WRITING ON THE IMAGE: READING WILLIAM MORRIS

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'To Frame a Desire': Morris's Ideology of Work and Play

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Debates over the extent to which Marx may have influenced Morris begin with Morris's modest disclaimer about enjoying the historic parts of *Das Kapital* but finding the economics beyond him ('How I Became a Socialist' 380). Morris's modest disclaimers should never be taken literally. He well understood the analysis of economics, but the question of whether it is correct to call him a Marxist is beside the point. The continuity of his interests in Gothicism in his early poetry and barbarism in his later prose romances suggests that Morris was a Marxist before he ever heard of Marx. Yet in his reaching beyond economics for his primary issue, he may be considered more than a Marxist. By examining the concept of work as a human activity, Morris, in Northrop Frye's words, 'started out, not with the Marxist question "Who are the workers?" but with the more deeply revolutionary question "What is work?"' ('Varieties' 129). This is the revolutionary question Morris leaves us with at the awakening end of *A Dream of John Ball*: As the 'frightful noise of the "hooters"... call[s] the workmen to the factories ... I grinned surlily, and dressed and got ready for my day's "work" as I call it, but which many a man besides John Ruskin (though not many in his position) would call "play"' (*CW* 16:288).

Morris's political vision may have been too original and profound for Friedrich Engels to understand when he dismissed Morris as typical of the sentimental English socialists. With his careful articulation of the beauty of natural life and the ugliness of the perverted system, of methods for evaluating work by measuring the quality of hope in it, of distinctions between idle dreamers who remain passively wistful and visionary artists who inspire change, Morris provides a most practical analysis of the most profound question concerning our basic need to integrate the deeds and dreams of our daily lives. His steadfast pursuit of this integrity may be documented by following the three political phases he moved through in his effort to inspire a socialist revolution: his aesthetic (1877–82), militant (1883–90), and visionary (1891–6) phases.

Morris is the first artist to devote an extensive body of literature to the question so fundamental to our well-being: how may we eliminate the distinction between work and play, between labour and pleasure in our lives? Until the industrial revolution extended the influence of the capitalist system over the majority of lives, work was seasonal by nature: people worked hard when there was work to be done and rested when the work was completed. Holidays were holy days for communal celebrations and festivities. They were busy days, not intended as a relief from work. The industrial factory-system changed the nature of work, regularizing it into a daily routine. The machines originally envisioned as freeing us from menial work instead have kept us busy every day. Agitation for a return to a mere semblance of the seasonal nature of work – in the form of a sequential row of holidays – was among the palliative measures Morris rejected as seducing the worker into coping with the capitalist system rather than rejecting it. This palliative 'vacation' – a word meaning 'empty' time – has become a fixture since the twentieth century. That the majority of a community could work for the purpose of enjoying an annual vacation, an empty time of rest from work, would have been incomprehensible to the Goths of the Mark. Morris saw it as living proof of the absurdity of the capitalist system. When 'labour' and 'leisure' are degraded as words, one as toil to be endured, the other as time to be slept or drunk away, then we are deprived of the vocabulary with which we articulate our thoughts and shape our dreams. What shall we do with our daily labour, Morris asks in 'The Art of the People,' when we become 'wholly free and reasonable?... Shall all we can do with it be to shorten the hours to the utmost, that the hours of leisure may be long beyond what men used to hope for? and what then shall we do with the leisure, if we say that all toil is irksome? Shall we sleep it all away – yes, and never wake up again, I should hope, in that case' (*CW* 22:33). In 'Making the Best of It' he continues the search for meaningful words to discuss our meaningless lives: 'I was going to say leisure hours, but I don't know how to, for if I were to work ten hours a day at work I despised and hated, I should spend my leisure I hope in political agitation, but I fear – in drinking' (*CW* 22:115).

His first public lecture was the first of his many critiques of the consequences of the capitalist system – the death of art – and his visions of the new socialist system required for a renewal of art. 'The Decorative Arts' was delivered on 4 December 1877 to the Trades Guild of Learning and published as a pamphlet in 1878 and as 'The Lesser Arts' in his collection of five lectures, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, in 1882. This discomfort with the name of his subject is the first point of the lecture: the decorative arts should not be some lesser subsection of art. The severing divorce of the greater arts of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting from the 'so-called Decorative Arts' (by which we strive 'to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life') bodes 'ill for the Arts altogether: the lesser ones become trivial, mechanical, unintelligent,' and subject to 'fashion or dishonesty'; while the greater arts become elite and pompous, the 'ingenious toys for a few rich and idle men.' 'Divorced,' 'severed,' 'fallen apart from one another,' the arts cannot survive (*CW* 22:3–4).

