PHILLIPPA BENNETT

Rejuvenating Our Sense of Wonder:
The Last Romances of William Morris

'I can tell you a tale such as ye have never heard the like of, and which will move every heart of you.'

So passed the hours deep into the night at Wehermel, and folk went to sleep scarce trowing in the wonders that they had heard and seen.¹

Narratives of Wonder

William Morris’s last romances, like the tale of the old Carline in *The Sundering Flood*, are stories designed to move the heart of the reader – to stir and delight us by the wonders they reveal. They are also stories which, since Morris first presented them to the world, have struggled for credibility. Appearing at the end of what is generally acknowledged to be a life of tireless endeavour and outstanding achievement in a range of fields, the last romances occupy an uncertain position: regarded alternatively by critics as a satisfying culmination of Morris’s literary career, a tactical diversion from the harsh realities of socialist propaganda, or simply a bewildering regression into an impossibly beautiful past, these narratives continue to challenge and perplex readers, raising questions as to whether

they enhance or detract from Morris’s reputation as an artist, a writer and a socialist. Within Morris scholarship they remain a minor interest whilst outside Morris circles they are still relatively unknown – and yet, as Norman Talbot emphasizes, these are works of ‘extraordinary merits’ for which ‘there is never any need of special pleading.’ As such their continuing neglect in the wider field of nineteenth-century literary studies is disappointing, whilst their perceived idiosyncrasy within Morris scholarship is detrimental to the development of a full understanding and appreciation of Morris’s aims and achievements, for as Margaret Gennan recognizes, ‘to ignore them is to know one half or less of the man.’

At the outset of the twenty-first century when, as Colin Franklin writes, ‘the world becomes so un-Morris that he is needed and missed in earnest’, the maintenance and expansion of Morris’s reputation and the wider dissemination of his aims and ideas are timely, and the last romances have a crucial rather than peripheral role in this process. To dismiss them, as some have done, as the escapist fantasies of an ageing man, or as a final resurgence of literary Pre-Raphaelitism previously held in check by Morris’s socialism, is both to misrepresent and devalue them. To understand them as a radical and constructive contribution to his aims as an artist, a writer and a socialist is, in contrast, to give them the attention they deserve as the remarkable literary achievement of Morris’s final years.

It is through their predominant concern with the experience of wonder that we can begin to develop such an understanding and hence to reassess the value and significance of the last romances in our own age. The exuberant celebration of the wondrous and the wonderful in these narratives, together with the wondering disposition of their protagonists, is a feature which has received passing mention in commentaries but which has never been fully explored. May Morris and Norman Talbot, two of the most sensitive and perceptive readers of the romances, have however laid

stronger emphasis on this quality than others. May Morris observes that it is ‘always the remembrance of the Wonders of the World’ that sustains the protagonists in their bleakest moments, whilst Norman Talbot argues that Morris’s profound understanding that the successful story ‘should nourish our sense of wonder’ is demonstrated particularly in these final narratives, in which he ‘offered his readers not only beauty but the rejuvenation of their sense of wonder.’ This rejuvenation of our sense of wonder is the most significant achievement of William Morris’s last romances. Contrary to those who would argue that it renders these narratives simplistic and unworthy, I propose that it is fundamental to our understanding of their contribution to his wider aesthetic and political vision, and essential for an appreciation of their continuing relevance for a twenty-first century readership.

The experience of wonder and the act of wondering are, however, increasingly neglected and devalued aspects of human existence, and if Morris’s final narratives continue to be misunderstood and undervalued it is because the concept of wonder is also misunderstood and undervalued. In a new millennium the last romances thus offer us a crucial reminder of the importance of the human capacity for wonder, and show us how, by wondering, we can help to make the world a little less ‘un-Morris’.

