated with every generation; each moment, each individual, must add its unique perception and experience to the common tale, or fall victim to its ever-strengthening bonds. Such is in fact the case in Morris's second romance, *The Roots of the Mountains*. In this romance Morris presents the direct descendants of Thiodolf's people, who (as feared by the elders in the earlier work) have been

forced out of their ancestral Mark. Struggling to retain their heritage, these Woodlanders, as they are now called, live apart from their neighbors and protectors, the Dalesmen; but the more they struggle to preserve their past, the more they jeopardize their future. Where the first work traced a need for "the merging of the individual into the community," Morris's second tale depicts the necessity for merging two communities into a greater whole.

Interestingly, the world of the Dalesmen is almost identical to the world of Nowhere: a cashless society, in which all people freely labor at all tasks, ornamenting their lives with the products of their work and with social rituals commemorating their past and invoking their future: "tomorrow was not a burden to them, nor yesterday a thing which they would fain forget" (XV, 11). But it remains a world of pain and threat, not only from the same Huns who have pushed the Woodlanders off their ancestral land but from within; indeed, it is precisely because the Dale faces such dialectical resistance that it has avoided the stagnation of Nowhere.

The threat is embodied in the subordinate status of the Woodlanders; they are "well nigh servants" to the Dalesmen. How could the socialist prototype, the Mark, have degenerated into the base of a stratified class system? Ironically, the very success of the first Wolfings has trapped their descendants. Just as Nowhere's success took away its vitalizing "hopes and fears," leaving them with neither aims to strive for nor adversaries to perpetuate the dialectical process, so have the people of the Mark been trapped by "the old story-lays," the "tales of old time." They still use the obsolete anapestic

hexameter poetry introduced by Thiodolf and his contemporaries, a form into which the achievements of the present cannot be cast. Face-of-God, the Dalesman hero, recognizes the potential harm these tales and traditions pose to his own people as well; because he is courting a Woodlander, he can see how they represent a pathological reliance on outworn forms, rather than a freely willed resolution. Meeting Sun-Beam in the ancient Wolfing hall, he draws her outside before embracing her: "There are words crossing in the air about us--words spoken in days long ago, and tales of old time, that. . . I would not hearken to, for in this hour I have no will to die" (123). Woodlander traditions have become so ritualized, so irrelevant, that any individual effort to direct a future course is stifled; and without hope they sink into vassaldom.

Exorcism is their only hope; they must renounce not only their rituals but also their sense of inevitable powerlessness. Morris accomplishes this exorcism in three ways. First, the Woodlanders must exorcise the spectre of their identity, by acknowledging kinship with the Dalesmen and proclaiming themselves to be more than merely descendants of the Mark. Secondly, they must join the coming fight against the Huns and, by achieving a victory equivalent to that of their ancestors over the Romans, justify its supercession. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they must recite "the ancient story" one last time (288-9) and then synthesize it with the prose art of the Dale, achieving a new tetrameter form that looks not to the glories of the past but to the uniqueness of the present. "To-day hath no brother in yesterday's tide," they exult; but the future will not be enthralled by its glories: "This eve of our earning comes

once and no more. . . To-morrow no other alike it doth hide" (400-1). *Carpe diem*, these restored men and women exult--not in despair of the latter days, but in hope, "determined to be free" (XV, 285) of the illusory resolution offered by the past.

Morris's model for the future's enthrallment by the successful narratives of the past is Icelandic. Morris was a great popularizer of the sagas, translating several and basing his greatest narrative poem, *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876), on the *Volsunga Saga* rather than its more literary descendant, the *Nibelungenlied*. In Icelandic tale-telling, and especially in the religious code he found in the sagas, Morris found what to his own agnostic eyes was a deep discontinuity. On the one hand, the purpose of heroic action is to prove the hero's fitness to join the army of Odin's warriors, who will fight their greatest battle during *ragna rok*, the end of the gods. On the other hand, the hero's deeds are equally necessary as raw material for a tale of heroic action, which will provide a paradigm of heroism for the next generation and so perpetuate the desire to do great deeds and be initiated into Odin's army. But to Morris, and any contemporary, the tale is also the only evidence we have that Odin and the *ragna rok* exist. Heroes "fashion a tale" (XII, 22) out of their own lives, from which we infer the larger tale of Odin, the great battle, and divinity itself.⁹ The two creators join, blurring the definition of divinity: one god (Odin) future generations are to worship, while another (the hero) is creator of the first. Thus the gap between humanity and the gods is bridged by the fashioners of tales. In the last lines of *Sigurd the Volsung*, Odin and the heroes of the poem fuse: none of them is a god; each is merely a "Goth"

(306). In the Norse sagas, in other words, Morris found a pattern by which the future may be rendered safe from the exaltation of the past, through self-effacement and identification. But the question remains: who, once the tale has been exalted by the assent of generations, would dare to aspire to either state?