Morris next outlines the consequences such loss means for humanity. That too many of us give little notice to ornament signifies that the consequences are already upon us, since the very function of ornament is to sharpen our senses to prevent them from being dulled to 'those things which we are always looking at.' The arts provide the means by which humanity maintains its harmony with nature: 'Everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her; it cannot be indifferent' (*CW* 22:4). If we allow ourselves to grow dull and indifferent, oblivious to beauty and ugliness, then how can we recognize goodness from evil? Without the arts, humanity is left in isolation to become unnatural, perverse, demonic.

Art is our saviour enabling us to live as godly creators in harmony with nature. The creative process is a godly activity: the craftsman weaves intricate patterns and invents strange forms in the way that nature does, 'til the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, the mountain flint' (*CW* 22:5). When art is popular, when we all become artists, then 'art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides'; it will make the streets where we live as beautiful as 'the fields where beasts live' (*CW* 22:26, 25). Our hellish civilizaton can look to the earthly beasts to find its heavenly direction.

Morris never directly promises this apocalyptic earthly paradise, but rather evokes it subtly through his language. 'Godly' and 'demonic' and 'saviour' are words which Morris resists using, but they are the archetypal implications he exploits to inspire us to envision our resurrection from hellish hovels to a heavenly paradise on earth. Art is the aesthetic complement of beauty and nature, its creative process being the moral complement of goodness and godliness. Though couched in a discussion of the best kind of drawing to practise for ornamental work, the following is a rare instance of Morris moralizing aloud: 'Teaching the scholar to draw the human figure' would develop the 'habit of discriminating between right and wrong,' which 'would really ... be an education in the due sense of the word' (*CW* 22:20–1).

The subtle apocalyptic allusions to spiritual resurrection are supported by the more obvious organic metaphors for natural renewal. But for the rhetorical power of the former, Morris is more comfortable with the Darwinian framework of the latter, revealing throughout his essay what would later be called a Spenglerian notion of civilization as an organism. The growth of art is 'like all growth' (*CW* 22:9): it blossoms for a season (22:6) and flourishes fruitfully for awhile, then grows into decay, but will ultimately 'grow into something new' (22:9). The death of art 'will be but a burning up of the gathered weeds, so that the field may bear more abundantly ... Amidst its darkness the new seed must sprout' (22:11). So full of hope is Morris that he cannot bear to speak of the winter of death that should follow the decay and burning of the fields; rather he turns from seasonal to diurnal imagery: we shall awaken from the dark night to a new dawn (22:12).

The allusions to spiritual resurrection and the metaphors for natural regeneration prepare us to anticipate social revolution. Morris begins his lecture with a disarming disclaimer. Though his listeners may very much disagree with some of what he has to say, they should take faith in his belief that 'all the change and stir about us is a sign of the world's life' and will lead 'to the bettering of all mankind' (*CW* 22:3). Hence, however disagreeable his ideas may be, they are part of the 'change and stir' of life. When later he returns to the imagery of this rhetorical disclaimer, he is much more forceful: 'it is not by accident that an idea comes into the heads of a few; rather they are pushed on, and forced to speak or act by something stirring in the heart of the world' (22:13). But first he further prepares us for the change and stir by surveying the relation of art and history in Greece, Rome, Byzantium, Scandinavia, and so forth. This survey places his own age in perspective: the present condition is not the condition of life, but merely a passing fashion; hence, we can shape our condition, revolutionize it.

Anticipating the response of his audience, he confronts head-on the concept of 'change' as one that threatens us with fear of the unknown: 'We who believe in the continuous life of the world, surely we are bound to hope that the change will bring us gain and not loss, and to strive to bring that gain about' (*CW* 22:10). He sets the concepts of change within the context of images of continuity and progression contrasted with images of gyration and stagnation. Hope is not found in the sisyphusian-like circle 'going on round about us.' Encircling ourselves with stability is an act of fear. Hope lies in the evidence of change, of growth, of future development, and in the 'little unexpected things' that 'have come to pass' from 'but a little way ahead' (22:10). To resist change is to risk the damnation of the earth. That we can no more envision a world without art than our ancestors could imagine their fair county degraded into the hideous hovel of London should warn us of the consequences of maintaining the policies of our present system.

