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The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer

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WILLIAM MORRIS' lifelong reforming aesthetic endeavors trace those mazy ways crisscrossing the landscape where art and life mingle, for he passionately believed, as he said in "The Aims of Art," "art is and must be, either in its abundance or its barrenness, in its sincerity or its hollowness, the expression of the society amongst which it exists" (*CW*, XXIII, 84). For this convinced socialist, change in the institutional framework of man's life, most basically a check upon the mindless and inhuman pace of industrialization and a recognition of the basic fellowship of man, had to precede any sure and sound establishment of a true art, an "Art of the People."¹ Short of this social revolution Morris felt that even the most accomplished artistic achievements of individual genius lacked solid foundation; looking about the contemporary artistic scene he once commented that, "now such small scraps of it as are left are the result of individual and wasteful struggle, are retrospective and pessimistic" (XXIII, 89-90). Faithful to his own assessment of those areas in contemporary society where aesthetic and widely relevant social concerns met and merged, Morris concentrated his greatest energies in the fields of book production and design of household goods, thus hoping to supply through modified industrial means an exemplary pattern for a daily life enlivened by art, based not on the dilettantism of an elite, but rather on the vigorous creative participation and

¹Morris' theory of the relation between art and society is trenchantly outlined in a lecture bearing this title (*CW*, XXII, 28-50). For his comments on how socialist beliefs colored every phase of his activity, see his essay, "How I Became a Socialist" (XXIII, 277-281), where on the first page he asserts, "Now this view of Socialism which I hold to-day, and hope to die holding, is what I began with; I had no transitional period, unless you may call such a brief period of political radicalism during which I saw my ideal clear enough, but had no hope of any realization of it."

enjoyment of the great mass of men. He realistically accepted the possibility that even his own carefully considered reformations, which drew their hope for future innovation from the best survivals cultivated from a better past, would one day be superseded and viewed as the constrained and severely limited transmitters of the integrative artistic impulse.²

It is consistent with his critical regard for the dependence of art on social context that Morris assigned to certain modes of the imperfect art of his own day a deeply "re-creative" role along the difficult way leading to the beautiful society he images in *News from Nowhere*. His own numerous prose fictions, which occupied his leisure hours from 1886 until his death in 1896, maintain through their highly imaginative choice of subject matter and artistic method a felt continuity with his Socialist beliefs and practical projects and also a conscious testing and delineation of those limits which he declared his decadent society had placed on man as creator and his expressive forms. E. P. Thompson, in his book *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*, as part of an evaluation that polarizes Morris' interests into split areas of social relevance and aesthetic whimsy, attacks these works for exhibiting a lamentable escapism.³ Such an unsympathetic interpretation, and others like it, have as their premise a belief that the relation between art and social reform is either nonexistent or must be concrete and programmatic.⁴ Unfortunately they slight the clear statements in Morris' lectures and critical comments and the subtle testimony of the fictions themselves to the deliberately indirect and yet often powerfully effective radicalizing directions in which he developed his literary art.

²See Morris' comments in "The Art of the People" (*CW*, XXII, 34), and his letter to the editor of *The Daily Chronicle* (November 10, 1893), reprinted in *AWS*, II, 522-524.

³Moreover, we are already aware in *The Roots of the Mountains* of the motive for writing which becomes dominant in the other late romances—that of pure self-indulgence in pleasurable reverie or dream, in which neither Morris' intellect nor his deeper feelings are deeply engaged" (London, 1955, p. 785). This criticism not only ignores the evidence of Morris' continuing involvement in projects for social reform throughout his later years and his carefully articulated theory of art and its position within society, but also his conscious and consistent defense of the musing, contemplative mood in which he produced his literary works as a prerequisite for the release of a creative power that could overcome constrictive contemporary forms. Morris would have defended these "moods of idleness" as arousing his very deepest and most significant feelings (see "The Aims of Art," XXIII, 81-82).

⁴Few commentators are willing to grant a balanced and positive evaluation to Morris' thoroughgoing attempt to reconcile his artistic efforts and social philosophy. Several critics who concentrate on his art find his socialism either repugnant or irrelevant; among these are his early biographer, J. W. Mackail; W. B. Yeats, in his early appreciative essay, "The Happiest of the Poets," *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London, 1903, pp. 70-89); and Philip Henderson. Others, such as Professor Thompson, admire his ideology and end by downplaying his art; to this company should be added Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London, 1947), who although much more sympathetic to Morris' deliberate archaism, misunderstands its political content and links it with simple nostalgia and aestheticism. C. S. Lewis, in his provocative reassessment, "William Morris," *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), shifts ground to

