

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS
Studies in the Relationship between the Arts

Edited by J.B. Bullen

Volume 20



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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William Morris in the Twenty-First Century



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mind. But new data, which would radically alter the accepted paradigms (though it did not arrive in time to influence Morris's historiography), was about to be furnished by *fin de siècle* archaeologists, ethnologists, and historians uncovering hitherto untapped archival sources. Modern Morris studies can hardly hope for an infusion of fresh primary material on a similar scale, and therefore remains, like most author-centred studies, locked into the game of interpretation. Theories proliferate, but the number of texts upon which they operate is finite. And so, perhaps paradoxically, the game looks set to go on forever. Until new information arrived, the socialist village community was as likely a proposition as the Liberal imperialist one; the scattered facts, appropriately selected, could accommodate either ideological arrangement. An authorial corpus sufficiently extensive and varied – such as Morris's – is subject to the same pressures: for any testimonial of a particular opinion or tendency one may find another of its opposite number. Who is to say whether the 'Marxist' Morris is more representative than the 'Romantic' one if what he wrote in 1865 is as authentic as what he wrote in 1885? Given the complexity and multidimensionality of even one man's output, any agenda-driven approach will omit important counterexamples, whether through lack of sources, sheer ignorance, or deliberate suppression. But at bottom, the difficulty remains hermeneutical: literary critics who deduce the existence of a worldview on the basis of selected quotations are behaving just like the Victorian historians who drew sweeping conclusions from the evidence of three morphemes, a saga, and two books of laws. To engage in any act of interpretation is to become in a certain sense a romancer. 'Doesn't the fool realise', Morris is reported to have replied to a query about his sources for *The House of the Wolfings*, 'that it's a romance, a work of fiction – that it's all LIES! Hasn't the pedantic ass ever heard of creative imagination ... an artist who knows his business can fill out an epoch on the strength of half a dozen details. Well, more than half a dozen, but all the same!'⁵⁴ One could only wish for twenty-first-century Morris critics to be blessed with Morris's methodological self-awareness.

54 H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), p. 50.

DAVID LATHAM

Between Hell and England: Finding Ourselves in the Present Text

'Fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell.'

— WILLIAM MORRIS, *A Dream of John Ball*¹

The inspiration for Oscar Wilde's insistence that any reputable 'map of the world' must include Utopia² arose from the idealism at the heart of William Morris's signature interest in the government of 'the province of art'. W. B. Yeats described all of Morris's work as the prophetic vision of a perfect life, adding that 'more than any other man of modern days [Morris] tried to change the life of his time into the life of his dream'.³ In a complementary observation, Arthur Clutton-Brock noted that Morris did not try to reform the world of literature as he did the world of life.⁴ Like all great artists who turn from tragedies to romances as the culmination of their careers, Morris turned from the hindrances of routine and detail

- 1 William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1888), p. 29. Hereafter, cited within parentheses. The title for my essay is from *A Dream of John Ball*, as Morris depicts the jocular peasants unable to imagine a narrator choosing to visit their sorry station on Earth 'unless he had the choice given him between hell and England' (p. 13).
- 2 Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross (New York: Bigelow, 1921), VII, p. 23. The full quotation is: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at.'
- 3 W. B. Yeats, Review of *The Well at the World's End*, *Bookman*, 10 (November 1896), pp. 37–8.
- 4 A. Clutton-Brock, 'The Prose Romances of William Morris', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 January 1914, pp. 9–10.

to the ideal genre of romance in order to express his own vision of reality more clearly. This emphasis on the creative dream suggests the reason why serious writers mature in the same direction, as their work culminates not with the horrific verisimilitude of tragedies like *King Lear* but with the fantastic realms of romances like *The Tempest*, where the brazen world of reality is left behind for the golden world of the artist's imagination. The artist naturally progresses more and more towards the province of art, where the full flight into fancy and fiction is unfettered by matters of fact.