Morris's recognition of this seemingly unresolvable dialectic was sharpened by his own experiences. To the Icelandic singer, the recruitment of new heroes for Odin's army was a goal worth the risk of distorting the hero's individuality or imposing the standards of the past on a changing present. The result was a tale impervious even to the arrival of Christianity; to the people of Iceland, the Day of Judgment co-existed for generations with the *ragna rok*, even though their paradigms are almost antithetical. Morris, however, encountered radically different conditions during the 1880s and 1890s, when he joined the ranks of a new species of story-teller, the sidewalk Socialist. As we have already seen in the case of *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris discovered that his greatest challenge was not preaching the word, but jarring his readers loose from their adherence to past words. Speaking of art and "The Socialist Ideal" in 1891, for example, Morris asserted: "I use the word *art* in a wider sense than is commonly used among us. . . The Commercialist sees. . . no pretense to art, and thinks that this is natural, inevitable, and on the whole desirable. The Socialist, on the contrary, sees in this obvious lack of art a *disease* peculiar to modern civilization. . . . Or, to put it very bluntly and shortly, under the present state of society happiness is only possible to artists and thieves" (XXIII, 255-6). But the adages of Samuel Smiles were far too deeply rooted in the psyches

of his listeners for Morris to be successful with such witticisms; and it was in reaction to his failures of preaching that he turned more and more to the romance. Only in fiction could he create an artist (or a thief) of socialism, one who could achieve mastery over the world of commercial transactions and the world of subjective artistry alike--bow to the forms of social art, yet subsume them within new, self-generated forms of art.

III

It is because *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1896), completed in the year of Morris's death, presents this synthetic hero that it stands out as the greatest achievement of his final years. The skeleton of the story, as Morris recognized, "falls very flat"¹⁰ when schematized; it revolves around three knights, three ladies, and the efforts of Birdalone, the heroine, to create a permanent "fellowship" with them which will simultaneously allow her to achieve a personal bond with the knight she loves, Arthur. The action includes several encounters with evil witches, the intercession of a Faery Godmother, and assorted miraculous coincidences and conveyances--it is, after all, a romance. Most importantly, the romance depends, at its most crucial moments, on the telling--or the refusal to tell--of the personal narratives of each of the main characters. By solving the dialectic inherent in personal autobiography, Morris at last comes to terms with the tensions of the social narrative, and learns how to articulate "the poetry of mankind." It is, in fact, Birdalone's success as a verbal and mythic artist which enables her to become a heroic worker of romantic

magic: by becoming tale-teller to her world, Birdalone becomes its maker.

This process begins quite early, with Birdalone's arrival at the castle where the knights are awaiting word of the ladies; she has just escaped from the island where the ladies are being held captive. Her mission is merely to assure the knights of their ladies' safety: "Those who sent me. . . bade me do mine errand" (XX, 119). When Arthur kisses her hand in formal greeting, he seems to embrace not Birdalone but some autonomous appendage: "the dear hands suffered it all, and consented to the embracing" (116). But during the course of her imposed tale Birdalone is asked by the curious knights how she came to find the ladies; pressed by them, she finally takes "heart. . . to tell them all the story of her. . . crossing of the water." And the result is an explosive recognition of Birdalone not as agent but as actor; meeting her later, Arthur exclaims: "After what thou hast told us today, I seem to know thee what thou art" (128-29). The two exchange names (since such tokens of individuality have been unnecessary when she was simply "the kind maiden do[ing] her errand"), and this acknowledgement binds them permanently. There is a complex social deconditioning in Morris's tale-telling paradigm: in antithesis to English convention, where introductions are simple but one's personal history is guarded even from one's closest friends and family, here autobiography is a prerequisite to acquaintance. Later, when Birdalone is aided by the Black Knight, the same ritual is followed; before the two exchange names, Birdalone "without more ado" falls "to telling him of her life" (183).