Human Wonders

Wonder is a multifaceted concept. We can experience a sense of wonder when we encounter something admirable or unusual, we can direct our sense of wonder at an object or a person, we can conceive other people or objects as wonderful, and we can engage consciously in the act of wondering. These

are essentially related elements of the same process, for as Mark Kingwell identifies, wonder ‘exposes a threefold structure’ involving a ‘wonderer’, the ‘wonderful’ and a ‘wondering’. The experience of wonder is thus neither escapist nor passive – on the contrary it is, as Cornelis Verhoeven argues, a ‘vital experience’, an ‘enthusiastic contemplation’ in which we engage more fully with the realities of our existence. In the last romances Morris’s protagonists are, like Thomas Cadlyle’s Teufelsdröck, ‘wonder-loving and wonder-seeking’ men and women; vital and enthusiastic, they are motivated primarily by the ‘zest for living’ that characterizes the attitude of wonder. Indeed it is their pursuit of and receptivity to wonder that constitutes the primary momentum of these narratives, a momentum which always brings these characters more fully and actively into the world rather than taking them out of it. Morris’s final protagonists are in fact one of the best examples he offers us of what it means to live the ‘eager life’, the life he claims as the birthright of all men and women at the end of his lecture ‘The Aims of Art’. But Morris also understood that the consequences of a wondering disposition are not confined to the pleasure and fulfilment of the individual life. He recognized that an attitude of wonder can profoundly influence the way people respond to each other and to the world in which they live, and thus have a highly beneficial role in social reconstruction and environmental regeneration.

In his last romances Morris offers his most compelling exposition of the advantages to be gained by integrating the experience and the attitude of wonder more fully and actively into human life, beginning with the enrichment of our relationships with other people. The protagonists of these narratives frequently respond with delighted wonder to the presence of others, a response memorably expressed in the meetings between Osbern and Elfhild on either side of the eponymous river in The Sundering

Flood: At their very first encounter Elfhild ‘starts back astonished’ on seeing Osbern, crying ‘O thou beauteous creature, what art thou?’; similarly amazed at the appearance of Elfhild, Osbern in turn demands: ‘Tell me what thou art. Art thou of the Faery? For thou art too well shapen to be of the Dwarfkin.’ Elfhild continues ‘wondering at him’ throughout their subsequent conversation, and when they next meet Osbern has lost none of his mutual joy and surprise at the appearance of Elfhild, finding her always ‘a wonder and delight’ to behold. Both characters simultaneously evoke and express a sense of profound admiration and pleasure in their meetings, exchanging appreciative compliments over the ‘gurgling and rushing and talking’ of the Sundering Flood which lends its own vibrant dynamic to their enthusiastic discussions. Indeed, their wondering interactions offer a notably less self-conscious version of the first meeting between the more mature Christopher and Goldilind in Morris’s earlier romance ChildChristopher and Goldilind the Fair. On this occasion the mutual admiration of the characters expresses itself rather in the ‘speechlessness’ and ‘paralysis’ identified by Mary Baine Campbell as characteristic physical effects of a state of wonderment, rather than the animated movements of Elfhild who ‘clapped her hands together and laughed’ in her delight at Osbern. In contrast, Goldilind stands ‘staring in wonder’ at Christopher whilst he stands ‘gazing’ back at her, a shared and silent immobility in which each attempts to comprehend the appearance of the other. When Christopher is finally able to speak, he admits frankly to Goldilind: ‘Though I be young I have seen fair women not a few, but beside any of them thou art a wonder.’

It is easy to dismiss such exchanges as the predictable interactions of characters possessed of an impossible fairytale beauty, but Morris does not allow such a dismissal: Christopher is, after all, described as ‘such an youngling as most might have been in the world, had not man’s malice been,