While Morris in many ways fits this pattern of the maturing artist, he is in other respects just as revolutionary in literature as he is in politics. As an early reviewer of *A Dream of John Ball* recognized, Morris 'invented a system of poetic socialism and expounded it in a brand-new kind of prose fiction,' never excessively rhetorical, but always clear, pictorial, and musical.⁵ Morris was poeticizing the political and politicizing the romance in the deliberate pursuit of his agenda to revolutionize the province of art. I want to look at *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* as liminal texts composed by the editor of a political newspaper just before he became the publisher of his Kelmscott romances. I am singling out these two texts from the pages of *Commonweal* not because they mark a departure in Morris's interests but because they serve so well to clarify the remarkable consistency in the development of his political vision for a revolutionary government that will enable us all to inhabit the province of art.

'Great is my harvest of riddles tonight' (p. 113): these are the words of John Ball after hearing about the capitalist system of the future. The riddles concern such Morrisian issues as how we have come to live the lives we are living now and how we might come to live better lives in a socialist system. As an historic figure in the fourteenth-century past, John Ball is incredulous to learn how bad our present is; in *News from Nowhere*, Guest is incredulous to learn how good the future could be, an incredulity we are all too likely to share. Morris is demonstrating how short-sighted our present views can be, unable to see beyond our present conditions as remaining the norm. Since such stagnation can lead only to further rot, Morris challenges us to consider a revolutionary social order by raising profound questions about

5 Review of *A Dream of John Ball*, *The Athenaeum*, 22 December 1888, p. 483.

the relationship between the personal and the communal, the role of the individual within the community, and the concept of the community as a neighbourhood of artists living in close harmony with nature. To understand better this additional 'harvest of riddles,' I want to contextualize a discussion of *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* within three frameworks: first, the Aristotelian function of metaphor as essential to the daily growth of our minds; second, our current postmodern crisis in the humanities compared with the post-Victorian crisis in the arts addressed by Morris; and third, Morris's political concept of heaven as a unifying motif in his artistic, literary, and political work.

I'll start with the function of metaphor. Morris was from his youth the most scholarly student in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition of what Dante Gabriel Rossetti called 'fundamental brainwork';⁶ the principle that all creative work requires a disciplined foundation of scholarship, pursued by Morris to the extent that he became master of all the trades he practised. To design wallpapers, he thoroughly researched the history of dyes; to print books, he thoroughly researched the history of ink. Just as he returned to the origins of each craft he practised, he returned as a writer to the recorded origins of words. In the beginning was the word, and like John Ruskin, Morris was acutely aware of how words have been distorted from their original roots, degraded to fit our decaying social order. The degradation of language is complete when the word has come to signify its opposite: 'The "manufacturer" (most absurdly so called, since a manufacturer means a person who makes with his hands)' has no interest in making 'goods'. Rather, as the master of a monopolized labour-power, he produces profits by creating a false 'demand' for sham 'supplies' in a rigged 'market.'⁷ With this interest in the slippage from synonym to antonym in mind, Morris would have fully studied Aristotle's analysis of metaphor, and the implications of the equation of metaphor with error.

6 Dante Gabriel Rossetti quoted in T. Hall Caine, *Recollections* (London: Elliott Stock, 1882), p. 249.

7 William Morris, 'Useful Work v. Useless Toil,' in *Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1910-15), XXIII, pp. 109-10.

As Aristotle explains, 'strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something fresh.'⁸ The freshness arises from the epiphany of error, the deliberate mistake of the metaphorical equation: 'this is that.' As defined in the *Poetics*, 'Metaphor consists of giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.'⁹ Paul Ricoeur thus cites Gilbert Ryle's reading of Aristotle's definition of metaphor as a 'category mistake': 'Metaphor always involves ... taking one thing for another by a sort of calculated error.'¹⁰ Anne Carson explores Aristotle's definition in her poem entitled 'Essay on What I Think about Most.'¹¹ She describes Aristotle as picturing 'the mind moving along a surface of ordinary language when suddenly that surface breaks or complicates. Unexpectedness emerges. At first it looks odd, contradictory, or wrong. Then it makes sense. And at this moment the mind turns to itself and says: "How true, and yet I mistook it!". From the true mistakes of metaphor we learn not only that things are other than they seem and so we mistake them, but that such mistakenness is valuable. Hold onto it, Aristotle says, there is much to be seen and felt here. Metaphors teach the mind to enjoy error and to learn from the juxtaposition of what is and what is not the case (pp. 30–1).