The Black Knight is killed by the evil Red Knight before any higher level of intimacy can be reached; Birdalone survives only because the three original knights return providentially. One more knight is killed attempting to save Birdalone, and Arthur is maddened to see her grieve over the Black Knight's body rather than rushing to embrace him. With this derangement of the social balance, it seems that "the breaking up our fellowship" (201) is at hand. Under the stress of this immanent disintegration, autobiography assumes an active role in determining the characters' destinies. Afraid that she will be unable to convince Arthur of her purity, and stricken with guilt over being the unwitting cause of the Black Knight's death, Birdalone begs one of the ladies to explain the circumstances of her abduction to the rest of the fellowship, but the latter refuses: "Nay, nay. . . never shall I be able to tell it so that they trow it as if they had seen it all. Besides, when all is told, then shall we be bound together again" (201).

The argument is clear: a tale is a means of sharing experience with others, creating complementary memories of a single moment. Thereby each individual becomes part of a larger society, while retaining his or her own unique selfhood. But there is an additional attribute of the tale, which Morris has developed out of his original dialectic between direct sense-data, what we at first called "truth" but which Morris now calls "history" in its etymological sense of "information,"¹⁰ and the data transmitted through an aesthetically crafted tale, believed in "as if [the listener] had seen it all"; this second form of belief, an act of faith, is what previously was called "LIES."

Morris is not, of course, the only artist of the nineteenth century to employ such a distinction. Even Anthony Trollope recognized "two kinds of confidence which a reader may have in his author. . . a confidence in facts and a confidence in vision."¹² In Trollope's vocabulary, Birdalone holds unique possession of the facts; what she engenders through her tale, however, is a vision--unverifiable, yet standing to her audience as firmly as the facts of their own memories. Viridis, the other woman, cannot tell the tale as a surrogate, because she neither participated in the action nor--the alternative which provides space for a later, reconstructive poet like Morris himself--has been initiated into the role of "a proper minstrel." Birdalone, of course, qualifies on both grounds at once.

This dilemma has also been articulated in our own time, most concisely by Philip Roth, in *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*. There Roth asserts that what saved him from the effects of his disastrous marriage was "having been able to find ways of reimagining it into a fiction with a persuasive existence independent of myself."¹³ But he gives the last word to Zuckerman, that very "persuasive existence" who has "counterlived" Roth's recent years, who attacks his motives: "You are not an autobiographer, you're a personificator" (162). In conclusion, Zuckerman claims, the ultimate struggle lies between fiction's "fundamentally aesthetic" motive and autobiography's "primarily ethical" one. But that, of course, is simply "truth" and "LIES" at odds yet again.

It is now that the importance of Morris's first romances becomes clear. *The House of the Wolfings*, with its wealth of details about the economy, society, and religion of the fourth century A.D., appears to be a

"history"; yet it stands or falls as a work of art, a "LIE". If the tale has been well told, we will believe it "as if we had been there"; if not, we will reject the people and their world alike. Similarly, there is little room in our modern version of history for faery godmothers and magic boats; yet we listen to Birdalone's tale and, like Arthur, assent to it "as if it were written in Holy Gospel" (221). We make not an intellectual commitment but an emotional, almost a religious, one; and in the process history and lies alike become things ruled not by our logical sense but by a problematical "as-if." The tale-teller thereby assumes a power above any other worker with words, certainly more than the preacher or the propagandist.

But that power is double-edged. As Cardinal Newman noted, in his analysis of religious belief, "the images in which [belief] lives. . . have the power of the concrete upon the affections and passions."¹³ The vision engendered by the tale-teller has the power to change the lives of those who hear the tale--even the life of the tale's creator. When Birdalone finishes her tale, it is clear that she has won Arthur's love away from its first object, Atra. The fellowship is not broken by Birdalone's encounter with the evil Red Knight, but it is shattered by the power of her narrative. Fearful of her new-found power, Birdalone flees the fellowship; but the next time she starts to recount her autobiography, she finds that it has begun to entrap her as well: "the memory of those days seemed to lead her along, as though she verily were alive in them now" (268). Once the tale achieves dramatic resolution, the teller becomes irrelevant, imprisoned within the bounds set by her past self. It is the same fate Thiodolf verged on

when, donning the magic armor, he dreamed himself back into days of youth and peace: "and he felt as if he were stiffening into stone" (XIV, 150). The vision-making power threatens to advance far beyond "as-if," into "nothing-but."