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9 CW, XXIII, p. 97.
10 CW, XXI, pp. 32–3, 45.
12 CW, XVII, pp. 176, 179.
and the mischief of grudging and the marring of grasping." Furthermore, a superficial interpretation of such exchanges as the stuff of fantasy fails to acknowledge Morris's understanding that such wondering is the key to a respectful engagement with one's fellow man — a point made more recently by Luce Irigaray who identifies man's need 'to leave an interval between himself and the other, to look toward, to contemplate — to wonder' as the basis of appreciative human interaction. In such wonderings, Irigaray suggests, 'the “object” of wonder or attraction remains “impossible to de-limit, im-pose, identify’, rendering our wondering an essentially non-possessive, non-reductive act, for in its “attracting me toward”, Irigaray explains, ‘wonder keeps me from taking and assimilating directly to myself’. Such non-possessive, non-reductive wonder is, for both Morris and Irigaray, an important element of physical attraction and sexual desire. In The Water of the Wondrous Isles, when Arthur and Birdalone are reunited and finally free to consummate their relationship, they approach each other ‘breathless with wonder and joy and longings’ whilst in Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair the energies of wonder and desire similarly interact within Christopher on the day of his marriage to Goldilind as he both gazes on her ‘in wonderment’ and ‘yearned towards her in his bowels’, an intensely visceral experience in which the integrated experiences of wonder and sexual attraction are felt deep within the organs of the body. But as Marguerite La Caze rightly asserts, ‘the response of wonder cannot be confined to the relation between the sexes’ — or, for that matter, to the experience of sexual attraction — ‘but should be extended to all our relations with others, and in his last romances Morris does not restrict his protagonists’ sense of wonder to those they physically desire.’ In The Sundering Flood, Osborne’s relationship with his mentor Steelhead begins significantly with his wondering appreciation of his new friend. 'Somewhat startled' at the sudden emergence of Steelhead in the land in which his sheep have gone astray, Osborne waits 'in no little wonder' for Steelhead to return from gathering the strayed animals, admitting to his new companion, 'I was far to see thee again; for thou art goodly and fair to behold, and I am far to remember thee.' It is with just such forthright and generous admiration that Aurea and Viridis greet Birdalone when she first lands on the Isle of Increase Unsought in The Water of the Wondrous Isles. Aurea approaches Birdalone 'with wonder in her eyes' and subsequently declares, 'now I look upon thee, how fair a woman thou art!' — a compliment readily reiterated by Viridis, who 'looked a while on Birdalone' before kissing her and declaring: 'I would thou were happier, for thou art beauteous, and all but the evil must love thee.' As in Osborne’s unselfconscious appreciation of Steelhead, Viridis and Aurea express their admiration of Birdalone simply and spontaneously, unconstrained in their wonderment by any strain of jealously or the antipathy it necessarily incurs.

The wonder-dominated inter-personal exchanges in the last romances confirm La Caze’s claim that wonder encourages a mutual appreciation between individuals which opens the space for generosity, and 'in generosity, we recognize the worth of others', argues La Caze, meaning that 'respect, veneration and magnanimity follow wonder.' Furthermore, as Iris Young argues, 'a respectful stance of wonder toward other people' can be an eminently practical means of deepening and enhancing our relationships with others, allowing us 'new insight about their needs, interests, perceptions, or values.' The cultivation of an attitude of wonder hereby assumes an ethical dimension, for by deepening our understanding of others, our wondering can beneficially influence the manner in which we behave towards them. Through the enthusiastic interactions of their protagonists, Morris’s last romances thus continue to offer us a valid and persuasive vision of what a respectful stance of wonder toward other people might achieve in terms of the reconstruction of human relationships on more generous and appreciative terms.

13 CW, XVII, p. 147.
15 CW, XX, p. 351; CW, XVII, pp. 207, 206.
18 CW, XX, pp. 54, 55, 56.
19 La Caze, p. 12.
Topographies of Wonder

The respect and veneration generated by wonder are, Morris recognized, essential not only to the way people respond to and treat each other, but also to the ways in which they respond to and treat the natural environment. The last romances are filled with spectacular topographies which readily elicit awe and admiration, and their very titles are richly suggestive of a world composed of marginal and marvellous places – of glittering plains, woods beyond the world and wondrous isles. But Morris is less concerned overall in these narratives with such manifestly extraordinary places than he is with the wonderment generated by the prospects and details of more familiar landscapes. There are unforgettable expressions of such wonderment in each of the last romances, such as when Birdalone ‘cried aloud with joy to see the lovely land before her’ as she approaches the City of the Five Crafts in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, or when Walter’s spirit wavers ‘for very surprise of joy’ in delighted response to the ‘lovely land’ which surrounds the magical wood in *The Wood Beyond the World*. One of the most expressive and affective demonstrations of such elation, however, occurs when Ralph leaves his homeland at the beginning of *The Well at the World’s End*. Posing to look at ‘the down-country before him”, listening to the wind that ‘played a strange tune on the innumerable stems of the bents and the hard-stalked blossoms, to which the bees sang counterpoint’, Ralph’s pleasure and excitement grow until ‘the heart arose within him, and he drew the sword from the scabbard, and waved it about his head, and shook it toward the south, and cried out, “Now, welcome world, and be thou blessed from one end to the other, from the ocean sea to the uttermost mountains!”’. In his close observation of this distinctly English topography, Ralph experiences a state of heightened sensory awareness, receptive simultaneously to the green expanse of the perspective and the minutiae of physical detail, both interpenetrated by a natural polyphony. Sights, sounds and textures combine to provoke in him a wondering exultation in which he conceives his own life as an integral element of the natural environment and recognizes his share in its vibrancy and vitality.

but he believed that the causes of this folly might one day be removed and the buried landscape redeemed. It simply needed enough people to have the courage to say: 'Let us seek a remedy while any of our wealth in this kind is left us'.