Metaphor as error and teaching the mind to enjoy error: what does Morris seem to have done with this fundamental concept? First, he appears to understand that it works on a personal, individual level: personal error can develop insight into the construction of identity by changing our expectation. But when the metaphor goes unrecognized, when the poetry of our lives is left unread, we then succumb to being channelled into a mass movement of misdirection. A social order emerges that perverts the natural order, a harvest of riddles in the night that turns the dawn dark and

8 Aristotle, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1984), p. 186.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

11 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costelle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 21.

12 Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Knopf, 2000), pp. 30–6.

the heavenly hellish. It harvests a system beyond the power of individual insight, leaving the value of metaphor, of the unexpected epiphany of error, socially insignificant, as the art of poetry is marginalized to an irrelevant activity of our lives.

Secondly, Morris understands that this distinction between the impotent individual and the dominant social order has led to a crisis in the arts. For most readers, our daily reading is not the metaphors of poetry but rather the daily reports in a newspaper. The crisis Morris writes about – the need for a return to barbarism, the belief that the arts must first die if they are ever to live again¹³ – suggests a parallel between the post-Victorian paradigm of Aesthetic poetry and the postmodern paradigm of our own age. Much of our age has tended to echo the disaffected tone of Oscar Wilde, but recent trends suggest the passionate commitment of Morris may serve as our future model, as we show signs of impatience with the focus on identifying the problematic and instead turn to the risky business of finding solutions. The editors of *Critical Inquiry* invited a recent discussion of the 'future of criticism' in terms of what they consider 'the crisis in the humanities'. Bruno Latour responded by asking us to turn away from our rational dismissal of 'matters of fact' to embrace a more emotional interest in 'matters of concern'. 'If the critical mind', he argues, 'is to be relevant again, it must devote itself to the cultivation of ... what I will call "matters of concern".'¹⁴ Morris was responding to a similar crisis when he was writing *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* for the pages of

13 In letters to Georgiana Burne-Jones, Morris complains that 'the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again' (21 August 1883) and declares his faith in the cleansing flood of barbarism: 'I have [no] more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of "civilization", which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies. With this thought in my mind all the history of the past is lighted up and lives again to me' (13 May 1885). *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984–96), II, p. 217; pp. 435–6.

14 Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Winter 2004), p. 231.

Commonweal. He was impatient with the conservative tastes of a literary world that promoted either a nostalgia for the pastoral myth of lost gardens and vanished golden ages or a faith in dreams of a future leisure secured by technological invention. He grew equally impatient with the anarchist zeal of a political world that promoted random violence.¹⁵

Consistent with his understanding that originality requires a return to origins, Morris sought to revolutionize the province of art by reviving and integrating two ancient literary genres as a means for channelling his creative artistry for the Victorian medium of the political newspaper. *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* exemplify the two elite genres of prose reserved for serious subjects that correspond with the epic and tragedy genres of poetry: the Socratic dialogue and the ideal-commonwealth narrative practised by Plato. By poeticizing socialism and politicizing the romance for the weekly columns of a newspaper, Morris restores metaphor to our daily lives by transforming ephemeral journalism into canonical literature. Morris foregrounded the hybrid nature of his art when he published the two texts as books: the full title of *A Dream of John Ball* includes (*Reprinted from the 'Commonweal'*) and the full title of *News from Nowhere* includes *being some chapters from a Utopian Romance*, a pleading admission that the artist's vision remains an incomplete fragment, requiring still much more effort from all of us today to add some more chapters in order to bring it towards completion.