Morris drew his deepest inspiration from a rich confluence of renewed and revitalized historiographical traditions and an immanentist's rhythmic and yet teleological faith in natural fulfillment. He combined the socialist's translated providential belief in the final outcome of history with the mythologist's fascination for primitive culture and the craftsman's and romantic historian's enthusiasm for medieval art. His fictions illustrate a range of experimental techniques directed toward illuminating the historical continuum, or, in the case of those works which blur their precise setting in time to focus on the development of an individual, toward exploring the analogous phenomenon of personal growth as a microcosm for social development. In each work it is an organic metaphor that supports his historical or biographical plot. He could not be content with a realistic depiction of the conditions of his own day, a period when, according to the Marxist analysis he accepted, men had become unnaturally separated from the sources and ends of their productivity, and all the daily expressions of life revealed a reductive, mechanical tension between toil and weary idleness, rather than a life-giving alternation between useful work and refreshing leisure.⁵ The problem which he confronted in his prose fictions was that of compressing his view of natural and historical process, bracketed by the less perfect Golden Ages of the past and the socialist society of the future, by lost cultural innocence and true cultural maturity, into a vision which would release in modern man some deep-repressed desire for perfection.⁶

The chief difficulty with such an endeavor lies in establishing the precise point of contact between the ideal sought and the imperfect means available for glimpsing it, a difficulty intensified for Morris by his deep revulsion for most things modern, and therefore for those very agencies, environments, and

discuss the relation of Morris' ideology as expressed through his art to Christian metaphysics; his essay is one of the few criticisms which look at Morris' prose fictions in some detail, and his approach highlights, from the perspective of a critic accustomed to dealing with the complex Christian allegories of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the analogous problems which Morris grappled with in a secular framework. The most sympathetic and synthetic overview of Morris' life work is presented diffusely and biographically by his daughter, May Morris, in the Introduction to *CW*; Margaret Grennan in *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (New York, 1945), discusses Morris in the context of Victorian historicism as a means to social reform.

⁵"To their employers they are, so far as they are workmen, a part of the machinery of the workshop or the factory; to themselves they are proletarians, human beings working to live that they may live to work: their part of craftsmen, of makers of things by their own free will, is played out" ("The Aims of Art," XXIII, 88-89).

⁶May Morris' explanation of her father's reasons for writing *News from Nowhere* in response to such programmatic utopias as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* highlights what he felt to be the allusive, metaphorical value of his art as a more flexible and profound motivator of social change: "There were dozens of Utopian paper constitutions and economic schemes in the market, all unreadable and repulsive, and not one credible and attractive picture of what life might be under Communism . . . Morris knew that all this would do itself one way or another when once people wanted it: the difficulty was to make them want it" (*AWS*, I, 504).

media that shaped contemporary perceptions. The purpose of the discussions of Morris' prose fictions which follow is to chart some of the ways in which he tried to evoke his ideal vision of the relation of the individual to society and relate that necessarily conditional and fictive portrait to the latent longings of his readers.

Approximations of Myth

Morris localizes two of his earliest prose fictions, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), in a particular historical period and setting; his fictional accounts represent an imaginative reconstruction of the life of tribal Germanic societies at the moment when they were invaded by the legions of the Roman empire. Drawing on the post-Enlightenment enthusiasm for Northern mythology and folkways, he interprets this clash of cultures as an attack by a degenerate and profane "civilization" upon a society whose welfare is rooted in a mythic, totemic identification of the individual, collective interests, and nature. The drama of these works centers in the responses of two tribal leaders to the alien threat to their people and their own sense of self, which only attains its fulfillment in the life of the tribe. These two men, Thiodolf of the Markmen and Face-of-God of the Dale, are early expressions of two characteristic personae and two characteristic sets of life problems which Morris explores in his other fictions: the mature leader who is faced with the process of historical change as it affects the life of his community, and with the crisis of his own aging and first premonitions of death, and the maturing youth who must decide how to direct his growing life energies. For Morris the depiction of these two types of humanity characteristically leads to two types of structural pattern: the meditation or debate on the theme of change, which echoes so poignantly in those of his works which employ the structural frame of a dream vision, and, in his allegorical romances, a concentration on growth from adolescence to adulthood—the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*—in which an apprehension of the central value of communal life is the culminating point in the protagonist's development, the final end of his quest.

The House of the Wolfings stands out among Morris' prose fictions as providing a particularly full and powerful artistic statement of communal life in its pristine form. The heart of this primitive ideal is the near-complete identification of the community of man with the cycles of nature: "and they worshipped the kind acres which they themselves and their fathers had made fruitful, wedding them to the seasons of seed-time and harvest, that the birth that came from them might become a part of the kindred of the Wolf, and the joy and might of past springs and summers might run in the blood of the Wolfing children" (XIV, 30). The Wolfings exist at only one remove from the very source of their being; their society is a sacred one, its adopted leader the

beloved of a nature goddess, its household guardian, the maiden Hall-Sun, the product of this union. Even the artifacts of their civilization are infused with a numinous power; the "houses" of the tribes, which figure in the title of the story, are cathedrals for the celebration of ritualized phases in man's natural development, and this sacred character of "place" emanates directly from the sacred groves where the chieftain Thiodolf meets the goddess Wood-Sun, and where the people go to Folk-mote to renew their tribal life: "And a dear God indeed to them was the Roof of the Kindred, that their fathers had built . . . and it held the memories of the generations and the very life of the Wolfings and their hopes for the days to be" (XIV, 30).⁷ This perception of the House as the seat of a communal life that flows from nature lends tremendous symbolic power to the tribe's ritual battle preparations in the forest, and intensifies the significance of the final struggle between the Markmen and the Romans for its possession. The Markmen save the House from destruction, and the closing scenes of the book are devoted to describing the celebration which surrounds the reconsecration of the Hall and the rebuilding of the ravaged House of the Bear.

