WILLIAM MORRIS

Medievalist and Revolutionary

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To H. D. G.

*Mulierem fortém quis inveniet?*
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INTRODUCTION

"Gothic opinions" was the phrase John Ruskin used when he wished to indicate nineteenth century ideas that were thirteenth century in inspiration. "Gothic opinions," however, did not die out with the last century nor with the medieval revival that created them. Testimony as to their persistence and vitality in our own times would involve a host of witnesses from many fields: the Chestebellloc in economics, Maritain and the Neo-Thomists in philosophy, the late Ralph Adams Cram and his followers in American architecture, and the exponents of various plans for a post-industrial order that recall the Middle Ages in their decentralization and their emphasis on the land. Guild Socialism and Distributism in England are only two of the modern movements indebted to this revivified medievalism.

Much of this use of the past to instruct the present stems directly from the Victorians. It was in the nineteenth century that the Middle Ages were first viewed as a vast storehouse of concepts helpful in solving current difficulties in art, religion, politics, and economic theory. Whether the past they imagined corresponded to the actuality is less important for us than the fact that the Victorians believed in the truth of their picture. In an elaborate process of myth-making—and a similar tendency is apparent in their use of Greek material—they sought to add authority to their own message by appealing to remote and supposedly better times. No one familiar with the nineteenth century needs to be reminded of the complexity of the medieval revival. Attempting to cure modern social ills by resuscitating old ideals of just price, fair marketing, guild management, and creative craftsmanship represents but one aspect of a many sided movement. But this appeal to history in discussing the "condition of England question" is clear as early as Cobbett and lively as late as Bellloc. It is, in part, the subject of this book, but the trend is brought to a focus in William Morris, who used the medieval more consistently than any other writer and whose social philosophy—a form of communism—may have present day implications.

William Morris, Medievalist and Revolutionary approaches its subject, therefore, from a new vantage point. The emphasis is not biographical. Mackail is still the best source of information on Morris' life, though
fortunately the slight and somewhat disappointing treatment of the socialist years has been supplemented by Lloyd Eshleman's detailed account in *A Victorian Rebel*. And though there is room for an estimate of Morris' importance in the history of the arts, Aymer Vallance has adequately treated him as the craftsman. Elisabeth Kuster in *Mittelalter und Antike bei William Morris* covers the aesthetic use of the Middle Ages in the earlier poems, and Karl Litzenberg has fully explored the influence of the Norse. But the present book attempts to define and develop the interrelations of Morris' medievalism and his socialism and to place him in a tradition that has undoubtedly left its mark on modern thought.

For the wisdom of his observations on the central problems of the Victorian Age, I recall with gratitude discussions with Professor Emery E. Neff of Columbia University; and I am grateful for the criticism of Professor Roger Sherman Loomis, whose affection for Morris and whose knowledge of medieval art added to my own pleasure in writing. No work I have done or shall do in the nineteenth century can be without its special debt to Dr. Joseph J. Reilly of Hunter College, whose teaching first illuminated for me the depths and complexities of a great period in English literature.

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MORRIS AND THE TRADITION

"It was mostly in periods of turmoil and strife and confusion that people cared much about history."—News from Nowhere

When Sir Thomas More appears to Southey in the Colloquies and discusses, among many things, the state of the Blessed, he excludes foreknowledge from the gifts they enjoy. It is, rather, he explains, in the intensification of an earthly pleasure that they find their heavenly reward—not in prescience but in a deepening of the historic imagination, a “clearer and more comprehensive knowledge of the past” by which these honest ghosts are better able to reason “from causes to consequences and by what has been to judge of what is likely to be.” Such a heaven Southey could comprehend, and hardly a thoughtful man of his generation or later to whom the new history came like the discovery of a universe, would deny the possibilities of happiness in this celestial research. What the invention of the telescope did for space in the seventeenth century, the sense of the past accomplished for time in the nineteenth. To Milton and his generation the new science presented worlds beyond worlds, and our own dwindled to a pendant “in bigness as a star.”

Two centuries later, with the development of historical studies, the Present similarly dwindled in the contemplation of the Past, and suddenly, as never before, the earth became notable for other times. Men were released in a marvelous way from the bonds of the contemporaneous, and, free to range the centuries, they searched the hidden places and looked with new eyes on old familiar scenes. There were discoveries and revaluations, and as always the imagination, stirred by both, found expression in a growing literature. “History is the true philosophy of the nineteenth century,” said Renan. “It is the true epic poem, the universal divine scripture,” said Carlyle. It is the “compensation,” said Morris, “for the ugliness which surrounds our lives at present.” With as startling effects as the vitalization of Europe in The Dynasts, the Past stretched and groaned. The concept of the “machine of the universe” was challenged by the symbol of the Life-Tree Ygdrasil, whose roots are “down deep in the Death-Kingdoms,” whose boughs are “beyond the
stars," yet "in all times and places is one and the same Life-Tree." This novum organum, the quickened sense of the past, left its mark on almost every aspect of life. The "time-telescope" was destined to revolutionize whatever field it entered, and as the world in space changed for the seventeenth century, the world in time, to the nineteenth, never looked the same again.

At first the possibilities of the new instrument were only partially realized. Its enthusiastic discoverers were to learn that it could pivot to the present and the future, but in the beginning they believed it to be fixed in one direction and they kept it trained on the past. From the obscurity of neglected tracts of history and legend new figures emerged: Ragnar Lodbrog and the Norsemen, Odin and the Scythian Goths, Beowulf and the "Englishmen" of the continent. The Middle Ages from the start were the favorite field of scrutiny, and saga, ballad, and romance, followed by the scholarship of the academic historian, fed the curiosity which continued undiminished into the Victorian period. All the romantic elements that come to a focus in Scott characterize this first stage. But the second soon followed when the interest in the past for its own sake was supplemented by the interest in the past for the sake of the present. The eighteenth century "smoke and flame conflagration," viewed through the time telescope, gave an uncomfortable impression of the warmth and dangerous possibilities latent in its revolutionary embers. The seventeenth century divines, seen in new perspective, seemed to offer the ideal of church government sought by the Victorian members of the Establishment—though some observers thought the Arians of the fourth provided a better parallel for the Via Media. The Germans on their moot-hills and the Icelandic bonders at their thingstades were enthusiastically hailed as the progenitors of present liberties. Admonitions for the modern world could be drawn even from the remote reaches of Greek democracy. But in this stage as in the first, the medieval became the favorite court of appeals, with Past and Present probably the greatest and most characteristic expression of the second function of the new instrument. Carlyle's theme reflects the aim of other and similar attempts at contrast: "We will strive to penetrate a little into a somewhat remote century, and to look face to face on it, in hope of perhaps illustrating our own poor century thereby."

But the gift of the novum organum was realized in its fullness when to the interest in the past and the concern for the present, the hope for the future was added. The historic fed the prophetic imagination, and in the older patterns, the times to come were prefigured. Perhaps in no other age was the majority so consistent on singing a hymn of praise to apparent progress, and the few, conscious of the tremendous forces of change inherent in the very system that seemed unchangeable to those who accepted it, just as insistent on chanting their warning in a minor key. From history they drew both threats and promises, and as always in difficult times, the study of the past was sharpened by the need of clue for the future. Two of the four major prophets, Carlyle and Ruskin frankly turned to the Middle Ages. Arnold, though acknowledging the charm of the period, also pointed out its irrationality, and perhaps by virtue of the talisman he shared with Heine, "the power of modern ideas," he escaped from its fascination and preferred to draw his lesson from other times. Newman too, though paying tribute to the spirit of romance and Scott's and Southey's share in fostering it, always seemed moat at home in the fourth than in the fourteenth century. But Carlyle and Ruskin gave their most effective indictments and prophecies in medieval terms.

It is with a lesser prophet and his appeal to the medieval, however that this study is concerned. William Morris, like Scott whom he loved as was interested as anyone in the past for its own sake; he shared with Carlyle his conviction of its value as a tutor of the present; and he had no rival in the ability to create the vision of a new world out of the best traditions of the old. He was the master craftsman of the new instrument and like every good craftsman, he worked in a tradition that must be understood before his contribution can be evaluated. Against the general background of the medieval revival, and in particular against that aspect of it which saw in the earlier social institutions a solution for modern problems, must be placed the Utopia Morris fashioned from his knowledge of the past, his concern for the present, and his "hope for the days to be."

To the Victorians the time telescope revealed a new world emerging from what was once, Kenneth Clark has said, "a foggy sea with but one landmark—the Norman Conquest—round which the Gothic cathedral drifted like rudderless ships." It would be difficult to exaggerate the enthusiasm with which the discovery was greeted. Medievalism invaded every walk of life, and the revival became as many-headed as the multitude to whom it appealed. The faddists had their ha'penny look, and withdrew with new ideas for Gothic wallpapers and castellated gates. Housemaids, says Pugin, slept in watch towers, and "butlers cleaned their plate in a bastion." The upholsterer could say with his betters—"I am nothing if not historical"—as he fixed miniature flying buttresses on either side of a wing chair. For the thoughtful, however, the medieval scene became the object of steady and prolonged contemplation; and from it was drawn the spirit that: reified a waning faith and gave at least a semblance of life to the art of the times. The Victorians as a body
seemed intent on writing the sequel, more complex and less familiar, to the well known story of the earlier romantic interest. We would find it difficult to forget William Beckford at Fonthill; but we are less likely to remember that the Victorian gentleman too could live in a castellated villa "with a drawbridge that would not draw up and a portcullis that would not lower down." He could be educated at the home of lost causes, whispering the last enchantments of the Middle Ages; he could earn a very comfortable living designing railway stations in Venetian Gothic; or he could write a popular novel with a hero who resembled Calahad and to whom a slight on the _Morte D'Arthur_ was a personal affront. He could spend his leisure at art exhibits, where the subjects sounded like a roll call at Camelot. He could understand the jokes in _Punch_ which depended on a knowledge of medievalism, at least of the Tennysonian variety. He could worship in a church newly built perhaps, but true to the principles of English Perpendicular, or even better, to Early Decorated. And when he came to die, he could receive the comforts of the true church, directly descended from the medieval, but purified from the Romanist taint. And the attending clergyman, of course, would be attired according to the rubrics, in vestments of the proper length and cut. And finally this Victorian gentleman could be laid to rest in the family vault, unfortunately built in the Grecian style, but happily modified by a Gothic ironwork gate bristling with pinnacles and angular saints.

For better or worse, then, most of the seeds of the early revival came to a full, even a luxuriant growth. The favor with which the Middle Ages were regarded by the transitional historians, Pinkerton, Strutt, and Sharon Turner, was followed by a Victorian school dedicated to proving the medieval origins of modern liberties. The interest in the medieval Norse, awakened by Mallet's _Northern Antiquities_ and fostered by Percy, Scott, Cottle, and Herbert, deepened with growing scholarship into the work of Daseant, Thorpe, Vigfusson, Magnusson, and Morris. Pre-Raphaelitism was preceded by an earlier and timid appreciation of primitives, and Strawberry Hill was followed by a vogue that changed the face of Victorian England. If we could understand the reasons behind this return of the Victorian mind to the medieval; if we could see the social and ethical overtones the movement developed as it progressed; if we knew what the Victorians were looking for in an age so unlike their own; and if we knew to what extent the answers they found there were illusions—misreadings of the past; in other words, if we knew to what extent they created a medieval world out of their own needs, we would know something more, perhaps, than we do now of the springs of action of Victorian England.

So pervasive a movement could hardly avoid the central problem of the age to which all roads seemed to converge—the social question. Thoughtful men, looking back from a divided world dominated by _laissez faire_ economics to what they considered a unified society, recognizing in theory at least a real responsibility of class to class, felt that the medieval serf was not much worse off than the Victorian worker, and it is some years had advantages over his successor. Gurth, born thrall to Cedric and no "exemplar of human felicity," at least had a claim on Cedric's bacon—more than could be said for many a Lancashire and Buckinghamshire man of Carlyle's day, "not born thrall of anybody." Hand in hand with medievalism went the new developments in social history, minimizing "the Court, the Senate, and the Battlefield," and concentrating on the "Temple, the Workshop, and the Social Hearth," and the shift in emphasis provided the reformer with attractive pictures modified by later research, of the democracy of the open field system, of the fraternity of the guilds, of the creative freedom of the mediaeval worker, and of the liberties of medieval towns. Medieval Past, Victorian Present becomes the theme of writers earlier than Carlyle and later than Morris. What Ruskin expressed memorably in _The Nature of Gothi_ was the conviction of many:

> There might be more freedom in England, though her feudal lords raised lightest words were worth men's lives, and though the blood of the vexed husbandmen dropped in the furrows of her fields, than there is while the animation of her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the exactness of a line.

The tradition of turning to the Middle Ages for an indictment of the present, a solution of its difficulties, and a program for the future, represents a strong current of thought in the nineteenth century that began at least as early as Cobbett and is still animating the Distributist propaganda of our own times. And it is the tradition in which William Morris worked.

However much many features of the revival deserve the adjective _reactionary_ usually awarded to them, the term must be seriously qualified if it is to be applied to the use of the past as a corrective of modern social and economic ills. Even in this trend, certainly, there were strong conservativeness elements, best illustrated perhaps by the Young Englishmen who combined a vigorous denunciation of the age with paternalistic theories of government. But others who took Past and Present as their theme were untouched by Tory Democracy, that paradoxical brand of thought that coupled a genuinely radical social program with reactionary politics. Southey in the _Colloquies_ may have found the use of con
William Morris

contrasts a natural and easy expression of his conservatism; but the anarchist Kropotkin was equally at home discussing the modern implications of “Mutual Aid in a Medieval City.” The movement housed the socialism of Morris, the Distributism of Belloc, and the “Tyrant-dyed Communism” of John Ruskin. Similarly the common association of the Medieval and the Catholic Revivals reflects only a partial truth. For the Anglo-Catholics the doctrinal and ritualistic aspects made the first appeal and only later in the century did they direct their full efforts toward the social question. Though in our own times the “Chesterbelloc” became the dragon threat to collectivism and the names of the Dominican Vincent McNabb in the Land Movement and of Eric Gill in art bear witness to the vitality still left in the movement, Catholics are not conspicuous in the earlier years. There is even a healthy disdain of nostalgic medievalism in the caustic words of Manning, the acknowledged leader of the social Catholic revival in England:

We do not live in an exhausted receiver. The middle ages are passed. There is no zone of calms for us. We are in the modern world—in the trade winds of the nineteenth century—and we must brace ourselves to lay hold of the world as it grapples with us, and to meet it intellect to intellect, culture to culture, science to science.

But from a general view of the movement certain patterns do emerge: recurrent figures, appeals to the same facts of history, and repetitions of theme and treatment. While there is plenty of diversity, political, religious, and economic, there are similarities enough to provide a common ground and to distinguish the trend from the many currents in the century which it crosses or parallels.

All the writers in the group, for example, are almost obsessed with the notion of the Great Change in store for the age and the signs of the times that herald it. Southey talks darkly of “portentous and monster-breeding days.” “It is your lot, as it was mine,” More tells him, “to be living during one of the grand climacterics of the world.” Carlyle, on reading The Stones of Venice, writes to Ruskin: “It is quite a new ‘Renaissance,’ I believe, we are getting into just now; either towards new, wider manhood, high again as the eternal stars; or else into final death and the marsh of Gehenna for evermore.” And in the gloomier sections of Fors Clavigera Ruskin predicts the change in store for England—“in a century or more she will be where Venice is—among the dead of nations”—unless in the perilous times she heed the warnings of her self-appointed prophet. More cheerfully, Morris finds his years “fruitful of change and wondering expectation,” but he too has moods when the inevitability of a new world haunts rather than sustains him and the Norse ragna rok becomes its symbol—that “phoenix-fire-death” in the future when the gods and the forces of evil will meet in a final encounter, and in the destruction of the old order the new will be born. Like the Norse spawives, these Victorian souls leave their nineteenth century bodies, an hurry forward to meet the coming event. And their intuitions concern the needs of the future drive them to seek the answers in the past.

All are familiar with the new spirit animating historical study—in reaction to the emphasis of the eighteenth century classicists. The medieval panorama extends to the village community as well as to the court. Morris feels that the genius of the “keen-eyed, cool-headed Gil bon” was wasted over “the mean squabbles, the bald self-seeking . . . kings and scoundrels.” In theory at least Carlyle sees history as the record of a “long forgotten train of artists and artisans.” “It is all work and no gotten work, this peopled, clothed, articulate-speaking, high-towered wide-acred world.” The time telescope revealed a series of contrasts that became the stock-in-trade of the reformers: the guild and its regulation insuring quality and distribution contrasted with the free trade of the modern period; the just price, with the inexorable law of supply and demand; laws against usury, with the profits of interest and rent; strictures on “buyers-to-sell-again,” with the accepted place of the middleman in the nineteenth century economy. And it is not enough that the appeal to history must be constantly made. History must be rewritten. These men intend to do it—either directly, as in Cobbett’s History of the Reformation, Morris’ Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome, or Penty’s A Guildman’s View of History, or indirectly and incidentally as Southey in the Colloquies and Ruskin in Fors Clavigera. There is general dissatisfaction with the way the story has been formerly told and the feeling of the need for sweeping revaluations before any genuine progress can be made. The ghosts of the past must be laid—particularly those haunting twin events of doubtful blessedness, the Reformation and the Renaissance. “The written history of our country,” says Disraeli in Sybil, “of the ten last reigns has been a mere phantasma, giving to the origin at the consequence of public transactions a character and color in every respect dissimilar to their natural form and hue. In this mighty mystic all thoughts and things have assumed an aspect and title contrary to the real quality and style...."

These writers have their favorite saints, Dante, William of Wykham, Thomas More, and the more recently canonized Owen of Lanark and they have their pet anathemas, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill. Ruskin thunders against the modern addition to the decalogue, revealed “the word of the Devil, in short summary, through Adam Smith: ‘Let ye ha one another!’ ” Cobbett is as indignant against Parson Malthus and t
“Scotch feelosofers” as G. K. Chesterton against the modern advocates of birth control. And in most cases, on the theme of Past and Present the familiar variation is played—what is happening to art and the beauty of life in a world where the “division of labour is really the division of men.”

Perhaps the earliest important use of contrasts to prick the bubble of modern superiority is Cobbett’s History of the Protestant Reformation. It is also one of the clearest examples of the interrelations of history and literature, of the man of letters in the role of historian. Cobbett wished to destroy the prejudice that threatened the proposed measures for Catholic Emancipation—a prejudice he believed to be rooted in the popular association of national misery with any increase of Catholic power. It was necessary for his purpose to substitute a picture of a happy life under the old faith for the picture circulated by Mr. Joshua Watson, wine merchant, and the anti-Romanist tracts of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. And to do it he contrived “with tremendous reconstructive power, to turn all English history upside down.” The source of his opinions, the cool and measured pages of Linsgard, had been a revelation to him; he discovered “that England had been secretly slain.” With the pamphleteer’s zeal he sharpened the weapon he borrowed from the academic historian, and with many a flourish and far less caution, he used it against the historical assumptions of the age. Contrasts proved to be the inevitable method. Against a modern England of “barracks, taxing-houses, poor-houses, mad-houses, and gaols,” he set a medieval England of “convents, hospitals, guilds, almshouses.” For nine hundred years, under the Catholic religion, there were neither poor laws nor paupers. Then suddenly, England, from a “land of roast beef” was changed into a “land of dry bread, or oatmeal porridge.” The Reformation, he contended, with perhaps more vigor than accuracy, far from being an object of national pride, should really be viewed as the tragedy in social history from which stemmed most of our modern economic woes.

Whether no serious historian today would risk his reputation defending Cobbett’s main points, or whether the History of the Protestant Reformation is “to be revised but never reversed,” the fact remains that it had an incalculable effect and that its generalizations became the commonplaces of later medievalist propaganda. As Coulton has said, “One of the most curious tasks of the future literary historian will be to trace its acknowledged and unacknowledged influence during this last century.” Coulton believes the Distributists consistently rely on its arguments, and although he cannot be taken as a disinterested observer of the “Chesterbelloc,” it is certain that the monster Shaw christened saw in

Cobbett one of its own breed. Morris certainly was deeply impressed by Cobbett’s views; and perhaps the echoes of his attack can even be heard in passages of Sybil, where the political exclusion of Catholics is attributed to the “plunder of the Church” and to the factitious aristocracy—“ever fearful that they might be called upon to reorge their sacrilegious spoils.”

With a zest for name-calling and a thesis that must have made his first readers think they were standing on their historical heads, Cobbett re-told the familiar story. He drew a very different gallery of Characters of the Reformation: Elizabeth, the “horrid virago,” the “worst woman ever existed in England, or in the whole world, Jezebel herself no excepted”; Cranmer, the “cold-blooded, most perfidious, most impious most blasphemous scoundrel”; the “ruffian” Thomas Cromwell, who conducted the work of plunder; and the continental instigators of the “alteration for the better” (“and it would have been hard if the makers of this great alteration could not have contrived to give it a good name” Luther, Zuinglius, Calvin and Beza, “not a man among them who did not merit a halter.” He drew a picture of pre-and post-Reformation England calculated to support his thesis: that the great change left the country impoverished and degraded; that it led to the “present decline of power and character”: that to it can be traced “all the wild schemes and cruel projects relative to the poor.” In the place of the monasteries, “twenty to a county and richly endowed,” modern England has poor houses that grudgingly and ineffectively perform the duties once fulfilled “in the most genteel and amiable way by the church of our fathers.” The medieval church as the “champion of the poor and the people” is contrasted with the modern, with its money-raising schemes conducted by vintner of Mincing Lane. A celibate clergy is contrasted with a married clergy and the modern encouragement of the “procreation of idlers” with the modern discouragement of families for the “working part of the community.” All the economic difficulties of Industrial England are laid at the door of the Reformation: the excise tax, the national debt, “the blessing peculiarly and doubly and gloriously protestant,” and the division of the nation into masters and slaves.

Most of the contrasts are incidental to the narrative, but Letter XVI headed “Former Wealth, Former Power, Forme Plenty, Ease and Happiness” is a full exposition of the sad contrast between past and present. Cobbett maintains that the people of mediaeval and Catholic England were better fed and better clad, and the nation “more populous, wealthy, powerful and free” than now. His argument on population is chiefly based on the number of parishes, the size of their churches, and consequently on the number of men needed t
build them and use them. That the wealth was "generally diffused" he feels is proven by a comparison of the price of meat and land rents in the two periods; and Cobbett's modest statistics look forward to the elaborate schemes of Thorold Rogers, whose theory of the "coarse plenty" of the Middle Ages was so influential in confirming Morris' ideas. England's possessions on French soil were proofs of her power, and the origin of modern civil liberties in Catholic times was proof of her freedom. Cobbett concludes with Fortescue's picture of life in the fifteenth century, with its good food, drink, and clothing, and suggests that it be read to the poor souls "eating sea weed in Ireland." He feels the modern labourer, urged into an appreciative acceptance of his "nice potatoes and pure water," may be interested in a criminal's treatment in the time of Richard II—"a fortnight fast of bread and beer"; or in the wage scale of Edward III, which lists beef, mutton, pork, and veal as the "food of the poorer sort"; or in the standard of living that entitled a woman to a fat goose and a half for a day's haymaking. When Coulton listed the "History" under "Interested Misstatements" in the appendix to his Medieval Village, it must have been this chapter in particular that offended his historical sensibilities as the "bull-dog" style of Cobbett offended the aesthetic sensibilities of Heinrich Heine.

A few years later, 1829, Southey published his Colloquies, the two volumes of imaginary conversations with Sir Thomas More, in which the assumptions of nineteenth century progress are again shaken (but far less rudely) by an historical discussion comparing the position of labor in medieval and Tudor times with that of the workman living under the new dispensation of the Manchester school. Oddly enough, this second study in contrasts was written to refute the position which Cobbett's "History" was intended to support. For though More and Montesinos (Southey) agree on the social ills that followed in the wake of the Reformation, they still feel Catholic Emancipation to be dangerous to the nation, since "it is against the plainest rules of policy to entrust men with power in the state whose bounden duty it is to subvert the church." St. John Fisher might have a little difficulty in recognizing his fellow martyr in the solemn and humorless shade who discourses on the "infidelity of the Romish clergy" and who wishes modern England had a Clara or Teresa, "but without their delusion and fatal superstition." But Southey, convinced that time alone was lacking to make a good protestant of More, is thoroughly at home with a ghost who so obligingly echoes his own opinions. It is as the observer of an earlier Great Change in society—a role which years later Morris liked to ascribe to More—that Southey pictures the papist saint.

Enthusiasm for the old days being usually in inverse ratio to the knowledge of them, Southey, as an historian, is more temperate than Cobbett in his praise of Merry England. But he does feel that "bad as the feudal times were, they were less injurious than these commercial ones to the kindly and generous feelings of human nature, and far, far more favorable to the principles of honour and integrity." More suggests that perhaps improvement in modern England is "neither so general nor so certain" as Southey supposes, and the poet agrees that the majority have lost rather than gained, being worse fed, clothed, and housed than before the Reformation.

They are less religious than in the days of the Romish faith; and if we consider them in relation to their immediate superiors, we shall find reason to confess that the independence which has been gained since the total decay of the feudal system, has been dearly purchased by the loss of kindly feelings and ennobling attachments. They are less contented and in no respect more happy.

He deplores the loss of the influence of the church that has resulted not only in a lowered standard of devotion, but has "prepared the way for the uncontrolled dominion of that worldly spirit which it is the tendency of the commercial system to produce and foster." In almost every case the age that built the monasteries is granted the advantage over the age that built the cotton-mills, and in the dissolution of the monasteries Southey sees a real loss to the tenantry, the artificers, and the poor. Medieval serfdom is contrasted with industrial slavery, and the familiar conclusion drawn: the modern worker is in a worse state—"unowned, like the dogs of Lisbon and Constantinople." Even medieval outlawry is less vicious in that the man who then preyed upon society was a "proclaimed and open enemy." Now depredation (and how familiar this note becomes in William Morris) is "more intimately connected with the constitution of society, like a chronic and organic disease, and therefore more difficult of cure."