Morris's utopian vision is to me the most flexible and least prescriptive of utopias. He shows how a commitment to 'matters of concern' need not be discredited by our postmodern fear of ideologues. His focus on serious matters of concern redirects Latour's argument within a more radical context by distinguishing concern from anxiety. Morris indicates that concern is the heartfelt response to social problems and responsibilities. Anxiety is based on the desire to exclude or subordinate, to preserve the values or benefits of society for an elite group of citizens who believe they have the right answers. Anxiety is the centralizing base of political and economic movements that have built up the assimilating global centres championed

15 William Morris, 'Where Are We Now?', *Commonweal*, 15 November 1890, pp. 361-2.

by the Bushes and Blairs of the world. As an artist Morris counters such anxieties by practising the paradoxical cultural principle that the more a work of literature is rooted in a particular region the more universal its power will be; social fellowship similarly arises from personal liberation, not the impersonal cause; it arises from each neighbourhood community, not the globalized mass movement.

His Arts and Crafts movement is an effort to decentralize the flow of history, the mass movements that replace one dehumanizing system of oppression with another, as revolts against the feudal order fail when succeeded by the capitalist order, reaping that harvest of riddles which renders the personal reading utterly impotent to influence the social order. As Margaret Atwood says, while elsewhere in other regimes you can be tortured for what you say, 'in this country you can say what you like / because no one will listen to you anyway'.¹⁶ The ideal social community is not the urban state where poets might be banished to ensure conformity, or where commercial products are manufactured to ensure uniformity, but rather a pastoral neighbourhood of interdependent artists who support each other's self-expression. To replace the mass movements that lead to global assimilation, Morris campaigned for a decentralizing Arts and Crafts movement that would encourage individual readings, the recognition of metaphor and the personal insight that arises from error.

How do we change the flow of history from the values of the globalized state to those of the communal neighbourhood? Morris recognized that the answer to the political question 'where are we going?' is best found by asking the historian's question: 'where are we now, and how did we get here?' Through his dream of the past in *John Ball* and his dream of the future in *News from Nowhere* Morris delivers us to the unknown realm of the present. To change the flow of history from the past to the future, we need to apprehend the present wherein we find ourselves: 'It is from metaphor that we get hold of something new and fresh' by causing the mind to experience itself in the act of making a mistake. Something changes in the quotient of our expectations.

16 Margaret Atwood, 'Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written', *Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999), p. 225.

Let's look at *John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* for examples of Morris's metaphors for this elusive present moment and how it emerges from the 'sunder betwixt' image-patterns of past and present, heaven and hell, dream and deed, 'betwixt the living and the dead'.¹⁷

The dreams in both books are fragile, threatened by intrusions of the light, the changes in the sky, the dawn, the sun, and the moonlight. Caught betwixt now and then, or now and later, the literal impossibility of the metaphorical twice upon a time leaves the reader caught within the flux, the abyss of the present, that fleeting mutable moment described by Walter Pater as the liminal essence of the Pre-Raphaelite conflict between the ideal and the real, between heaven and hell, 'between Christ and a rival lover'.¹⁸

In both books the dreamers awaken from their winter night to a summer day. The daily and seasonal cycles of life are thereby eluded in the dream vision, as a way of overturning the semblance of what's inevitable. If we can imagine that such cycles as the natural order of time are not necessarily inevitable then surely we can overturn the seemingly irreversible forces of our social order. Imagine the self-enforced fetters we can break free from if enough of us keep pursuing such visions. With the infamous London fog now having largely disappeared with the coal-smog from the chimneys that caused it, how many Victorian readers of the sunny *News from Nowhere* would ever have guessed that the weather would improve sooner in the actual future than the social conditions of labourers?

Accompanying the transformation of the winter night into a summer day is a focus in *John Ball* on a sky imagery with such metaphors as 'the moon wound round the heavens' (p. 92), as Morris combines light and time, heaven and hell. Imagery of walls and windows supports this framework, as the medieval John Ball, through a night-long discussion with the modern narrator, tries to transcend the 'wall that parteth us' (p. 90), while

¹⁷ William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, p. 84.

¹⁸ Walter Pater, 'Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review*, 90 (October 1868), p. 309. Dylan Thomas speaks similarly of the poet's role in "redeeming the contraries" with secretive images, in *Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 181.

the narrator looks to the window and is metaphorically enlightened. Each of them attempts to transform the wall betwixt them into a window, as they recognize how each has seen things the other has not seen, one from the past and the other from the present.