That remedy, for Morris, lay in recognizing that 'the countenance and expression of every tree, nay every bough, every little sweep of bank and hollow' could be an enduring source of wonder and delight, and in acknowledging that 'the external aspect of the country belongs to the whole public', meaning that 'whoever wilfully injures that property is a public enemy'.

As John Underwood Lewis emphasizes, these are related processes, for to find wonder in the natural world is also to understand that 'human beings exist not in order to ravage their environment' any more than they exist 'to dominate and exploit one another', but rather 'in both cases to reverence them'. Thus in The Well at the World's End whilst Ralph's battle for Upmeads is primarily a battle for the preservation of a benign form of governance against the brutal regime of the invaders, integral to that fight is the salvation of the very soil and contours of the land itself. The 'happy meadows' of Upmeads have become 'black with weaponed men' – an aesthetic blight and a travesty of the natural fertility of the fields now forced to accommodate the forces of destruction. In defeating the men of the Burg, Ralph restores the kingship of his father but he also redeems the 'fair meadows' and the 'upland tillage' from unsympathetic occupation, and he continues this process when he is made King, ensuring that 'the very sound of his name and rumour of his coming stayed the march of hosts and the ravage of fair lands'.

Staying 'the ravage of fair lands' was central to Morris's own purpose as a socialist, and in a twenty-first century beset with anxieties about resource depletion, environmental degradation and climate change, that purpose remains as urgent as ever, and the experience of wonder continues to have a significant role in achieving it. The willingness to cultivate 'a sense of wonder' and a feeling of 'reverence' for the natural world was, as Linda Lear observes, central to Rachel Carson's ideas for countering environmental degradation in Silent Spring, whilst more recently Robert Macfarlane has argued that a 'resurgent sense of wonder' at the natural environment might be one of the most important foundations for the development of 'good environmental practice' in the twenty-first century. Morris's last romances continue to make a valid contribution to such debates by their fervent celebration of the inexhaustible opportunities for wonder provided by the natural world. They enthrall the reader with those 'sublime and awe-inspiring mountains and wastes that men make pilgrimages to see', and which many people, Morris knew, must be content to learn about through 'the tales of poets and painters', but they also encourage us 'to learn to love the narrow spot that surrounds our daily life for what of beauty and sympathy there is in it'. Perhaps most importantly, in the diversely wondrous topographies of his last romances Morris offers his most memorable confirmation of the belief he asserts in his lecture 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth' – that 'there is no square mile of earth's inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way, if we men will only abstain from wilfully destroying that beauty'.

Building Wonder

Morris recognized the natural beauty of the earth as valuable in its own right, as an enduring source of wonder and pleasure for 'such as choose to seek it', but he also believed it was of value because it inspired in men and women an instinctive desire 'for making it more beautiful' by means of their

26 CW, XXIII, p. 159.
29 CW, XIX, p. 227.
30 CW, XVIII, p. 21; CW, XIX, p. 243.
32 CW, XXII, p. 170.
own creative endeavours.\textsuperscript{33} For Morris a topography of wonder was the foundation of an architecture of wonder: "Those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place", he emphasized, and in honour of these beautiful places the buildings people construct should be 'ornaments to Nature, not disfigurements of it.'\textsuperscript{34} In consequence, he viewed the restoration of man's wondering engagement with the natural environment as the first step towards a restoration of wonder in the built environment, a relationship which he and many of his colleagues in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings believed had been integral to the practice of architecture in previous eras, for 'if architecture was born of need', asserted W. R. Lethaby, 'it soon showed some magic quality, and all true building touches depths of feeling and opens the gates of wonder.'\textsuperscript{35} Philip Webb insisted that the generation of a state of wonderness was 'a primary essential' of the Gothic mode in particular as it developed in the Middle Ages, and Morris's own consistently wondering response to medieval churches and cathedrals is a recurrent theme in his writings, and particularly evident in the letters written during his visit to France in 1891 in which he enthused that the west front of Reims Cathedral was 'as wonderful as anything one can see', and declared Beauvais Cathedral 'one of the wonders of the world.'\textsuperscript{36} But Morris also recognized that it was not only the great Gothic cathedrals that laid claim to the response of wonder: contemplating with profound pleasure and interest the design and construction of a fourteenth-century labourer's house in his lecture 'The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization', he celebrates it as a vital and valid contribution to 'the numberless links' of a long chain of architectural achievement 'whose beginnings we know not of, but on whose mighty length even the many-pillared garth of Pallas, and the stately dome of the Eternal Wisdom, are but single links, wondrous and resplendent though they be.'\textsuperscript{37}