But the vigorously written modern adaptation of a saga described above would be an inadequate, archaic, and perhaps even a naive means of conveying Morris' didactic message to the individualistic, psychologically complex readers of his day. The portrait of the tribal leader Thiodolf's personal dilemma in choosing between a sacrificial death fighting at the head of his people and an individual assurance of freedom from all injury focuses Morris' argument for the modern mind.

This temptation from within the community is skillfully paralleled to the external threat to the tribe. For Morris the decadence which accompanied "civilization" took its deepest toll on human nature, artificially separating the community of man into downtrodden slaves on one hand and isolated, radically individual masters on the other. Thiodolf is given a chance to be such an individual, a hollow hero. The nature goddess Wood-Sun, fearful for the welfare of her consort, offers Thiodolf a hauberk, which although he does not at first realize it, will protect him from death at the price of the confusion and death of his adopted people. It is dwarf-wrought, a manifestation within the life of the tribe of the external destruction menaced by the Romans, who are like dwarfs, a short and dark-skinned race. Thiodolf, under the spell of the hauberk, makes this identification during battle: "And as the dream gathered and thickened about him the foe before him changed to his eyes, and seemed no longer the stern brown-skinned smooth-faced men

⁷Morris here imaginatively pursues ideas set forth earlier by John Ruskin in "Traffic" concerning architecture and the integral role of worship in other historical periods: "In times of real art people built their churches in just the same style as their houses" ("Art and the Beauty of the Earth," XXII, 162).

under their crested iron helmets with their iron-covered shields before them, but rather, big-headed men, small of stature, long-bearded, swart, crooked of body, exceeding foul of aspect" (XIV, 152). This is what happens to men when they are made slaves to another's glory, or to an empty ideal of empire! Morris quite specifically subverts certain classical ideals of heroism at the same time as he exalts the community of the Folk over the classical achievement of the Roman Imperium. In Virgil's *Aeneid* the hero is given Vulcan-wrought protective armor by his mother Venus so that he may safely lead an aggressive war of conquest and found an empire.⁸ But Thiodolf cannot truly defend his people unless he is willing to sacrifice himself for them; he must in the end refuse his magic armor and accept the possibility of his individual death willingly. In Morris' translated socialist ethic, there is no life apart from the life of the tribe, and there is no death within it, since each man continues to live on through his fellows.

The true heroism and pathos of the absorption of the life of the individual into that of the people are conveyed in one exceptionally fine sequence. Thiodolf is alone at night, resting after his first encounter with the foemen. Morris orchestrates Thiodolf's musings on the course of his life with his actions in a dreamlike and suggestive description. Thiodolf dams a stream to create a bathing pool; as he watches it fill, his mind is flooded with an onrush of memories and hopes for his life:

As he sat he strove to think about the Roman host and how he should deal with it; but despite himself his thoughts wandered, and made for him pictures of his life that should be when this time of battle was over; so that he saw nothing of the troubles that were upon his hands that night, but rather he saw himself partaking in the deeds of the life of man. There he was between the plough-stilts in the acres of the kindred when the west wind was blowing over the promise of the early spring; or smiting down the ripe wheat in the hot afternoon amidst the laughter and merry talk of man and maid; or far away over Mirkwood-water watching the edges of the wood against the prowling wolf and lynx, the stars just beginning to shine over his head, as they now were; or wending the windless woods in the first frosts before the snow came, the hunter's bow or javelin in hand; or coming back from the wood with the quarry on the sledge across the snow, when winter was deep, through the biting icy wind and whirl of the drifting snow, to the lights and music of the Great Roof, and the merry talk therein and the smiling of the faces glad to see the hunting-carles come back; and the full draughts of mead, and the sweet rest a night-tide when the north wind was moaning round the ancient home. (XIV, 105-106)

He is drawn inevitably to connect himself with the seasonal life of his people, and the sacredness of their house. Nightmare intervenes; the narrator concludes, "He fell asleep, his dreams going with him, but all changed and turned to folly and emptiness." He wakes to see the strength of the water erode the dam; the pool he had so carefully husbanded flows away. He sleeps again, and at his next awakening Wood-Sun is there, and she persuades him to wear the hauberk in the next battle.