What is the wall that parteth between the dreamer and his dream? The question arises during the night-long conversation that begins in the church with a discussion of metaphor, as John Ball and the narrator view the bodies of those slain during the first day of the socialist uprising. With no sense of pity, the dreamer dismisses the dead: 'This is an empty house, and the master has gone from it' (p. 88). The metaphor is of the corpse and the departed life; it initially suggests that there is no reason to mourn because the soul has risen from the body. But the conversation that follows suggests otherwise, suggesting rather a temporal wall, the passage of time between the dreamer and the dream, the spiritual signs of the times that prevent the modern cynic from sharing the medieval priest's vision of a heavenly home beyond the evidence of a godless, masterless chaos. Focussing on the literal limitation of metaphor as irrational error rather than the literary power of the image, the dreamer charges that the corpse is not even a waxen image of the man, for an image would represent him as he was when alive. The corpse is no semblance of life; there is, he says, more life in the 'clothes and war-gear', the images displayed in modern museums, all that the Victorian public likely learns from history. Earlier the narrator had identified himself as a 'dreamer of things past, present, and to come ... in sooth a gatherer of tales' (p. 16). But images and tales are no longer used for history and prophecy; now they are misused by the disillusioned cynics of the modern age for whom metaphor is nothing more than error: a means for practising deception rather than discovering fresh truths. As the narrator explains to John Ball, the cowardly masses who fear the risk of improving the world must 'make many tales to deceive themselves, lest they should grow too much ashamed to live. And trust me if this were not so, the world would not live, but would die, smothered by its own stink' (p. 90). That intrusively personal 'trust me' is bitterly poignant, reminding us how Morris himself must have struggled to overcome such cynicism. In a carefully constructed passage of parallel paragraphs concerning the Christian view of hope and faith and the agnostic view of despair and

doubt, the two characters from different centuries both shake their heads in refusing to trust the other's viewpoint (pp. 90–1). Yet, after hearing the dreamer's account of the capitalist future as a 'harvest of riddles' whose horrors must be true since no minstrel could make up a tale so grievous (p. 108), John Ball now fears that the sun shall 'rise upon me' (p. 122) with a dark despair rather than a dawn of promise, that the new era 'shall not bring heaven down to the earth ... but rather that it shall bring hell up on to the earth' (p. 122).

But the two reverse their positions when the narrator recalls Ball's earlier words that defeats are trifles. Inspired by Ball's vision, the dreamer now confirms his faith in a heavenly day when all 'shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil, without money or price ... The time shall come, John Ball, when that dream of thine shall come about' (p. 124). When the narrator awakens amidst the dirty discomfort of Victorian London, he feels inspired consciously to 'carry on a daydream of the friends I made in the [unconscious] dream of the night' (p. 128). John Ball has assumed for him the role of the poet-prophet whose metaphorical reading of life – 'for I say unto you that earth and heaven are not two but one' (p. 28) – inspires us to establish on earth the province of art. Morris would later articulate this inspirational role of art (employing the word 'province' here as 'responsible business' rather than our 'principal-ity'): 'It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before [us], a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary as [our] daily bread.'¹⁹ Our health is dependent upon harvesting the metaphor as a staple of our daily lives.

'Hard it is for the old world to see the new', confesses John Ball (p. 103). It is as hard now in the present as it was for Ball in the past. *News from Nowhere* is a vision of one new world our descendants might inherit if we remember Ball's words and resist being discouraged by the trifles of defeat. When I teach *News from Nowhere*, I often find students dismissing Morris as a naive dreamer. But Morris repeatedly situates the realization of hope

19 William Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', in *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 383.

in the most problematic realm of the 'betwixt', finding it not in the lofty dream but in the midst of political despair. *News from Nowhere* provides examples similar to those in *John Ball*.