What follows is Morris's first critique of the capitalist system. He addresses the 'counting-house' mentality of commerce on its own terms: why can't we 'adorn life with the pleasure of cheerfully *buying* goods at their due price; with the pleasure of *selling* goods that we could be proud of both for fair price and fair workmanship; with the pleasure of working soundly and without haste at *making* goods that we could be proud of?' (*CW* 22:22). With a measure of dispassionate control he answers with a paragraph-long critique of the passion of greed, the commercial 'greed of unfair gain.' Greed cumbers our path with the tangle of sham, the worst hindrance to overpass. Greed gathers 'into heaps little and big' worthless currency gathered for its own sake. Though attributed with false distinction, this rubble of money is not negligible, but rather as 'tons upon tons of unutterable rubbish,' it is a costly barrier raised up against the arts. Utility is the remedy for such vulgarity and pretence: 'nothing can be a work of art which is not useful: that is to say, which does not ... amuse, soothe, or elevate' the health of the mind (22:22–4). But this remedy is unattainable without popular support. Art cannot be cultivated in isolation by an elite: 'I do not want art for a few, anymore than education for a few, or freedom for a few':

> No, rather than art should live this poor thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible, for a brutality that they will not struggle with – rather than this, I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile, as I said before I thought it possible she might do; rather than the wheat should rot in the miser's granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might have a chance to quicken in the dark. (*CW* 22:26)

Morris concludes with an assertion of his faith in humanity, imagining us as growing wiser and thereby working to establish a new society, one which acknowledges the centrality of art. At the beginning of this lecture he defined the two great offices of decoration that make it essential to our lives: 'to give people pleasure in the things they perforce use' and 'to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce make.' Without these two great offices, 'our rest would be vacant ... our labour mere endurance' (*CW* 22:5). If we let the arts grow popular then they will beautify our labour, making it not a curse but a blessing. Now, at the conclusion of his lecture, he asserts that simplicity and utility will make labour and creativity one and the same, and that everyone 'will have his share of the *best*': 'It is a dream, you may say, of what has never been and never will be; true, it has never been, and therefore, since the world is alive, and moving yet, my hope is the greater that it one day will be' (*CW* 22:27). Recalling Tennyson's Camelot (the city 'built to music, therefore never built at all, and therefore built forever,' 'Gareth and Lynette,' 272–4) and anticipating his later distinctions between dream and vision, Morris here delineates the nature of his dream and his practical hope: 'And I am here with you tonight to ask you to help me in realizing this dream, this hope' (*CW* 22:27). It is the request he would make again and again throughout the rest of his writings, keeping alive the hope for the duration of his life.

'The Decorative Arts' begins the early phase of his political prose, a five-year phase culminating in the 1882 publication of the collected volume *Hopes and Fears for Art*. We may call this his aesthetic-socialist phase, wherein he could still be considered as an aesthete whose topic was the death of art, a topic less disconcerting than political

revolution. A reviewer of 'The Decorative Arts' thus entitled his review 'The Decoration of Houses' and found the pamphlet inspiring: Morris dreams that all public buildings will have beauty and splendour and all private dwellings reveal 'every man's share of the best' ('Decoration' 127). A reviewer of 'Some Hints on House Decoration' (retitled 'Making the Best of it' in *Hopes and Fears for Art*) praised the lecturer as noble: the greatest living master of house decoration is like the perennially attractive wild rose that never succumbs to the whims of fashion (Review of 'Some Hints' 14). The reviews of *Hopes and Fears for Art* were predominantly positive: Morris is applauded in the *Athenaeum* for writing with refreshing optimism about the beautification of labour through art (Review of *Hopes* 374–5) and in the *Fortnightly Review* for his 'unextinguished hopefulness' that life can be improved by changing our notions about the three categories of work – 'mechanical, intelligent, and imaginative' (Simcox 771).

The next phase of his political prose begins in 1883 and may be called his militant-socialist phase. It is not a phase he passed through and abandoned, but its focus extended from 1883 through 1890. Thereafter his focus on fiction might be called his visionary-socialist phase, though he continued to lecture occasionally, delivering his last addresses in January 1896. Predictably, the militant-socialist lectures were less well received. 'Art under Plutocracy' was delivered on 14 November 1883 at University College, Oxford, and pleased John Ruskin (*Art of England* 236)[1] but not the college administrators: 'Mr. Morris announced himself a member of a socialistic society and appealed for funds for the objects of the society. The Master of the University then said to the effect that if he had announced this beforehand it was probable that the College Hall would have been refused' ('Mr. W. Morris at Oxford' 7). When seven of these socialist lectures were collected for publication in 1888 as *Signs of Change*, the reviews ranged from the damning – 'Morris's facts' are wrong, his suggested reforms are unnecessary, his aspirations are bloodthirsty, and his view of human nature is entirely mistaken ('Earthly Inferno' 607–8) – to the bemused: 'The charm of his pure, strong literary style' makes this book a handy explanation of socialist doctrines and the transformation of this well admired man, carried away by his hatred for a system requiring complete change rather than tinkering, is of psychological interest (*Westminster Review* 130 [July 1888]: 237–9).