Southey touches on most of the familiar themes of the medievalists—even to that "spot upon the earth which may be regarded with most pleasure," Ireland, later so prominent in Morris' thought and affections. King Alfred and Owen of Lanark are praised; the Malthusians condemned; the national debt and the nature of wealth discussed. But just as the wider range of his historical interests tempers the extravagance of his praise, so his belief in the possibility of real progress for his own age makes him "sum up on the hopeful side." There is not the usual uncompromising revolt against industrialism in the Colloquies. "Steam will govern the world," and Southey, at this point, is the last to quarrel with his governors. But though he is not so cager as others to take the
pattern for future improvement from the past, he repeatedly affirms that the nineteenth century could learn much from the pre-reformation scene. Religious houses without “their irreverent vows” could be revived as retreats for the thoughtful; protestant nunneries could provide the machinery for much needed charitable works; church fraternities could supply the outlet for a zeal otherwise driven to Methodism; universities could learn from the medieval institutions lessons on the treatment of poor scholars and on the true nature of learning. And particularly the nineteenth century men of business could look to the guilds and to their merchant ancestors “wiser in their generation than the men of these days” in their knowledge that: “when trade is conducted by corporate bodies, the check upon fraud may more than compensate for any inconveniences arising from want of competition.”

Fourteen years after the Colloquies were published, a circular appeared on whose title page was a generous excerpt expressing the poet’s wish that England too might have “her Beguines and Sisters of Charity.” The pamphlet was intended as a memorial to Southey and its purpose was to raise funds for the foundation of an Anglican sisterhood. It was issued, significantly, by the Young Englanders, one of whose leaders, George Smythe, named the Colloquies as a primary source of their ideas and Southey as the real founder of the movement.

Neither Cobbett nor Southey was much concerned, however, with what was later an inevitable concomitant of the economic side of the revival—a comparison of the arts in medieval and in modern times as a revelation of the state of the societies that produced them. But in 1836 a slender volume, discussing the Reformation much in Cobbett’s spirit, placed the emphasis on the excellence of medieval architecture and the inferiority of modern, and foreshadowed, though faintly, the position of Ruskin, Morris, and Arthur Penty. The title, Contrast, hinted at the author’s purpose: “I wish to pluck from the age the mask of superior attainments so falsely assumed and I am anxious to direct the attention of all back to the real merit of past and better days.” In the scales of the art they produced, the young architect, Augustus Welby Pugin, weighed the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries and found his own times very much wanting. More important than the text, however, were the accompanying plates. On each of sixteen pages appeared a modern and a medieval scene; and in every case the latter had the distinct advantage. There were town halls, churches, monuments, conduits, palaces, college gateways, and inns, and everywhere in the modern picture were hints of brutality, sordidness, and degenerate taste. Two in particular illustrate Pugin’s method and purpose. In the first, “towns 1840 and 1440,” the fifteenth century scene is resplendent with spires rising into the clear air.

There is a beautiful harmony in the style of the buildings despite the varying purposes of each, and in the clearings between, tiny figures can be seen enjoying the walks that lead to a tree-lined embankment. In the modern, all is incongruity and ugliness. Scattered ruins mark the sites of a few of the old churches, but the scene is now cluttered by the cheese box chapels of sectarianism. Smoke rises from the factories, and the additions to the picture are signs of the times: the jail, the lunatic asylum, the iron works, and the Socialist Hall of Science. “Contrasted Residence of the Poor” is Cobbett’s argument made visible—that the monasteries fulfilled amicably and well the duties grudgingly and ineffectively performed by those working under a modern law that permits, even encourages, indignities to the suffering poor.

The book was partisan, brilliant, and eccentric, a likely product of the youth of the man who later recited complines in full vestments in his private Gothic chapel and who once declared that life was worth living for two reasons: Christian architecture and a boat. It is strange that Ruskin failed to see wherein his lesser contemporary anticipated him on the subject of architecture in its relations to the state of society. It can be no surprise, however, that Ruskin failed to appreciate Pugin’s pleasing humility in discussing his own accomplishments that here and there softens the vigor and wit of his style.

A few years later, 1838, two other very young men in an Ambleside church listened with complete and enthusiastic approval to the speaker, himself a very young man, as he raised the “standard of ancient truth,” lately rediscovered at Oxford. The preacher was Frederick William Faber; his converts, two students of Cambridge, one of whom recorded in his journal that night: “We have now virtually pledged ourselves to restore—what? I hardly know—but still it is a glorious attempt.” But in 1842, the year before the publication of Past and Present, Lord John Manners had clarified his views as to what was to be restored. “The mists are rolling away, and the alternative will soon present itself—a democracy or a Feudalism.” He and his friend George Smythe were now members of parliament—the second Ambleside convert having won his seat after an election distinguished by a fervid speech of loyalty to the queen and by a challenge to a duel. Together they read More’s Utopia and visited the Lancashire mills, where they saw the extremes represented by the Grant brothers (Dickens’s Cheeryble) and the horrors of the Stockport cellars. Manners wrote a plea for the return of national holy days and much chivalric poetry; Smythe wrote a Carlylean apostrophe to the cotton spinners, whom he regarded as the “legitimate heirs of the English adventurers.” Their romantic and medieval background was clear enough from their reading and their enthusiasms: they were ardent
Jacobites; the Eikon Basilike, Clarendon’s History, and Kenelm Digby’s Broad Stone of Honour were included in their canon; and they paid the proper tribute to Burke and Scott. No radicals could have been more convinced of the necessity of reform than these young Tories; but they saw the solution in terms of the traditional past, in a return to a responsible aristocracy and a healthy and prosperous, and religious, peasantry. Their generous concern for their own times and their attempt to relate social reconstruction to the new history as they understood it were intermingled with enough fondness for maypoles and Morris dances, however, to make their efforts the butt of the superficial observer. As Thackeray’s James de la Pluche notes of “Young Hengland”: “They’re always writing about battleaxis and shivvelry, these young chaps.”

Saintsbury in our own times has come eloquently to their defense, but they had a champion closer at hand in Disraeli, whose astuteness saw the possibilities of turning the exaggerated enthusiasm for all things feudal into constructive Tory channels. When he, Smythe, Manners, and Cochran sat and voted together in 1842 the Young England Movement officially began. How far the older and shrewder member followed his young friends in their historical adventures it would be difficult to determine with exactness. Certainly even John Manners must have been satisfied with the sentiment expressed in an early speech of Disraeli’s: “The principle of the feudal system was the noblest principle, the grandest, the most magnificent and benevolent that was ever conceived by sage, or ever practised by patriot.” And on another occasion he admonished the workers of Manchester in Ruskinian tones and held up to them the “stimulating examples of the great merchants of Venice, who were the patrons of Titian and Tintoretto . . . . and the manufacturers of Flanders.” The medieval dress, therefore, very gracefully if temporarily clothed the unchanging figure of his thought—the strengthening of the influence of church and crown; and he shared the Young England views sufficiently to incorporate them in the two novels, Coningsby and Sybil.

It was, therefore, to an England familiar with the association of medievalism and the social question that Carlyle addressed the greatest study of contrasts in this tradition. Past and Present. Paradoxically enough, the distinction of writing the book that mention of the revival immediately suggests, belongs to the man who had far less perfect sympathies than others with many of its phases. The pageantry of the past concerned him little. Carlyle was not of the company who sang, as Chesterton said of Scott, “‘Wa’d ye nae come back again’ to people who would have been a terrible nuisance to him if they had.” He cared, rather, for “what went on the while” among ordinary men, when Rich-
William Morris

reap-silver and carucates, mill and market dues—indeed the strength of Book II depends largely on the inspired use made of the visible details of life—there is a subtle shift in emphasis. Pamphleteer, poet, artist, and statesman have tried their hand at the new instrument. Now it is the mystic’s turn. The garment of medievalism has merit only while it corresponds to the living body beneath. What is of value for modern England in medieval St. Edmundsbury is timeless—eternal and unchanging inner facts.

With the same penetration to the heart of things, Carlyle views his own times. He finds that the lot of “the dumb millions born to toil” has never been “so entirely unbearable” in the whole range of history. An England full of wealth is “dying of inanition”—millions of shirts, millions of bare backs, and an enchantment that prevents the necessary transfer. The energies that have gone hitherto almost entirely into production must now turn to a just distribution; labour must be organized under the proper leadership and the cash payment forever discarded as the sole relationship between man and man. “Under that heaven’s light, my brethren, bloom the Happy Isles.” Such a leadership and such a relationship he sees in Samson and the medieval scene. With an England lost in the enchantment of semblances, Carlyle contrasts an England close to eternal verities; with a game preserving lord, a sainted landlord Edmund; with a modern idle aristocracy, a feudal aristocracy giving real government and guidance in return for their land; with the “diseased self-introspection” of nineteenth century religion, the living and work-a-day faith of the monks; with the mutual hostility and the isolation of man from man, the sense of belonging, however humbly, to the social group; with the tragic inability to secure wise leadership, the “social vitality” that instinctively recognized the fit governor; above all—he contrasted with a Jabesh Windbag, member of parliament, an Abbot Samson of St. Edmundsbury.

How Samson worked through his difficulties is at the center of the lesson. Far more complex problems await the modern Samsons, but men of his stamp must settle them. They will establish the chivalry of labour to replace the buccaneer spirit of nineteenth century industry; they will substitute permanent for temporary contracts and so end the fear that keeps the worker a virtual slave. In seeing “Millocracy” as a real giant “though a blind one,” and hope for nobility in the rude strength of a Plugson of Undershot, Carlyle again departs from the pattern. With Ruskin and after, medievalism becomes increasingly identified with an anti-industrial spirit. But Carlyle accepts “Tools and the Man” as the epic theme of the future. A “splendour of God” will unfold itself in a world of cotton-mills and Richard Arkwright, no less than St. Edmundsbury.

Morris and the Tradition

will have his monument. Perhaps it is significant that the two historians in the group, Southey and Carlyle, rebel the least against the machine and its place in the modern world.

Perhaps the historian’s delight in a fresh primary source and the poet’s in the breath of life still present in its homely details are responsible for Carlyle’s greatest triumph—the sense of the past evoked by the medieval section, Book II. The picture of St. Edmundsbury and the England of 1200, a “green and solid place, that grew corn and other things,” symbolizes what was happening in the nineteenth century to the imaginations of thinking men. With their new instrument they looked back across the grey years, and suddenly found them no longer grey, but green, and the living past revealing itself “beautifully in our earnest loving gaze.”

For John Ruskin, the return to the Middle Ages was not, as in Carlyle’s case, an isolated adventure, but a repeated pilgrimage to the past, fruitful of much that was best and most characteristic in his work. Medievalism reveals itself in the allusions and examples of Munera Pulveris and Unto This Last, and it is implicit in the moral values that upset for him the balanced calculations of the political economists. It is directly expressed in the studies on art and architecture, notably The Stones of Venice; and it pervades that treasury of wisdom and madness, of eloquence and crabbled wit, Fors Clavigera. The writing of two decades bears witness to the strength of Ruskin’s conviction that those ages were feudal, ours free; those reverent, ours impudent; those artful, ours mechanical: the consummate and exhaustive difference being that the creed of the Dark Ages was “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty . . .” and the creed of the Light Ages has become “I believe in Father Mud, the Almighty Plastic . . .”

Eight years after Past and Present Ruskin, too, consciously assumed the prophet’s role to read a sermon for modern England in the stones of medieval and Renaissance Venice. He saw parallels in their history, and in the parallels, warnings that were not to be ignored unless England looked to be led “through proder cunmenence to less pitied destruction.” The “secret spring” of the Venetian Republic was her commercial interest. “She could forgive insults to her honor, but never rivalry in her commerce; she calculated the glory of her conquests by their value, and estimated their justice by their facility.” Her strength lay in the vitality of her domestic religion; her limitation, in her failure to extend its principles to public life. Her greatest years were those in which, with Carlylean wisdom, she chose her “wisest and noblest” to guide her vigorous commonalty. Her decline began with the adoption of modern errors in
the guise of Renaissance gifts. “The Renaissance frosts came and all perished.” In Ruskin’s hands the architecture of the city becomes a national confessional, and churches, palaces, and tombs, the occasions of vice or virtue from which the most intricate and marvellous lessons are drawn. He can see morality in the gentle lines of a convex chamfer, and character in the strength of an arch. He finds religion in cornices; Protestant in one, “with a slight touch of dissent, hardly amounting to schism, in those falling leaves, but true life in the whole of it”; Romanist, in another, in whose “officialism” old Heathenism stands revealed. The ranks of ornament, in which beauty and nobility depend on fitting subordination, become for him the types of “good human government.” Their antithesis is “democratic ornament” in which all “is equally influential” and the whole reduced to the level of “continual struggle for independence and notoriety, or of gambling for chance regards.” But the greatest lesson is neither moral, religious, nor political, but social. It is found in the nature of Gothic itself as defined by Ruskin in the chapter Morris called the “one inevitable utterance of the century.”

Familiarity has somewhat dulled the point and the eloquence of Ruskin’s argument, just as most revolutionary utterances seem to lose their fire when dropped in the sea of human casualness. But perhaps the indictment against industrialism has never been so clearly expressed in terms of the price we pay for mass production and mechanical finish—no less a price than the freedom of spirit of the men reduced by the system to precision tools. “We manufacture everything there but men.” In “The Nature of Gothic” and its brilliant but less familiar companion piece, “The Roman Renaissance,” Ruskin places the blame where it belongs: upon the society that allows and encourages methods of manufacture that reduce the majority to virtual slavery. Modern faults, he believes, stem from Renaissance faults, and the art of both periods inexorably record the first principles that have made the nineteenth century worker worse off than his medieval counterpart. The architecture that replaced Gothic tells the story. “It is rigid, cold, inhuman; incapable of glowing, of stooping, of conceding for an instant.” Forgetful of “the common majesty of the human soul” and of “the brotherly kindness due from man to man,” it is “full of insult to the poor in every line.” In this setting, of whose temper art is the visible expression, the workmen find “their souls withering within them.” Cut off from original design by demands for an erudition possible only for the few, reduced in execution to slavish copying of another’s thoughts, prevented by expense from creating the lovely forms that once adapted themselves to the humblest material, they become the “miserable workers” in the unhappy world they share with the “morbid thinkers.” A return to Gothic and its principles is the only answer: for England to accept once more the thoughtful effort of the labourer, regardless of limitations of finish, and once more “out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole.” The roughness and irregularity of the earlier art were the “signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children.” It is no wonder that when Morris came to print his best loved books at Kelmscott Press he did not forget “The Nature of Gothic.”

The Stones of Venice ends on a note of hope—London may yet be “as Venice without her despotism, as Florence without her dispease”—but hope is hardly the mood of Fors Clavigera twenty years later. Now the deluge is inevitable. “Nothing can save the country or the church from the punishment of her crimes.” Ruskin is merely constructing a life raft of medieval design to salvage something of modern England. The historians have failed him. They have missed the possibilities in didactic contrasts. Even Froude, “despite the backward leanings of his inmost thoughts” has left Ruskin waiting “passionately” and in vain for “some utterance,” some “noble story about the brave and faithful dead, and noble wrath against the wretched and miscreant dead-alive.” He himself, then, as amateur historian, in these letters to the workmen of England will place before them “so much of the past history of the world” as may enable them “to see the laws of Fortune or Destiny . . .” He will share with them what God has revealed “to Carpaccio, and Angelico, and Dante, and Giotto, and Filippo Lippi, and Sandro Botticelli”—and to him. To medieval events and characters the appeal is most frequently made: to John Hawkwood and his White Company, to Robert of Flanders, Henry II, and Edward III, to St. Louis and the two Friedichs of Germany and Prussia, to Jean de Meung, Chaucer, and Victor Carpaccio, and to that figure of the transition and saint of the revivalists, Sir Thomas More, “communist of the old school.” “Gothic opinions,” subversive of modern economic notions of free trade and cash nexus and political notions of equality, are fortified by Giotto prints and appeals to Dante, authority on the fit punishment of usurers, and by stories of Richard Coeur-de-Lion, who insisted on honest cloth and honest measures, and who worked at Ascalon “with greater ardor than any labourer.”

Throughout the ninety-six letters run the inevitable contrasts. With the spirit of modern commerce is contrasted that implied in an ancient Venetian inscription: “Around this temple let the merchant’s laws be just—his weights true, and his agreements guileless.” The “first words of
Venice to the mercantile world,” Ruskin calls them, and coupled with “laws of liberty and equality such as you know not, nor yet for many a day, can learn again.” The Florentine regulations against middlemen branded as criminal the methods that in the nineteenth century permit the “buyers-to-sell-again” to dump back into the sea the fish on the Yarmouth quays rather than lower the prices in hungry London. The slovenly craftsmanship of the modern world would need its own In-fer-no, but in the comprehensive retribution of Dante’s Hell there is no punishment for bad workmanship willynilly done—“no Tuscan mind at that day being able to conceive of such a ghastly sin.”

St. George’s Guild is the life raft Ruskin offers England “amidst the inevitable wreckage.” It must be acknowledged that many would prefer the open sea. Few men have been capable of greater wisdom and grace in the outlining of larger truths; and few have been as erratic in detail. England is to be converted and saved by the example of healthy young men and women living in a hierarchical community governed by fourteenth century Florentine laws, “with additional rules from Bacon or Sir Thomas More.” They will reverence their Doge and Dogaressa, dress according to sumptuary laws, and for currency use well-turned ducats and florins stamped with the images of St. George and St. Michael. And all this under the patronage of Ursula, that sweetly smiling saint of medieval legend, who, rather coldheartedly, it would seem, led her thousand bridesmaids to inevitable martyrdom. But her life’s purpose prefigures his, Ruskin assured us: “to convert the savage mind of the English, or the people of Over-Sea, from the worship of their god Malcometto to the rule of St. John the Baptist.”

William Morris was next in the tradition, and perhaps no other writer in this group equalled him in the range and variety of his medieval interests. The story of his enthusiasm for the period is the story of the revival, beginning in a romantic preoccupation with the past for its own sake and ending in a pragmatic concern for the past for the sake of the present and future. His life touches the movement at almost every point: Scott and ballad literature in his boyhood; plain chant and high church liturgy in the after-glow of the Oxford Movement; architectural apprenticeship and pilgrimages to the cathedrals of France; poetry and painting in the Pre-Raphaelite manner; medieval crafts with the founding of the Firm; book making and book collecting in the Kelmscott days; and finally—medievalism with a purpose in the socialist years. The chapters that follow will illustrate how this lifelong interest shaped his vision of the world, and how, when the vision was clear, it furnished again and again the images that helped him share his dream with others. One thing, however, this study will not do: it will not minimize his revolu-

tionary politics or “explain away” his socialism. The sincerity of his final position cannot be questioned, though the road that led to it was medieval and romantic and he shared it often with the reactionary. The purpose is, rather, to trace the workings of the historic imagination in the evolution of his plan for the future, and to illumine the movement as it stands revealed in the efforts of a characteristic figure.

Medievalism with a purpose might have been illustrated at length, perhaps, with Carlyle or Ruskin as well as with Morris. But Morris loved the Middle Ages more than Carlyle and understood them better than Ruskin. He is without that ethical preoccupation that turns the lessons of Past and Present not only into a commentary on Victorian political economy, but also into a moral treatise on the individual soul struggle with work the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. And he is without the vagueness of Ruskin, the quality that made Aubrey de Vere lament a lack of “hooks and eyes” in his thought. Granted that Ruskin has a magnificent vagueness at times—the mountain glory and the mountain gloom and the mist of catacombs—it is far less effective in driving home a permanent lesson than the homelier illustrations of Morris—comforting with the reality of the hammer, the chisel, the plane, and the feel of worsteds. Morris, too, is as acceptable to us in what he rejects of the medieval tradition as in what he retains. There is no disturbing praise of feudalism, even in principle, as a hierarchy to be imitated. There is nothing in his social theory that finds its fittest illustrations in the relation of master to domestic servant, a figure that the reader of Ruskin constantly encounters. When Carlyle read the Heimskringla, the story of the early kings of Norway written by Snorri Sturlason of Iceland, he delighted in a perfect feast of strong men: Old Gorm of Denmark and Harold Hairfair—they knew how to bring order out of chaos by the strong-arm method—“virtues largely in discredit,” says Carlyle, “at present, but not unlikely to be needed again to the astonishment of careless persons before all is done!” And Hakon the Good could cope with Hakon Jarl, that Scandinavian Puseyite with his pagan church building and his ritualistic horse-eatings and blood sprinklings. But when Morris read of Harold Hairfair, his sympathy was with the rebellious bonders—the men who left Norway and founded the medieval republic of Iceland rather than submit to Harold’s “authentic virtue in the savage state.”

But perhaps the best reason for illustrating the trend in the works of Morris is his position in the century. He looks back to Ruskin. For despite his lack of sympathy with the crockets of Ruskinian medievalism, he frankly and repeatedly acknowledged his indebtedness to the fundamental ideas of the older man. And he looks forward to our own times—
of the outward trappings of the nineteenth century tradition; it consists, rather, of principles, of which anti-statism is one of the most prominent. Like Morris, they look back to the decentralization of the past and the times when real government was conducted by more agencies than the state alone.

Descent from the Victorian tradition is illustrated by another movement, whose spokesmen, Chesterton and Belloc, by the brilliance of their literary gifts, have won for the group an attention beyond the merits, perhaps, of their numbers or influence. Significantly they claim both Cobbett and Morris among the forerunners who made straight the path of modern Distributism. The Servile State, The Restoration of Property, and the lively medieval capers of the American Review give their position: they hope for the return of the widely distributed property they believe characterized the later Middle Ages. The *sumnum bonum* is not collectivism and bureaucracy, not guild socialism combined with heretical rejection of private property, but the end of capitalism and the return of power to the hands of the little owners.

For one hundred years, then, men have turned to the medieval past in their attempt to formulate a lesson for the present and an ideal for the future, and on several occasions the story of the search and the solution has been memorably expressed. *Past and Present*, *The Stones of Venice*, and *A Dream of John Ball*, with all the signs of the times implicit in them, are within the field of the student of literature. But when the full record of the tradition is written, it will need the supplementary accounts of the artist and the historian. And even then, with all its ramifications scholarly and creative, it is still but a part of the greater revival in which the Victorian Age turned again and again to history, ancient, biblical, and European, for some answer to the pressing questions of a growing and changing world. The century seems to have written its autobiography, however, in terms of its medieval enthusiasm: its foibles revealed in the dilettantism that Carlyle decried; its faith in the earnest search for spiritual truths in traditional forms; its need for beauty in the appreciation of primitives and of Gothic; and its inner restlessness and uncertainty, never far beneath the seemingly calm surface of national complacency, in the persistent return to the past to recapture the lost responsibility of man to man. Of this last, William Morris, medievalist and revolutionary, is the fitting symbol.
Forging of the Sword

The obscure but powerful ethics of Going North.
Morris did it before, dropping the frits and fuss,
Harps and arbour, Tristram and Theseus,
For a land of rocks and sagas...

W. H. Auden—Letters from Iceland

Morris’s life has the integrity of one of his own patterns: there is a singleness of vision in all he said and did. His dream of a new world, apparently the creation of the later years, in reality grows from his earlier thoughts as inevitably as the flower from the vine, and medievalism and socialism, like two intertwining branches, now one, now the other predominating, but always inextricably joined, run through the fabric of his days. When he became a member of the Social Democratic Federation in 1883, his contemporaries, and even his friends, were not looking back over the years for the continuity that gave logic to the step. But Morris himself recognized how deeply his political thought was rooted in his past and how his joining a revolutionary group came as a confirmation rather than a beginning. In “How I Became a Socialist” he said, “Now this view of Socialism which I hold today, and hope to die holding, is what I began with; I had no transitional period...” He was always with those “who were in open rebellion against Whiggery” and though he carried his crusade against the spirit of the times beyond either Carlyle or Ruskin, they were the prophets who first “gave form to his discontent” and deepened the “leading passion of his life,” hatred of modern civilization. Strengthened, this passion led him to revolutionary politics, but it was essentially the same feeling that animated him in the days of the Oxford “Brotherhood” when he and the set accepted Past and Present as from one having authority and planned “doing something for the world, each in his own way.” William Morris of the Hammersmith Socialist Society entertained some socio-political ideas not unfamiliar to William Morris of Hell Quad, Exeter, and something of the mood and methods of the triumphant union of medievalism and socialism in A Dream of John Ball is prefigured in his “first allegory of modern England,” Swend and His Brethren.

“The love of the Middle Ages was born in him,” has been well said of Morris, and certainly little he met with in the Oxford he entered in January, 1853, was likely to alter the original bent of his mind. The town itself retained much of its medieval character, and as he testified years later the “memory of its grey streets as they were then” became an “abiding influence and pleasure” in his life. The university was alert to all the aspects of the revival. The Oxford movement may have passed its prime but there was still warmth and light in the afterglow. The numerous Tennyson idolaters among the undergraduates watched with approval the growing medievalism of his verse, and Anglicans, agnostics, and latitudinarians flocked daily to St. Thomas’ and the fascination of plain chant. George Street, architect, was conducting local building in the proper Gothic manner, and the authorities were soon to contemplate a design for the Debating Union in a combination of Rhenish and Venetian. Certainly much in the atmosphere of Oxford in the fifties was congenial to young Morris, who arrived from Marlborough with a fair knowledge of archeology, a better knowledge of architecture, and a generous enthusiasm for ballads, heraldry, and Sir Walter Scott.

Nor was the naïvely worded warning of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine needed in his case: the necessity for “young men of the present age” to meditate upon “social wrongs, their causes, and the best way in which they, each in their several spheres, may help to heal them”—an obligation that extends “even to those who love the life of the recluse, and would strive to conjure up images of the Middle Ages as they pore in some quaint Gothic nook, over the stirring chronicle of the olden days.” Morris was always saved from mere antiquarianism by the characteristic he shared with King Olaf of Gertha’s Lovers: “that mighty power of sympathy for others, which no fiercest passion can altogether put aside, even for the time.” In addition the innate socialism Mackail says Morris never was without was to be strengthened by another set of ideas: “the spirit of dedication afloat, often but not always medieval in expression or inspiration, that animates Alton Locke and appealed strongly to the young Anglican, who showed a significant preference for Kingsley over Newman.