The hauberk, although it may preserve his individual existence, will destroy the real source of his life. Soon it becomes evident that Thiodolf must surrender his carefully husbanded individuality and allow the natural succession of time and new generations to flow through him for the sake of the common good:

The days of the world thrust onward, and men are born therein
A many and a many, and divers deeds they win
In the fashioning of stories for the kindreds of the earth,
A garland interwoven of sorrow and of mirth.
To the world a warrior cometh; from the world he passeth away,
And no man then may sunder his good from his evil day.
He hath lived, and his life hath fashioned the outcome of the deed,
For the blossom of the people, and the coming kindreds' seed. (XIV, 87)

When his people are driven to the last extremity in the woods beside their homestead, Thiodolf realizes he must give up the hauberk. He tells Wood-Sun that he wishes truly to be united with his people, and here, by stressing for one last time Thiodolf's alien blood, Morris deliberately hints at an extension of the ideal fellowship of man beyond tribal blood ties. Thiodolf dies on the dais of the House at the moment when he can see his people's victory and the salvation of their homestead:

Therefore shall they and I together earn the merry days to come, the winter hunting and the spring sowing, the summer haysel, the ingathering of harvest, the happy rest of midwinter, and Yuletide with the memory of the Fathers, wedded to the hope of days to be. Well may they bid me help them who have holpen me! Well may they bid me die who have made me live! (XIV, 170)

A similar tribal ethic pervades Morris' second work based on ancient Germanic folk culture, *The Roots of the Mountains*. Here two related tribes, that of the Dale and that of the Shadowy Vale, are threatened by an invasion of the Dusky Men. The new departure in this tale, a structural and thematic pattern central in Morris' succeeding allegorical romances, is the initially unspecified longing of the young hero, Face-of-God of the Dale, which motivates him to a woodland quest. The journey leads to his love for Sunbeam, of the people of the Shadowy Vale, and the eventual union of their two peoples against the common foe. Awakening sexuality, like sudden consciousness of aging and mortality, is a universal experience of man in time. Morris employs these radical life changes as dramatic turning points, centers for conflict, in his works. They highlight for him the crucial problem of the proper direction of desire—constructively channeled back into the community of man, or harmfully dissipated for self-indulgent ends. The difficulties threatening the love union of Face-of-God and Sunbeam, like the battle crisis of Thiodolf, are resolved in terms of the primary value scheme in these works, the good of the Folk.

In these two early works Morris attempts to evoke the spirit of primitive societies with, to adopt Northrop Frye's terminology, an almost undisplaced

⁸*Aeneid*. VIII. 608-731. In 1875 Morris had published his own verse translation of *The Aeneids of Virgil*.

mythic consciousness.⁹ The characters in these two stories are frequently brought to the verge of identification with gods, the conflicts they engage in have strong apocalyptic overtones, here drawing on the Norse myth of the *ragna rok*, and sketched in stark terms of good and evil, light and dark, the Folk against the slave masters of the cities. The language Morris employs is a conscious blend of archaism and formulaic units. These efforts to create an archetype through historical reconstruction are often in tension with Morris' desire to communicate with a modern audience; the moving folk-songs and descriptions of folk-ways sit ill with the anachronistically conceived psychological conflicts of the heroes, and the frequently awkward dialogue. Morris' fine feeling for Northern tribal life, developed through his study of saga literature under the famous scholar Eiríkr Magnússon, provides some of the most stirring moments in these works. But finally, it is his characterization of Thiodolf, who holds within himself both the consciousness of his race and a sense of his own stubborn individuality, that appeals and provides the link between these approximations of myth and Morris' subtle and effective analysis in his speeches and tracts of the historical dilemma of alienated modern man.

The Allegorical Romances

The House of the Wolfings and *The Roots of the Mountains* do not, then, aim at commanding immediate, uncritical assent to their primitive, Golden Age ideals, but neither do they provide a consistently effective structural bridge for the infusion of a translated form of that idealized tribal spirit into the struggle to alter contemporary conditions. In the works next to be considered—the allegorical romances—Morris employed the quest plot and developmental characterization of romance—to be even more specific, that sub-genre concentrating on youthful growth and experience, the *Bildungsroman*—as a structural means of concretely representing gradual constructive channeling of desire and instinct to their communal fulfillment, and of securing our participation in this quest and assent to its final goal. Morris suggests his youthful protagonists' development by means of external description of their journeys through fabulous and fantastic terrain; his simplification of the psychological nexus within his characters highlights his Spenserian method of visualizing their progress as complex relation to symbolic landscape. Technically this lush pictorialism, which forms a transitional stage between medieval romances and their conscious imitations and such current quest literature as fantasy and science fiction, is another aspect of Morris' deliberate effort to break out of what he saw as the solipsism of modern reductive individualism through attention to context and the shaping and satisfying forces of natural and social environment.

⁹*The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 129-239.

The sensation of open-endedness that accompanies full participation in such quest patterns, based as it is upon constant dislocation of past experience and the structures of expectation conditioned by it, and freed by the lure of genuine discovery, provides a marvelous field for the exercise of human desire. The exploratory mode of Morris' romances, operating through evoked responses of both characters and reader, may be viewed as an experiment in overcoming the barrier of historical shift in consciousness that hinders a modern reader's efforts to participate in the tribal ethic of his earlier works. But the very theory of art as conditioned by its originating society—the denial of pure aestheticism—demands that the reader go beyond the imaginative release that these works allow to inquire tentatively about their closure, to offer some carefully modulated interpretation, and to test their validity in areas other than the aesthetic sphere.