Though these militant-socialist lectures have essentially the same message as the earlier lectures, Morris had now refined his appeal for social revolution with such clear, straightforward prose that his topic could no longer be safely rationalized as an aesthetic issue peripheral to society. 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil,' 'True and False Society,' 'How We Live and How We Might Live,' 'Work, as It Is and as It Might Be,' 'Misery and the Way Out': the titles typify the dialectical approach he takes in identifying the absurdities of capitalism and in envisioning the socialist alternative.

'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' will serve as an example of his procedure. It was first delivered on 16 January 1884 to the Hampstead Liberal Club, published as a pamphlet in 1885 by the Socialist League, and reprinted in the *Signs of Change* in 1888. A semblance of the disarming rhetoric of his earlier lectures is exploited briefly in his introduction, but only in the form of a humorous portrait of the 'happy worker' cheered on by the well-to-do. This image of the work ethic – 'the creed of modern morality that all labour is good in itself' – is derided as 'a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others' (*CW* 23:98). But it is derided with humour; it is not yet condemned as the 'semi-theological dogma,' the 'hypocritical praise of all labour' (23:119, 98). Morris begins with the leavening humour of Horatian satire, moves on to the objective tone of a deductive analysis of the nature of work, and reaches the climax with a Juvenalian irony that is momentarily more bitter than Jonathan Swift's darkest moments: more bitter because Morris is speaking openly and directly without the comforting distance of a persona when he envisions 'the slaughter of men by actual warfare' as all we can presently 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' (23:119). A pacifist by nature, Morris was forced by his analysis of capitalism to recognize with heart-wrenching reluctance that a violent revolution was inevitable. Otherwise the capitalist system would continue to destroy the lives of multitudes. He could only hope to limit the resistance by inspiring the vast majority to support the revolution. Hence in this lecture he analyzes how we waste our lives through useless toil and demonstrates how we could elevate our lives through useful work.

The subtext of the whole lecture is the dichotomy of the natural life and the perverted system. Thus, when he begins with the hypothesis that man 'must either labour or perish' as one that should be met with common agreement, he is leaving aside for the moment the reality of our system wherein the working class supports a leisure class. If man must labour or perish, then nature should 'give some compensation for the compulsion to labour,' as she does with other 'acts necessary to the continuance of life,' making them 'not only endurable, but even pleasurable.' Yet if it is in man's nature to take pleasure in his work, then why is work so often considered as more a curse than a blessing? The answer is that natural work has been degraded to useless toil. Useful work is blessed with hope in it, is a lightening of life, and is manly to do; useless toil is a curse, a burden to life, and is unmanly to do (*CW* 23:98–9).[2]

To restore pleasure and dignity to labour, Morris establishes a means to evaluate our work by measuring the quality of hope accompanying it. The quality is found to be threefold. Its first degree is the hope of rest: this is the hope of animal relief which must be long enough to enjoy without anxiety. If we have this first hope, then 'we shall, so far, be no worse off than the beasts.' Second is the hope of product: this is the hope of productive achievement, producing something really worth having and using 'by one who is neither a fool nor an ascetic.' If we have this second hope, then 'we shall, so far, be better than machines.' Third is the hope of pleasure in the work itself: this is the hope of 'our daily creative skill,' the conscious pleasure in the creativity of exercising the mind and soul as well as the body. Memory, imagination, and the tradition of the human race help him as he works, as he creates. If we have this third hope, 'we shall be men, and our days will be happy and eventful' (*CW* 23:99–100).

This threefold hierarchy of the work ideal counters the threefold hierarchy of our class system. The first is meant to establish a trinitarian depth of hope in rest, productivity, and creativity which should be the universal experience of our daily lives. The other is the stratifying hierarchy of the capitalist system that segregates us into classes pitted against one another. The working classes merely hope for animal rest, but because they must work to produce the waste of luxuries for the leisure class and then produce cheap sham to feed, clothe, and house themselves as slaves, they have no rest and are therefore 'worse off than mere beasts of the fields' (*CW* 23:100). The middle classes live under the pretence that they are productive, but their competitive salesmanship – 'the puffery of wares' – makes nothing other than profits, so that 'there are many things which cost more to sell than they do to make' (23:103). These middle classes work hard, produce nothing, and hope only to gain for their children the status of the idle aristocracy – 'the proud position of being obvious burdens on the community' (23:102). They are therefore worse off than the machines. As for the leisure classes, if any of them live under the pretence that they cultivate their minds and souls, Morris wastes no words to even hint of any such delusion. He defines them merely as burdensome consumers, wasteful parasites, shameful robbers.