To build and to make was, Morris believed, to give structure and substance to man's sense of wonder at the world in which he lived, for as Howard Parsons writes, artistic creation is the attempt to transform a 'receptive, inward wonder' into 'images and shapes of meaning', to give that wonder 'communicable forms.'\textsuperscript{38} As the master-art, architecture was, for Morris, one of man's most effective means of communicating such wonder, and in his last romances he provides several compelling examples of the powerful influence buildings can have on the human imagination. In \textit{The Sundering Flood} Osborne gazes at the church of Eastcheap 'ravished with joy at the great pillars and arches', whilst in \textit{The Well at the World's End} Ralph similarly stares in speechless delight at the Abbey of Higham-on-the-Way which shone 'like dark gold ... under the evening sun', its 'painted and gilded imagery' glittering 'like jewels upon it.'\textsuperscript{39} It is a building deliberately designed to provoke a wondering response from the observer, as acknowledged by the monk who guides the awe-struck Ralph through the town: "'Yea,'" said the monk, as he noted Ralph's wonder at this wonder; "'a most goody house it is, and happy shall they be that dwell there'.\textsuperscript{40} But as in Morris's own letters and lectures, it is not only grand public edifices that generate a state of wonderness in the last romances. Osborne finds it 'a great wonder' simply to see 'so many houses built of stone and lime all standing together, and so fair', when he first visits Eastcheap, whilst in \textit{The Water of the Wondrous Isles} Birdalone's simple but well-built cottage in Evilshaw appears wondrous in its own right to Arthur, with its thatched roof that 'shone under the moon' and its homely windows 'yellow with candle-

\textsuperscript{33} CW, XXII, p. 17; CW, XXIII, p. 274.

\textsuperscript{34} CW, XXII, p. 170; CW, XXIII, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{35} W. R. Lethaby, \textit{Architecture: An Introduction to the History and Theory of the Art of Building} (London: Williams and Northgate, 1911), p. 13. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was founded in response to a letter by Morris printed in the \textit{Athenaeum} in March 1877 regarding the restoration work being undertaken at Tewkesbury Abbey under the direction of Gilbert Scott. See CL, I, pp. 351-2.


\textsuperscript{37} CW, XXII, p. 126.


\textsuperscript{39} CW, XXI, p. 73; CW, XVIII, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{40} CW, XVIII, p. 24.
uneasily together on the architect’s desk.” Furthermore Philip Fisher has, in recent years, reiterated Morris’s belief that architecture at its best can offer a ‘pervasive appeal to the experience of wonder’ but observes that wonder remains ‘the most neglected of primary aesthetic experiences within modernity’, whilst Tony Wood has criticized the ‘moral malleability’ of the contemporary architect in a society in which ‘individual talents and tastes’ are subservient to the demands of the market, and in which the ‘signature’ architectural projects of the day serve predominantly as expressions of ‘the power of finance capital’. In such circumstances Morris’s last romances continue to serve as texts of architectural consolation and inspiration – as narratives which help us to conceive alternative, more invigorating modes of social interaction with the built environment. Indeed, it is in his last romances that Morris finds his most effective means of envisioning an architecture that consistently denotes ‘the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth’, and, in doing so, of reclaiming wonder as a communal aesthetic experience not only for his own age, but also for our own.47

The Will to Wonder

For people, buildings and the natural environment to inspire awe and reverence, and to generate appreciation and respect, Morris knew that the social and economic relations fostered by capitalism would have to be transformed. He understood that our sense of wonder at each other and