Academic life was a disappointment to him, however. It was the familiar story, too familiar for comment, of the young student “full of enthusiasm for things holy and beautiful and true,” finding in the lecture hall very little to answer his real need. More advance in wisdom and knowledge, though accompanied by bear-fights and hilarious talk, was
made in Faulkner’s rooms at Pembroke than in his tutor’s at Exeter. For Morris found the means a kind fate seems sometimes to provide for the disinheritance of the universities—a lively, congenial, and intelligent “set.” There was William Fulford, with his appreciation of Tennison, his eager, incessant, yet stimulating chatter, his intensity that burned itself out before college was over, and left him with the prospect of a quiet and uneventful life and his friends with silent regret at the lost promise. There was Charley Faulkner, the gifted mathematician, who left a university career to follow Morris into art and later into socialism, and who was his companion on both Icelandic journeys. There was Cornell Price, who came, like Faulkner, from the manufacturing districts and brought with him a first hand knowledge of conditions there that tempered the romanticism of the others. There was Canon Dixon, and Harry MacDonald, and later Wilfred Healey and the Lushingtons of Cambridge. But above all, there was Edward Burne-Jones.

When Burne-Jones came to Oxford he brought with him, in addition to a gift for drawing enchanting devils, several enthusiasms and interests that attracted the boy from Marlborough. Edward too was under the spell of the High Church movement, though, as with Morris, the religious background of the family was evangelical and on his frequent London visits he attended the chapel whose plump red pulpit cushion has been immortalized in Praeterita. His love of beauty, however, certainly not satisfied by Cruikshank, the artist he then knew best, responded to the cathedral services at Hereford, and at home in Birmingham, he persuaded his father to change from the evangelical church of St. Mary’s to the Anglican church of St. Paul’s. Through the University Sermons Newman too exercised once more the fascination that held an earlier generation of Oxford men. And Edward had seen the Cistercian Monastery in Charnwood Forest and had come away with dreams of peaceful retirement that may have contributed to the plans for a “Brotherhood” at Oxford. His thoughts, like Morris’, were directed toward the ministry, and with the mock-seriousness so characteristic of him always, he signed himself “Eduardo Cardinal de Byrimgham” or “Archbishop of Canterbury, elect.” William “might have been a bishop” was Mrs. Morris’ lament for her son. But the designs of the two “might-have-beens” on high places in the Establishment bore at least this much fruit: their friendship was strengthened by the excitement they shared over Archdeacon Wilberforce and his Enquiry into the Principles of Church Authority and by their common delight in the theological arguments that were growing a little less fashionable in the fifties.

Edward had another claim on Morris’ interest. He had already developed that feeling for history which later created for him, as it did for his friend, a very “world of sympathy and love,” with “heroes, hundreds of them, up and down the centuries.” He knew something of the East, of Babylon, Nineveh, Persia, and Egypt, and he had discovered the British Museum. His “literary works,” all fragments, included an “Epitome of Ancient Chronology, from the Creation of the World to the Birth of Our Lord” and a “Universal History” in which he wrote of the times from the deluge to Cambyses in “a very few weeks.” He knew the English ballads, and to the question—“Do you believe in witches?”—he could answer: “I should very much like to do so.” He was ready for Oxford, for the set, and for “Topsy.”

The real fruit of their friendship, however, grew from their custom of reading together, begun at Oxford and continued throughout their lives. To the Tracts for the Times and the Church Fathers were added masses of chronicles and Latin poetry. They read Chaucer and years later commemorated their early love in the beautiful Kelmscott edition of which Burne-Jones said, “We have made at the end of our days the very thing we would have made then if we could.” It was Burne-Jones who found Southey’s edition of the Morte D’Arthur and it was Morris who bought it; and for both it always remained the book of books. Among their modern favorites was The Heir of Redclyffe, whose hero wrote an epic on King Arthur, called his wife “Verena,” and found comfort on his deathbed in hearing her read from Sintram. Sir Guy, in his resemblance to Sir Galahad “when he kneels to adore the San Greal” and in his plans, in the spirit of Young England, for the improvement of the peasantry, symbolizes the combination of the social and the romantic that appealed so strongly to the Oxford undergraduate of the mid-century. For a more forthright treatment of modern problems the two preferred Yeats and Alton Locke, and Edward concluded that the Christian Socialists were good fellows if Kingsley and Maurice were typical. Sidonia by William Meinhold satisfied their fondness for the grotesque and violent, the same qualities that made Morris particularly enjoy The Earl’s Return of Owen Meredith. The romanticism and pietism of Fouque’s Sintram did not prove too excessive for them, relieved as it was by a Dürer woodcut and a northern theme. It was Edward who introduced Morris to Thorpe’s Northern Mythology and a new world. Burne-Jones later lost his interest in the Norse; his medievalism became increasingly Celtic. But the beautiful exaggerations of the Irish material in which the painter delighted rather chilled Morris. To him Cu Chulainn and his distortions were a source of wonder rather than of love, whereas Grettir, in spite of the troll women, was of the stuff of humanity.

One author, Kenelm Digby, whose name is virtually forgotten today or else confused with that of his seventeenth century ancestor, influenced
them profoundly. They read him independently, however—a little shamefaced in acknowledging their admiration, perhaps because of Digby's avowed popery or because of his flamboyant romanticism, his poetic appeals to the “knightly and meditative man,” and those qualities of thought and style that made Chateaubriand, with rueful remembrance of his own dead enthusiasms, call The Broad Stone of Honour an anachronism and “fit only for dreaming youth.” Digby in his life and writings symbolizes the shift in attitude toward the medieval period. He left Cambridge with the conviction, implanted by Julius Hare, that the accepted view of the Reformation was the creation of a “vulgar fool” and he foreshadowed the tone of his future work by keeping a knightly vigil in King's College Chapel. Several years before Cobbett or Southey's picture of pre-Reformation England, Digby, also with a didactic purpose in mind, wrote his “history of heroic times, arranged chiefly with a view to convey lessons of surviving and perpetual interest to the generous part of mankind.” Though his emphasis was philosophical, religious, and moral rather than social, Digby greatly influenced many others whose appeal to the medieval was made primarily for light on modern reform. The “Broad Stone” contains the familiar challenge to the progress of the age, “the subject of such exaltation to some and of such regret to others”; the familiar question, “Were these mighty changes necessary?”; the conventional picture of the prosperous and artistic medieval England, free from poor laws; and the supporting arguments of the new historians, “the ablest political writers of France and Germany,” who “ascribe a much greater degree of real freedom to the majority of subjects under the temporal governments of the Middle Ages than many persons will believe they enjoyed.” Digby knew well Lord John Manners and Ambrose de Lisle Philips, and the “Broad Stone” was an acknowledged influence in the Young England Movement. Ruskin confessed that Digby was the author “from whom I first learned to love nobleness,” and certainly passages from Digby on the spirit of obedience and the dangers of republics and democracies compared with sections in Fors show that Ruskin learned his lesson well. Montalembert's comment on Digby's Mores Catholici, a study that won the special favour of Morris and Burne-Jones, gives a hint as to the nature and the influence of these eleven books on the spirit of the beatitudes as it was made manifest in the Middle Ages: “The Mores Catholici is the best book to make the Middle Ages known and loved,” but, he adds, “It is right to acknowledge that the defective aspect of the Middle Ages (what the Germans so justly call the Schattenzeit) has not been sufficiently brought to light by Mr. Digby.”

Perhaps the book that had the greatest influence, however, on Morris' artistic and social theories and their medieval expression was Ruskin's Stones of Venice. The set remembered always the delight with which he would chant aloud the passages that pleased him most. Long after, as a socialist, he said of it, “To some of us when we first read it now many years ago, it seemed to point out a new road on which the world would travel.” There can be little doubt that it permanently fixed some of his major ideas. The high church leanings that were already weakening were quietly destroyed by its caustic anti-romanism and Ruskin's contention, accompanied by the brilliant but vicious attack on Pugin, that Catholicism was not the necessary companion of the arts. It cured him of Puseyism, he told Andreas Scheu. Certainly the marvellous but neglected passages on wall veils and cornices, buttercups and piers, in which Ruskin conveys in non-technical terms the sense of creation present in all good architecture, must have stirred the builder's instinct in Morris and strengthened the resolve made on the quay at Le Havre to devote himself entirely to his new profession. The central theme—architecture as the record of the society producing it—was to be repeated time and again in the art lectures of the seventies and eighties. By arguments whose social emphasis made them more attractive, the “Stones” confirmed his natural preference for the medieval over the renaissance, and the message of the “Nature of Gothic” is at the heart of much of his socialist propaganda.

Admirers of Morris are sometimes unwilling to admit the extent of his indebtedness, but it would be difficult to find many points in his work, from his interest in calligraphy to “Anti-Scrape,” not previously developed or at least suggested somewhere in Ruskin. Eshleman's attempt to minimize the influence of the older man makes meaningless Morris' repeated statements that the “pith” of what he had to say was “said by Ruskin years ago.” Vida Scudder is equally far from the truth in stating that Morris is merely Ruskin “demoralized.” Morris took much but he rejected the cornerstone—the Ruskinian conception of the rightness and inevitability of inequality in this world—and that rejection threw all he thought and said into new patterns. Besides the greatness of Morris lies not so much in the originality of his message as in the sincerity with which he believed it, the art with which he preached it, and the genius he had for reaching the hearts of men to whom the greater music and the greater subtlety, and, alas, the infinitely greater vagaries of Ruskin leave forever untouched. It would be a mistaken zeal, however, that would lessen the importance of The Stones of Venice, with its challenge to modern England in medieval terms, in the development of Morris' attitude toward art and work.

It was not surprising that a group open to such influences in their
reading were equally receptive to an idea very much in the air at the
time—a romantic revival of interest in monasticism. Southey, of course,
had given in the Colloquies his plans for nineteenth century convents.
Littlemore, less than ten years before the set were at Oxford, had aroused
the curiosity—not always charitable as Newman testifies—of both town
gown. England had heard of the German Pre-Raphaelites, Overbeck
and Cornelius, who, with rigid standards of craftsmanship and
obligatory manual labour, lived according to monastic rule at Rome.
George G. Street, in whose office Morris was soon to begin his architectur-
ical training, was with difficulty dissuaded from launching such a pro-
ject himself. Even Ruskin contemplated a “protestant convent.” The
idea was one of the most persistent in the tradition of the appeal to the
medieval past and it was frequently linked with a revival of the arts and a
direct or implied criticism of the industrial order. One of the latest ven-
tures was in our own times: the artist Eric Gill, a man acknowledging his
debt to Ruskin and Morris, founded a lay society which lived under the
Benedictine rule. A monastic community with its fellowship, its tradi-
tions of art and learning, its promise of solving a problem of the present
by medieval means, had a powerful appeal for the set, and they joyously
became the “Brotherhood.”

Burne-Jones was particularly enthusiastic. They would conduct a crus-
da, a “Holy Warfare against this Age,” and they would live, celibates,
in a monastery with Galahad as their patron. In 1854 he writes that he
longs to be back in Oxford “with Morris and his glorious little company
of martyrs. The monastery stands a fairer chance than ever of being
founded: I know that it will be some day.” Celibacy and Galahad soon
proved incompatible with the notions of some of the would-be monks,
however, and for the original religious emphasis, probably inspired by
Hurrell Froude’s Project for the Revival of Religion in Great Towns,
were substituted social and literary aims. In 1855 the set were increas-
ingly conscious of their unity and purpose. They were all reading Past
and Present, and Morris, back from his eventful second journey to the
cathedrals of France, was full of ideas on architecture and the organiza-
tion of labour. The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, planned that fall
and issued monthly throughout 1856, gave the needed outlet to these
earnest young men in—“Dreamland.” “For there,” said Rossetti, “most
of the writers in that miraculous piece of literature seem to be.”

But it was a generous Dreamland. Most of the contributions, and the
more important ones, were literary, but current questions were not neg-
glected, and three main articles, “Unhealthy Employments,” “Lancas-
shire and Mary Barton,” and “The Work of Young Men in the Present
Age,” as well as others on Carlyle, Ruskin, and Froude, reveal the
thoughts and attitudes of the group in which Morris moved. It was to be
an all-out war against the age. “We have before us a Hercules task to
sweep the world clear of work-houses, open sewers, strikes, money-grubb-
ings, over-production, and an ugly infinity of political and religious
phantasms; the existence of such things implies an unsettled transition-
ary period—to what remains with ourselves.” As Morris said later, they
were young then, very young. The articles on Carlyle, however, give evi-
dence of a thorough knowledge of his work and a penetrating evaluation
of his use of history. Past and Present and the “gospel of social order”
embodied in feudalism—its “completeness and beauty,” its “faith, wis-
dom, and valour”—meet with special approval. The author of “Mary
Barton and Lancashire” urges the widespread adoption by the employer
of Carlyle’s “permanent contract”: “There was something more than
the mere bond of gold that united the feudal baron, your predecessor,
to his dependents.” There are appreciative quotations from the “Nature
of Gothic” and from Mr. Mill on the division of society into the “payers
of wages and the receivers of them,” a system “neither fit nor capable of
indefinite duration.” Froude’s History of England, particularly admired
because it refutes a “false belief” about the earlier period, the “gratuitous
and ungenerous assumption that we are better and better off than they,”
is reviewed in a manner that shows the “backward leanings” of the critic’s “inmost thoughts.” The selections chosen are those that describe
the sixteenth century as an age “when an attempt more or less successful
was made to bring the production and distribution of wealth under the
moral rule of right and wrong; and where those laws of supply and de-
demand, which we are now taught to regard as the immutable laws of na-
ture, were absorbed or superseded by a higher code.” Such was the at-
mosphere of Morris’ formative years at Oxford.

To expect the direct expression on social problems of a Wilfred Heeley
or a Vernon Lushington from William Morris would be to misunder-
stand the start the nature of the man who said his work was always
the “embodiment of dreams in one form or another” and who, even as a
socialist, was given to the vision rather than to dialectics. But here and
there in the immensely medieval prose are foreshadowings, however faint,
of the implied message of the romances of the last years and unmistak-
able evidences that the thoughts common to the group had taken deep
root. The people of Gertha’s Lovers, the “free brave men” whom the
“tyrant kings” have reason to fear, could claim kinship with the House
of the Wolfings or the Burgdalers of The Roots of the Mountains. With
thoughts of another kingdom Morris writes of Valdemar of Svend and
His Brethren, the ruler of a mighty but unhappy people, who, in spite
of all their achievements, have within their seeming prosperity the seeds
of destruction. For "year by year their serfs, driven like cattle, but worse fed, worse housed, died slowly, scarce knowing that they had souls." The "bauleful enchantment" of so many of his subjects robbed Valdemar of any cause for pride, and even took from him his own claim to freedom.

Alas! alas! They were slaves—king and priest, noble and burgher, just as much as the meanest tasker serf, perhaps even more than he, for they were so willingly, but he unwillingly enough.

They could do everything but justice and truth, and mercy; therefore God's judgements hung over their heads, not fallen yet, but surely to fall one time or another.

Two of the articles, "The Story of an Unknown Church" and "The Churches of Northern France," while they contain nothing of the social criticism that later accompanied his discussions of art, show his ever-growing preoccupation with Gothic. It was the text in which he first read the Middle Ages, and architecture rather than the academic historian furnished him with the view of the past that moulded his plans for the present and future. "Thinking of their passed-away builders," he said in "The Churches of Northern France," "I can see through them very faintly, dimly, some little of the medieval times, else dead and gone from me for ever; voiceless forever." Both these pieces, one by its imaginative reconstruction of the life of a medieval mason, the other by its minute and loving observation of an actual building, are evidences of the deep impression made on Morris by the trips taken in the Long Vacations of 1854 and 1855. Then he first saw Amiens, Beauvais, and Chartres, for him the ultimate expression of human genius, and perhaps no other experience so moved the powers of his mind and heart or did more to shape his final purpose in life. The grace and beauty of Gothic, springing with naturalness from such a countryside "as might," he said, "make a background for Chaucer's Palamon and Arcite," satisfied a need of his spirit that his own country and its buildings, dear as they were, had never answered.

He took for his own the poplar land with its quiet summer fields, lovely enough to have been planned for beauty's sake alone and not for harvest, and looking as if they were caught in the enchantment of some perpetual August. This landscape reappears in the romance as the master-mason looks from his scaffold across the "great golden corn sea, waving, waving, waving, for leagues and leagues; and among the corn grew burning scarlet poppies and blue corn-flowers." The towns too delighted Morris. The sight of Rouen was to him what Jocelin's manuscript was to Carlyle—the talisman that dissolved the centuries between and left him looking upon the past he loved. Long after, in "The Aims of Art," Morris said:

Less than forty years ago, I first saw the city of Rouen, then still in its outward aspect a piece of the Middle Ages: no words can tell you how its mingled beauty, history, and romance took hold on me; I can only say that, looking back on my past life, I find it was the greatest pleasure I have ever had: and now it is a pleasure which no one can ever have again: it is lost to the world forever.

The first trip Morris took with his sister Henrietta, but the second was a walking tour with Burne-Jones and Fulford. Burne-Jones was impressed by his friend's knowledge, broad and almost intuitive, of all that touched on medieval art. "He knew everything about every place we went to," Morris' letters home are full of the exaltation of a sensitive nature finding its proper sphere. "Crom," he writes, "we have seen nine Cathedrals, and let me see how many non-cathedral churches; I must count them on my fingers; there, I think I have missed some but I have made out twenty-four all splendid churches; some of them surpassing first-rate English Cathedrals." "The Story of an Unknown Church" and "The Churches of Northern France," printed the following year, are the records of these trips—the first given characteristically in the guise of a romance that fused actual impressions with imaginative re-creation, and the second less typical in form, one of Morris' rare attempts at description and evaluation for its own sake. The second paper is full of the desire to share his discovery, and with a boyish enthusiasm and a charming humility he prefaced his detailed description of Amiens with the hope that he can "at least tell men how much he loved them [the churches]; so that though they might laugh at me for my foolish and confused words, they might yet be moved to see what there was to make me speak my love, though I could give no reason for it."

Morris told Andreas Scheu that the socio-political ideas he held at Oxford "would have developed but for the attractions of art and poetry." Even in 1856, after experiencing the satisfaction of creation in both prose and verse, he might have continued with the social program of the Brotherhood if the argument for the aesthetic had not appeared personally in the guise of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti had been pleased by a sincere tribute to his work in Burne-Jones' article on The Newcombs and by a relationship he saw between the Germ and the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. With his appearance at Oxford, he seemed to swing Morris from the orbit of his natural development. Val Prinsep says of the older man's influence in the days of painting murals at the Union:

Rossetti was the planet round which we revolved. We copied his very way of speaking. All beautiful women were "stunners" with us.
Wombats were the most delightful of God’s creatures. Medievalism was our beau ideal and we sank our individuality in the strong personality of our adored Gabriel.  

It was not long before the man who thought the world should be divided into two classes—those who painted pictures and those who bought them—convinced Morris that he missed his vocation. Morris and Burne-Jones, already a willing disciple, were swiftly persuaded that the “condition of England question” which was agitating the thoughtful was beyond any help of theirs. “I can’t enter into politico-social questions with any interest...” Morris rationalized. Burne-Jones’ abandonment, unlike his friend’s, was permanent. “The Mag. is going to smash—let it go! The world is not converted and never will be... I shall not write again for it, no more will Topsy—we cannot do more than one thing at a time, and our hours are too valuable to be spent so.” In 1857 the two were in London and installed in the Red Lion Square Studio, with its medieval furnishings “like incubi and succubi” and chairs “such as Barbarossa might have sat in.” Morris was hard at work, even desperately hard at it. He could say with his hero of The Hollow Land: “Then I tried painting until I thought I should die; but at last learned it through very much pain and grief.”

But perhaps the complete absorption in art of these years was, in the long view, the best preparation for revolutionary politics in a man of Morris’ temperament. In his old setting he might have remained content with a vague liberalism, but the new world Rossetti opened offered in time a new perspective. He saw the things he loved endangered by a Philistine society that could no longer be ignored in its stupidities but must be actively opposed for its destructive bent. “I have been gradually driven to the conclusion,” he wrote in 1883, the year he joined the Social Democratic Federation, “that Art has been handcuffed by it (capitalism) and will die out of civilization if the system lasts. That of itself does to me carry with it the condemnation of the whole system, and I admit has been the thing which has drawn my attention to the subject in general.” Radicalism through art is perhaps less frequent than through reading the Socialist Fathers, but it is not an uncommon approach. Ruskin was driven earlier to his highly personal “Tyrian-dyed” politics along the same road; and Eric Gill later became a rebel by contemplating the reasoned beauty of medieval town planning.

In another way too Rossetti was less the disturbing influence he appears to be at first. It was during the Red Lion Square days that Morris became interested in the crafts, and in spite of Rossetti’s scornful “Top’s taken to worsteds,” it was a development made possible only in the life devoted completely to art, a devotion for which he was largely responsible. Even the wild project of the Oxford frescoes was not without lasting good. When, during the Long Vacation of 1857, Rossetti commandeered eight young men, and with little knowledge of the technicalities of fresco painting, set them merrily covering the walls with colors that rivalled a medieval missal in brilliance but not in durability, Morris was given one of the bays. His picture is characteristic of him and of the venture: “How Sir Palomydes loved La Belle Isulsut with exceeding great love out of measure, and how she loved not him again but rather Sir Tristram.” The fading of a few months left little but a knight’s head dolefully raised behind the sunflowers with which Morris had crowded the foreground. But since he worked with greater energy and speed than the others, he was given the decoration of the roof and there he showed his true gift. Swiftly and effortlessly he filled the space with an all-over design of unusual loneliness and originality. Morris found his true vocation: he was a born craftsman. And it was probably the work of his hands as much as anything else that brought him to Socialism. The founding of the Firm in the sixties is not too remote from the founding of the Hammersmith Socialist Society in the nineties. The joy in labour he so richly experienced himself was to be the motive power in his socialist utopia. Carlyle had preached a gospel of work, but there is a grimness in his counsel. The wise man looks for blessedness, not happiness, in this world and he finds in work a kind of Calvinist regeneration. Ruskin talked as ardently if not as persistently as Morris of the pleasure that must accompany the effort of any free man, but there is a conviction in Morris that grew from years of daily discovery.

In 1858 Morris published The Defence of Guenevere, a volume that gave proof if any were needed that its author, like the narrator in “The Lindensborg Pool,” could leave his “proper nineteenth century character” and walk in the living past. Nothing could be more free from social implications than these poems so largely inspired by Malory and Froissart, and yet they revealed an approach to the Middle Ages through the chronicle and the romance that remained characteristic of Morris even in after years when the social side of the period became increasingly important to him. He always drew his impressions from primary sources, and only turned later and incidentally to the secondary or “tool books,” as he called them; and prominent among the primary sources were the chroniclers he loved. Besides his favorite Froissart, there were a host of others: Monstrelet and Commines, Higden, Grafton, Stow, and Holinshed, the Franciscan commentator on the Revolt of Ghent, and many more. Morris was once asked for a list of the books he considered memorable, and in his reply he noted particularly “uncritical or traditional
histories,” including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, De Gestiis Regum Anglorum of William of Malmsbury, and the Heimskringla. His rich collection of early printed books, which eventually found its way to the Morgan Library, shows that this interest revealed in his undergraduate days and in his first volume continued unabated throughout his life. Almost all Europe is represented in records, both national and local, of England, France, Germany, Flanders, and Hungary, of Piedmont, Savoy, and Saxony, of Nuremberg and Cologne.

Similarly the love of romance evident in his first book proved no small gift to the amateur historian, who could discern threads of the actual in the web of fantasy. At about the time of the publication of The Defence of Guenevere Morris was also discovering in the original the world of French romance through two little volumes, Nouvelles Francoises en prose du XIIIme Siecle and Violier des Histoires Romaines. At the end of his life he translated from them the delightful stories, The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane, Amis and Amile, The Tale of Emperor Consants, and The History of Over Sea. Every year in the fifties and sixties brought fresh adventures in medieval reading and with them a firmer grasp of the times to which he later made so many appeals, and often for reasons far from aesthetic. The Earthly Paradise offers clues to the joy he must have had in John De Mandeville’s fantastic travels and in those treasuries of story, the Gesta Romanorum, the Golden Legend and the Arabian Nights. He came to know the medieval versions of the tale of Troy in Caxton’s Historyes of Troye, in Dares and Dictys, in Benoît de Sainte-More and Guido delle Colonne, but even before he knew them, he found it natural to medievalize the classical material. Little of beauty or historical interest escaped him; he knew and loved the Chanson de Roland, the Roman de la Rose, Reynard the Foxe, the Order of Chivalry, and Godefrey of Bologically. And always from the material of legend and romance, united with a growing knowledge of medieval art, he was forming a picture of those times only faintly suggested by the political historians.

In 1859 Morris married Jane Burden and moved to Red House, the scene of many happy days, of gay dinner parties with Burne-Jones and his wife Georgie, with Rossetti and the young Swinburne, and of the first exhilarating plans for the firm later famous as Morris and Co., Decorators. “So it was,” says Mackail, “that the half-unconscious adaptation to the conditions of modern life, the monastery of his Oxford dreams rose into being as a workshop, and the Brotherhood became a firm registered under the Companies Act.” The sixties were probably the happiest years of Morris’ life: literary success came with the publication of The Life and Death of Jason and The Earthly Paradise; his business prospered; Jennie and May were born and Jane seemed content; and he himself was in the state he liked best—that of constant and varied activity. But perhaps his greatest medieval adventure was still before him.

Toward the end of the decade he came to know at first hand the Icelandic stories that had attracted him earlier in translation. “The delightful freshness and independence of thought of them,” he says, “the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm.” Morris was to learn “the obscure but powerful ethics of going north”—an experience familiar to Kingsley and Carlyle before him, and to Auden and MacNeice long after. In Heroes and Hero Worship Carlyle had recorded his admiration for the seriousness of the life, its consecration of valour, and the profound truths implicit in its Life Tree Ægdrasil and in ragna roh. Another Past and Present might have been born of the Heimskringla so powerfully was he moved by “those old Tryggvosens, Hakons and Olafs, and their work in the world.” As it is, The Early Kings of Norway and its remarkable epilogue belongs in the tradition of the didactic use of the past.