If the reader, encountering these highly imaginative incitements to desire, is tempted to linger with W. B. Yeats under the shade of some exquisitely refreshing green tree, or to overreach, with C. S. Lewis, the bounds of human existence and locate his ultimate end in some other world, Morris manages to balance these extremes; he fulfills his characters' longings in a worldly community, and he even makes some gesture toward localizing these ends within time through his allusions to vaguely medieval costume, custom, and social structures. In his conclusions, then, he is presenting his readers with a prefiguring example, much less detailed than his portrait of German tribes, yet nonetheless another historically inspired foreshadowing of a future socialist ideal.

The problem for interpretation centers on those long, central sections of the protagonists' journeys, lonely, longing-led, and both blocked and inspired by strange forces acting in nature. The situations and the language draw their main force from deeply traditional sources. This series of romances, versions of pastoral, offers an irresistible springboard for allegory. With their undeniable allusions to an ideal, they can easily be construed as belonging, in the words of Rosamund Tuve, to some scheme of "metaphorically understood relation...where a similitude can point to valuable human action, or to matters of spiritual import."¹⁰ But what are the waters over which one must pass, or for which one must strive? What are the boundaries, the ends, which one must reach, or even exceed?

Morris clearly intends his readers to respond to the traditional suggestiveness of his natural imagery, with its tremendous cyclical vitality and also its eschatological, gracious overtones. However, the source of all this abundant life is at heart not some transcendent force, but a natural, albeit wondrous, one: the paradigmatic wedding of man and woman, creating a unity out of

¹⁰*Allegorical Imagery* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 13.

doubleness and thus the central metaphor for societal and cosmic harmony. Structural pattern shapes this lesson. The protagonists journey to find love and bring it back to warm their homes; their outward travels provide those situations of stress and definition which create a consciousness of self and the limits of self-definition, their inward journeys exemplify the progressive enriching of self in community. The stories grow as cyclical movements that are both progress and return.

The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1897) and *The Well at the World's End* (1896) are Morris' masterworks in this allegorical mode. In these romances the incidents occurring along the cycle of outgoing and return have the visual intensity and symbolic suggestiveness of carefully stylized, symmetrically arranged moral *exempla*, devoted simultaneously to illustrating the growth of the central figure and to stimulating the education of the reader. Birdalone's sojourn in and around the Water of the Wondrous Isles forms an extended allegory of sexual maturation. Her journey away from the Castle of the Quest to the City of the Five Crafts reverses this pattern as she gains experience of the world of societal relations. In her first journey across the lake she encounters many emblems of the destructive extremes of pure femaleness and pure maleness, beginning with the two offshore islets, Green Eyot and Rocky Eyot, and continued and developed in much more grotesque form in the isles of her later journey. If the witch's Isle of Increase Unsought is a Bower of Bliss of extreme female sensuality, the Isle of Nothing is the reductive expression of male sterility, while neither the lush beauty of the Isle of Queens nor the fierce stoniness of the Isle of Kings prevents these places from being essentially dead. These allegorical isles of unnaturalness operate for the reader on several other levels as well, in particular the Isle of Increase Unsought, with its unrestrained productivity and externally beautiful but stupidly forgetful witch-mistress, forms an effective image for externally oriented, mindlessly productive modern society, which has forgotten its true origin in nature, the value of work, and its roots in the past.

After Birdalone's journey across the water she has both the nature-derived power and the experience of sexual awakening which will enable her to love. The dilemma of her love for Arthur, the seeds of death sown in their relationship, symbolized by his black raiment, and opposed to the fertility-connoting colors of green and gold in the dress of his companions, can only be resolved by working out the proper social context for their love. Birdalone's presence both saves and disrupts the fellowship of the three knights and their ladies, and when her irresponsibility to her new community of friends leads to the death of the gold knight Baudoin it is a clear sign that her natural instinctive longings and powers must be turned to the ends of the community if they are not to prove finally destructive. This process of social education occupies the greater portion of the latter half of the book, and

culminates in Birdalone and Arthur's decisions to leave their idyll of love to be reunited with their friends. Thus, although the source of the characters' strength in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is always depicted as flowing directly or indirectly from nature, in the teachings of the wood-wife and the exemplary character of the landscape, the presence of such "nature" in man is revealed to be solipsistic and deformed without fulfillment in community. In the final sequence of the book, Arthur, who has become a primitive wild man, is recalled from his maddened involvement with this destructive nature by Birdalone's love, and their mutual love then finds its highest expression in the restoration of their fellowship in the town of Utterhay, the town from which Birdalone was kidnapped as a child. The romance completes its restoring circle. At the beginning of the tale the witch who kidnapped Birdalone divided the town from the forest, the mother from her child, and civilization from nature. At the end, through the powers of Habundia and the growth to maturity of Birdalone, both men and their civilization have reestablished their healing ties with nature.