The degradation from the natural life of useful work to the perverted system of useless toil is thus complete. This degradation extends to our language, as the derivation of words reveals how our present misuse of a word distorts its root. 'Manufacturer' is 'most absurdly so called, since a manufacturer means a person who makes with his hands' (*CW* 23:109). A modern manufacturer has no interest in producing real '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' (23:110). To rectify this degradation, 'we must be resolute in getting rid of' the capitalist system. Then to make 'labour attractive' we must 'get the means of making labour fruitful, the Capital, including the land, machinery, factories, etc., into the hands of the community, to be used for the good of all alike, so that we might all work at supplying the real "demands" of each and all – that is to say, work for livelihood ... instead of working for profit – i.e. the power of compelling other men to work against their will' (23:110).

As with his evaluation of useful work by means of his analysis of the threefold quality of hope, Morris again moves beyond economic analysis to ask how can 'all labour, even the commonest ... be made attractive' (*CW* 23:111). His answer is fourfold: work must have a useful end; work must be short in duration; work must have variety; and work must have pleasant surroundings. Though he elaborates on each of the four criteria, their virtuous simplicity aptly answers the despair of those who know not where to begin. Another fourfold set of criteria 'for decent life' was made in his lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live': 'First, a healthy body; second, an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present, and the future; thirdly, occupation fit for a healthy body and an active mind; and fourthly, a beautiful world to live in' (*CW* 23:25). These two passages differ in tone more than in content. They mark the carefully limited bounds within which Morris ranges between the practical and the idealistic tone. While the idealist inspires us to envision new orders, the practical socialist must prove they are within our reach. 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' is persistently practical. Even when Morris envisions the day when labour will be synonymous with art, enabling art to arise 'again amongst people freed from the terror of the slave and the shame of the robber,' we feel the burden of the present more than the flight of the future. Having started gently with an amused observation of the irony of our condition, the lecture now concludes with an urgent plea to accept the shocking reality of the paradoxical solution – 'the strife for peace.' The 'perpetual strife of opposing classes' must be replaced with peace, but we cannot 'win peace peaceably' (23:119). The vague hope of ridding ourselves of the burden of capitalism 'as if by magic' by making changes in the voting system is nothing more than a superstitious faith in magic (23:101). We cannot hope that the defenders of a system devoid of reason will be reasonable men with whom we may negotiate; rather we are 'hemmed in by wrong and folly' and must 'always be fighting against them.' Or at least until we live to see the rich classes slaughtering men by warfare rather than by commerce: 'then the end will be drawing near' (23:119).

The lecture closes with another development in Morris's pursuit of hope and vision. Dream is now replaced by a definition of vision. We begin with steadfast commitment, the eye keeping in view the single aim for the future. The reflection of the future will illuminate the reality of our present condition and thereby inspire others to envision a new social order.

To inspire others to share the socialist vision: such was the duty, Morris contended, of the nineteenth-century socialist. When people are 'prepared to manage their own business themselves ... to believe in their own capacity to undertake the management of affairs, and to be responsible for their life in this world,' then we can expect to rid ourselves of the master-slave system ('Where Are We Now' 362). This was the argument he repeated in his last editorial for *The Commonweal* (15 November 1890), a moving but sobering editorial written amidst the disintegration of the Socialist League by anarchist factions. He warns that neither palliation by the Parliamentarians nor partial rioting by a few anarchists will disturb the masters who control us. Socialists must therefore continue their duty to educate the public for mass revolution. His editorial was answered in the next issue by the anarchists who accused him of committing 'a gross abuse of language' (29 November 1890: 381–2). Clearly they wanted to fight with Morris. One anarchist refuted the power of the master's control on the grounds that death enables any rebel to end such control. Another anarchist added that scientific force enables anyone to carry enough dynamite in his pocket to destroy a thousand soldiers. With such comrades as these, Morris withdrew from the Socialist League to form his own Hammersmith Socialist Society, and turned his attention from *Commonweal* lectures to Kelmscott romances. This political transition is nearly as misunderstood as his alleged 'revolt' in poetry from *The Defence of Guenevere* to *The Earthly Paradise.*[3] Socialists, like E.P. Thompson, regretted it as a self-indulgent return to irrelevant art, dismissing the romances as fairy stories written for Morris's private pleasure. Conservatives, like J.W. Mackail, welcomed 'the full and unreserved return of the author to romance ... that glittering world, rich with all imagined wonders, into which Morris had entered long ago, and the doors of which always remained open to him' (2:242).