Birdalone faces, in other words, the very dilemma confronted by William Morris or any artist who truly seeks to "make it new." If the tale is so well fashioned that the audience "trow it as if they had seen it all," then the teller becomes superfluous; and when that happens there is no one left to sustain the distinction between true tales and false, "histories" and "LIES." Romances assume the importance of "Holy Gospel"; every narrative becomes a tract, not for the times, but for all times. Morris had, earlier in his career, adopted a pose of detachment to downplay that danger; he called himself simply "the idle singer," thinking thereby to disclaim responsibility for his narrative. But the narrator of autobiography has no such disguise to don. Pressed to tell her story to a chance acquaintance, Birdalone late in the romance replies, "It wearies me to think thereof" (XX, 306). Each retelling ties her in a double bind: like a parent trapped by her children's repeated urgings to "tell it again," she has lost the freedom to live a further life; and like a star performer known only by her works, she has become her performance.

For Morris the entrapment of the successful teller is all the more perilous because it furnishes a nightmarish paradigm for the consequences of Socialist political success. With the success of the revolution, the motivation that has impelled it will disappear; the revolution will become a completed tale, locked in the same cycle of wearisome repetition that Birdalone

faces. Yet the alternative to that tale of success would be a litany of repeated failures, misprisions and distortions of the true tale that would cut the deeper for their obvious inadequacies. Birdalone must leave the fellowship, or else doom it to sterility. The pattern of self-sacrifice, so familiar to Victorian readers and writers alike, looms before her, seemingly inescapable. If she would save the fellowship, she must lose it.

What, then, can save her? The only way is for Morris to break the pattern of his own developing tale, and allow his narrative to break free of dialectical necessity. Morris's epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung*, whose narrative defined the external conditions in which it was to be read, could not do that; neither did his avowedly Socialist works, defined in their turn by the "hopes and fears" of their readership, have any means of "changing their life," as Morris described the transition from a material to a spiritual plane. Therefore Morris in his last work looks beyond these literary and political traditions, to one which he and his audience imbibed in their youth: the tradition of Nature. In the naturalists whose works Morris pored through at Marlborough, and in the Romantic writers whose spirit filled the pages of his first tales and poems, there is traceable a different, yet complementary dialectic: that between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, Nature as an imminent, abiding presence and Nature as a consumable yet inexhaustible product of that presence. There is even, in St. Augustine and other medieval Christian writers, a parallel to Morris's *topos* of the tale which assumes the identity of its creator: the *liber naturae* or great Book of Nature, the visible Word of its Creator.¹⁴ In both its pagan and its Christian forms, this tradition successfully embraces

product and process, Being and Becoming; the principle of life which lies behind the "book" or the "speaking face" of Nature is never threatened by the "stiffness" of its material form, as Thiodolf had been by his armor or Guest by his insistent doubts.

For the Romantic poets, engaged in unmediated intercourse with Nature, such a possibility of dual identity had been vital. It allowed them, to return to Guest's words in *News from Nowhere*, to "look upon the course of the year as a beautiful and interesting drama," but at the same time to be "a part of it all, and feel the pain as well as the pleasure in my own person" (XVI, 206-7). Woods decay, sedge withers, the thorns of life make one bleed--all the joys and sorrows of temporal life surge through the Romantic sufferer; but precisely because the poet is never drawn totally into those "fairy lands forlorn" he retains the distance necessary for aesthetic judgment. For Morris and other Victorians, however, the potentialities of immediacy had given way to the ambiguities of narrative: the poet is "an idle singer," engaged merely in filling time, not redeeming it--caught, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, "in a sterile self-enclosed circling in which the self talks to itself."¹⁵ The convergence between Miller's image and Caudwell's image of the "walled-in peepshow" reveals the broad validity of this seemingly inevitable entrapment.

How, then, can Morris--or at least his heroine--escape this enthrallment by single vision? Precisely by doubling it. Where many Romantics were haunted by the nightmare of the Doppelganger, that image of the self which augurs one's death, Morris creates a benign second self, Birdalone's faery godmother Habundia. With the clear reference to "abundance" in her name,

she is no mere faery tale sprite; she is "another form of Diana, Venus, and the German goddess Folla."¹⁷ Habundia thus embodies *natura naturans*, the principle of natural fertility; but she is also the "image" (19) of Birdalone as she was when her tale began. Correspondingly Birdalone's tale, which embodies the principle of *natura naturata*, may be transferred to Habundia simply by being told one last time. At that moment "natural supernaturalism" will transform the autobiographical dialectic; twinned, it will achieve synthesis. Birdalone's tale will "change its life" and become Habundia's, define the godmother's life rather than/in addition to Birdalone's; from the seeming "either/or" of the finished tale will arise "both/and." Then, from the young woman's perspective, her autobiography will at last lapse back into history, and she can assume a new identity of *narrator narratans*, tale-maker.