Perhaps nothing illustrates more clearly the gradual development of Morris’ social philosophy from his creative experience and the naturalness of its medieval dress than his progress in the Norse studies, of which Sigurd the Volsung is the artistic culmination. As early as the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine he showed a romantic’s feeling for Scandinavian material. He used northern names in the prose tales, recognizing instinctively that this device would, in later words, “be a corrective to the maundering side of the Middle Ages.” The first version of “The Wanderers” is a proof of the growing interest that deepens with the framework and several of the stories of The Earthly Paradise. In the sixties Morris must have read widely in secondary sources, for he knew, when he met Magnusson, the sagas of Burnt Njal and of Gisli from Sir George Dasent’s translations and the Elder Edda from Benjamin Thorpe’s. He also knew Cottle’s translations of the mythic songs of the Edda, Mallet’s Northern Antiquities, and Scott’s abstract of the Eybyggja-saga. “From modern books of travel on Iceland,” says Magnusson, “he was surprisingly well up in the geography of the island, and from Bishop Finn Jonson’s Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae he had mastered the main features of the general history of the country.” In fact the story of the Norse revival from Grey on is reflected in Morris’ experience: his interest began in sheer romanticism, fed on deepening scholarship, reached independence in translation from the original, and finally ended in works of interest independent of their sources in the Lovers of
Gudrun and Sigurd the Volsung. With growing mastery Morris made
the Norse stories more and more his own, and, not surprisingly when a
powerful and original mind works with comparatively uncharted
material, he left his mark. The magnificent "Sigurd" has the Norse spirit,
but it has something more that the sagaman would not have recognized.
The epic is impregnated with Morris' concern for the world, for the
"poor in the doom-ring," for the victims of "the fashioners of tears," and
with his hope for the vanga rok that will sweep away old tyrannies. All
the impulses of the Oxford years, the wish to do some good in the
world," the influences of earlier reading, seem to be gathered like the
shards of Sigmund's sword and welded into a unity of purpose in the
fire of creative imagination. Morris forged his own "Wrath," and after
the writing of Sigurd the Volsung he never again looked at the Victorian
world with the comparative detachment of the Red House days.

From the first Morris felt at home in this Icelandic material that was
to deepen and crystallize his social thinking and recur in the propaganda
of later years. The directness, the passion, the mingling of good and
evil, the full rush of the sagaman's art, even the violence itself, were
welcome to the Victorian tired of the shams and the tame ugliness of his
own times. His response to it was immediate and deep, and the Heims-
kringla and some "half dozen of the best Icelandic sagas" took their place
beside Froissart and William of Malmesbury in his list of memorable
books. Magnusson says that Morris "entered into the spirit of it not with
the preoccupied mind of a foreigner, but with the intuition of an uncon-
monly wide-awake native." His approach to the great body of medieval
material hitherto known to him only through translation is typical.
There was no gradualness. When things he loved were concerned, his
mind had a viking appetite. With the energy that made him master of
medieval crafts in the time it would take another man to contemplate so
ambitious a venture, he began the study of Icelandic. At first he was the
poet in search of material. When Magnusson suggested a preparatory
study of grammar, Morris said, "No, I can't be bothered with grammar;
have no time for it. You must be my grammar as we translate. I want
the literature, I must have the story. I mean to amuse myself." The form
amusement took, however, is best judged by the translations of Gunn-
laug-the-Worm-tongue, Grettir the Strong, the story of the Volsungs
and the Niblungs—all the work of 1869—the Three Northern Love Stories,
and six volumes of the Saga Library.

Only those whose mistaken notion of Morris is based on the dream-
iness and the softer stories of The Earthly Paradise and on what Morris
said of himself, "the idle singer," can feel surprise at the hold exerted
by the strong fare of the north. The author of "Sir Peter Harpdon's

End," "The Haystack in the Floods," and "The Defence of Guenevere"
 knew the full measure of the intense feeling and the violence in the story
of Kaartan, Bodli, and Gudrun. Swinburne praised Morris' first volume
for its "perception and experience of tragic truth, of subtle and noble,
terrible and piteous things," for its "touch of passion at once so broad
and so sure." Morris said of an Icelandic tale that the sensitive reader
would be "touched by finding, amidst all its wildness and remoteness,
such startling realism, such subtlety, such close sympathy with all the
passions that may move himself today." The heightened romanticism
excepted, there is a real kinship between the sagaman's art and the earlier
work of the Victorian poet, and it must have given Morris a simple plea-
ure when the Icelanders called him the "Skald," even if the compliment
were followed by remarks reflecting on his horsemanship or his mastery
of the language. There is enough, then, in his poetry, but much more in
his temperament to explain his interest in the Norse and to prepare
the ground for the effects the Icelandic studies had on his later art and
thought.

As was natural to a man who always turned from the beauty of an ob-
ject to the world that produced it, Morris' interest in Icelandic society
grew with his interest in the literature. What he found pleased him well.
He did not shrink from the brutality and savagery of much in these
northern lives and stories. He felt the rough side was more than balanced
by the freedom such a life gave to most men and the measure of protec-
tion it granted to all. The poets and historians he considered "brave,
generous, if somewhat masterful" and the times, as reflected in the Njala,
especially noble, since, despite violence and tragedy, "all men's children in
it" were "so venerable to each other, and so venerated." 19

Morris liked to tell his socialist audiences of the later years of the
Icelandic life of the Middle Ages. He drew for them a picture of men so
fierce in their love of freedom and so uncompromising in their pursuit
of it that they left their lands in Norway rather than live under the "tyr-
anny of kings and soundrels"—men of "bold and independent spirit
who could not brook what they deemed the early form of feudality
forced upon the freemen of the tribe at a time when Harold Hairfair was
winning his way to the sole sovereignty." Though recent scholarship ac-
cepts more critically Snorri Sturlason's account of the motives for coloni-
ization. 20 Morris, the poet reading the Heimskringla, is still probably
close to Ruskin's "vital truth." And even if economic necessity rather
than political idealism drove the settlers to the "Outlands," the most
unromantic can be stirred, nevertheless, by Ari the Learned's record of
law and procedure in the Icelandic Commonwealth. The Althing held
at Thingvellir every summer, to which most Icelanders flocked, afforded
the opportunity for a real expression of the people's will. The judicial and legislative branches were beautifully balanced, and the lawmaker, first official in the land, was eligible for election every three years. The Icelanders, however, were so jealous of their freedom that they deliberately left the executive weak—a decentralization which Morris would have admired in theory but which in actuality resulted in much of the violence recorded in the sagas. The freemen in each district had their say in the local “thing” and held a real check on the local official, the Goði, in that they could transfer their allegiance at will to another goði even though he lived in distant parts. There were inequalities, of course, but slaves were few and yeomen many, and power so divided among the chieftains that the common people were fairly well off except in the bitter winters that hit bondmen and Goðorð alike. As Mackail has said, “The Icelandic Republic represented, more nearly than any other state in recorded history, the political and social framework of life which satisfied his imagination.” It is one of the ironies of shifting historical taste that a real lover of freedom found spiritual satisfaction in what was to provide, seventy years after, the Goering and Rosenbergs with a theory of Iceland as the “cradle of Germanic culture”—Nazi variety.21

May Morris has preserved a late lecture to a socialist audience that gives the tone of much he must have said in those years. He was talking of the old Icelandic chieftains and the state of their society.

As to the manners of these early settlers, they were naturally exceedingly simple, yet not lacking in dignity: contrary to the absurd feeling of the feudal or hierarchical period manual labour was far from being considered a disgrace: the mythical heroes have often nearly as much fame given them for their skill as weaponsmiths as for their fighting qualities. . . . The greatest men lent a hand in ordinary field or house work, pretty much as they do in the Homeric poems: one chief is working in his hayfield at a crisis in his fortune; another is mending a gate, a third is sowing his corn, his cloak and sword laid by in a corner of the field; another is a great housebuilder; another a ship-builder: one chief says to his brother one eventful morning:

“There’s the calf to be killed and the viking to be fought. . . . Which of us shall kill the calf, and which shall fight the viking?"22

Characteristically Morris concluded with an admission of the limitations of the society he loved so well. It is surprising that a man who rarely wrote a passage of praise without qualifying it with the less attractive side of the picture his honesty and good sense discovered, should be so often described as seeing the medieval period through a golden haze. Morris admits the “hard and grasping side” to the characters of the he-

roes and their use of “weapons of deceit in their struggle for life and fortune.” He was probably the first to enjoy the point of one of Burne-Jones’ entries in the Firm’s account book: a bill for a stained glass cartoon he made of “Norse heroes on the sea, making for other people’s property.”

Within a few years the country became a symbol for Morris, and to understand his attitude one must, as Mackail says, “imagine a strange combination of Johnson in the Hebrides and Byron in Greece.” His trips to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 were like pilgrimages, though there is little sentimentality in the journals he kept. They are, rather, the record of a very happy holiday: of Morris’ talks to natives who were sometimes skeptical that it was Icelandic they were hearing in spite of Magnusson’s assurances; of cooking in tents with a curious native audience peering beneath the flaps; of sleeping uncomfortably near the “Gusher” on the geysers plain; of noting the rifts and mounds that marked the incidents in saga stories; of enjoying the inevitable brandy and coffee of the bonder’s hospitality; of fording streams, recovering runaway donkeys, skirting dizzy passes—all the joys and trials of a prolonged camping trip in a well-loved country. The real emotion he felt at visiting the land is almost too intimate for expression, but here and there it flashes through. Usually he is restrained, and he admits a little shamefacedly as they draw near Thingvellir, “My heart beats, so please you, as we near the brow of the pass, and all the infinite wonder, which came upon me when I came up on the deck of the ‘Diana’ to see Iceland for the first time, comes on me again now, for this is the heart of Iceland. . . .”28 Several times he experiences “that thin thread of insight and imagination which comes so seldom to us and is such a joy when it comes. . . .” On his return from the second trip he gives the heart of the matter in a comment that, in its introspection, is unusual for Morris: “The journey has deepened the impression I had of Iceland and increased my love for it. The glorious simplicity of the terrible and tragic, but beautiful land, with all its well remembered stories of brave men killed all querulous feeling in me, and has made the dear faces of wife and children and love and friends dearer than ever to me. . . . Surely I have gained a great deal, and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed.”29 The Icelandic study and the travels gave Morris a new vantage point. Removed in time and space and spirit, he viewed his Victorian world and the new perspective profoundly shocked him. He said later: “Apart from my pleasure in seeing that romantic desert, I learned one lesson there, thoroughly I hope, that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes.”28

Another and very different Englishman once returned from Italy with
the haunting words "I have a work to do in England." From both his spiritual and physical adventures, Morris himself was drawing close to such a resolve.

In 1876 he gave another proof of the historic imagination and the timeless sympathies that could reach back to the floating traditions originally captured by the sagaman and from out of the welter of the mythical and the legendary, fashion a powerful and passionate story. He published Sigurd the Volsung, and it is not surprising that the epic is full of the overtones of these years of thought. Morris was as aware as any of his critics have been since that he added much to the original. He frankly admitted "modern amplification and sentiment," but at the same time he felt he preserved the integrity of the saga. It was no failure to understand the sagaman's art that led him to expand the story to over twice its length. No one had a keener appreciation of the economies of the medieval narrative with "nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated; nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament. . . ." But in spite of what commentators have said to the contrary Morris was a man of his own times and he was writing in his own fashion. To criticize Sigurd the Volsung adversely because its implications have meaning only in a modern setting and its beauty conforms to a later and more ornate taste is on the same plane, historically considered, as the unthinkable criticism that would deny literary excellence to Malory because his Arthur is not the dux bellorum of Nennius. "When you are using an old story," Morris once told his daughter, "read it through, then shut the book and write in your own way." While this procedure is probably not one he could follow literally in as long a work as "Sigurd," it represents his spirit. It is what he added when writing "in his own way" that records the direction of his thought and the meaning of his poem for his own times.

The modern implications are particularly strong in the descriptions of the land of King Hjalprek, in the lessons and warnings Brynhild gives Sigurd, in the famous peace speech, the first Sigurd gives in the court of the Niblung, in the description of his returns from battle, and in the destruction of Atl's court. In the saga little is said of the country where the hero is born, but in the epic it becomes the kingdom of the "Helper of Men," a medieval miniature glowing with the warmth of the days of good King Hakon and resembling the jewel-like sketches that later illumine the plain setting of the socialist prose. The enigmatic rhymes and the traditional wisdom of the saga meeting of Brynhild and Sigurd are transformed in the epic. There is a modern note in the softening of the fatalism and in the threat to the fools who rejoice in the ap-

parent sleep of the gods. An even clearer indication of the transformation of the Volsunga material in Morris' nineteenth century mind occurs when Sigurd leaves Brynhild and journeys to Giuki's court. In the saga he merely announces, "I am called Sigurd, son of King Sigmund." But foreign to the saga spirit are the words of the epic with their promise of peace to "the kings of the earth who bear the sword aright" and their threat of "unread to the lords of evil." They have been cited by Oliver Elton among others, as an early sign of Morris' socialism and as an evidence of growing purpose—an increasing sense that in a just world simple justice demands that "he that soweth should reap.""27

Perhaps more significant than the peace speech, however, is the role Sigurd plays in the battles fought in the company of the Niblungs. The spirit of the conflict is far removed from the medieval struggle for power or survival. The "golden Sigurd, the face without a foe" becomes the champion of the folk; the saga hero's equal courage is directed toward less altruistic ends. Sigurd is now the enemy of the "slaves of kings," the reclaimer of wealth from "the fashioners of tears," and the defender of the "acre-bider," the "poor in the Doom-ring," and the "lowly people." The epithets are important for Morris' conception of the character. Sigurd is the "straightener of the crooked," the "helper, the overcomer, the righteous Sundering sword," the sweet-spoken king whose car is dull to no man that his helping may be seen." In the saga "oft they ride abroad together, Sigurd and Gunnar and Hogni, and ever is Sigurd the foremost of them, mighty men of their hands though they were." In the modern epic

Forth in front of the Niblungs the golden Sigurd rides;
And Gunnar smites on his right hand, and Hogni smites on the left.

But on their return to Giuki's court, the "fair speech-masters" of Morris' poem tell of the "lowly man exalted and the mighty brought alow" and promise with returning summer that

The sheaf shall be for the plougher, and the loaf for him that soweth,
Through every furrowed acre where the Son of Sigmund rode.28

Another passage is almost symbolic of the naturalness with which Morris expressed the ideas of his heart in medieval terms:

They sing the song of Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And they sing of the prison's rending and the tyrant laid alow,
And the golden thief's abasement and the stilling of the churl,
And the mocking of the dastard where the chasing edges whirl;
William Morris

And they tell how the ships of the merchants come free and go at their will,
And how wives in peace and safety may crop the vine-clad hill;
How the maiden sits in her bower, and the weaver sings at his loom,
And forgets the kings of grasping and the greedy days of gloom;
For by sea and hill and township hath the Son of Sigmund been,
And looked on the folk unheeded, and the lonely people seen.59

The social philosophy, however, is in no way obtrusive from an aesthetic point of view. Morris' complete and sympathetic mastery of his sources, his satisfactory treatment of the architecture of the poem, his affection for what he considered should be to the Englishman "what the tale of Troy was to the Greek," resulted in a fusion of elements into a single artistic impression. The poem is alive in its entire length, swift in its movement, and the modern sentiment is not artificially imposed on the ancient tale. But the concern for his own times is unmistakably present. To call that concern "socialism"—and it has been done—is perhaps premature, unless we are willing to agree with Morris that men of good will have always been socialists at heart, or unless we remember that the socialism Morris "began with" was never political. But from Sigurd the Volsung on, his impulse to "straighten the crooked" became more difficult for him to deny, and finally, following the practical bent of his varied nature, he decided to "do something about it."

Throughout the Norse studies and with increasing frequency in "Sigurd," Morris used a figure to which Karl Litzenburg attaches the greatest importance.50 Morris refers repeatedly to the Norse ragna rok—that time in the distant future when the gods and the forces of evil will meet in a final encounter, and all will fall in utter destruction, but in the death of the old order the new will be born. The shining god Baldur will return to earth to rule this golden age. There can be no doubt of the hold this figure had on Morris' imagination and some of the best lines in "Sigurd" are inspired by it. Litzenburg feels that "Morris' ideal for the future, in its method of attainment and in its result is almost identical with the 'Doom of the Gods'" and that its first appearance is as a poetic device but that later it becomes "a part of his social philosophy." It is a fascinating conjecture, but one difficult to prove. But whether or not Morris literally derived the philosophical ideal of his revolutionary socialism from ragna rok, anyone will agree that it remains the best figure to describe his position.

Perhaps even more difficult to gauge, but equally important, was the impact of the religion and ethics of the North on a serious nature whose hold on Christianity had failed but whose earlier tendencies and innate spirituality survived in sufficient strength to keep him from materialism. The religion of the pagan North as it is embodied in the sagas of Christian redaction—if such a religion can be imagined divorced from a literal Valhalla—Morris found good. "I know of the deed that dies not, and the name that shall ever avail." The courage implied in the willing acceptance of this life—"short life but long remembrance"—appealed to the man to whom personal immortality was to become a question hardly worthy of debate. "To Morris' mind," says Mackail, "the philosophy or religion that lived under these half-humanized legends was something quite real and vital; and it substantially represented his own guiding belief."

What his biographer called his "innate socialism" would not let Morris rest once he became convinced that the "gods were preparing trouble and terrors for the world." The publication of Sigurd the Volsung marks the end of the comparative retirement of the artist happy in his own work and the craftsman successful in the narrower field. In 1877 Morris took three steps that were the practical expression of his concern for the times that remained implicit in the epic. He organized the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings ("Anti-Srape"); he took an active part in the Eastern Question Association he had joined the previous year; and he began his lectures on art. In another man these might have been unrelated activities. In Morris they were one in motivation. As with Ruskin, politics, history, and art refused to remain isolated: they were threads that formed a single web. With the continuity of history and its evolutionary character as one of his constant and living thoughts, he saw the story of man as some great work of his loom—always growing, yet owing something of its beauty and meaning to the delight of returning patterns. His faith in the best of the past was chronicled in the architectural relics Anti-Srape was intended to preserve; his concern for the present was brought to focus by the threat of an imperialistic war with Russia; and his hope for the future found its natural language in the familiar and well-loved terms of art.

The first of the lectures, "The Lesser Arts," coming immediately after Sigurd the Volsung, gives prose expression to the overtones of the poem and confirms the conclusion that Morris, as early as 1877, was deep in the course of thinking that led to socialism. It is not the best of the lectures—he is most successful when his enthusiasm and his artist's knowledge of the past carry the weight of the argument as in "The History of Pattern Designing"—but it is typical, and it is charged with the sense of change of the northern studies, though with far less of their gloomy forebodings. It covers points that were to become increasingly familiar to his audiences: the philosophy of the decorative arts, the relationship of the
lesser arts to the greater, their unity in periods of artistic freedom; the
appearance of the past, this time to medieval London with “its pretty, care-
fully whitened houses,” and “its fair gardens running to the broad
river”; a tribute to Gothic, to Ruskin’s famous chapter, and to native
English art; and finally, a plea for the work that brings joy to the maker
and the user. And through the lecture, like an ever-recurring theme,
rungs the prospect of the new order soon to be, “the birth of wiser, simpler,
freer ways of life than the world leads now and the world has ever led.”

As yet this revolution is seen mainly in terms of art, but the political
and social changes “that in one way or another we all desire” are frankly
acknowledged to be necessary. Morris emphasizes the equality in all but
natural gifts that must exist among those employed in ornamental work,
but the lecture concludes with a wider application and the belief that
one day equality will follow the partially achieved liberty of the nine-
teenth century—“no one bidden to be any man’s servant, every one
scorning to be any man’s master.” He is aware of his own part in this great
change. In words reminiscent of an Icelandic tale, he says, “There are
some of us who cannot turn our faces to the wall or sit deedless because
our hopes seem somewhat dim.” With his fellow craftsmen he must keep
alive the scraps of living tradition from the medieval period; he must
warn against what the disappearance of art would mean for the ordinary
man; he must point out the relationship of art to fields commonly remote
from the problems of the artist. He feels that there is some new
movement afloat, heralded by the “change and stir” about him. “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 which would otherwise be left without expression.”

Two years later, in “Making the Best of It,” he says: “Have you not
heard how it has gone with many a cause before now? First few men
heed it; next most men condemn it; lastly, all men accept it—and the
cause is won.” In 1879 it is still the cause of art, but it is becoming more
and more identified with larger issues, until, as with Ruskin, the shift in
emphasis is complete and the primary concern is for society, which pro-
duces inevitably the art that reflects its state.

All the lectures between 1877 and 1883 are similar in mood and inten-
tion and reveal Morris earnestly fashioning the conception of a new
world, and working, as the craftsman must, in the tradition in which he
finds himself—in this case, aesthetic and medieval. He never fails to ap-
pel to both the art and the times he loved as witnesses that the qualities
of free and joyous labour were once known and could be known again.
At one time he hoped that the impulse toward beauty would suffice to
fashion the means to “sweep away all the difficulties between us and a
decent life.” He discovered he had placed too much confidence in the
aesthetic sense of most men, however. But in his own case his creative
experience did forge the weapon, and along the shining blade were carved
the runes of its medieval origin. In 1881 he posed the question: “where
is the lever and the standpoint?” In January 1883 he made his own an-
swer when he joined Hyndman and Bax and the little group working to
forward the cause of socialism in England.

It would be difficult to imagine Ruskin taking such a step, even if
what he said of himself were literally true—“I myself am a communist
of the old school, reddest also of the red.” In spite of his undoubted influ-
ence and the wide audience his earlier books, at least, received, there is
something solitary about him, alone in his thought as in his life. What
he could do himself he did, but the simple act of joining others, on an
equal basis, to forward what was nearest to his heart, seems alien to his
nature. It was not so with Morris. With no loss in originality but rather
a gain in humanity, he looked for companionship in most of the work of
his life. Burne-Jones and he together discovered the medieval treasures
of the Bodleian; with Rossetti and the happy group at Oxford he
painted sunflowers in the days of his apprenticeship; he studied Ice-
landic with Magnusson and Anglo-Saxon with Wyatt; George Wardle
and he worked profitably at Merton Abbey; Emery Walker’s knowledge
of early printing fired Morris’ plan for Kelmscott. When he became a
socialist, he turned instinctively for companionship in his latest venture
and found it in Belford Bax and Andreas Scheu. The spirit of fellowship
which Morris wished salvaged from the medieval world and preserved
in the future one, was at the center of his own nature.

The early socialist movement in England might have remained un-
known to him if it were not for his work in the Eastern Question Asso-
ciation, which, like Anti-Scrape and the lectures on art, seemed to grow
out of the deepening feeling of the year of Sigurd the Volung. In this
organized effort to prevent England from entering into what was con-
considered by many an unjust war with Russia, Morris came into contact
with most of the radical leaders of the London workers and consequently
learned something not only of practical politics, but of the new thought
beginning to form in labour circles. Certainly the letter Morris ad-
dressed “To the Workingmen of England” on the subject of capitalist
war is hardly equaled in violence of language and intensity of feeling by
anything in the socialist years. It is the evidence of a nature profoundly
stirred.

To the pressure of events in his public life was added a personal sor-
row that made the self-centered life of artist and craftsman even more
impossible for him. In 1880 the elder of his two daughters suffered a
tragic breakdown, and Morris was never again to be without the special anxiety for her that shows in the warmth and love and solicitude of the many letters beginning “My dearest Jennie.” On New Year’s Day 1881 he wrote to a friend: “When one is just so much subdued one is apt to turn more specially from thinking of one’s own affairs to more worthy matters; and my mind is very full of the great change which I hope is slowly coming over the world.” The tragedy seemed to focus and strengthen the scattered resolves of his many activities.

The next year Morris prepared to join the S.D.F. No catechumen ever behaved in a manner more characteristic of the days before conversion. When he sold part of his library to raise funds for the cause, the sharpest sacrifice was losing the lovely medieval De Claris Mulieribus, and prominent in his preparatory reading was the Utopia of Thomas More. Eshleman has treated fully and well the crowded years of Morris’ socialist career: the period with Hyndman and the Federation, and Morris’ secession from it in 1885; the founding of the Socialist League, from which he was again forced to retire in 1890 when the anarchistic element gave it a tone unrepresentative of his attitudes; of the Hammersmith Socialist Society and his last days, after he had discovered that the tide of English politics, the subtleties of Marx, and even more, the subtleties of his followers, were less malleable material than the great mass of an “Earthly Paradise” or a “Volsunga Saga.” He would have directed the patterns of his times, but the loom had a strange way of running itself whether the craftsman was there or not. He found at last that he could not shape his world, and like the wise artist he was he withdrew. His last years were spent in a more limited field with possible goals. He would “make socialists” but not immediate revolution, and he would make them in the way he could, by education and, unavoidably, by example.

But whether in the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, or the Hammersmith Society, Morris’ socialism was essentially the same. To understand it it is well to remember that its clearest expression is found in a work of the imagination. It is not found in an essay, though another Equality might well have been written, doubly interesting to us as containing the pivotal idea in Morris’ thought and as a companion piece or foil to Arnold’s. It is not found in a treatise. Morris was never happy with the theoretical exposition of a Hyndman or a Bax. But it is in A Dream of John Ball, a dream and a medieval one, that he gives the most effective statement of his reading of the past and his vision of the future. That the final statement of his position should have taken such a form emphasizes the deep and constant relationship between his social thinking and his creative life, and the relationship is of the greatest importance in any analysis of his thought. William Morris, designer and

Forging of the Sword

“shaper” of poems and things was the same William Morris, socialist and “shaper” of a new society—and that identity, too often lost sight of gives unity to his socialist years, places them in relation to his most “creative” past, and confirms the evolutionary character of his thought —no sudden conversion but the long slow growth from the Oxford days to the inevitable socialism, high-lighted at the end by a characteristic gesture of renunciation and by the extreme doctrine he professed.