The transition to fiction was neither sudden nor reactionary. While he was writing his militant-socialist lectures, he was writing his fictional account of the revolutionary peasants of fourteenth-century England in *A Dream of John Ball* (1886–7 [serialized], 1888); his fictional account of the 'tribal communism' of barbarism in *The House of the Wolfings* (1889) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1890); his fictional account of the socialist society of twenty-first-century England in *News from Nowhere* (1890 [serialized], 1891); and he returned to mythical barbarism in *The Glittering Plain* (1890 [serialized], 1891). Wherever one may dare to locate the transition, it led to the culmination of his political development from aesthetic socialism, through militant socialism, to visionary socialism. The initial reviewers had no trouble recognizing the continuity in his thought. *The Story of the Glittering Plain* was read as presenting Morris's views on the socialist cause with 'genuine poetic quality and fragrance' (*Westminster Review* 138 [July 1892]: 102–3). *The Wood Beyond the World* was interpreted as a socialist allegory in which the Maid, personifying Labour, wins the Lady, personifying Capital (*Spectator* 13 July 1895: 52–3). Though Morris responded with a letter in the next issue indignantly refuting this allegorical interpretation, his refutation is not a denial of the romance's social significance. The prose romance is not a lecture cloaked in romantic garb, nor a didactic fable with a specific message. Rather the romance provides the medium for Morris to express and to experience his social values. His lectures incite discontent with the brazen world; his romances inspire us to envision a golden world. Yeats described *The Well at the World's End* as Morris's prophetic vision of a perfect life, and said that Morris 'more than any man of modern days tried to change the life of his time into the life of his dream' (37).

Like all great artists who turn from tragedies to romances as the culmination of their careers, Morris embraced the romance genre as the most self-consciously artistic, the genre least bound by the strictures of verisimilitude, thus freeing himself from the hindrances of reflecting the routine details of a recognizable life. Stressing instead the communal values of equality in relationships, Morris turns to the ideal art of romance as a means to express his own vision of reality more clearly.

In his essay on 'The Society of the Future,' Morris distinguishes visionaries from dreamers. Visionaries are practical people (190). And he distinguishes art from academicism. Genuine artists are not 'mere rhetorical word-spinners and hunters of introspection [but are] masters of life' who 'make the eyes tell the mind tales of the past, present, and future' (199). The prose romances serve this practical purpose, providing what 'Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say' to the awakening guest of *News from Nowhere*:

> 'Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship – but not before. Go back again, then, and while you live you will see all round you people engaged in making others live lives which are not their own, while they themselves care nothing for their own real lives – men who hate life though they fear death. Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.'
>
> Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream. (228)

If literature is so practical and prophetic, clarifying our own sense of reality and inspiring visions of the 'past, present, and future,' then why is it not central to the lives of the characters who inhabit the socialist society of *News from Nowhere*?

The first reference in *News from Nowhere* to literature is dismissive: an inquisitor is chided for behaving like a character in those 'silly old novels' (56). It is further dismissed as a weakness to spend 'time in writing reactionary novels,' an antiquarian hobby 'on much the same footing' as mathematics (60). When an old 'grumbler' is nostalgic about the good old days, he complains that the books of the competitive pre-socialist age 'are much more alive than those which are written now ... There is a spirit of adventure in them, and signs of a capacity to extract good out of evil which our literature quite lacks now' (174). His conclusion that 'such splendid works' must mean that historians have exaggerated the 'unhappiness of the past days' undermines his credibility and prepares us for Ellen's response:

> 'Books, books! always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much? Look!' she said, throwing open the casement wider and showing us the white light sparkling between the black shadows of the moonlit garden, through which ran a little shiver of the summer night-wind, 'look! these are our books in these days! – and these,' she said, stepping lightly up to the two lovers and laying a hand on each of their shoulders. (175)

As the guest listens to her he cannot help 'thinking that if she were a book, the pictures in it were most lovely' (175). She is compared to a picture because she is designed to demonstrate her argument that those who inhabit the happy and healthy world of fellowship are living lives that are the embodiment of art. Ellen continues with a contrasting critique of the alleged 'social realism' of Victorian novels whose closures provide the predictable reconciliations that lend stability to the prevalent social order:

> As for your books, they were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, and when they must needs supplement the sordid miseries of their own lives with imaginations of the lives of other people. But I say flatly that in spite of all their cleverness, and capacity for story-telling, there is something loathsome about them. Some of them, indeed, did here and there show some feeling for those whom the history-books call 'poor,' and of the misery of those lives we have some inkling; but presently they give it up, and towards the end of the story we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily in an island of bliss on other people's troubles; and that after a long series of sham troubles (or mostly sham) of their own making, illustrated by dreary introspective nonsense about their feelings and aspirations, and all the rest of it; while the world must even then have gone on its way, and dug and sewed and baked and built and carpentered round about these useless – animals. (175–6)