41 CW, XXI, p. 73; CW, XX, p. 350.
42 CW, XVII, pp. 181, 168, 182.
43 CW, XXII, p. 350.
at the world in which we live is inevitably suppressed and dissipated in conditions of social exploitation and environmental degradation – that when the interests of profit and utility dominate, the opportunities for wonder decline. His calls for a revitalised mode of human interaction, a regenerated natural environment and a reinvigorated architecture were thus all essentially the same call: a call for the rejection of capitalism and a radical rethinking and restructuring of society along socialist principles. But Morris also recognized that, paradoxically, the key to achieving this reconstruction of society and thereby to reclaiming wonder was to be found in the concept of wonder itself, and, more specifically, in the act of wondering.

Wonder has what Ronald Hepburn calls a 'questioning and questing aspect', for in the act of wondering we question what confronts us and we quest for meaning. As Morris's colleague Theodore Watts-Dunton observed, wonder thus operates in direct opposition to unquestioning acceptance, for 'the instinct of wonder' is 'that instinct which leads to the movement of challenge'. This interpretation of wondering as an inherently courageous and potentially revolutionary act is of fundamental significance in regard to Morris's socialism – indeed his very commitment to the movement was based on such wondering, as he explained in a letter to Charles Maurice in 1883: 'in looking into matters social and political I have but one rule, that in thinking of the condition of any body of men I should ask myself, "How could you bear it yourself? What would you feel if you were poor against the system under which you live?"' Morris's political lectures are filled with such questions – questions designed to challenge the listener, to encourage them to question the necessity of social and economic injustice and to quest for revolution and transformation. He repeatedly asks his audiences to wonder at what is and to wonder how it might be different – a dual process ingrained in the very title of his lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live'. Questioning thus translates into questing not only by challenging what is but by considering what might be – by moving from a questioning of actualities to a questioning of potentialities. 'Wonder that a thing is so,' writes Cornelis Verhoeven, 'is motivated by a possibility that it might be different,' and this binary dynamic emerges regularly in Morris's political writings in which he consistently emphasizes that things not only might, but should and indeed could be very different indeed. To recognize this was, Morris believed, to be compelled to take constructive action, a belief explicit in his exhortation to the working-class audience of his lecture 'Misery and the Way Out': 'try to think of the life you might live and would naturally live if you were not forced into misery by your masters, and then I do not think you can help combining together to tell the world that you must be free and happy; and then all will soon be won.' In encouraging his audiences to wonder Morris thus urged them to engage in what Ernst Bloch identifies as essential acts of personal and social transformation – 'to think oneself into what is better' and hence to 'throw oneself actively' into the creation of that better future.

The protagonists of Morris's last romances exemplify what it might mean to live such a questioning and questing life, for these are men and women who challenge the unnecessary limitations of their social conditions and throw themselves actively into the creation of more optimistic and fulfilling futures. This is the life openly espoused by Ralph in The Well at the World's End, who, when told by the monk at Higham-on-the-Way that many men in the monastery 'have tried the world and found it wanting', responds: 'Father, did the world try them, and find them wanting, perchance? Incredulous that such a thriving and powerful town should be based on the restrictive ethos of its Abbey, Ralph challenges his companion: 'Are ye verily all such as this in this House? ... Know ye not at all of the world's ways?' In contrast, Ralph's own wondering about 'the world's

51 Verhoeven, p. 27.
52 AWS, II, p. 164.
ways’ motivates him to seek out its adventures and its opportunities, for as he tells his friends Clement and Katherine when he first leaves Upmeads, ‘I come out to seek my luck in the world.’ In The Story of the Glittering Plain Hallblithe engages in a similar process of interrogation with his companion the Sea-Eagle when they arrive on the shores of the eponymous Plain. Troubled by the Sea-Eagle’s unquestioning acceptance of the governance of the Plain’s all-powerful King and his willingness to relinquish all memory of his former life in exchange for immortality, Hallblithe embarks on a vigorous sequence of provocative questions intended to expose the compromises and limitations of the Sea-Eagle’s chosen life, asking him: ‘What art thou, O Warrior, in the land of the alien and the King? Who shall heed thee or tell the tale of thy glory? ... The bidding of what lord or King wilt thou do, O Chiefstain, that thou mayst eat thy meat in the morning and lie soft in thy bed in the evening?’. In contrast, Hallblithe rejects the easeful stasis of the Plain and the dictates of its self-interested King for the vigour and autonomy of the mortal but fully human life, telling the Wanderers who find him in the wasteland, ‘I have an errand in the world’.