Morris wanted to build anew. (Mackail recognized the transcendent meaning architecture had for him.) The unity, the intensity, the life time of effort that go into a work of art, Morris forced into his socialist years—trying to mold tougher material than his genius had worked in before. He was building a new life, not writing a poem or weaving a tapestry, but his methods were still the same. He had mastered a dozen crafts and he entered political life with the spirit he brought to his work at the madder and indigo vats. Something must be done and he would do it, or at least he would join those who were, he felt, “like good fellows— trying by some dim candle light to get our workshop ready against tomorrow’s daylight.” Anyone reading the prose of these years can feel the artist at work, shaping the ideal he was constantly placing before men. And the vision reflected encompasses the great enthusiasms of his life, art and medievalism, and finds its source in his earliest years.

But to consider Morris’ socialism as limited by aestheticism or by a romantic love of the past because it was artistic and medieval in inspiration would be based on a misconception of his final position and of the earlier influences that led to it. “That which I understand by real art is the expression by man of his pleasure in labour” was said by one who was interested in a work-a-day reality, an art that could be handled and even roughly, and no more interfere with ordinary duties than the beauty of nature interferes with her cosmic functions. In his dream of a new world he never stressed the search for beauty for its own sake since he was sure such an aim would result in lassitude and effeminacy. A generous portion of the art of the past was unconscious and spontaneous, and so it would always be in healthy periods. He abominated that group in his own times whose aims were “artistic” as most people understand the word. Nor did he ever wish for an imitative world—one that literally copied the features, even the best, of medieval times. His thoughts, like his stained glass windows, were frankly modern in design if medieval in inspiration. He worked in the tradition of his craft, but it would be an insult to his historic imagination and his grasp of the times to imagine him, either in art or social philosophy, as content with a mere reproduction.

But this approach to Socialism through art and the medieval saved
William Morris

him from the doctrinaire. Socialism was never a mere political creed with him; it remained always an “all-embracing theory of life” with a religion, an ethic, and aesthetic of its own. It took as its starting point “man as a social being” and equality as its first and greatest commandment. Its aim was to secure a world in which “the perception and creation of beauty shall be as necessary to man as his daily bread,” in which he may “take a genuine interest in all the details of daily life.” Gone, forever would be the old order that “kept thousands making nothing” and kept many more “terrified for a livelihood,” unable “to read a book, or look at a picture, or have pleasant fields to walk in, or to lie in the sun, or to share in the knowledge of our time.” And when such socialism eventually came, the word itself would disappear—no longer needed in the fullness of the life it fostered. This was the vision that would not let him rest. “You see, my dear,” he wrote Mrs. Burne-Jones, “I can’t help it.” He preached it on street corners, in the pathetic little workmen’s clubs of Glasgow, in the more organized but equally shabby clubs of London, in the rooms of the Social Democratic Federation and later of the Socialist League—to Fenians, to radicals, to anarchists, to fellow socialists, to Oxford students, and to the indifferent. From a cinderpile in a manufacturing town such as his new world would never know, he preached the fifteenth century Golden Age of English labour until the stars were diminished in the local blast-fires—and he preached it to men as ignorant of the history of the past as they were of his hopes for the future. But his revolutionary message grew in strength and beauty when it drew, as it so often did, from the rich treasury of his medievalism.

3

HISTORY, MEDIEVALISM, AND PROPAGANDA

“All the past read true is prophecy.”

One feature of nineteenth century life Morris always excepted from his otherwise inclusive condemnation of the times—that growth in the appreciation of history and in the art of historical generalization, resulting, he said, in “so earnest a study amongst us as to have given us, as it were, a new sense.” With his acute awareness of the inner springs of action working beneath the “raree show” of the Victorian present, he arrived at a conclusion modern scholarship has since confirmed—that this “gift of the epoch,” the new history, arose with the romantic impulse in literature and was intimately related to it. He saw this concern with times past, begun in the era of Scott, deepen with the movements that drew from it their own life: the Anglo-Catholic revival in religion, the Gothic in art, the Pre-Raphaelite in poetry and painting; and he saw the reaction to eighteenth century attitudes alter from the days when “its supporters were for the most part mere laudatores temporis acti” to the time when those who took pleasure in studying the past were “more commonly to be found in the ranks of those who are pledged to the forward movement of modern life.” With a perspective admirable in one who was himself experiencing the change, he was as aware as the modern critic of the new instruments responsible for the new views: the historical method that wrested unfamiliar meanings from familiar texts; the possibilities in linguistics and archeology in supplementing the traditionally accepted data; and the developments in the philosophy of history that left his generation no longer content “with a string of doubtful tales and bloody wars and the unaccountable follies of kings and scoundrels.” He watched with delight as the “mists of pedantry” lifted and revealed a picture of the world, evolutionary in character, in which the earlier times were “never dead but living in the new”—an attitude that involved the final rejection of the idea of the medieval as an era of accidental confusion between two periods of order, classical and modern. And justice done to the Middle Ages was particularly welcome since at the root of his beliefs was the conviction that those times must be revaluated and their contributions pre-
served if men were not to lose, under the illusion of progress, traditions of lasting worth. "The part which they played in the course of history," he said in *Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome*, "was not only necessary to the life of the world, but was so special and characteristic that it will leave its mark on future ages in spite of the ignorant contemplation of them from which we are slowly emerging."

If his own definition of the word were accepted, Morris would never have objected to being called "romantic" at any time in his life, for to him romance was the "capacity for a true conception of history." His love of it, like the art and medievalism to which it lent perspective, is apparent from his earliest years. At first, however, his knowledge was characterized by intensity rather than range, by the gift revealed in the Oxford poetry and prose of suggesting impressions immediate and contemporaneous—"I, John, saw all this with my own eyes." But when the development of the arts, particularly the decorative arts from which he looked "as if from windows" upon the life of the past, became the object of his constant and enthusiastic attention, he arrived at what Burne-Jones called his "bird's eye view"—that remarkable grasp of the centuries underlying such lectures as "The History of Pattern Designing" and "The Hopes of Civilization." As he studied the "symbols of worship and belief" that constitute the applied design of every nation, and as he pressed back to the Babylonian and Assyrian in time and ranged from Bokhara to Iceland in space, his earlier conception of the Middle Ages too deepened and broadened in his constantly expanding view of the world. The medievalism of "The Defence of Guenevere," largely inspired by Froissart, Malory, and the French romances, seems narrow, even in its beauty, compared to the vision of the maturer years, founded on his understanding of the manifold activities of the life of men, and supplemented by his excursions into the Norse and into Teutonic origins. Now the period showed the signs of its birth in the free use of the arch in Diocletian's palace at Spalato and its "last hiding away beneath the rubbish heaps of pedantry and hopelessness," St. Peter's at Rome. So comprehensive a view made a philosophy of history imperative, and hints in the lectures on art reflect the evolution of his thought. The new leaven—the sense of the past—was at work and it led Morris to that position which history seemed to indicate would alone prepare for the inevitable aftermath of the Victorian world. "All great human causes turn on theories of history"—and some causes have been more willingly adopted for the sake of the theory. Certainly Morris' study of the past, medieval and artistic in emphasis, prepared the way for his socialism.

At least as early as 1879 Morris seemed to be groping for the theory that would give meaning to the wealth of fact he had gathered over the years. Apparently a belief in a "straight-line progress" became increasingly untenable for him, and the art lectures previous to his entrance to the Social Democratic Federation record the progress of his thought from the traditional view to his adoption of a cyclic interpretation. It is not a steady progression, however; the earlier idea reasserts itself now and again and reveals the reluctance with which he accepted a theory that seemed, at first, pessimistic in its overtones. In "Art and the People," given in February 1879, there is a hint that determinism would be neither an unfamiliar nor unwelcome concept: "... Hard necessity, I doubt, works many of the world's changes, rather than the purblind striving to see which we call the foresight of man." But a year later in "The Beauty of Life," he insists on foresight—the choice of never ceasing growth. "No man has any right to say ... that mankind will but go round and round in a circle forever," and for Morris the remedy still lies in "more complete civilization." Again in March 1881, in the "Prospects of Architecture," he reasserts his belief in the "beneficent progress of civilization" and he introduces his talk with a significant quotation from Carlyle: "the horrible doctrine that this universe is a Cockney Nightmare—which no creature ought for a moment to believe or listen to." But the leaven is at work and a letter of the following summer reveals that his "faith in gradual progress" is sadly shaken. In October of the same year, in "Art and the Beauty of Earth," Morris uses a figure that appears in earlier lectures but which now recurs with greater frequency and greater meaning: the seeds of death present at the height of any civilization, which yet carry with them the possibilities of new life in a new order. So had the art of the Middle Ages climbed gradually to the top of the hill, doubtless not without carrying the seeds of the disease that was to end it, the threats of a great change which no doubt no one heeded at the time." The figure is repeated in December in "Some Hints on Pattern Designing," but it is in the brilliant "History of Pattern Designing" in 1882 that Morris seems to be reconciled to a cyclic theory in which death bears "new quickening within it."

To Brooks Adams the church of St. Sophia was a "matter of time and money," the symbol of the power and wealth of Justinian. To William Morris, however, it symbolized the forces at work in the destruction of the old world and the birth of modern Europe. It was the collective triumph of the new barbarism, not the individual triumph of the "barbarian shepherd." "It has gathered to itself," he says in "The History of Pattern Designing," "all those elements of change which, having been kept apart for so long, were at last mingling and seething, and bringing about so many changes, so much of death and life." The interest in a healthy barbarism reflected in his account of the "unheard of people
thrusting on into Europe; nation mingling with nation, and blood with blood," is further developed in "Art and Socialism" of 1883. Now Morris identifies not only the barbarism of primitive society with the barbarism before which Rome fell, but he foresees a third wave sweeping the modern world, now in its turn ready for dissolution. "To those who have the heart to understand, this tale of the past is a parable of the days to come; of the change in store for us hidden in the breast of the Barbarism of civilization, the Proletariat." The idea grew in attractiveness for him, and in a letter of 1885, he rejoices in the thought that civilization is "doomed to destruction and probably before very long." "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." Unlike Adams he is at no loss to find the stream of fresh energy that alone is necessary to complete the parallel between the nineteenth century London and the Rome of Caracalla. It will come this time from within civilization when "those who lack" will take from "those who have." 

The possibility of a third barbarism only intensified Morris' search of the Middle Ages, for to him that period represented an earlier form of the "organic" society that was inevitably to follow in the wake of the "mechanic" society of the modern world. "The hopes for the social life of the future are involved in its struggles in the past." 

The interest in recurrent barbarism suggests that Morris may have been reading Vico. Eshleman says it is a possibility and that Morris may have known the Italian through the translation of Michelet. But there is no definite proof. The possibility almost becomes a probability, however, in the light of the ideas and their juxtaposition in the earlier chapters of Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome: the emphasis on points of resemblance between the pre-classical period and the Middle Ages; the division into "organic" and "mechanic" forms of society, suggesting Vico's "imaginative" and "reflective"; the warning against the reading of the past based on a lack of understanding of the psychology of earlier men, a view that "annihilates history" where it seeks to create and forges the world to "look on Homer as a literary man." Morris also showed during the eighties a great interest in the conflicts between the Romans and the Goths and in the more conjectural fields of early medieval history—an interest so beautifully reflected in the prose romances. But the parallels may merely indicate Morris' familiarity with the general ideas of his times, which Vico, described by Croce as "neither more nor less than the nineteenth century in germ," so marvelously foreshadowed. Certainly there are similarities equally strong in an author he could not have read, Brooks Adams—similarities to be explained perhaps by

the growing sympathies for things medieval also shared by the American's brother, Henry. Morris anticipates The Law of Civilization and Decay so frequently, however, that it cannot pass without comment.

Both men saw in the death of modern art the harbinger of disintegration for the modern world, and in the Reformation, for Morris and Brooks Adams alike "eminently an economic phenomenon," the source of the disease that made the creation of the beautiful an impossibility. It was in the Middle Ages, the imaginative and emotional years, that architecture flourished, but it died with the advent of the "economic man." For both the "history of art coincides with all other phenomena of life" and "reflects with subtlest delicacy those changes in the forms of competition which enfeebles or inflames the imagination." Even in the socialist years it was always the history of art rather than political or economic history that shaped for Morris the pattern of the past and future. The history of art was the history of the people, omnipresent, continuous, never to be denied. Art gave the best answer to the question "How then did men live from day to day?" "History (so-called) has remebered the kings because they destroyed; Art has remebered the people because they created." In the medieval scene "the palace and the camp," Morris thought, "were but a small part of their world, surely; and outside them you may be sure that faith and heroism were at work, or what birth could have been from those days." The story of traditional history must be supplemented not only by the record of great art, but, perhaps even more important, by the record of the lesser arts, the daily solace of men who otherwise lived under "grinding tyrannies." It was Froude's ignorance of art that Ruskin considered his "deadly disadvantage." The finish the craftsman gave to his work, the delicate border of flower and fruit that grew on the vessel's rim as it flew beneath the potter's fingers, the quaint lion carved on a projecting beam, told of another medieval world too long neglected. It was art that recorded the one kind of freedom the Middle Ages knew well—the freedom of the craftsman in his work—and "all the world glittered with its brightness and quivered with its vigour."

Christian and Mussulman were made joyful by it; Kelt, Teuton, and Latin raised it up together; Persian, Tartar, and Arab gave and took its gifts from one another. Considering how old the world is it was not too long-lived at its best. In the days when Norwegian, Dane, and Ice-Ilander stalked through the streets of Micklegarth, and hedged with their axes the throne of Krielax the Greek king, it was alive and vigorous. When Dandolo was led from the Venetian galleys on to the conquered wall of Constantinople, it was near to its best and purest
days. When Constantine Palaeologus came back an old and careworn man from a peacefuller home in the Morea to his doom in the great city, and the last of the Caesars got the muddle of his life solved, not ingloriously, by the Turkish swords on the breached and battered walls of that same Constantinople, there were signs of sickness beginning to show in the art that sprang from there to cover east and west alike with its glory.¹⁸

Morris became a socialist first and read Marx afterwards; so the philosophy of Capital, in so far as he understood it, supplemented and modified rather than moulded Morris' views. The historical sections delighted him—the economics gave him "agonies of confusion of the brain"—but he found his approach to the past through art no remote preparation for a theory based on methods of production and the position of the worker. Research in connection with the Firm's revival of earlier crafts resulted in a very real acquaintance with labour history and he found many of his own conclusions verified and his difficulties cleared by Marxian explanations. Nor is it surprising that in other ways Morris found much that was already familiar to him. Marx' indebtedness to English tradition is well known. The indignation of passages in Capital owe their fire to abhorrence of the same conditions in Victorian society that stirred Carlyle and Ruskin, and created the heritage of rebellion they passed on to Morris. Morris and Marx were in agreement too in their attitude toward the Reformation—essentially the thesis of Cobbett whom Marx quotes—and both believed that the English labouring class was precipitated "without any preparation from its golden into its iron age." Morris probably welcomed Marx' contention that Victorian conditions were in some respects actually worse than the medieval, when, for example, the working day of the Middle Ages was shortened by twice as much time off for meals as was enforced by factory legislation when Marx was writing.

But, though as Shaw says, "Morris stood with Marx contra mundum," there is evidence that the loyalty of the disciple was based on a doubtful understanding of the teaching of the master, even in regard to the theory of history that formed its base. Phrases in the midst of orthodox socialist propaganda betray a failure to understand the fundamentals of dialectical materialism. After reading Marx, Morris earnestly searched history again for evidences of class struggle. He sacrificed something of his frank and easy delight in the old tales, and the chroniclers, once "laborious and conscientious men who loved their subject and often dealt with it dramatically and forcibly; all honour to their memory," are now even at their best, "compelled to look on life through the spectacles thrust on them by the conventional morality of their own times."¹⁹ But there was too much of the residuum of idealistic liberalism in Comrade Morris to make him a consistent follower of Marx and he seems at times closer to twentieth century socialist thought in its reaction to the dogmatism of the nineteenth century form. Of the Marxian theory of value he understood little and cared less. His classic answer to the Scotch heckler who asked him for a definition is only a more explosive version of the temperate confession in a letter to Andreas Scheu: "I find myself weak as to the science of socialism on many points...I want statistics terribly; you see I am but a poet and artist, good for nothing but sentiment."

But if Morris could have been intellectually more receptive to Marxian ideas, he could never have been better prepared emotionally. Modern industrialism, without the hope of change, he considered the "greatest disaster that has ever happened to the race of man." The prospect of its continuance was intolerable to him, and Marx, as much by apocalyptic vision as by scientific certainty, offered the assurance of a new Jerusalem. Morris responded not so much to what Christopher Dawson has called "the internal logic" of Marx' thought as to the "prophecic fervour and burning conviction that inspired his message."¹⁰ That the message was based on an appeal to history strengthened its claim. "The new school," says Morris in "The Hopes of Civilization," "starting with an historical view of what had been, and seeing that a law of evolution swayed all events in it, was able to point out to us that the evolution of history was still going on, and that, whether Socialism be desirable or not, it is at least inevitable."

Once convinced of the inevitability, Morris returned to the roots of his socialism—to art and medievalism and the Ruskinian doctrine of joy in labour. The best pages of his propaganda are illuminated by the generous reading of the past, born of long and affectionate knowledge, that characterized him always. And hardly a lecture from 1889 until his death is without its appeal to the Middle Ages.

And Morris knew the period with the intimacy of an observant contemporary. He was "landed in fourteenth century England"—the England, he said, "I have before my very eyes"—as truly as a man can live in another era, and all the artist in him responded to what he saw. His interest centered not so much on the intangibles explored by Henry Taylor in The Medieval Mind, as on things: brasses, windows, illuminations, early printed books, domestic furnishings, the costume of men, the appearance of towns, and even the face of nature in those days. The chronicles he loved for their pageantry, the pictorial quality that placed history before the reader as so many scenes to be transformed at will into
woven or painted drama—much as King Henry III commanded the workmen of his court: “Cause a map of the world to be painted on the said hall” and the “history of Antioch and the combat of King Richard to be painted in the same chamber, and to paint the wainscot of a green colour, with golden stars.”18 Morris was like another Villars de Honecourt, medieval mason, with notebook in hand, sketching a Gothic floor plan or a marvel of the woodcarver’s art or the folds of drapery over a sorrowful figure in some cathedral porch.

From sacred and secular art, from hints in the romances and the chronicles, from the evidence of illuminations, he gathered the materials for his re-creation of a world. With the instinct of the historian, he turned to the “visible speech” of art to supplement written record, and from the webs of Sicily as well as from Malory, he extracted the spirit of romance: “the strange monsters, the fairy woods and island shores, the lions drinking at the woodland fountain, hawk, swan, mallard, and dove, the swallow and her nestlings and the hot sun breaking through the clouds.” He knew that the medieval craftsmen as well as the poets of Persia had their story: “In their own way they meant to tell us how the flowers grew in the gardens of Damascus, or how the hunt was up on the plains of Kirman, or how the tulips shone among the grass in the Mid-Persian valley, and how their souls delighted in it all, and what joy they had in life.” He recognized the magic way in which the news of beauty got abroad in those days, whether it was the beauty of an old story in an alien setting or the beauty of Palermo silk painted in the background of a roof screen in East Anglia. In the illuminated manuscripts of the Bodleian Library and in the British Museum, he could see the craftsman at work. In one of the master carpenter supervises his apprentices and journeymen, and in the background, half-finished rise the outlines of Noah’s ark! In another the poor weaver is at his loom, perhaps just such a fellow as Morris liked to imagine “chuckling as the bright colour comes round again.” Here the blowers shape the delicate vessels marked with the faint colour, the streaks and speckles of handbook glass. Even the humble art of cooking is represented. Little figures thrust the bread into conical ovens in some great manor house, or turn the spit for outdoor cooking as in the Bayeux embroidery. Medieval towns become as vivid as reality from their frequent repetition: moat, walls, and market-place, towering spire, and many-angled roofs. From years of contemplating such scenes Morris’ medievalism came to resemble some magnificent and crowded cathedral porch, sculptured with the life of man from baptism to viaticum—all that can be seen, and warm with humanity.

He could draw on this knowledge at will and with no apparent effort. In the Oxford Union days, Rossetti once needed a suit of armour of unusual type. Morris designed it and supervised its execution at the local blacksmith’s. Years later Hyndman complained that he never understood the action at Agincourt. With a few swift strokes in the manner of the excellent battle scenes in the prose romances, Morris sketched the field and Hyndman could visualize each movement of the armies, and the English “sticking their arrows in the soft earth like little palisades around them.” The socialist lectures are relieved time and again by bright illuminations of medieval towns. Here is London: “a smallish town, beautiful from one end to the other; streets of low whitewashed houses with a big Gothic church standing in the middle of it; a town surrounded by walls, with a forest of church towers and spires, besides the cathedral and the abbeys and the priories; every one of the houses in it, nay every shed bearing in it a certain amount of definite, distinct conscientious art.” Medieval Oxford he recaptured in a sentence: “a vision of grey-roofed houses and a long winding street and the sound of many bells came over me.” Perhaps no quotation is more characteristic of this visible side of his medievalism than one from “Feudal England.” It describes a country that becomes very familiar to the reader of the prose romances.

Not seldom I please myself with trying to realize the face of medieval England; the many chases and great woods, the stretches of common village and common pasture quite unclosed; the rough husbandry of the tilled parts, the unimproved breeds of cattle, sheep and swine, especially the latter, so lank and long and lathy, looking so strange to us; the strings of packhorses along the bridle roads, the scantiness of the wheel-roads, scarce any except those left by the Romans, and those made from monastery to monastery; the scarcity of bridges, and people using ferries instead, or fords where they could; the little towns well bechurched, often walled; the villages just where they are now (except for those that have nothing left but the church to tell of them), but better and more populous; their churches, some big and handsome, some small and curious, but all crowded with altars and furniture, and gay with pictures and ornament; the many religious houses with their glorious architecture; the beautiful manor houses, some of them castles once, and survivals from an earlier period; some new and elegant; some out of all proportion small for the importance of their lords.

This pictorial quality in his historical imagination has resulted in widespread misunderstanding and is largely responsible for the critic’s labelling as visionary or romantic Morris’ appreciation of the Middle Ages and his wish to carry over to the future the best traditions of the
past. But it must be remembered that this approach to the past through the visible, through art, is likely to result in a more favorable view than that presented by traditional political history or the social survey in the manner of Coulton. When an artist, a poet, and a craftsman is the observer, the overtones of pleasure colour the record of fact and the result is warm, human, and persuasive. Nor is the history of art the triumphant story of steady progress, resembling in its complacency a Victorian version of constitutional development broadening from precedent to precedent. As Morris said in "Some Hints on Pattern Designing," "the world has been noteworthy for more than one century and one place, a fact which we are pretty much apt to forget." The English manufacturer of his day had not improved much over the lovely onion skin linens described in the Odyssey or the texture of the webs recovered from Egyptian tombs. The art of dyeing had changed little from the time of Pliny to the reign of Victoria—except for the worse in some ways. Morris could lament for the passing of the true vermilions and scarlets, for the "beautiful lost purples of the earliest Middle Ages." No matter what can be said, and justifiably, against many aspects of life in the twelfth century, it would be impossible to deny beauty to Ruskin's "fairy cathedrals," the painted books, or to minimize the creative intelligence responsible for the engineering feats of Gothic—what Lethaby has called the art of "thrust and parry." It is not so much that Morris' view needs to be corrected, as that it needs to be understood and supplemented, as he himself was the first to recognize. Some of his readers have not been sufficiently aware of the repeated admonitions against exaggerating the merits of the Middle Ages given by the man who said that in speaking of those times he was "on his own dung-hill."

His medievalism was not uncritical. There are many passages to show that Morris recognized the brutality and tyranny of the times; and an entire chapter in Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome is devoted to the "Rough Side of the Middle Ages," the rudeness of life, the absence of material comfort, the ignorance, the superstition, the violence and misery that marked the period. Even in his defence of the Middle Ages against the misreading of them common in his day, he states clearly that his purpose is primarily to make the medieval past understandable so that its value in the evolutionary scheme of things may be apparent. "We do not stand forward for them except in relation to modern times." He acknowledged that he "would not be scandalized by the statement that in comparison the present state of the world is in many ways a "casting aside of old encumbrances and follies." He recognized the arbitrary inequalities, the medieval privilege of birth. He could admit that the times were "rough and rude," "days full of oppression, gloom, and tur-

moil"; that sometimes the medieval outlook "checked the thirst for knowledge." "Barbarous, superstitious, unpeaceful Middle Ages," he calls them in "Wealth, Art, and Riches"; "The most superstitious epoch in the world," in the "Socialist Ideal." He never had any desire to "turn the clock back," any wish, as he reminded a young American socialist, to "make a thirteenth century Icelandic bonder out of any man." In moments of depression, however, he was more weary than most men of the evidences of "civilization"; so much so that in "The Beauty of Life" he could wish that men had never progressed beyond a simple society and that they had remained "men with little knowledge, but desiring much; rough men if you please but not brutal; with some sort of art among them, genuine at least and spontaneous; men who could be moved by poetry and story; working hard yet not without leisure; getting drunk sometimes, quarreling sometimes, even to dry blows; nay if the times were heroic enough sometimes with point and edge; neither malicious nor over soft-hearted; well pleased to live and ready to die—in short, men, free and equal." But Morris concluded this and all such dreams with: "No, it cannot be: it has long passed over, and civilization goes forward if unsteadily."