The Well at the World's End embodies a similar rhythmic cycle in which the youthful hero and heroine's natural sexual awakenings form a prelude to the development of social consciousness. Once again female-male relationships set forth a model for the relation between nature and society. The plot of *The Well at the World's End* confirms the equality in action yet primacy in value of the female partner, explicitly acknowledged in Morris' central interest in the character of Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*; in Morris' nature-rooted ethical and social schemes women are more closely tied to the source of life, as his stress on nature goddesses and matriarchal descent reveals. Ralph and Ursula's initial involvement with the Lady of Abundance provides the continuing motive force for their shared journey to the Well at the World's End, and grounds their eventual love for each other. She is their link with the powers of nature, functioning in much the same way as did Habundia in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. But while Morris thus points through his use of female characters to the fundamental role of nature, he denies the possibility of lasting love based on hierarchical principles, in either the traditional supremacy of male over female, or a simple inversion of that ordering. Whatever the source of the overwhelming attractive beauty of the women in Morris' works, that beauty itself, like all virtues that excess turns to vice, must be balanced through suffering and action. The Lady of Abundance, who has already drunk from the Well at the World's End, as Wood-Sun in the House of the Wolfings, belongs to another order of being. Ralph must find a more equal partner in Ursula, and they share together the humanizing struggles of their outward journey, the piercing sweetness of sexual union, and the collectivizing fulfillment of homecoming.

Although the episodes in Ralph and Ursula's journey have changed from those in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, relinquishing qualities of perfect balance and symbolic clarity in favor of a more prolix and naturalistic exposition, they conform to much the same pattern, directed toward similar ends. The towns Ralph passes through on his way to the Well illustrate, on sexual and political levels, the harm of unnatural, unbalanced rule. Alone he can do little to restore them; as a matter of fact, it is his and Ursula's power to make anyone of the opposite sex love them which, while they are not united, aggravates the disruptive elements in any society they enter. In union, having strengthened their natural powers at the Well, they provide an archetypal model for the balance of sexual powers on which a natural, well-balanced society may be based. On their return they pass back through the towns, now, through mysterious sympathy, in the process of sexual and political restoration. Yeats expressed the symbolic heart of the story succinctly when he said that the enchanted water of the Well gives fertile life to the Dry Tree (pp. 72-73). When Ralph and Ursula reach the country around the Wood Debatable they discover that the masculine fellowship of the Dry Tree, the former Champions of the Lady of Abundance, have disbanded to marry with the women of the surrounding communities. Now only the dispossessed former inhabitants of the Burg of the Four Friths, a race of cruel and masterly men, both social and sexual oppressors, present a final threat to the peace of the community which stretches in amity from Utterbol to Ralph's home. *The Well at the World's End* concludes on the stirring note of defense of the homeland, the central theme of Morris' two Germanic fictions. Ralph's longing for adventure and proofs of maturity, which had prompted his outward journey, now becomes longing for community and kinship on the way home. In the final scene Ralph brings Ursula into the House of his parents; once again Morris resolves the theme of the growth of the individual in that of the health of society.

Although Morris' allegorical romances assume a forcefulness and artistic clarity when interpreted in a manner consistent with his socialist beliefs in the possibility of the reformation of nature and establishment of the fellowship of man, it is easy to see that these works, with their affinities to traditional religious symbolism and their alluring sensuousness, tempt those slightest of transpositions which would make them congenial to a species of otherworldly or aesthetic escapism. *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Well at the World's End* will probably remain among the most popular of Morris' works because their quest pattern and fantastic natural settings require little critical filtering in order to touch a generalized and basic wellspring of human desire. Nonetheless, moving beyond this general attractiveness to more specific questions of intention, it is unfair to slant the reading of Morris' fictions and then blame him for the critics' vagaries. If any further evidence is needed of

his ability to distinguish between his own ideal of a socialist society and either hedonism or the religious idealism of the past, these distinctions are clearly set forth in the historical reflective mirrors of his two literary dream visions.

The Dream Visions

A Dream of John Ball (1887) is the earliest of the prose fictions, and the closest in form to the catechetical technique of the lay preacher which Morris frequently employed in his lectures. May Morris says of this piece, "The initial idea was to bring together the past and the present and the vision of the future" (*AWS*, I, 502). This historical illumination is accomplished in the closing sections of the work by having Morris' fictional persona, a modern man who has been transported in a dream back to the fourteenth century, discuss the future state of society with the medieval social reformer, John Ball. These sections clearly differentiate Morris' belief in an immanent earthly paradise from the eschatology of the medieval period. The two men are first drawn to speak of death as they sit within the chill parish church, talking against the backdrop of the bodies of their slain comrades, killed in the day's battle with their feudal overlords. John Ball uses the language and concepts of his period, and the setting within the church itself establishes his Christian heritage. They are seated beneath a mural of the Last Judgment, and John speaks of how he looks for a heavenly reward for his social labors. The fellowship he places his faith in is the fellowship of Heaven, and he accepts the prospect of the imminent death of his body in expectation of this new life of the soul. As the dialogue between John Ball and the dreamer continues, Morris' polemical purpose becomes clear. The dreamer argues that the hypothesis of the existence of an immaterial soul and a scheme of spiritual final rewards and punishments is in fact an unnecessary one; that the true fellowship is the fellowship of man on earth. The task that John has embraced is in fact one that is capable of earthly fulfillment, and without this immanent hope John's social efforts are meaningless. If John believed fully in his otherworldly ideal, "as thou thyself saidst at the cross, with few words spoken and a little huddling-up of the truth, with a few pennies paid, and a few masses sung, thou mightest have had a good place on this earth and in that heaven" (XVI, 265-266).