The story of *Nowhere* begins with an argument: a political discussion among six socialists means that there will be six different opinions, with each quarreller shouting damnation at all the others. Morris thus confronts head-on the cynicism of those who would argue that the heavenly ideals of socialism are impossible to achieve because of our selfish human nature. He acknowledges that such discord is as inherent in our souls as it is in our language: much of the first chapter is a play on the 'dis-' prefix. 'Sundering betwixt' is the Morris phrase in chapter nine which serves well as the definition of this prefix.²⁰ 'Discussion', 'discontent', 'discomfort', 'disgust', 'disgrace' (pp. 43–5): with discord seemingly at the centre of humanity, how could Morris ever dream of a utopia wherein the capitalist principles of competition, profit, and exploitation are replaced by the socialist principles of co-operation, sharing, and neighbourliness? Stewing over the many excellent points he should have argued before leaving the meeting, Guest now walks to the riverside where his remembrance of the discussion eventually 'disappears' in the beautiful moonlight, as wind, sky, river, and elm refresh him from the fretful logic of rebuttals, leaving him with 'a vague hope, that was now become a pleasure, for days of peace and rest, and cleanness and smiling goodwill' (p. 44).

The vague hope arises from that spirit Walter Pater found in Morris's art, that 'desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death' from which we acquire a 'quickened multiplied consciousness' from living our lives by experiencing the intensity of each individual moment.²¹ To apprehend that elusive moment 'betwixt the living and the dead' expressed in *John Ball* (p. 84) is to live the life of Ellen in *News from Nowhere*. But Ellen warns Guest that he cannot reside in Nowhere because he is always relapsing into his 'never-ending contrast between the past and this present' (p. 222), remaining a guest of neither here nor there. The contrast between the hellish present of

20 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 92. Hereafter cited within parentheses.

21 Walter Pater, 'Poems by William Morris', pp. 305, 312.

his world and the heavenly future of Ellen's world becomes unbearable as Guest is left haunted by the loss of so many potential Ellens forced to suffer the fate of servants and slaves. When Guest then fades from her view, we understand the logic that he is the fading phantom because the heavenly world of Nowhere is the more credible reality than the hellish nightmare into which Guest seems to be drifting. Returning to this hellish realm, he encounters a Victorian neighbour, a 'grimed'-faced figure, 'eyes dulled and bleared,' 'body bent,' 'feet dragging and limping,' 'clothing ... a mixture of dirt and rags' (pp. 227–8). In contrast to the 'joyous, beautiful people left behind' in Nowhere (p. 227), this figure surely must be a phantom from a nightmare. Such an incredible nightmare surely could never be allowed to become the normative reality of a wide-awake world. Most disturbing because it rings so pathetically true in its detailed contrast with Nowhere is the trace of real fellowship that is all but extinguished by the soul-destroying mastery and servility of the class-system: as they cross paths, Guest's Victorian neighbour 'touched his hat with some real good-will and courtesy, and much servility' (p. 228). The indomitable traces of the humanity of fellowship revealed in this nightmarish figure leave Guest 'inexpressibly shocked' (p. 228), and they tear at the reader's heart, as we realize that this nearly broken figure was born with the same potential as Ellen. Moreover, we realize that Ellen may never have the opportunity to reach such potential unless we in the present work toward a better future.

Morris concludes with Guest imagining what 'Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say' (p. 227). It is a rallying call for revolutionizing the world by striving 'to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness' (p. 228). Significantly, this speech attributed to Ellen is not her own spoken words, but rather is Guest's impression of what someone like Ellen might wish to say but will not be empowered to say aloud until enough readers are inspired to join the struggle for a more heavenly world where future generations of Ellens may thrive. Morris thus appeals to our social conscience to awaken us from the wish for a single dream-lover, replacing that selfish wish with an empathy for all our fellow neighbours so that we will fix our sight on the effort to change the conditions of our world, never abandoning our hope that future generations will enjoy living heavenly Ellen-like lives here on Earth.