But it must be admitted that though Morris knew the seamy side of the Middle Ages he preferred it to the reverse of the modern tapestry. He preferred medieval to modern vice because the medieval, in his opinion, was free for the most part from hypocrisy, and was not so pervasive of every phase of life as to stifle all creative expression. The times that were "rough and rude" produced art that was "elegant and refined." The kingdom of God in heaven became confused with the kingdom of God on earth to the benefit of the common man; so that even superstition had its uses. And the tyranny was forthright. In the following passage from "The Political Outlook" we see Morris' charge against the times, characteristic in its mixture of praise and blame. He is speaking of the enemies of the worker in the modern world. Then:

Changed indeed are they in outward aspect from what the enemies and the tyrants of the workers once were, as I have seen their images many a time, carved by their own slaves; sitting solemnly in their high places, their half-drawn swords laid across their knees, their haughty but eager faces looking into the life of personal energy and contention which were its chief elements. All that is changed now. In no cathedral of the future will the effigies of our present rulers make fair and fitting architectural ornaments; the sword is laid aside and the unseen compulsion of famine has taken its place. The natural mask of hypocrisy cultivated so highly that it does not know itself has supplanted the war-helm.
And it also must be admitted that Morris’ picture, though not romantic in the ordinary sense, is probably still too favorable in its view of medieval conditions for the social historian of today. Independently Morris had arrived at the conclusion his contemporary Thorold Rogers had expressed in *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*: that the Middle Ages were times of “coarse plenty”; that “all the necessaries of life in ordinary years... were abundant and cheap”; that the medieval worker was in a better position than the poorest class of Victorians, “whose condition is more destitute, whose homes are more squalid, whose prospects are more hopeless than those of the poorest serf of the middle ages and the meanest drudges of the medieval cities.”\(^\text{19}\) Despite the “robbery of the workers, thought necessary then as now to the very existence of the state,” Morris says in “The Hopes of Civilization,” “life was easy, and common necessaries plenteous: the holidays of the Church were holidays in the modern sense of the word, downright playdays, and there were ninety-six obligatory ones: nor were the people tame and sheep-like, but as rough-handed and bold a set of good fellows as ever rubbed through life under the sun.” And he felt he could safely appeal to those times to strengthen his central message—the neccessity for joy in work—since the Middle Ages, he believed, were the historical witnesses that “this claim of labour for pleasure rests on a foundation stronger than a mere fantastic dream.”

From the many illustrations in the lectures on art and socialism and from such separate studies in the relation of the medieval to the modern as “Feudal England,” “The Revolt of Ghent,” and “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” it is possible to reconstruct Morris’ vision of the medieval world (his opinion of feudal society, the Church, and the Guild, for example) and to determine what features of the earlier tradition he thought valuable for his own times and the future. It is a generalized picture that emerges, however, rather than the detailed re-creation of a *Past and Present*. The propagandist writing required simpliticy and repetition, delineation of the past in broad strokes rather than the penetratting criticism of particular phases of life or thought. A few major ideas vividly conceived are illumined by the full brilliance of Morris’ historical imagination. We see in medieval England what Morris wanted the Victorian workman to see: a society wherein each group, theoretically at least, had its rights and responsibilities, and from lord to serf, there were certain things a man must do, but there were also certain things a man must have. The refrain is always present: this we once had; this and more we can have again when we take up, where commercialism and individualism broke it off, the medieval tradition of responsibility of man for man—not in a hierarchical society this time, however, but in a world of equals.

For Morris, unlike others interested in using medieval concepts in the reconstruction of modern society, found little to appeal to him in a hierarchical world. Enough is known of his ideal of equality, at the root of his social theory, to make the reason evident. He considered the idea of an “aristocracy of intellect to govern the average man for his own good even if he suffers by it” to be the “last stand of reaction.” While he always urged that the medieval society of status was superior to the modern society of contract, with its cash nexus replacing the old responsibility, he wanted no return to a stratified order—no “captains of industry,” no “natural leaders,” no group of philosophers, clergy or newspaper writers guiding a larger class of people industrious but “not too refined.”\(^\text{20}\) What Morris did admire in feudal England was the principle of “rights and personal duties between inferior and superior all down the scale.” He knew the rights were sometimes withheld and the duties neglected, but the theory at least was recognized, and oppression, when it frequently came, was at least free from hypocrisy. There might be little to choose between the feudal overlords and the Victorian, but, as Morris said, it is impossible that the modern capitalist will find himself immortalized in an art created largely by the people. In “Feudal England” Morris calls the system an “army fed by slaves,” a “state of war,” and in “The Hopes of Civilization,” he sees in it a “rigidly ordered caste society” with a kind of class struggle of its own. But within the antagonisms of this system developed the greatest safeguard of the medieval craftsman, the institution that protected his freedom and therefore laid the groundwork for his art, the medieval guild. It was with special satisfaction that Morris noted that certain lords who fought with the Count of Flanders in the Revolt of Ghent were really the vassals of his craft-guild enemies.

Morris recognized the mingling of good and evil responsible for the struggle within the social structure he had no wish to revive. One of the longest and clearest expositions of his attitude toward this hierarchical world is found in “Feudal England,” where he proposed to explain how “the people of England got into the position in which they were found by the Statute of Labourers enacted by Edward III, and the Peasants’ Rebellion in the time of his grandson and successor, Richard II.” He did so by tracing feudalism from its emergence to its decline, caused by its inability to expand production, and hastened, if not by the Peasants’ Revolt, “at least by the events that made it.” As might be expected when the times considered encompassed the great enthusiam of his life, thoughts and attitudes emerge in the course of the essay that are particularly characteristic of his historical approach. We see clearly his admiration for the Teutonic element in English history, and he scarcely
conceals his regret for the check it received with the Norman Conquest. England “missed forever in her laws and still more in her language and her literature, the chance of developing into a great homogeneous Teutonic people infused usefully with a mixture of Celtic blood.” We see his hatred of what he considered the first of the modern deadly sins, hypocrisy, in his treatment of Richard and John—scoundrels, but openly so, and “good specimens of the chiefs of their times.” His deep-rooted suspicion of purely parliamentary means to socialistic ends is reflected in his attitude toward the development of parliament, the instrument in the hands of the king for “fleeing the lower tribes,” this time theburghers. “I want you to be represented. Send me up from each one of your communes a man or two whom I can bully or cajole or bribe to sign away your substance.” But perhaps most characteristic is the pause in his analysis of the rise and decline of feudalism in which he describes the full flowering of the Middle Ages, “grown into manhood” within the system, a manhood with “an art of its own, which though developed step by step from that old Rome and New Rome, and embracing the strange mysticism and dreamy beauty of the East, has forgotten both its father and its mother, and stands alone triumphant, the loveliest, brightest, and gayest of all creations of the human mind and hand.” There follows a tribute to Chaucer and his world, to the “kindly and human muse” Morris loved, to ballad poetry, to the Lollard earnestness, and to that time in a sense brilliant and progressive in which the life of the worker “was better than it ever had been and might compare with advantage with what it became in after periods and what it is now.” In the days of the Peasants’ Revolt even the serfs had dreams, and the medieval follower of John Ball looked to a world where men should be free to enjoy the fruits of their labour, and those dreams were the foreshadowings of the breakup of Feudalism, just as to Morris the visions of the modern worker presaged the great change coming inevitably to Victorian England.

It is interesting to see what a man who travelled from Anglicanism to Agnosticism and who stopped just short of materialism, made of the great fact of the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church. To begin with Morris did not recognize in any modern body the descendant of the medieval institution. He warned his workmen “that it is little more represented by modern Catholicism than by modern Protestantism.” Both have been “driven into hypocrisy by commercialism.” Nor did Morris feel that the medieval church as a whole evolved from the early Christian. The emphasis of the early church was individualistic: how shall man save his own soul and what is his relation to his creator—a religion of pietism and almost anti-social in its implications. In Morris’ opinion there was no “development of doctrine,” not even a consistent philosophy in the history of the Christian church from patristic to modern. The medieval institution represented the fusion between the mysticism of earlier Christianity and the healthy spirit of association that came with the Teutonic heritage. Its emphasis was on the kingdom of God on earth and its special merit was its inclusiveness. “Men felt themselves to be each one of them of the great corporate body, the Church on earth and in heaven.” It included within itself, Morris says in “Feudal England,” the orders into which lay society was divided and “while by its lower clergy of the parishes and the friars it touched the people, its upper clergy were simply feudal lords”—but at least not absentee. Religion was not separated from the common affairs of men. “The division into a worldly and spiritual life, neither of which had much to do with each other, was a creation of the Protestantism of the Reformation.” There was no duality—two spheres, the moral and the non-moral, with the business of life largely conducted in the second. And it was a real religion not a sham that it offered to its followers. Like Abbot Samson’s, it was accepted as the truth about the world; and, since it was not yet a superstition, practice could be “deduced from its solid dream.” The church enforced the responsibility of class to class, and was frequently found on the popular side. It checked, by branding as immoral, usury, regrating, and fore-stalling, and labeled as criminals of that age those who, Morris says, became the masters of the next. So vivid was the sense of the church’s union with the Church Triumphant that it brought to the Church Militant something of the glory of the future life, and left the record of that glory in the pages of its missals and psalters, and in the reach of spire and the chronicle in stone.

To the influence of the church in the social sphere, Morris is more than fair. In fact it receives an almost disproportionate emphasis, so intent is he on the contrast between medieval and modern. But with the stern side of medieval piety and its hope, as he interpreted it, “that the wretched slaves of this world were to be the joyous masters of the next,” Morris had little sympathy. From the very nature of his mind, “careless of metaphysics” and wary of mysticism, came his underemphasis and underestimation of an important phase of medieval religious life. To him mysticism was not the strong current that moved the minds and hearts of men for several centuries, sometimes slightly or indirectly, sometimes changing lives and times. It was, rather, the temporary outcropping of the earlier pietism breaking through the dominant “Teutonic” spirit: that was very much of this world. St. Francis and others like him were not in the main movement of the age. We miss in Morris the penetration of Carlyle that so beautifully effected the delicate and diffi-
cult task of re-creating the medieval attitude toward St. Edmund. The
mystical life, for Morris, was dwarfed by other aspects, largely social, of
the medieval church.

If anything of this church is to be revived in Morris' future world, it
will be its corporate spirit only. In the pages of Commonweal Morris
dismisses honestly and finally the notion that Christianity, as at least one
third of the Christian world understands it, has any real place in his
Utopian scheme. Theological morality is frankly declared outmoded
and Communism warned "to keep itself free of superstition." "Socialist
ethics would be the guide of our daily habit of life; socialist religion
would be that higher form of conscience that would impel us to ac-
tion on behalf of the future of the race, such as no man could command
in his ordinary moods." In Morris' opinion Christianity was an histori-
cal phase through which the world had already passed or all but passed.
He saw "nothing eternal in its differentia," and while he was willing to
make allowances for the feelings that such a tradition leaves behind it,
he felt that as an active principle in the lives of men, its day was over. 28

What little of the spirit of the medieval church would be welcomed in
Morris' land "beyond the enchanted wood" is suggested by a character in
News from Nowhere:

More akin to our way of looking at life is the spirit of the Middle
Ages, to whom heaven and the life of the next world was such a reality
that it became to them a part of the life upon the earth; which accord-
ingly, they loved and adorned in spite of the ascetic doctrines of their
creed, which bade them condemn it.

One institution of medieval life, however, Morris carried over with
very little modification to his Utopian world. The guild, of which it has
been said "a few scholars know a little and numerous enthusiasts know
much," was at the center of his interest in the social side of the period. It
epitomized for him the medieval spirit of association; it was the first sign
of "secular combination," a "new and mighty force." He saw in its his-
tory the history of the people, and in its progress and decline, the revela-
tion of the form the class struggle took in those days. In its origin, arising
with the need of protection for producers and distributors against the
exactions of the earlier associations of freemen in the municipalities, and
in its development—particularly in the organization of the craft guilds
beneath the merchant guilds to offset the growing power and frequent
tyranny of the older group—Morris traced the leaven of freedom at work
in a hierarchical world. His greatest sympathy, not surprisingly, was
with the craft guild. To it he attributed a genuine spirit of democracy,
however short-lived, and he considered its ideal the medieval counter-
part of his conception of modern communism. Its brief history provided
at least a "foretaste," he says, "of what pleasure might be had in a society
of equals," though the political element in which it lived "quickly ex-
tinguished its tendency to equality." 24 Something of the enthusiasm
Morris felt for the craft guild may be gathered from a statement in "Art
and Industry in the Fourteenth Century."

If the leading element of association in the life of the medieval
workman could have cleared itself of certain drawbacks and have de-
veloped logically along the road that seemed to be leading it onward,
it seems to me it could scarcely have stopped short of forming a true
society founded on the equality of labour: the Middle Ages, so to say,
saw the promised land of Socialism from afar, like the Israelites, and
like them had to turn back again into the desert. 25

Most important to Morris was the moral force which the guild ideally
exercised over its members—its power in fairly distributing the work at
hand, in checking competition, in ensuring production for use and not
profit, and in maintaining a standard of value. It was a force that worked
to the advantage of producer and consumer alike, as Morris illustrated
from the regulations of the Flemish weavers—rules limiting apprentices
and journeymen, and fixing wages, hours, and conditions of labour on
the one hand, and on the other providing for width of web, quality of
dye, and inspection of the goods by the guild. Like Manning, Morris
looked on work "not as a commodity but as a human and social act,"
and as such subject to the laws of ethics. Though Morris might not be
likely to admit the theological background from which the ethics of the
guild were deduced, he knew what those sanctions meant in the protec-
tion of the medieval craftsman. "The labour of the Middle Ages," he
says in Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome, "though individual from its
mechanical side was from its moral side quite definitely dominated by
the principle of association; as we have seen the master of the period was
but a delegate of the guild." The guild was the real employer and under
its auspices developed those conditions which led to free, pleasant, and
therefore, according to the Ruskinian syllogism, artistic work. The tri-
umph of Gothic came simultaneously with the triumph of the guilds, and
both victories were not coincidental but deeply related. The high point
in architecture in Morris' opinion coincided with the Battle of Courtrai
when the "chivalry of France turned their backs in flight before the
Flemish weavers." 26

Some of the most spirited writing in the socialist prose and the long
holiday work of the romances grows from this enthusiasm for the guilds.
"The Revolt of Ghent," which ran serially in the Commonweal in 1888,
tells "one of the great tales of the world," the story of the rising of the craftsmen of the city against their feudal overlord, the Count of Flanders. In the form of generous and lively excerpts from Froissart, with running commentary in the socialist vein, Morris gives a full account of this medieval rebellion under the leadership, first of John Lyon, and then of Philip Van Artevelde. It would be difficult to find another episode in guild history better suited to Morris' purpose than this revolt against feudal tyranny from without the town on the part of the craftsmen who for one hundred years had warred against oligarchy from within and had won at last a generous share in self-government. As Ashley said: "... the history of the Flemish towns in the fourteenth century is the record, not of jealous and meaningless squabbles, and the uprisings of the ‘residuum,’ but of an intelligible advance in the world’s order." From the literary point of view this sketch is not particularly important, but it is an excellent illustration of Morris' use of the medieval in work that is admittedly revolutionary propaganda.

Morris told how the Count of Flanders deliberately stimulated the rivalry of Ghent and Bruges by permitting the townsfolk of Bruges, the commercial city, to set about digging a canal to the north of their industrial neighbors—thus threatening the position of Ghent by cutting off the supplies that customarily came to the town by way of the river Lys. Some of the Gantois, organized as the "White Hoods," stopped the proceedings, defeated the company sent by the count to "restore order," and even murdered his "bailly." There were recriminations followed by a long and involved war, in which the guildsmen exhibited at times remarkable military prowess and the lesser crafts of other towns, and frequently enemy towns, revealed sympathies that followed class lines rather than local loyalties. "Few epochs of history, indeed," Morris says in his introduction, "are more interesting than this defeated struggle to be free of the craftsmen of Flanders." The spirited pages that follow bear him out, and they are best when they are free from the somewhat tortured meaning Morris reads into them. He saw the revolt as a "link in the great chain of the evolution of society, an incident full of instruction in the class struggle which is now coming to be recognized as the one living fact in the history of the world since civilization began, and which will only end when civil society as we know it has been transformed to something else."

There were several points which Morris wished to emphasize for his modern workers in this tale of the medieval craftsmen of Ghent. First by the narration itself he wished to show their solidarity. The guilds—and most important of all, the craft guilds rather than the powerful merchant guilds—held out against the tyranny of the count and the weight of the feudal support he could command. Second, the spirit of democracy was strong. "Within the guilds themselves there could be no capitalists or great men, because the rules of the guild were framed to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few." Third, with this democracy there existed a well-developed communistic feeling (which we may accept as meaning the "spirit of association" when Morris speaks of these times). Fourth, the decline in the guilds may be traced to the growing power within them of the great burgesses, the leaders of the revolt, because with the concentration of power began the transformation of an association of workers into an organization of privilege. "The valour and conduct of the Guildsmen of Ghent was indeed a link in the revolution of the middle class whose final triumph is so recent." Like many another revolt this medieval struggle could not issue in a real victory for the workers. In fact with it begins the decline of the handicrafts, and between Ghent and modern England lies the long waste land of commercialism. But Morris felt, and wanted the workers to feel, that the craftsmen citizens "amongst a people of kindred blood to ourselves" hold hands to them "across the lapse of drearier years." And in conclusion, Morris says:

But the times have brought about the times, and Ghent still lives, not only in the past but in the present also, and while I speak is taking a full share in the struggle toward communal life which is the real fact of modern history. Who knows but that we may live to see a new Revolt of Ghent on these new terms and in the assured hope of well-deserved victory.

Morris' use of the guilds in his socialist propaganda illustrates both the strength and the weakness of this tradition of the appeal to history. On the one hand the possibility of a decentralized world with the guild as the unit along occupational lines is imaginatively reinforced by the enthusiasm for the features of the future as they can be discerned in the best of the past. Perhaps the fourteenth century craft guild did for a while prefigure the benefits of a universal organization of workers. But on the other hand, the nature of propagandist writing demands simplicity. And simplicity results in hardly a statement that cannot be challenged by the historian. What emerges from Morris' lectures is a generalized picture—of necessity ignoring the complexities that beset every step of the way of guild history. It was not that Morris was ignorant of the complexities. He was familiar with contemporary guild scholarship. He recognized that Green's opinion of the relation of the frip to the merchant guild was outmoded; he saw Gross reverse Brentano on the relations of the greater to the lesser guilds in England; he knew the publica-
tion of the Early English Text Society that gave actual medieval regulations. And he knew the less favorable side of the guild picture: the self-interest, the exclusiveness that led to their downfall, and the inter-guild rivalry that once left five hundred corpses of fullers and weavers in the marketplace of Ghent. For this purpose, however, he had to abstract the ideal from the real. Bede Jarrett has remarked that a renaissance often draws its strength from history misunderstood. At times the renaissance of medievalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries draws its strength from an equally dubious source—history simplified.

Morris' treatment of one aspect of medieval life did not suffer from over-simplification, however, since it served as the basis for almost every lecture for fifteen years—the relation of the craftsman to his work. In that relationship was the answer, Morris thought, to what he considered the central problem of the modern world: “the due employment of human labour.” Convinced as he was that he was living in a period of transition with the possibility in the not too distant future of the “birth of wiser, simpler, freer ways of life than the world leads now or the world has ever led,” he dreaded the thought that man might lose his chance through ignorance of a tradition of artistic and satisfying work; that “man should find at last,” he says in “The Prospects of Architecture,” “that he has toiled and striven and conquered and set all things on earth under his feet, that he might live thereon himself unhappy.” Such a tradition of satisfying and artistic work Morris saw in the Middle Ages; and in the lectures on art from 1877 until his death, he never tired of contrasting the medieval craftsman with his Victorian counterpart in an effort to shake the complacent modern faith in progress and to point out to the worker his real position.

For Morris was convinced that in all essentials the medieval worker had the advantage. In a lecture to the Socialist League, he stated his belief that “the world has progressed for the rich but not for the poor” and that the medieval worker with his arbitrary inequalities was better off than the modern worker with inequalities held to proceed from “natural causes” and therefore inescapable. The medieval privilege of birth had given place to the modern “privilege of riches,” he said in a lecture on communism, with the workman in a worse state than at the height of the feudal period. In “True and False Society” Morris claimed that the labouring classes were then “in a far better position than they had been before and in some ways than they have been since” and that they “suffered more from spasmodic arbitrary violence than from chronic legal oppression.” He arrived at his conception of the medieval workman not primarily from the study of surviving records of conditions of labour and real wages but from the study of the surviving product—the art of the Middle Ages. The arts and crafts essays, covering such subjects as textiles, printing, dyeing, woodcuts, stained glass, and illumination, from an historical as well as a technical viewpoint, are proof of his familiarity with medieval industry. A lifetime of appreciation formed his conclusion that only under satisfactory conditions of labour and in relative freedom could such results be effected. He checked his conclusions with the results contemporary scholarship offered, but he began with intuition. The “common fellow” who was responsible for the “images of mysterious beauty,” “strange beasts and birds and flowers,” for the wonder of Gothic, knew the secret of real art: “the expression by man of his pleasure in labour.” Morris welcomed such compilations as Thorold Rogers' *History of Agriculture and Prices* that confirmed his own thoughts on the medieval workman. “We who have studied the remains of his handicraft have seen without any further research, long instinctively sure that he was no priest-ridden down-trodden savage, but a thoughtful and vigorous man, and in some sense at least, free.”

Morris once said of himself, “My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another.” This dreamlike quality, present in his socialism and in his medievalism, is frequently the source of irritation to the analytical. But when Morris talks of the joy the medieval labourer had in his work, the poetic force of the dream combines with the sharp outlines of reality and we have the finest union of his medievalism with his social thought. Here is an authority we miss in Ruskin and a pleasure we miss in Carlyle. For Morris knew the difficulties and the triumphs of the medieval worker not only from an enthusiasm for their products, but from actual practise of their trades. He mastered a half dozen of the earlier crafts. He set his own blue vats, for example, and dipped the bolts of silk in the luminescent mordants that once produced the beautiful scarlets and vermilions of the Middle Ages. He tried weaving with the velvet-wrapped gold threads of medieval velvet. The Kelmscott Press alone represents a knowledge of the older industries that would be the result of a lifetime's study on the part of an ordinary man. Out of his own joy in labour, and similar labour, springs his appreciation of the medieval craftsman.

“And did he loathe his work?” Morris asks in “Art and the People.” “No, it is impossible.” “And I will assert,” he continues, “without fear of contradiction, that no human ingenuity can produce such work without pleasure being a third party to the brain that conceived it and the hand that fashioned it.” And the least complimentary view of the fourteenth century worker, he says in “The Aims of Art,” is—“Poor devil, his work was of so little value that he was allowed to waste it by the hour in pleasing himself—and others.” It was this joy in labour that made the age
romantic, he says in “The Beauty of Life,” and not the “robber-barons and inaccessible kings with their hierarchy of serving nobles and such rubbish.” One view of history tells of the kings and scoundrels; but another tells of the guilds.

Not every day, you may be sure, was a day of slaughter and tumult, though the histories read almost as if it were so; but every day the hammer clinked on the anvil, and the chisel played about the oakbeam, and never without some beauty being born of it, and consequently some human happiness.

The Victorian side of the contrast is too familiar for comment. Though Morris acknowledges that there were “eyesores in the palmy days of medieval art,” he says they were caused “by the destruction of wares” and not, as in the nineteenth century, “by the making of them.” In the 1860’s it was prosperity, not ruin, that was “extremely ugly.” It was impossible for the Victorian worker to be an artist—to say nothing of the other deprivations implied in the comparison between the medieval and the modern: the factory system and the division of labour in contrast with the complete product in the hands of one worker and the “freedom of human development it permitted”; the capitalist as coordinator in contrast to the master as the most skilled workman; the simultaneous employment of a “number of workmen on the same terms” in contrast to the limitation in the number of journeymen allowed to any one master; the modern exchange, money—commodity—money, in contrast with the medieval, commodity—money—commodity, with its emphasis on production rather than profit; the means of production in the hands of the few in contrast to the medieval worker’s mastery, within the regulations of the guild, of his “time, his tools, and his material.”

Of this weighing of past and present Morris never tired, and its use is too frequent for citation. But one of the longer passages developing his favorite theme is found in the 1884 lecture to Anti-Scrape. With the Victorian worker he compared the medieval, “who lived, however roughly, far easier than his successor does now.” He worked for no master in the modern sense, he made his wares from beginning to end, and “sold them to the man who was going to use them.” He worked at his own rate and in his own home, and he himself “determined the ornament on the finished work.” And the freeman of the guilds was entitled to his share in the pasture lands of the country. “Port Meadow at Oxford, for instance, was the communal pasture of the freemen of that city.” Morris then gives a picture of the nineteenth century worker that has become the generalized portrait of commercialism, so frequently is it found: monotonous work, scant wages, wretched housing, blunted sensibilities.

For the medieval workman the surroundings of daily life were at least tolerable. “Nor must we forget,” says Morris, “that even if he lives in a town the fields and sweet country come close up to his house, and he at whiles occupies himself in working them, and more than once or twice in his life he has had to take the bow or brown-bill from the wall, and run his chance of meeting the great secret face to face in the ranks of battle; oftenest, indeed, in other men’s quarrels, yet sometimes in his own, nor wholly unsuccessfully then.”

Scholarship since Morris’ day has, of course, put a considerable dent in the halo of the medieval craftsman. Coulton is astonished at “how few medieval documents testify directly to the artist’s love of his work.” W. G. Campbell, in an introduction to a study of the medieval carver, says: “Time has concealed some of the worst crimes of the medieval builder; but there is plenty of evidence that he could be both lazy and dishonest.” There were not only giants in those days, apparently, but also disgruntled strikers. And sometimes work for the glory of God had to be further encouraged by bonuses or carried on by the impressment of labour. And some very bad men built some very good buildings. But when all that can be said against the conditions of work in the Middle Ages is weighed and that part deducted which is in obvious reaction to the over-romantic view of the last century, there still remains to be explained, but never explained away, the miracle of Gothic and the organization of labour that could achieve cooperative effort on such a scale.