In Morris' interpretation the truly positive element of the medieval period was the care then for the relationship of man to nature, and the limited charitable and social institutions which emphasized the universal fellowship of man. The dreamer stresses this natural humanism in his admiring description of the parish church. Its patron saint is the charitable Martin of Tours, primary example of the practice of *corporal* works of mercy. Even the mural of the Last Judgment is described as truly revolutionary art:

And then I saw that the walls were all figured over with stories, a huge St. Christopher with his black beard looking like Will Green, being close to the porch by which we entered, and above the chancel arch the Doom of the last Day, in which the painter had not spared either kings or bishops, and in which a lawyer with his blue coif was one of the chief figures of the group which the Devil was hauling off to hell. (XVI, 263)

The dreamer proclaims that the glorious future, to which John looks with such hope, is a future achievable by men within time. Socialists of the nineteenth century, such as the dreamer, with their historical perspective on the epochs of man's oppression, can now actually foresee the means for the accomplishment of this revolution.

Morris' method for achieving this telescoping of past, present, and future is intensely effective in the final scenes. He draws attention to the ambiguous nature of his title—is it a dream *about* John Ball, or is it John Ball's dream?—when he has that figure say to the dreamer, "Thou hast been a dream to me as I to thee, and sorry and glad have we made each other, as tales of old time and the longing of times to come shall ever make men to be" (XVI, 286). He succeeds in uniting the two figures from different eras through the device of the dream vision, drawing up memory of the past and struggles of the present into aspirations for the future. The tone of the conversations in the church is hortatory and forward-looking as Morris first has John dominate conversation, then draws John and the dreamer into a tightly woven interchange concerning the ends of society, and finally has the dreamer conclude on a note of prophecy. Movement of spirit from past to future is carefully underlined by the movement in time from a moonlit night of fears and illusions to the coming of the dawn, which the dreamer sees as an image of the "Day of the Earth":

John Ball, be of good cheer . . . the Fellowship of Men shall endure . . . Look you, a while ago was the light bright about us; but it was because of the moon, and the night was deep notwithstanding, and when the moonlight waned and died and there was but a little glimmer in place of the bright light, yet was the world glad because all things knew that the glimmer was of day and not of night. Lo you, an image of the times to betide the hope of the Fellowship of Men. (XVI, 284)

And great and grievous shall be the strife in those days . . . yet shall all bring about the end, till thy deeming of folly and ours shall be one, and thy hope and our hope; and then—the Day will have come. (XVI, 286)

For a brief moment the dreams of the two men are essentially one, but the coming of day breaks in upon dreams and cuts off their realization. With great poignancy Morris writes that the dreamer's vision of John Ball fades even as he closes his exhortation; the liberating and revealing quality of the dream gives way to the dreariness of his own room in nineteenth-century London.

The technique of the dream vision is effective in a way that is different from Morris' use of allegory. The latter method is employed as a vehicle for the sustained symbolic and analogous treatment of the problems of everyday; it only suggests the solution to problems, presents only glimpses of an ideal

realm. *A Dream of John Ball*, however, utilizes the dialectical argument of Morris' lectures. It presents a vision of the future through the medium of a dream, then ironically undercuts itself as fictive illusion. The dream first offers a promise, an object for desire, so as to incite men to renew their struggle for the ideal, yet it is above all a *critical* medium that forces each man to test and rework its solutions. As the dreamer himself says,

It may well be that this bright day of summer which is now dawning upon us is no image of the beginning of the day that shall be; but rather shall that day-dawn be cold and grey and surly; and yet by its light shall men see things as they verily are, and no longer enchanted by the gleam of the moon and the glamour of the dreamtide. By such grey light shall wise men and valiant souls see the remedy, and deal with it, a real thing that may be touched and handled, and no glory of the heavens to be worshipped from afar off. (XVI, 285)

And when he awakes it is not to the bright day of his dreams, but to the grey dawn of an industrial city. But as the quotation illustrates, this breaking of illusions is not meant to be a disillusionment, just as the fictive quality of Morris' art is not meant to make it mindless escapism. The dream, the creative musing of rest, these fictions themselves, which Morris produced as a recreation from his crowded public life, are meant to be an inspiration to action, so that dream may one day become reality.