Birdalone's transmittal of her story to her alter ego Habundia is an act of liberation equivalent to her physical traversal of the islands in the Great Water: it removes the spell of the past. One by one, the members of the old fellowship arrive to rebuild their union; like Birdalone they have freed themselves from their pasts. Even Atra returns; though she will never marry, she can participate in this new, free fellowship not as a thrall to passion but as a partner. With the liberation of narrative, the social contract too is rendered for the first time truly free. For the rest of her life, Birdalone makes "feigned tales" (325), "LIES" that never evoke the dialectic of truth-telling; her stories are "forms of words" like other stories, but they bind no one, enthrall no one, convert no one. Birdalone's new world of playful tales

therefore still belongs to her, for it lives only in words; her "game" (353) threatens neither creator nor listener; she is fertile; her world truly reaches "an era of rest."

And her readers? Do they find in her creator's "LIES" a similar paradigm of narrative openness, a fulfillment complementary to hers? We, after all, inevitably read any narrative which describes knights and their ladies seeking to form a perfect fellowship under the rule of Arthur with a certain amount of skepticism. We lie under the spell of the consummated story of that earlier Arthur no less than Birdalone lay under the spell of her own tale; we expect his bride to be unfaithful, his relatives to seek his harm, his dreams to end in horror and waste--for that primal catastrophe satisfied us so! It had been one of Morris's youthful dreams to retell the story of England's first fellowship, a dream crushed by Tennyson's achievement. Now, at the end of his career, Morris recognizes that his teenage dream had been a trap; no matter how the "tales of old time" satisfy us, we must ultimately break free of them and become the makers of our own tales. Only true "LIES" can satisfy our insatiable appetites for resolution. It is William Morris's achievement to have found the way to grant that satisfaction, yet not be swallowed up himself.

The result is not closure, but rather an eternal succession of creative tales and tellings, running parallel to that "eternal recurrence of lovely changes" which is the created world. Each item within that succession is at once a comprehensive product of the past and a visionary image of the future; and with them "we must be content." For had Roland beaten back the Moors at Roncesvalles, or Sigurd lived happily ever after with Brun-

hild, we might have seen their monuments, or felt the impact of their lives; but we would not have had poems. Only immersed in the unbroken yet ever-changing stream of events does the artist achieve that amphibious, dialectical "fruition. . . which fills a man as he receives from the minds of those who came before him to give to his fellows now living and to those that shall live."¹⁷ There are worse fates.

Notes

1. Quoted in J. M. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (1899; rpt. New York, 1968), II, 147.
2. Roderick Marshall, *William Morris and his Earthly Paradises* (New York, 1981), 279.
3. Letter of 19 October 1885 to Fred Henderson, quoted in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York, 1961), 876.
4. All quotations in this essay are taken from the *Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (24 vols. London, 1910-1915), and given as (volume, page).
5. Christopher Caudwell, *Romance and Realism: A Study in English Bourgeois Literature*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Princeton, N.J., 1970), 55-56.
6. Quoted in H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* (London, 1924), 50.
7. See the famous Fenwick note to the "Immortality Ode," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. A. Grosart (London: E. Moxon, 1876) 194.
8. *William Morris Artist Writer Socialist*, ed. May Morris (London, 1924), II, 420-21.
9. For a full explication of this process, see Hartley S. Spatt, "Morrissaga: *Sigurd the Volsung*," *ELH*, 44 (1977), 355-375.
10. Letter of 29 January 1889 to May Morris, in Mackail II, 218.
11. At least according to Skeat, who was the most recent source Morris had.
12. *The Autobiography of Anthony Trollope* (1883, rpt. New York, 1905), 113.
13. *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (New York, 1988), 152.
14. *Grammar of Assent* (1870, rpt. Garden City, 1955),

- 86.
15. For fuller discussion of these underpinnings, see M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), chapter 2; and E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.
16. See *The Linguistic Movement* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), 30.
17. Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, Ohio, 1982), 182.
18. *William Morris Artist Writer Socialist*, II, 394.