For to Morris the final proof of the superior state of the worker was his product and the greatest product of the craftsman was Gothic. Beside the organic art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, expressive of the aspirations and the character of the society that produced it, he placed the architecture of the Victorian period, expressive of nothing but a muddled eclecticism in the narrow sphere of art and a record of injustice and slovenliness in the broader sphere of daily living. “The most completely organic form of art which the world has ever seen” was produced, he thought, in fourteenth century England. The best the nineteenth century could show was “an imitation of an imitation of an imitation, the result of dull respectability, or of foolish whims without root or growth in them.” Architecture he considered the surest social record, since building, a cooperative act, revealed more than any other art the true state of society. He said in a lecture to Anti-Scrape: “It is clear that men so working must be influenced in their work by their condition of life, and that the man who organizes their labour must make up his mind that he can only get labour of a kind those conditions bred.” This is the Ruskinian doctrine, of course, and Morris frankly says that he “echocs” it.
He considered architecture not only as the surest social record but as the
greatest of the arts and inclusive of all o’ them. How inclusive and
how impossible of imitation in the Victorian world may be judged from
a selection from an essay on Gothic.

For now Gothic had completed its furniture: Dante, Chaucer,
Petrarch; the German Hero ballad epics, the French Romances, the
English Forest-ballads, that epic of revolt, as it has been called, the
Icelandic sagas, Froissart and the chroniclers represent its literature.
Its painting embraces a host of names (of Italy and Flanders chiefly)
the two great realists, Giotto and Van Eyck at their head: but every
village has its painters, its carvers, its actors even: every man who pro-
duces works of handicraft is an artist. The few pieces of household
goods left of its wreckage are marvels of beauty; its woven cloths and
embroideries are worthy of its loveliest buildings, its pictures and
ornamented books would be enough in themselves to make a great pe-
riod of art, so excellent are they in epic intention, in completeness of
unerring decoration, and in marvellous skill of hand. In short, those
masterpieces of noble building, those specimens of architecture, as we
call them, are the standards of the whole art of those times, and tell the
story of all the completeness of art in the heyday of life, as well as of
the sad story which follows. 9

Much of Morris’ medievalism and his historic grasp is reflected in his
attitude toward the Gothic revival of his own times. Perhaps few men
have been so well equipped as he to judge of it, and yet he shows little of
the scorn for it common to the modern criticism of the movement. He
did not consider it a “mere piece of superficial nonsense,” yet he felt it
was incapable of any real growth, limited as it was to the feelings
and hopes of an exclusive group. The spirit of the age was more honestly
expressed by the box shaped, slate roofed horrors of the Victorian scene.
The strength of the revival, in Morris’ opinion, was that it had its origin
in an appreciation of the new history, the “living history,” the “chief
joy of so many of our lives,” and that the best architects, consciously or
not, were under the influence of such men as Freeman and Green. But
though through history the revival had mastered the technical side of
Gothic, it had stopped short of the fundamental lesson of the historians,
the evolutionary principle of a changing architecture in a changing
world. It was as preposterous for a Victorian workman to turn out a
Gothic building as it would be for an Athenian to do it, or for the me-
dieval craftsman to erect the Parthenon. But Morris understood the pas-
sion for beauty that drove the best contemporary architects to their
hopeless task, and he watched sympathetically as they “toiled consci-
entiously and wearily to reconcile the Podsnappery of modern London
with the expression of the life of Simon de Montfort and Philip Van
Artevelde.” He saw the revival slip from the ideals of Pugin’s Contrasts
to lower and lower goals, but few had the courage to reach Morris’ con-
clusion about the movement as a whole—“It is all hung in the air.” 99

Morris’ sympathy for those who attempted to build anew in the Gothic
manner did not extend to the second group within the revival—those
who attempted to restore. To him the untouched surfaces of buildings
were as truly the records of a former age as the chronicles they supple-
mented; they told not only of “the aspirations of men passed away but
also what we may hope for in the time to come.” Restoration was de-
structive of historical evidence, and Morris fought it at every turn. “For
this among the rest was I ordained.” To those who objected that the an-
cient buildings were themselves “restored” in earlier times, he answered
that they were restored in days that had their own living tradition, and
whatever history restoration destroyed, it “left history in the gap.” Will-
iam of Wykeham, Morris told Anti-Scape in 1889, was not in the po-
sition of the Victorian architect who could imitate only mechanically.
“Wake up Theodoric the Goth from his sleep of centuries, and place
him on the throne of Italy; turn our modern House of Commons into the
Witenagemote (or meeting of the wise men) of King Alfred the Great;
no less a feat is the restoration of an ancient building.”

When the interest in restoration grew to such proportions that it
threatened to fill England with sham Gothic and remove every trace of
the real, Morris took practical steps. A letter to the Athenæum, in which
Morris expressed his concern that “this time it is nothing less than the
Minister of Tewkesbury that is to be destroyed by Sir Gilbert Scott,”
marked the beginning of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Build-
ings. Celebrities of the day were marshalled—even Carlyle, who, to Mor-
ris’ disgust, wanted to see Wren’s work preserved—and Anti-Scape was
inaugurated, with its weekly meetings, vigorous letters of protestation
to the press, and jaunts to “view cases.” In the Society’s Manifesto Morris
said that learning, as applied to building, was a snare once tradition has
gone. “We think that those last fifty years of knowledge and attention
have done more for their destruction than all the foregoing centuries of
revolution, violence, and contempt.”

The architecture of Morris’ future world will resemble Gothic only
because it will have recaptured the conditions responsible for the me-
dieval greatness—freedom and joy in labour—conditions impossible of
realization in an industrialized and mechanized society. Building will
not be imitative, however; it will reflect its own times and not simulate
“needs and aspirations passed away.” But the communal hall of Morris’
future, like the medieval cathedral, will be “such an abode of man as no private enterprise could come anywhere near for beauty or fitness because only collective thought and collective life could cherish the aspirations which give birth to its beauty, or have the skill and leisure to carry them out.” England in News from Nowhere is rich in buildings that suggest Gothic and yet they have an originality of their own. “I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century,” the narrator says. “Like the medievals, we like everything trim and clean and orderly and bright—as people always do when they have a sense of architectural power,” a character explains. But the change in architecture must be preceded by a change in the fundamental organization of the world.

“Meantime we are waiting,” Morris says in “The Revival of Architecture,” “for that new development of society, some of us in cowardly inaction, some of us amidst hopeful work towards the change; but at least we are waiting for what must be the work, not of the leisure and taste of a few scholars, authors, and artists, but of the necessities and aspirations of the workman throughout the civilized world.”

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL.

“Ah ye good people, matters go not well to pass in England, nor shall they, till everything be held in common.”

John Ball’s Speech—Froissart

In the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 Morris found the perfect subject. He had used the contrast between medieval and modern many times before, but in this romance the line between past and present which too often makes the parallels forced, blurs and then disappears. The vision of the rebel priest is fused with the vision of the modern socialist into a unity at once imaginative and forceful. The struggle of man to be free becomes one story, not a series of pathetic interludes with accidental similarities; and all true men are members of the Fellowship. To Morris, John Ball and his Kentishmen in the fourteenth century find their counterpart in the little band of socialists in the nineteenth. The masters, however, are more numerous in the Victorian scene; the villeins unaware sometimes of their servitude; masters and serfs alike too set in the belief that the present system is inevitable. And rousing the modern worker to a sense of his own position and of the dependence of one man upon another—“Kent is well off, but what of Essex”—is more difficult than stirring the sense of justice of the yeomen in a little medieval town on the road to London. The modern problem is of symphonic complexities; the medieval has the simplicity of plain chant. But the song of freedom is the same, and Morris transposes from one form to another until the reader recognizes the modern in the medieval, and hears the melody of the future in that of the past.

When he took the late fourteenth century as his setting for a romance with revolutionary overtones, Morris chose well. It was a time of great change, comparable to the one he felt was in the immediate future for the Victorian world. The Black Plague, the Papal Schism, the bitter and endless wars, prepared the way for the passing of the old order. A new class, not fully conscious of its unity as yet, was emerging to replace the dominant lords. In the burghers’ struggle for freedom, the serf also was involved, and while the turmoil of the transition meant advancement for the middle class finally, it was a time when “even the serf had
dreams,” and villeinage disappeared with the system that created it. The spirit of rebellion was not local. It spread with the swiftness and sympathy of an internationale. The “White Hoods” in Flanders, the “Maîlloûtons” in Paris, “Tuchins” in Languedoc, and three hundred thousand of the “noble commons of England” were on the march. It is not surprising that the wise and witty Froissart, observing it all between fear and despair, thought that the “noblews of England were in great paryll to have been destroyed,” that the country was “at a point to be lost without recovery,” and that “the commonties throughout all the world” were following the “empsale of the Gauntvoyse.”

And the picture of peasant well-being and solidarity which Morris wished to present to his nineteenth century reader is, in this period at least, not entirely the romantic’s dream. The decade before the revolt of 1381 was marked by high wages and low prices, and statistics show that the worker was in a better position than he had been earlier and that he held this advantage until about 1500. The scarcity of labour after the Black Plague and the ineffectiveness of the Statute of Labourers, the fourteenth century version of a ceiling on wages, frequently placed the bargaining power within his control, and when bargaining failed, protective unions and strikes proved more convincing to unwilling or difficult employers. As a contemporary record reads: “Everyone shall aid others to resist their lords with strong hands.” The spirit of fraternity was considerably fostered too by the absence of a police system. In his English Social History Trevelyan says:

The villein farmer striving for freedom, the free workman in constant revolt against the statute of labourers, were neither of them in such real subjection to their betters as the agricultural labourers in the well-policied countryside of the nineteenth century, when the poor had been deprived of the bow and club, and had not yet been armed with the vote. In the fourteenth century when every man was expected to take his own part with stick or fist, with arrow or knife, a union of sturdy villagers was less easily overawed.¹

The appeal this material holds for the propagandist is clear enough: a decadent world marked by violence and corruption, a spirit of rebellion afloat, and resentment at old injuries brought to a head by the fresh injustice of exorbitant taxation. The end of the fourteenth century, as well as the nineteenth, witnessed the breakdown of the old order and the slow and painful beginnings of the new.

No two contemporary accounts agree on all the details of the Social Revolt of 1381 and modern scholarship has still to arrive at a final picture of the events; so any summary of the story runs the risk of challenge at every point. Yet a traditional view of the rising has emerged from the many and frequently conflicting sources. It tells how the three great poll tax fanned the smouldering and inarticulate resentment of the poorer classes into an unmistakable and purposeful flame; how the commissions sent into disturbed areas only increased the resentment and unified opinion in favor of those who refused to pay; how Sir Simon Burley chose the wrong time to reclaim an escaped serf, an industrious man who had long left the manor and lived in the town; how a collector offered an insufferable insult to the daughter of one Tyler of Dartford, and how the father smashed the collector’s head in revenge; and finally what with the growing discontent that accompanies all times of change, and with one incident after another forcing the issue, how the men of Kent and Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, rose in rebellion and marched on London to tell their King how sadly misgoverned was his realm and to offer their help in setting it right. According to Froissart, by no means trustworthy at all points but Morris’ chief source, the Monday after Trinity Sunday in 1381, the men of Kent and Essex met their leader Wat Tyler at Canterbury. There “all the common people made great feast, for all the towne was of their assent.” They proceeded to Rochester, and on the way pillaged the houses of advocates and of “procurers of the King’s courte, and of the archbbysshoppe, and had mercy on none.” At Rochester they were welcomed by sympathizers, men of the “same secte,” and the rebels had good cheer before taking to the road again. By Wednesday they were at Blackheath. A messenger was sent to the King, and on Thursday the royal barge sailed down the Thames to Rotherhithe. Nothing came of the venture, because the King would not alight and he was persuaded by his advisers to return to the Tower. The commons then marched on London, where the sympathy of many within the walls won entrance for them.

All that day and night the city was at their mercy. Friday, however, the King arranged to meet the commons at Mile End, and there they were silenced by false promises, and with a pathetic simplicty, some sixty thousand of them promised to return home, taking with them the King’s banner and his letters granting them freedom. The royal word “apased well the common people,” Froissart says, “suche as were good playne men, that were come thyder and wyse not why.” John Ball, Wat Tyler, and Jack Straw, and thirty thousand others, according to the chronicler, remained away from Mile End and refused the settlement they rightly distrusted. (The reader of the romance remembers the warning John Ball gives at the Cross: “Therefore there is nought can undo us except our own selves and our heartening to soft words from those who would slay us.”) The next morning, Saturday, the king met Wat Tyler
at Smithfield, and the disillusioning close of the rebellion followed. The
rebel was murdered, the people outwitted, and their ruler's promise
broken. Only the young king's presence of mind relieves the story, and
there is some bitterness in the thought that his courageous act—if it were
courage and not mere obedience to a calculated plan that prompted it
—was intended not only to save his own life but to gull his foolish and
not ignoble subjects. In the dangerous moments after the death of Tyler,
Richard disarmingly offered himself to the commons as their leader and
so averted the possible massacre of the royal party. This revolt of 1381,
so significant as a study in transition, provides the background for the
romance.

With his love of England that had nothing of jingoism in it—"the land
is a little land . . . it is neither prison nor palace but a decent home"—
and with his emphasis on the native tradition of socialist thinking, Mor-
ris probably never worked with material so sympathetic to his tempera-
ment and his aims. The story of Ball, Tyler, and Straw offered the possi-
bilities of a medieval setting in the countryside. A striking leader in the
rebel priest; and a slogan of the strongest equalitarian appeal:

When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then the gentleman?

Morris could use his well loved Froissart as his chief source, although he
would wisely avoid duplicating either the scenes or the tone of the
chronicler. In the medieval record there was too much said of the point-
less violence of the rising to embarrass the modern champions of the
commons. But in the romance the facts could be judiciously introduced
against an imaginary setting; the tragic ending intimated; the destruc-
tion minimized; and the idealism heightened. It was, after all, the ideal
behind the revolt that concerned Morris most, and this he could picture
in the quiet village where John Ball preached the "Fellowship" in the
days preceding the Feast of Corpus Christi and its bitter octave of 1381.

For the poet in search of an ideal popular leader, Froissart's picture of
John Ball, the "folishe priest," affords excellent material. Though the
chronicler's attitude toward the rebellion is unmistakably antagonistic,
that refreshing fairness found time and again in the medieval account
has left John Ball with more than a touch of nobility. Even in the pages
of the friend of aristocrats, the priest's message has force: "and in the
beginning of the worlde they sayd ther were no bonde men . . . .": "why
shulde they then be kept so undre like bestes, the which they wold no
longer suffre, for they wolde be all one." "The meane people loved him"
(and "such as intended to no goodness," of course, Froissart adds), and

news of his preaching had reached London, where he had many sup-
porters as well as in the country round. Every Sunday after Mass he
preached to the people, and his sermon, for its poetic strength and sim-
plcity—the heart of the matter given in words all could understand—
could be a fourteenth century version of the best in Morris:

A ye good people, the maters goethe not well to passe in Englande,
nor shall not do tylly everythynge be common; and that there be no vil-
layns nor gentylmen, but that we may all be unyed toguyder, and that
the lordes be no greater maisters than we be. What have we deserved
or why shulde we be kept thus in servage? . . . They be clothed in
velvet and chamlet furred with grise, and we be vestured with pone
clothe; they have their wynes, spyes, and good breed, and we have
the drawyng out of the chaffe, and drinke water; they dwell in fayre
houses, and we have the payne and travelye, rayne, and wynde in the
feldes; and by that that cometh of our labours they kepe and mayntyne
their estates. . . . Let us go to the Kyng . . . and if we go to
guyder, all maner of people that be now in any bondage wyll folowe us,
to thentent to be made fre; and when the Kyng seyth us, we shall have
some remedie, outher by fayrnesse or otherwyse. 2

The gift of lively prose in the medieval supporter of the status quo
gave Morris the spur to create in the main character of the romance the
spokesman of those ideals which seemed to him to vary in expression at
different times in the world's history, but to be always fundamentally
the same in their demand for the decent life for the common man, a life
free from fear and free from want. John Ball's vision of the world after
the victory he hopes for is like Morris' land of the future, after what he
considered the inequalities and social callousness of Victorian England
have been purged. There will be no master then, but that will be the
only loss. Men will share the fields they till, the cloth they weave, the
homes they build. "And man shall help man, and the saints in heaven
shall be glad, because men no more fear each other; and the curtel
shall be ashamed, and shall hide his curtelship till it be gone, and he be no
more a curtel; and fellowship shall be established in heaven and on the
earth."

"Fellowship" indeed is always Morris' answer to "Devil Take-the-
Hindmost!" and John Ball’s speech at the Cross, in which hell is de-

fined as the place where "every man is for himself," is one long protest in
medieval terms against the principle of laissez-faire in any age. Eco-

nomic too it is not good for man to be alone, and all the implications
of the speech are directed against the Victorian system, or lack of it, in
which the responsibility of man for man is lost. The priest, naturally
enough, sees the solution in the understanding of the nature of the Church on earth and the application of such an understanding directly and fearlessly to the problem at hand. Heaven and earth are one; the Church is the manifestation of that unity in this world. The life of the Church is in every man and he kills that life who isolates himself from other men—"fellowship is heaven; and lack of fellowship is hell." The Foeman is the rich man who forgets his fellowship not only with the saints in heaven but with the poor in Essex—the oppressor who is "a world to himself, and needeth no helper nor helpeth any." The men of Kent are fairly prosperous, but their sense of brotherhood with the others in England, poorly clothed and poorly housed, will not let them stand idle. If the ideal does not move them, John Ball suggests self-interest: the interdependence of one group on another will result finally in all paying for the suffering and injustice inflicted on some.

Transposed into modern terms, this sermon could be heard weekly at the socialists' outdoor pitch in the Hammersmith area. On Sunday mornings Morris would leave the happy breakfast parties with Edward Burne-Jones, and very much without his old friend's blessing, he would hurry away to give to a handful of Victorian workers virtually the same message that John Ball gave to a larger and more attentive audience of Kentish men. In the medieval sermon, as in the socialist lecture, there is the usual emphasis on unity as the strength of the poor; of the necessity of action, not dreams; of the "most miserable sin" of all, forgetting their own interest in a mistaken play for the favor of the rich man whom the poor man "deemeth to be other than he." There is the same hope: that the fellowship is waxing stronger, "not strong to bear, but to do." And of course the ideal of absolute equality that John Ball preached was at the root of all Morris' social thinking.

Morris, vigorous and forthright, and rarely subtle either in his thoughts or in their presentations, uses a rather complicated device in the conversation between John Ball and the narrator on the evening after the skirmish. Morris knew that any momentous change in society must be based on a conscious revaluation of history. He also knew that his Victorian readers were, for the most part, as complacent in their historical assumptions as they were in their faith in progress. He wanted them to look back over the crowded years between the revolt of John Ball and the revolt of William Morris and to see that expanse from a new vantage point—to see it with all the wonder that it roused in John Ball—because for a very different set of reasons, they too had never seen it before. He wished to present in the simplest terms his own reading of history—the story of the steady advance toward the inevitable end—the "great revolt"—and of the increasing domination of class over class that will cause it. To be effective as propaganda and as art, this reading within the delicate compass of a tale had to be given with convincing detachment—none of the platform socialist rant—and with great simplicity. The speech at the Cross made use of the expedient of expressing a modern problem in medieval terms and letting the reader draw the conclusions. But in the conversation in the Church, the modern viewpoint is given explicitly though it is emphasized by the comment of the medieval priest. Artistically this double vision, the narrator looking back to the past and John Ball looking forward to the present, results in the desired detachment. Under the spell of the tale, the single argument has double force because of this device of using two spokesmen to express the same idea in terms understandable in their own world. The modern "free" labourer is to the medieval mind a thrall. For the Victorian reader the new and unwelcome concept of "lower class slavery" is thus strengthened by the seemingly independent judgment of two eras. Each age, medieval and modern, agrees on the ever widening chasm between rich and poor, Disraeli's two nations, and the reader receives the argument with twofold impact. It was as if Morris instead of using the familiar device of the past as a mirror for the present, used two mirrors, and allowed both past and present to exchange views in double vision and to conclude that the reflection of tyranny is always recognizable whether in lord or capitalist and that servitude is and nothing else whether it be called thralldom or "free" labour.

By means of question and answer this twofold emphasis is artistically sustained. John Ball questions; he receives his answers; his conclusions from the answer are adjusted to fact, and in the ironic correction of John Ball's mistakes lies the lesson for the Victorian. Swiftly the movement of five hundred years is sketched in modern terms: the break up of the feudal system, the disappearance of serfdom, the growth of the modern commercial system, the rise of "free" labour and the capitalist coordinator, the industrial revolution with its changes in production and communication, capitalist wars, cycles of prosperity and depression, laissez-faire, and the ills of modern England. Simultaneously the medieval priest and the modern socialist, by pointed question and simple answer, evolve a story of commercial society that is one in meaning though different in expression.

John Ball looks at the history of the times that follow his and sees in it a riddle: every apparent gain is a real failure, and the bitter irony of progress is softened only by the hope of eventual revolt. He rejoices at the passing of villeinage only to find that it is succeeded by a new mastery, a worse tyranny than the serf ever knew, a tyranny under which a man must be thrall or thief. The growth of commercialism means for a
while that a man will earn three pennies where he once earned two, but it is only a temporary improvement. In the new society, the serf who was sometimes thrall and sometimes free, has disappeared and the labouring men, “Thralls after the new fashion,” thrive only so long and so far as such prosperity suits their masters. With the enclosures, the last vestige of freedom goes, and men are again bought and sold at the Cross, not literally now, but in that market in which they paradoxically buy the right to labour with their labour. When the narrator explains the modern system, John Ball says: “The man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man,” and to him “the greatest fool is he who takes the name of freedom at the price of being a slave.”

But perhaps the more effective teaching occurs when the lesson is less obviously pointed. Morris' strongest argument is left unstated—such loveliness can exist only when the world creating it is sound—and though the conversations in the church may fade, the vision of the little village remains in the soft glow of late afternoon. Pugin used the visual method earlier and literally, and his “Contrasts” were clear. Morris’ purpose is identical, but in the romance he is content with creating the medieval picture and he leaves the contemporary for the reader to form by implication. Morris falls asleep in London, the “great wen,” in Cobbett’s words, where filth and dirt are the rule for the poor and vulgarity is fast becoming the rule for the rich, and he awakens in a village between London and Canterbury early in the fateful week of the rebellion. As clearly as if it were stated, we grasp his meaning: this is the way the poorer classes lived in those days; here is a yeoman’s house, here the commoner’s inn, and here is his church. What has Victorian England to show to equal it?

As often as we are prepared for Morris’ ability to evoke the past, the little piece of the fourteenth century world we meet in John Ball comes like the shock one gets on suddenly finding a good reproduction of a medieval illumination, with all its color and delicacy, set in the drab pages of a modern book. Our first view is of the Kentish countryside with its gardenlike trimness, its contours gently rising and falling, its land unhedged and cultivated in strips, and of three little villages seen in the distance through the clear bright air. Beyond the copse rises the clean white line of a new steeple, built in a living tradition and safe from restoring parsons. Morris finds himself clothed in a neat black dress, long and yet free, and relieved by embroidery. A well turned pen and ink case is at his side. He approaches the village, and in it is visible almost all that he loved in the medieval scene. The houses are oak frame work, well white washed. (Coulton says the medieval villages looked clean because the builders knew the value of lime to prevent weathering.) Here and there rubble-stone is added for strength, and on the arches, freestone, to allow for the mason’s love of decoration. The blacksmith’s house has a gaily painted St. Clement. (Who is the patron of the Victorian worker and where does he ply his trade?) Will Green—he would be of the lower classes in nineteenth century England—is fairly prosperous; so the first floor of his house is stone. The great room on the main floor is simply furnished and the walls are hung with coverings of green worsted “with birds and trees woven on it.” (“Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful,” was Morris’ needed advice to his contemporaries.) We find in the Rose the contrast to the Victorian “pub” where nineteenth century workmen sought refuge from their cheerless homes. The main room of the medieval tavern has oak panelling, with whitewashed wall above, and a rose stem pattern near the moulding. Above the oven shed, in bold natural colour is a great rose of plaster. No pastels for Morris—living red, the rose in its “proper color”!

Everywhere, in the tavern, the home, and the church, is that beauty in the details of life that comes, Morris feels, only from the joy of free labour. The tavern bowls are earthen pots but they are gay in color and curiously turned. The pewter salt cellar is good in shape and covered carefully with a white cloth. The wassail bowl at Will Green’s house is of polished wood “with speckles in it,” and on its silver band is inscribed a legend: “In the name of the Trinity, fill the cup and drink to me.” The very tiles on the church floor are glazed with the care that comes only with the real interest of the craftsman. Many things are crude, but nothing shoddy. The clothes of Will Green and his men are made of a rough but serviceable stuff, and not unattractive in form and colour. Their long bows are of the finest wood, a joy to behold in their supple strength and a greater joy to hear when the men shoot at the butts on their common ground, and a man can hear the “twang of the bow-string and the plump of the shaft in the target” through the still afternoon air. Such beauty in the surroundings of daily life is the true record of man—not the chronicles alone with their tales of “kings and scoundrels.” Look at a Victorian village, Morris unmistakably intends to say, and draw what conclusions you will.

It must have been with a special joy that Morris contemplated the Church in his medieval village. He tells us that “architectural peep shows” were among his most satisfactory dreams, and that he always re-created the scene in detail, often down to the “meditative hens” scratching about close to the “very jambs of the richly carved Norman doorway of the church.” Such a re-creation we find in John Ball. The chancel is “so new that the dust of the stone still lay white on the midsummer grass
beneath the carvings of the windows." When John Ball and Morris enter in their strange midnight visit, Morris sees the magnificent nave, free from benches, and paved with glazed tiles, from which the tall shafts rise. A vision for the secretary of Anti-scarpet! No austere grayness gives a puritan touch to the scene—mistaken notion of the Gothic spirit—but the walls are covered with colorful pictures in which the medieval artist has been allowed free rein—for bishops and lawyers crowd the gates of Hell in the Last Judgment and St. Christopher, with Will Green's face and figure, carries the Christ Child. Rood screen, and chancel, and newly carved stalls, jewel-like windows—everywhere is "rich and fair color, and delicate and dainty form."