In its questioning and questing aspects, the act of wondering thus reveals alternative possibilities and motivates the wonderer to realize those possibilities. In this way wonder is, in Marina Warner’s words, an ‘active motion towards experience’ – a dynamic exemplified in Osborne’s decision to leave Wertheim in The Sundering Flood. Explaining his decision to the unhappy Elfild, Osborne asks: ‘Must I not take chancelap and war by the hand and follow where they lead, that I may learn the wideness of the world, and compass earth and sea till I have gone about the Sundering Flood and found thy little body somewhere in the said wide world? And maybe this is the beginning thereof?’ This courageous commitment to the quest is demonstrated by each of the protagonists of Morris’s last romances and confirms Alfred Kuenzli’s observation that an attitude of wonder towards oneself and the world ‘results in an amplification of personality’ and a rejection of ‘fear and conformity and subservience’.

In their own personal rejection of fear, conformity and subservience, these protagonists refuse to limit themselves to that ‘conforming authoritarian personality’ which Howard Parsons claims is the antithesis of the wondering mind and the regrettable product of societies that contrive to ‘inhibit’ the experience of wonder in their citizens. Significantly, the need to reject fear and conformity and to develop a wondering mind was also a dominant factor in Morris’s own commitment to socialism and is consistently emphasized in his political writings in which he repeatedly encourages in his listener and his reader the ‘amplification of personality’ and the ‘ever-enlarging world awareness’ that Kuenzli identifies as characteristic effects of the act of wondering. In his lecture ‘The Ends and the Means’, Morris makes one of his most memorable and evocative appeals to his audience to overcome their fears and uncertainties and to move forward with the confidence and courage that only socialism could inspire, asserting, in suitably wondrous metaphors: ‘there is no turning back into the desert in which we cannot live, and no standing still on the edge of the enchanted wood; for there is nothing to keep us there, we must plunge in and through it to the promised land beyond’. It is an appeal that echoes throughout his final narratives. Confronted with the literal terrain of thirsty deserts and enchanted woods, as well as exploitative regimes and social injustice, Morris’s protagonists move with the enquiry and hope of wonder through their worlds, committed to their quests and willing to sacrifice both approval and security in order to achieve them. The last romances might thus be regarded as the prism through which Morris’s values and motivations as a socialist are refracted, allowing him to articulate them in an alternative and more immediately satisfying mode. As such they remain central to our understanding of the hopes and aspirations that informed Morris’s political activities and continue to offer a powerful inspiration for our own visions.

54 CW, XVIII, pp. 35–6, 13.
55 CW, XIV, pp. 256, 283.
57 CW, XXI, pp. 80–1.
of a more wonder-filled future. Most importantly of all, they remind us that what Howard Parsons terms 'a world of value' can ultimately only be achieved by 'the will to wonder, the will to consider great alternatives for self and society, and the will to try them out'.

The Way of Wonder

It is because they show us what Rufus Jones calls 'the way of wonder' that the last romances are as significant and relevant today as any other aspect of Morris's work. Their emphasis on the value of wonder as experience, attitude and praxis is crucial for a twenty-first century in which wonder is becoming an increasingly marginalized and undervalued element of human existence - in which we are encouraged to be more interested in novelty than in wonder, more attracted to the sensational than to the wondrous, and more inclined towards ameliorating what is than actively wondering how it might be made radically different. Howard Parsons emphasize the need for us to be deeply concerned about any society that 'inhibits wonder in the child and adult', for that in turn 'inhibits the very reconstruction of society' that our wondering calls for. I would argue that the same warning applies to a society that simply neglects rather than purposefully suppresses wonder, or that conceives it, as Mary Baine Campbell observes, as an activity legitimately practised only by the young, the uneducated, or the non-productive. Within this context the last romances, with their narrative vitality, their irrepressibly enthusiastic protagonists and their freshness of style, encourage us to look again at ourselves and at the world in which we live. In doing so they remain one of Morris's most important legacies - an invaluable resource for regenerating our sense of wonder and an essential reminder that in wondering we conceive our lives anew.

64 'A Philosophy of Wonder', p. 101.
65 See Campbell, p. 5.