The social relevance of serious art, the social role of the serious artist, the liberal notion that cultural pursuits can elevate humanity: Morris dismisses our patience with such conventional dreams as the delusions of Fabian-like reformists who place their faith in evolutionary progress. The ideal society is not one that cultivates an appreciation of literary genius but rather one that encourages everyone to be imaginative. In *News from Nowhere* fairy tales are more appreciated than novels, folk art more appreciated than the neoclassical. Of the two BMs, the British Museum is now considered as 'rather an ugly old building' (86), whereas the Bloomsbury Market is decorated with murals and friezes depicting subjects from fairy tales. When William Guest is surprised that everyone now knows these tales 'from the childhood of the world, barely lingering even in his time,' his host responds: 'I think them very beautiful, I mean not only the pictures, but the stories; and when we were children we used to imagine them going on in every wood-end, by the bight of every stream: every house in the fields was the Fairyland King's House to us' (130). The fairy tales are more relevant than novels because the adults of the socialist society have lost none of their childhood wonder for the world. Seeing Ellen in the hayfield, the host, with his wife, imagines they are in fairyland:

> 'Look, Guest,' said Dick; 'doesn't it all look like one of those very stories out of Grimm that we were talking about up in Bloomsbury? Here are we two lovers wandering about the world, and we have come to a fairy garden, and there is the very fairy herself amidst of it.' (179)

In 'How I Became a Socialist,' Morris defines 'the province of art' as setting the 'true ideal' before us, helping to 'frame a desire' for a 'full and reasonable life' (383). In *News from Nowhere* this noble aim is no longer needed, for the characters have achieved the true ideal, their lives being the embodiment of their imaginations. The ideals of love and beauty once found only in the imaginations of a few geniuses and recorded in their books to share with us are now embodied by every man and woman alive.

In this new society, carving a pipe and cutting a field of hay are no less artistic activities than writing a novel. But can the pretty pipe be as important as the serious novel? Can the child's delight in a fairy tale approach the adult's appreciation of an epic poem? Morris's analysis of work, of the relation of life and labour, provides a revolutionary answer. The aesthetic question is answered with a political question. Whether or not we agree that the condition of the worker will improve the aesthetic quality of art is immaterial, because Morris denies the commercial contention that the aim of society is to produce the best possible product. He considers the process as more important than the product, the worker as more important than the work. If in our commercial society the province of art is to inspire visions of the ideal, in the ideal society of the future art assumes its proper definition: 'Art is mankind's expression of his joy in labour' ('Art under Plutocracy' 67). Art then will no longer be sundered into the greater and lesser arts; it will be the universal labour of love.

In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Hallblithe arrives at an island in search of his kidnapped betrothed. Its glittering plain is precisely the paradise dreamed of and searched for by the Wanderers of *The Earthly Paradise*: it is 'the acre of the undying,' the land of eternal life. As Hallblithe compares his homeland with this paradise, he reveals himself as belonging not with the idle-dreaming Wanderers of *The Earthly Paradise* but with the haymaking artists of *News from Nowhere*:

> He fell a-pondering what they twain, he and the Hostage, should do when they came together again; whether they should abide on the Glittering Plain, or go back again to Cleveland by the Sea and dwell in the House of the kindred; and for his part he yearned to behold the roof of his fathers and to tread the meadow which his scythe had swept, and the acres where his hook had smitten the wheat. (*CW* 14:263)

Hallblithe is an artist in search of the ideal social order: 'I seek no dream but rather the end of dreams' (14:273). This same distinction between the wistful dreamer and the active artist is made by John Ball: 'It is for him who is lonely or in prison to dream of fellowship, but for him who is of fellowship to do and not to dream' (*CW* 16:234).

'To do and not to dream': by now we recognize that the distinction is not between the political and the poetical. Aside from those casual readers over the years who have accused Morris of abandoning his political commitment for an escapist pastime of printing Kelmscott editions of his prose romances, there are more careful readers who have accused him of abandoning his purist commitment to socialist revolution to support an evolutionary process of electing reformists in Parliament. This alleged reformist phase would suggest an about-face turn-around, a fourth phase of Morris's socialism that would signal an awakening from his visionary dream of the ideal to the rude reality of pragmatic compromise. Some of his statements in 1894 might indeed suggest such a disillusionment with his visionary aims and a resigned acceptance of what he had steadfastly warned against: a pragmatic pursuit of palliatives for labour reform as the stepping stones for an evolutionary path towards socialism. In January 1894 he acknowledged that there were 'two methods' for implementing socialism: 'open armed insurrection on the one hand; the use of the vote, to get hold of the executive, on the other hand' (qtd in E.P. Thompson 611). Because the workers had chosen to pursue the Parliamentary vote, Morris conceded that socialists would have to support this clearly voiced choice. But his support marked no serious abandonment of his original aims; it reveals rather his determination to pull together the competing factions of socialists.