Morris assumes the role of John Ball's minstrel and Ellen's troubadour to answer the questions: where are we and how do we find ourselves? Through dream visions of the past and the future, he delivers us to the unknown realm of the present by creating two inspirational models for our lives: John Ball as an advocate who encourages us to revolutionize our social order for future generations, and Ellen as an example of the potential each of us can reach when that social order of fellowship becomes the norm. Morris thereby reveals the present as a presence, not the norm of an external reality to which we conform, but the inspiration of a visionary presence which we articulate and confirm.

Thus Morris's interest in the romance as a means to express one's own vision of reality more clearly. The idea is articulated within its political context when Seamus Heaney explains his notion of 'the redress of poetry' as 'tilting the scales of reality.'²² Heaney introduces this notion of redress with a paraphrase of Wallace Stevens – 'It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality' – and concludes with a conventional defence of the nobility of poetry: 'This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances.'²³ Most poets are content with this revelatory role, content to share the power of their personal vision. Yeats, however, respected Morris for his commitment to a revolutionary role, admiring Morris as a poet committed to extending the jurisdiction of the province of art. As the Morrisian narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* recognizes, the condemned Ball could have prospered with 'a few words spoken and a little huddling-up of the truth'; but Ball's fidelity to the vision of Fellowship will inspire others to resist, to rebel, and to wage war against the oppressive reality of the status quo (p. 90). As the narrator's dream grows to pervade his life, he hears the inspirational 'voice of John Ball, at first as one speaking from far away, but little by little growing nearer and more familiar to me' (p. 111). In *News from Nowhere* the voices have faded to the extent that the dreamer is left to envision the implication of what

22 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 3.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 4.

'Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say', but the resolve is no less resolute: 'Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream' (p. 228).

At the beginning of *A Dream of John Ball* 'the dreams of the night' are said to be 'clearer' than the 'dreams of the day' (pp. 2-3), when reality inhibits our ability to envision the heavenly alternatives. Awakening from his night-time dream of a summer long ago when the 'early apples [were] beginning to ripen on the trees' (p. 4), the narrator has returned at the end of the book to the winter world of the present when the river is 'nearly at dead ebb' with 'a wide spread of mud on each side' (p. 127). But this day the dreamer is unwilling to remain content with the state of the fallen world; rather he is ready wilfully to carry on 'a daydream of the friends [he] had made in the dream of the night against [his] will' (p. 128). For Morris 'a glimpsed alternative' in a dream must be actively followed by a commitment to change the error of our ways and transform the order of our world so that 'fellowship shall be established in heaven and on earth' (p. 41). He challenged his own pacifist nature with the reluctant recognition that a return to the heavenly garden will require the violence of revolution; in *John Ball* it is 'the rush of arrows through the apple-boughs' (p. 62).²⁴ In 'Useful Work v. Useless Toil' it is heart-wrenchingly all we can hope for: 'The best we can hope to see is that struggle [to end class strife] getting sharper and bitterer day by day, until it breaks out openly at last into the slaughter of men by actual warfare instead of by the slower and crueller methods of "peaceful" commerce.'²⁵

For Morris, then, art is not merely the revelatory dream of 'a glimpsed alternative'; it is the full embrace of a revolutionary commitment to the potential of each individual life. Art must draw us beyond the threshold, across the sundering flood that rises between the hellish reality of how we live and the heavenly dream of how we might live.²⁶ John Ball

24 Before their battle with the king's soldiers begins, the peasants display their 'banner of Adam and Eve, rising above the grey-leaves of the apple-trees' (p. 62).

25 William Morris, 'Useless Work v. Useless Toil', *Collected Works*, XXIII, p. 119.

26 William Morris, 'How We Live and How We Might Live', *Collected Works*, XXIII, pp. 3-26.

distinguishes what Morris believes must be the artist's priority: 'It is for him that is lonely or in prison to dream of fellowship, but for him that is of a fellowship to do and not to dream' (p. 35). The ornament of romance involves no evidence of a retreat from the reality of life; it is no such thing for Morris who employs it to show us how to reach towards the heavenly realm of art wherein we find ourselves by embodying the angelic vision of our potential and thereby begin to replace our wishful dreams with the reality of creative deeds.