"That is no country for old men." The poignancy of the dream that fades lends its gentle undercurrent to the joyful celebration of the future in Morris' Utopian romance, *News from Nowhere*. The sad irony which closes *A Dream of John Ball* is infused throughout this work in the person of the dreamer, another figure for Morris himself, an aging, slightly crotchety and disillusioned socialist of the nineteenth century. His awkwardness amid the new ways of reformed society, which causes him embarrassment, amusement, and occasional dismay, serves as a constant but subtle index to the changes which have occurred. The dreamer offers a humane and educative induction into this ideal world of the future, so that the wonders encountered are filtered through a familiar and familiarizing medium. The delight in reading this work is obviously multiplied many times over by the degree of familiarity with the local English landscapes that Morris describes. His deep love for his physical environment and for the domestic qualities of the everyday emerges in his careful attention to details of place, and these minute social facets of his art begin to take on the pervasive meaning they bore for his family and friends.

There is a delightfully humorous movement into the utopian world in its opening sections, as the dreamer describes his journey to visit the old historian Hammond at the British Museum—travelling in from Hammersmith, through the various restored village centers which then and now constitute metropolitan London. The middle sections supply an indispensable description of the way in which the historical change from industrial society to a network of village communities occurred, and of the far-reaching social

effects of these changes. But it is the final section, in which the dreamer describes his journey up the Thames to what Morris readers will recognize as Kelmscott Manor, which supplies his finest artistic statement of the significance of his socialist beliefs in his life. May Morris sums up the effect of this part of the story:

And here, where the story grows to its climax, the reader can lose himself in the atmosphere of pure romance. The interest centres round Ellen in whom you have felt from her first appearance that the traveller from the old unrestful land has met his Soul transfigured in this vision of a fulfilled and happy life. As in *John Ball*, the Dreamer and his Dream confront each other and know that they belong to different times in this world and that they must part. The story ends up quickly on the sense of loss after the brief possession of a new world. Ellen belongs to the things of the spirit, and in the radiance of the atmosphere called up about her, she stands apart from the other heroines of Morris' late romances—elusive, beckoning, bidding farewell. (*AWS*, I, 505)

The dreamer is an old man, from an old, worn time, and all the while he journeys upstream with Dick and Clara and Ellen his life is flowing downstream: he will never see this future, save in a dream, and when he wakes he will be back in a house in the midst of industrial London on the lower reaches of the Thames. When Ellen touches the house at the journey's end, she almost blends into it: "She led me up close to the house, and laid her shapely sunbrowned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, 'O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and the weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it,—as this has done!'" (XVI, 201-202). As she leads the dreamer through its rooms she is bringing him in touch with all that epitomized for Morris, in his lovely Tudor manor, the right relation of man, nature, and society. Yet the conclusion of the work shows the dreamer being gently excluded from this complex unity as his dream dissolves into the harsh reality of modern London. It explains in a more affecting manner than any of Morris' formal discursive statements the organic nature of life and art as he envisioned them, and the alienation from this ideal which he, as well as every other modern man, inevitably suffered: "I stood on the threshold with the expectant smile on my face of a man who is going to take part in a festivity which he is really prepared to enjoy . . . They did not seem to see me . . . made no response to my glance . . . seemed to take no heed at all of my presence . . . I felt lonely and sick at heart past the power of words to describe" (XVI, 209).

Another great Victorian social reformer who turned to a fictive evocation of the past as a powerful source for the future direction of society justified his historical fiction in these words: "For the Present holds in it both the whole Past and the whole Future;—as the LIFE-TREE IGDRASIL, wide-waving, many-toned, has its roots down deep in the Death-kingdoms, among the oldest dead dust of men, and with its boughs reaches always beyond the stars; and in all times and places is one and the same Life-tree!"¹¹ Carlyle's

huge, vital and shadowy great tree of Scandinavian mythology provides an appropriate summarizing image for William Morris' prose fictions. The organic continuity of history and of the fellowship of man within it forms the faith of these works, the substratum for that figural system of cumulative correspondences which links the modern with men and events of the past, and builds on their achievements and trials to a great revolutionary apocalypse. Yet this tremendous organism consists of many specialized parts, functioning in different ways in the several periods of its growth, metamorphosing itself according to a set inner rhythm. Morris' art is grounded in a vision of this whole, while it is humanized by its sense of the manifold and separate stages of even organic process. His characters, the young people who must live all the difficult phases of growth within themselves, and the older men who strive to contemplate the entire drama at the moment of their own decline, experience the paradoxes of incomprehension and illumination of voyagers on the way to a mysteriously compelling and yet half-understood goal. His artistic technique for fusing vision and human sensibility must be correspondingly indirect: a release through the present in the strange juxtapositions, the reforming analogies of allegory, or a revitalization of the present as the link between a better past and future promise. Past, present, future; myth, allegory, dream-vision; the roots, trunk, and beckoning branches of that great tree: all are aspects of a subtle literary art that suggests a particular socialist ideal through universal imaginative forms.

¹¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, Bk. I, ch. vi.