His last repeated political speech, delivered on 30 March and 30 October 1895, is a direct address to the workers, and it is a careful balance of the militant and the visionary. Exploiting the monetary discourse of evolutionary progress practised alike by the reformists and capitalists, Morris professes his reaffirmation that a socialist order can be achieved only through revolution: the 'upward movement of labour' cannot continue to progress 'otherwise than by disturbance and suffering of some kind.' Its triumph 'will have to be paid for like other good things, and that price will be no light one.' Acknowledging the reluctance of labour reformers to pay such a price, he sharply challenges them to consider exactly what kind of seductive palliatives will they lobby for:

> Higher wages; more regular employment? Shorter working hours – better education for your children – old age pensions, libraries, parks, and the rest ... What else do you want? If you cannot answer the question straightforwardly I must say you are wandering on a road the outcome of which you cannot tell ... If you can answer it, and say Yes, that is all I want: then I say here is the real advice to give you: Don't meddle with Socialism: make peace with your employers, before it is too late, and you will find that from them and their Committee, the House of Commons, you will get such measure of these things

> as will probably content you ... I must own that sometimes when I am dispirited I think this is all that the labour movement means: it doesn't mean Socialism at all, it only means improvement in the condition of the working classes: they will get that in some terms or another – till the break up comes, and it may be a long way ahead. ('What We Have to Look For')

The stepping stones of small palliatives may mean some movement, but movement with too little direction, leading the lost over no new ground. Moreover, such movement is misdirected because it originates in the misguided polarization of labour and leisure. Such short-sighted dreams only prolong the wandering of the exiled. Morris challenges us to dream beyond the economic visions of Marx: we must dream not to improve the conditions of the working class but to utterly change the nature of work.[4]

Early in his career, as a twenty-two-year-old student of architecture, Morris identified his interests in life as 'love and work; these two things only,' and described the nature of his work: 'My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another' (*Letters* 1:28). Throughout the rest of his career he lived the life of the political visionary holding up the hope and preparing the way for a future when we may all make our lives the embodiment of our dreams.

NOTES

1 Ruskin understood the 'significant change which Mr. Morris made in the title of his recent lecture from Art and *Democracy*, to Art and *Plutocracy*' and noted how Morris identified 'excellence of work' as being in 'proportion to the joy of the workman' (*The Art of England* 228, 236).

2 A survey of his lectures demonstrates that Morris does not use 'manly' and 'unmanly' as gender distinctions, but rather as terms to distinguish the creative human from the bestial and the mechanical.

3 For a discussion of Morris's misunderstood shift from the dramatic intensity of his early lyrics to the 'slackening' muse of his later narratives, see Latham, 'Literal and Literary Texts: Morris's "Story of Dorothea."'

4 For a discussion of Morris's theories about the relationship between work and rest, see Latham, 'Reading Aright,' especially 122–5.

12

History Becomes Geography: Tracing Morris's Later Thought

Frederick Kirchhoff

The question that continues to intrigue me is 'What did Morris really want?' To some extent, the answer is not hard to find. If his socialist essays and works like *News from Nowhere* continue to ring true, it is because Morris grounded them in his own desire. He imagined a world in which he could imagine himself happy. But this happiness depends on a coming together of two things: knowing what you want and finding yourself at a time and place where you can have it. For a number of reasons, Morris was inclined to imagine the route to that time and place as a movement through time: in his earliest writings, a return to the Middle Ages; after he had become a socialist, a movement through history as conceived in Marxist thought. But these different routes are not alternate ways to the same place. The places they reach may have much in common, but they are not identical. 'What Morris wanted,' in other words, is not a constant, but an evolving goal. As he learned more about himself and the world, the goal, very naturally, changed. But within this process of evolution, Morris's writings were not merely expressions of modified desire – the signs of what he thought he wanted at a particular time in his life; they were also efforts to explore and grapple with desire. To find out what he really wanted, he tested alternative possibilities in narrative. For Morris, I believe, the ultimate test of a proposition was not theoretical proof, but whether it felt right in a story.

For this reason, one better understands Morris's evolving sense of what it was he wanted by examining the representations of fulfilled desire in his writings. And in the case of his later work, these