Certainly Morris never found happier expression for the simple yet fundamental message of Fellowship he so earnestly wished to bring to his times. That the form of the message gave free play to his artist's love of the medieval confirms its integrity: it was literally one with the man. But A Dream of John Ball has an interest beyond the response it awakens as an admirable medium for the translation of an ideal into terms of a lifelong enthusiasm. It has additional value as a test case of how a Victorian, working in the traditions of a great revival, used the material of history; and the result of the test may prove illuminating as a sample of nineteenth century medievalism with a purpose. So often Victorian medievalism is a nebulous thing—unmodified praise for the responsibility of group to group in the feudal system, a social structure of infinite variety and covering several centuries; or praise of the Guilds, unqualified by any hint as to their nature or origin or to the times in which their power was felt. But A Dream of John Ball is related to a series of actual events which can be checked, with the time, place, and characters known. Though no formal comparison of the vision and the actuality can take from the magic and beauty of Morris' re-creation, it is possible that such a test may result in a revaluation of the romance on the grounds for which it is so often praised—for the truth of its picture of 1381.

Of course Morris was writing a romance; and though it had a frankly political aim and was intended to instruct by an historical parallel, it was never meant to be the fairly faithful re-creation that Carlyle achieves in Past and Present. The heart of the piece, John Ball's sermon at the Cross, has no original in any contemporary account, though the chronicles are rich in comment on the nature of Ball's message to his followers. It is truth hid in the trappings of the tale we can expect from Morris with his love of "uncritical or traditional" history. The poet takes over the field of the historian with not unexpected results: an increase in vividness and in the sense of reality, and a loss in exactness and in complexity. Yet it is instructive to contrast the dream with the reality—the idyllic picture of village life, the manly struggle in meadow and on road, with the grim face Truth wears in poll tax lists and "antient indictments." One of the most complex and formidable events, or series of events, in English history, is reduced to its simplest terms—with what loss of accuracy and with what revelation of Morris as an artist we can judge by comparing the probable sources with the nineteenth century version. What was the state of Victorian scholarship? How account for Morris' omission of so much of the action or for the removal of the center of interest from London to an unnamed village east of the Medway? Or for the apparent denial of one point seemingly stressed by contemporaries, John Ball's Wycliffite tendencies? Or how explain the inaccuracies and doubtful judgments implicit in the tale? Though it may be said with truth that too much critical writing on the sources of poets is based on a fundamental lack of understanding of the creative mind, as if the poet needed the armory of facts necessary to fire the slowly kindling spirit of the scholar, a consideration of sources, approached in the full consciousness of its limitations, should tell something of Morris as historian and craftsman. Froissart would have been enough for any poet, but the fact remains that Morris knew more. How did he handle his shears as he cut into the gorgeous bolt of stuff, his artist's knowledge of the medieval period? What was the pattern he followed?

The traditional view, embodied in Froissart, and in a measure in Morris' tale, ignores the scope and complexity of the rising of 1381. We are likely to think of it as a rebellion of the peasants of Kent and Essex with London as the main stage of action and the will to abolish serfdom as the cause. Actually many more levels of society were involved than the term "Peasants' Revolt:" suggests; the rebellion flared over a wide area from the Humber to the Medway—Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire being involved as well as Kent and Essex—and the reasons for the uprising were as numerous as the interests involved. Kriechn has called it a social revolt, and rightly so. It was not a maneuvered political change, nor an upheaval that cut vertically through all classes but a rising of the "have nots" everywhere. It was town against gown in Cambridgeshire, priest against abbot at St. Edmundsbury, village against landlord monastery at St. Albans, apprentice and journeyman against master in London, and, of course, peasant against lord in Kent and Essex and in the dissected areas of East Anglia. In one town, to the north, it was the old mayor against the new, and in another it was a quarell among the burghers. Nor does the traditional view of the time element give any notion as to the true nature of the revolt. From the Monday before the feast of Corpus Christi (Thursday, June 13 in 1381) until the following Saturday when Tyler was killed and the rebels dispersed is usually thought of as
the "hurrying time" when "the nobles were in great paryl to be destroyed." But the revolt actually began in May, with angry warnings earlier, and it flared up again here and there as late as Michaelmas. The indictments, pardons and fines dragged on into the following years.

Before the nineties, a Victorian looking for comment on the meaning of the revolt would have turned to Thorold Rogers' Six Centuries of Work and Wages and his History of Agriculture and Prices in England. The opinion of this professor of political economy and member of Parliament, Oman says, was accepted without criticism for twenty years. According to Rogers and his school, with the shortage of labour after the Black Death and the high wages demanded by the workers in spite of the statutes, the lords determined to turn back the clock and to take from their tenants the rights acquired in other and different times. The money payments which the lord gladly took in days of labour plenty proved insufficient with the rising wages and low costs, and only a revival of the payments in labour would again give the lords their old advantage. "I cannot account for the outbreak on any other grounds than that of an attempt on the part of the customary tenants to vindicate their right to pecuniary commutation as against a threatened invasion of the custom." What he offers as an explanation in The History of Agriculture and Prices in 1866 becomes, as W. J. Ashley has noted, the scholarly fact of Six Centuries of Work and Wages in 1884. A generalization based on insufficient proof, therefore, became the current Victorian opinion on the meaning of the revolt. Ashley, writing in 1895 of Roger's theory says that "although this explanation of the Peasant Rising is now so generally accepted as to pass for undoubted fact, no evidence has yet been adduced that can be regarded as confirming it." Less harshly, Oman says "later research has shown it to be only one cause among many, and in some instances without any application to the events." With Réville's Le Soulèvement des Travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381, Powell's The Rising in East Anglia, Powell and Trelveryan's The Peasants' Rising and Lollards, and Trelveryan's brief but excellent account in England in The Age of Wycliffe, all published in the nineties, there was general agreement as to the inadequacy of Rogers' theory. But even without the supplementary evidence of the Public Record Office, in the form of indictments, confessions, and poll tax lists, it is surprising that so limited an explanation held ground so long. The chroniclers alone, without further research, suggest wider implications and a pattern far more involved than any Rogers realized.

The studies in the nineties, then, culminating in Oman's Great Revolt of 1381 changed the conception of the causes and the extent of the rebellion. After Oman, Réville, Powell, and Trelveryan it was no longer possible to consider the revolt as a rising of serfs against those who would keep them bound or of peasants against those who would renew the old villeinage. The rebellion now appeared as the focal point for many elements of discontent of which agrarian unrest was but one, even though an important one. People were discontented with the conduct of the war that drained England of money and man power. They resented John of Gaunt and his followers—"We will have no king named John"—and political grievances combined with social unrest. The workers were rebellious against statutes that artificially lowered their wages when the labour market had turned in their favor. Above all, in spite of every artificial restraint, the lower classes were in an unusually comfortable position during these years. They were not like the hard driven hopeless Jacquerie, who rose in despair in a bitter and fruitless anarchy that was just as bitterly suppressed. "They had arrived at a class and condition," says Powell, "in which extortion was well calculated to produce dangerous results." Extortion came in the form of the poll tax levied by parliament in 1380. More stringent than usual, and more likely to provoke resentment, the tax failed of its purpose because of the widespread falsification of returns. The obviously doctored records were re-checked by visiting commissions with the expected results. What happened in Fobbing, Corringham, and Stanford might have happened anywhere. The commissioners were driven out and their local accomplices murdered.

The poll tax is the starting point for most of the contemporary accounts. To the chroniclers it looked like the cause of the revolt but it was really only the occasion. The violence in Essex quickly spread to Kent and the conflagration was under way. On June second Abel Kerith riotously entered the monastery of Lesness; on the sixth, one Robert Cave, baker of Dartford, led a group against Rochester castle; on the seventh Wat Tyler of Colchester was chosen leader by the insurgents of Maidstone, and the familiar tale begins. There are as many variations as to what happened in the week of June tenth as there are contemporary accounts. The main action, already suggested in the traditional story, is enough, however, for the present purpose, since the differences concern details of London events—material of which Morris used so little. But what is extremely important is the character and temper of the revolt, since the spirit of 1381, as Morris portrays it in A Dream of John Ball, is open to question.

A cool summary of the events of the revolt would be enough perhaps to explain the thrill of horror in the chroniclers' descriptions and the sense of doom just narrowly escaped, still fresh as late as Stow's Elizabethan survey of London. In the vast panorama of centuries we are
likely to forget the very real drama at the end of the fourteenth. But the year 1381 suggests an "If" similar to the "If" of Tours and Lepanto—one of the idle yet fascinating conjectures of history as to what might have been if the delicate balance of events were tipped to the other side. "If," as Morris said regretfully in "Art and Its Producers," "the stout yeomen of Kent and Essex, gathered on the 'Fair-field at Mile-End,' had had wits not quite so simple as to trust the young scoundrel of a king, who had just had their leader murdered under tryst, but had carried out the peasants' war to its due conclusion." One hundred thousand discontented men, half-certain of their aims and guided by the slenderest thread of organization, marched on London to set the wrong things right. Behind them, were thousands more as far north as the Humber, only waiting for the slightest victory to unloose the force of their dissatisfaction against those they held responsible. From Wednesday until Saturday the rebels were the apparent masters of the situation—real mastery would have involved clearer purpose and firmer control. But to a contemporary, the structure of society was suddenly upturned, and nowhere was there evidence that anyone intended to do anything about it. In a sense it was more serious than the brutal terrorism of the Jacquerie. The English had at least some program, and its very moderation made it more dangerous. This new order was a possibility. The rebels even strove to keep discipline, as men conscious of a higher purpose than revenge. But the pressure of events proved too great for the leaders and the slender structure of organization was crushed under the weight of the discontent to which it gave expression. What would have happened if there had been a little more planning and wiser leadership, it is impossible to say. But the darkest moments of the rebellion are relieved by these remnants of order and purpose.

There are differences of opinion as to how much actual preparation preceded the revolt. Oman thinks there was little. "It is dangerous to conclude as some writers have done, that this simultaneous action was due to deliberate organization." He takes issue with Powell, who feels that there is "good reason to believe that it was the matured result of a comprehensive plan, carried on by means of a more or less perfect organization extending throughout the Eastern Counties." But much or little, there certainly was some. The "Magna Societas," the great company of the Norfolk revolt, in the name of which messengers were sent throughout the shire, attests a spirit of association, even if there was not a closely organized group. The letters sent by John Ball and his confederates are evidence of an audience fully prepared to understand their cryptic sayings; and the rebels everywhere looked to London as the source of propaganda and the determiner of the course of action. When the peasants rose in 1381, there had been enough preparation, conscious or unconscious, to spread the flame of rebellion with astonishing rapidity. It was recognized as the time to take from the "haves" what the "have-nots" either coveted or justly considered as their own, to wrest from one's neighbor his flitch of bacon or sack of lime or from the monastic landlord rights long overdue. Those who took advantage of the times ranged from the well intentioned and honest men eager for justice, whose existence even Froissart admits, to the members of the Scarborough "white hoods and red tails" composed of all those who "had old quarrels or wished to pick new ones."

With the first signs of revolt, rebel leaders assumed control. Besides the well known figures of the London episode, Tyler, Ball, and Straw, three others stand out in contemporary accounts: John Wraw, the least sympathetic, the disgruntled opportunist of the Suffolk rising; Geoffrey Litster, of Norwich, who succeeded only modestly in his dyer's trade, but who rose to "King of the Commons" and showed considerable talent as a revolutionary organizer; and William Gryndcobbe of St. Albans, who once walked naked through the streets of the town in punishment for violence done to the monks, and apparently never forgot his penance. To the credit of the monastic historian it must be said that with the objectivity which occasionally marks the chroniclers' account of their enemies, and is indeed one reason for their attractiveness, the story of this rebel leader is touched by the finest idealism of the revolt. Naturally, the men who followed these leaders were mostly peasants, but they were also joined by wealthy yeomen and even by members of the gentry, particularly in outlying sections. Sir Roger Bacon, of Baconsthorpe, was Geoffrey Litster's willing lieutenant.

But the preparation and the leadership served to keep order only here and there once the revolt was under way. It is true that when the men of Kent first entered the city they "did no hurt" and "they took nothing from any man but bought all things at a just price." Even the Savoy was sacked with the intent to destroy and not to loot. But all too soon the promise of their early activities was felt. The spirit revealed in a Kentish indictment of activities of the first days of the revolt becomes the rule and not the exception.

... Item dicunt quod Johannes Onewyne de Melhouse die lune proxima post festum Sancte Trinitatis apud Apuldre domos Willemhe Horne cum allis ignatis prostraverunt.  

London provided more than private dwellings, and the rebels followed their attack on the Savoy by raids on the Temple, the Inns of Court, the priory of Knights Hospitallers, and Fleet and Newgate pris-
ons. The rebellion raged like a mighty fire, only here and there under control, and in the sudden spurts of flame, little people and little things were illumined. As in so many revolutionary accounts, the meaning of events seems lost in the brilliance of the pictures and the light that flares into corners unlit by the calmer records of ordinary history. The revolt of 1581 becomes a series of scenes, tragic, comic, and grotesque.

On Corpus Christi night the royal party looks down from the Tower of London and sees camped round its base and on to St. Catherine's wharf, an army of peasants discussing the fate of those within. The odor of roasted flesh still rises from the cellars of The Savoy, where drunken rebels, stupefied by the rich wines of their enemy, John of Gaunt, were unable to escape the fires set by their comrades. At St. Albans the insurgent townsfolk rush into the monastery parlor and rip up the strange covering on its floor—millstones taken from peasant querns one hundred years before by the proud Roger Norton. Again they demand a charter they say St. Offa granted them, and the abbot temporizes with offers of bread and ale—unable to produce what never existed. On one grim night the rebels are forced to dig up the bodies, already corrupt, of William Gryndcobbe and his friends, and replace them on the gibbets from whence they had secretly removed them for decent burial. At Bury St. Edmunds the townsfolk conduct a puppet show. On two pikes they place the severed heads of lifelong friends, the gentle and musically gifted Prior Cambridge and John le Cavendish, justice of the shire. The puppeteers enact their play and the heads bow and duck, lawyer's lips to prelate's ear in an exchange of confidences. At Norwich, Geoffrey Lister, "King of the Commons" dines in state with four noblemen to serve him and Sir Steven Hales "(because he is a comely knight) to carve before him and to take assay of his meates." At Peterborough, however, the strong minded and violent Bishop Despenser gives "absolution with his sword" to rebels threatening his abbey church. At Cambridge the bells of St. Mary's summon the people to a treasure hunt which ends in the usual bonfire. Records and books of the University are gathered in the market place, and when the flames rise, old Margery Starre throws the manuscripts in one by one with the words "Away with the learning of clerks! Away with it." In London again, the rebels meet their king, and surprisingly enough, present their fairly moderate demands: abolition of serfdom, free marketing, a four pence per acre ceiling on land rent, and general amnesty.

Very little of this canvas of the revolt could have been unfamiliar to Morris with his well known love and knowledge of the medieval chroniclers. He had known them since his Oxford days when he read them and Latin poetry with "rapid and prodigious assimilation," and in later years his astonishingly rich collection of early books included the Chronicle of St. Albans, Higden's Polychronicon, Grafton's Chronicle at Large and the Annales of John Stow—all containing material on the revolt. Though most of the factual background for A Dream of John Ball could have been drawn from Froissart alone, there are hints from other sources. We can be fairly certain that Morris knew Knighton, with his generous samples of the incendiary letters circulated among the rebels and his naive admiration for the "pious" Duke of Lancaster, Walsingham and his long and vivid account of the St. Alban's rising, written in beautiful and flexible Latin, adapting itself to the flow of rapid narrative and the rich invective each side heaped on the other; and Malverne, the continuator of Higden. He also knew Stow's version, which summarizes the most important features of the earlier chroniclers and has the additional merit, in George Kriehn's opinion, of being based in part on the Anonymous Chronicle of York, the one important contemporary chronicle that could not have been known to Morris, since it was not discovered until the nineties. He must have read with much amusement, though with little profit, the five stanza account in Grafton's rhymed history, in which amazingly bad verse is united to amazing oversimplification.

They asked the ye Kate Strawe and Wat Tyler
To be made dukes of Essex and Kent
To rule the King thens forth in peace and warre,
For they be wyse of royall regiment.

Though there is no definite proof, he may also have known the Chronicon Angliae, based on Walsingham's Historia Anglicana, the lively but shorter account of the Monk of Evesham, and the brief and colorless record of Adam of Usk.

But of all the chroniclers Froissart is Morris' favorite. His story of the revolt has epic swing. There is a sense of doom in Froissart and though the threat is directed against his own world, he reviews it for the most part with dramatic objectivity. He is not the acrimonious recorder of monastery that has suffered, and though there is no doubt as to where he stands, his presentation of the popular view is marked by grace and force. But of course the very qualities that make the Chronicles great literature, the poetic intensity, the heightening of figure and inciden the long and beautiful speeches, sometimes lessen their value to the historian. Froissart's authority for English domestic events is at times acknowledged to be weak. Oman speaks of his "well-known capacity for going wrong." It has even been questioned that Froissart's account comes from a first hand witness. Kriehn objects to M. Kervyn de Lettenhove statement that Froissart's informant was Robert de Namur, Lord
Beaufort and Chievres, and in London at the time of the rising. So it is likely that Morris' most important primary source, as well as his secondary, Thorold Rogers, is not the most reliable on the events of 1381.

Whatever may be said, then, in praise of *A Dream of John Ball* as the artist's idyllic re-creation of a medieval village or as the propagandist's effective play of light and shadow upon the meaning of past events, it must be admitted that as historical re-creation it has its limitations. When the picture of the peasants' revolt of the romance is compared with that of scholarship, it is evident that deliberately in some cases, mistakenly in others, Morris has ignored the scope, the complexity, even the dramatic possibilities of the rising, and once, at least, he has read more into the sources than the record will justify.

It would be too much, of course, to expect Morris to anticipate the scholarship of the nineties and to reject Thorold Rogers' theory of the cause of the rising, but the fact remains that his romance is built squarely on an erroneous hypothesis. With one or two important exceptions, Morris follows Rogers. We know Morris knew Rogers' work at least three years before he wrote his romance—and probably longer. In a lecture to Anti-Scrape in 1884 he referred with praise to the research of the Oxford professor. Rogers' conclusions satisfied the artist's sense of the past. *Work and Wages* would be one of the "tool" books Morris mentioned in his reading list—valuable as a check on the knowledge gathered from the great traditional sources of the chronicles, supplemented by the visible signs of history in the form of art. "Mr. William Morris has actually based on Mr. Rogers' assertion his prose poem, *A Dream of John Ball*, and calls upon us to be indignant with 'the lords that would turn their tenants all into villeins again as their grandfathers had been'" is the acid footnote in Ashley's *Economic History*. Not only does Morris accept Rogers' explanation of the cause of the rising but the narrator's message to John Ball implies agreement with Roger's conclusion as to the effects. "And yet when the lords have vanquished, and all England lieth under them again, yet shall their victory be fruitless; for the freemen that hold free lands shall they not bring under the collar again, and villeinage shall slip from their hands, till there be, and not long after ye are dead, but few unfree men in England; so that your lives and your deaths both shall bear fruit." Actually the Peasants' Revolt had little effect on the movement of the times. It came, rather, as an illumination—a sudden bright and flaming consciousness of the position of men and the concept of personal freedom. That little influenced the status of the villein is generally conceded, and whether or not it even hastened the decline of villeinage is a matter of debate. Oman says "Villeinage died out from natural causes and by slow degrees... it certainly had not been destroyed once and for all, by the armed forces of Wat Tyler's Hurling Time." "It must remain a matter of opinion whether this process (disappearance of villeinage) was accelerated or retarded by the Peasants' rising" is Trevelyan's attitude. With Rogers, it was not a matter of opinion but a fact that "The rebellion was put down, but the demands of the villeins were silently and effectually accorded. ..." There is just the possibility—though it would be dangerous to press it too far—that Rogers' presentation also influenced Morris' form in places. Rogers' account has several fancied dialogues: the lawyers argue the case for their lords; the poor priest's imaginary sermon is summarized. Rogers' simplification and his style can be seen in an excerpt:

It is very possible also that perfidious lawyers, bailiffs, and agents pointed out to the impoverished and angry lords that after all, in law and in past times these serfs had no rights at all; that they possessed what they had by the good natured easiness of their superiors; and their black ingratitude should be punished by resuming those lands and that liberty which had been so grossly abused.

There follows an imaginary dialogue in which the lawyers argue very much in the strain of Morris' lords. It will be remembered that Morris breaks into the thought of the narrator with direct discourse in which the lords argue their position. Again in reading John Ball's speech at the Cross in the romance, the sermon of the poor priest in *A History of Agriculture and Prices* is at least suggested. At any rate the resemblance in the situation is too striking to pass without comment, even though Rogers' scene may have had no direct influence or lurked only in the background of Morris' mind. Certainly no literary merit would strengthen anyone's remembrance. Rogers' sermon begins with the familiar theme of equality "When Adam delved and Eve span"; and continues:

And when they told them that the lords had determined to drag them back to their old servitude, the preacher could discourse to them of the natural equality of man, of the fact that all, Kings, lords, and priests, live by the fruit of the earth and the labour of the husbandmen, and that it would be better for them to die with arms in their hands than to be thrust back without an effort on their part, into the shameful slavery from which they had been delivered. And as their eyes kindled, and they grasped their staves, he could tell them to keep their ears open for the news of their deliverance, that on the password being given, they were to once to hie to the appointed place, where a great work could be done for God's people by his appointed servant.

While Morris' use of the reasoning and perhaps even the tone of
William Morris

Rogers takes nothing from his work as a prose poem, it should temper the praise frequently given A Dream of John Ball as a perfect miniature of the medieval past. As has been said, it would be too much to expect Morris to anticipate the scholarship of Oman, Trevelyan, Réville and Powell. But since Morris was frequently right through an almost intuitive sense of the past rather than through seasoned and deliberate scholarship, his wrong instinct in this case comes as a surprise. Even the partial justification that the poet must simplify—that “serfdom” is not the legal phrase of Vinogradoff’s Villeinage in England but the symbol of every form of oppression in Feudal England—must not be pressed too strongly, because Morris was presenting this view of history to the Socialist audience of the Commonweal—and in all good faith—as his understanding of a very important aspect of English events. John Ball’s speech at the Cross was one of his favorite pieces. He used to read it in his rich chant at the Hammersmith Socialist parties. For the workmen there, according to May Morris, it was “no dream for the moment.” But it is a dangerous symbol, however poetic, which has at its roots a discredited theory.

Another question arises in considering the historical background. Was Morris justified by anything in his sources in giving the rebels, and in particular, the priest himself, communist aims, even the mild communism of John Ball’s sermon? It is well to note here that the word communism itself is dangerous in the richness of its connotations. It would take a John Stuart Mill using the method of the essay on Nature to analyze the many shapes the word, or the idea, assumes in Morris alone. When he used the term it could mean the spirit of association that marked the guilds, or the apparent survivals of communal holdings in unheeded tillage, or a society so loosely organized that the anarchists could claim him for their own. Sometimes it seems as if any form of social responsibility in the middle ages won from him this term of approbation—“medieval communism.” But in the sermon at the Cross, John Ball offers his followers common ownership and common reward. “The reaper shall eat in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he has won . . . and the tithe barn shall garner the wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward, and the raindrift hideth the sheaves in August; and all shall be without money and without price.” There is only one place in the mass of information the chronicles offer where any justification for such an interpretation of the motives of the rebels can be found: in Froissart’s account of John Ball’s sermon: “Aye good people, the maters gathe not well to passe in Engelande, nor shall not tyl every thing be common.” Nowhere else are communal holdings demanded, not even from the most radical group at Smithfield when Tyler and the recalcitrants lingered for even greater concessions. Certainly the four point program of the rebels gave no hint of Communism. They wanted private holdings for everyone at the low price of 4d per acre—a revolutionary but not a communist suggestion. A modern distributist would be more likely to find a spiritual ancestor in the fourteenth century insurgent than would the modern communist. Even the confession of Jack Straw—and surely any hint of violence would have been readily seized upon by the chroniclers—is devoid of any plan for communal holdings. The friars and the Wycliffites share the blame in contemporary chronicles for the radical teaching that inspired the revolt; but neither evangelical poverty nor dominion by grace as Wycliffe intended it could be the basis for a genuine communism. In Trevelyan’s opinion “the attempt to picture the rising as a communist movement ignores the plainest facts.”

Of course Morris has too keen an historical sense to emphasize strongly the communist element he suggests, but it is undeniable that he sees John Ball in the position of the late Victorian of his own League and that he wishes to suggest the essential likeness of their doctrine. It is effective propaganda and effective art, but it is doubtful historical representation.

To cavil at the dreaminess, the hushed intensity of feeling, where the emotion is almost lost in the quietness that cloaks it; to object to the soft blurriness that muffles even the clash of arms, would be to wish a good romance unwritten and the author’s talent other than it was. But when the “Dream” is checked with the reality the loss of life and vigor in the imaginative work is apparent. Granting the excellence of much in Morris’ tale, one could wish that Carlyle had fancied the subject in his excursions into chronicle material and treated it in the manner of The French Revolution, though, naturally, on a smaller scale. To give a notion of the force and violence of 1381, the perfect combination might be, for example, William Gryndcobb’s harsh altercations with the determined abbot of St. Albans and the style of the middle sections of Past and Present. The revolt is stern stuff. John Ball at Blackheath would have been more convincing than John Ball discussing in soft rhythms to an orderly group at a newly carved cross in a Kentish village. The tremendous rush of events is lost in the “Dream.” It is a quiet backwater Morris presents with a noble priest addressing a following already unified and motivated by the “wrath of battle and the hope of better times”—no zealot urging the terrible simile of the wheat and the tares and the bloody harvest time for lords and lawyers; no mob compounded of opportunists and of honest and well-intentioned men—“zelatores veritatis et justitiae, non fures aut latrones”—and of the raggle taggle of every revolutionary effort. All is serene and hushed in the village east of the Medway, somewhere between Chatham and Sittingbourne. Will Green,
secure in his leadership, is followed by a group equally sure of their aim. Order, purpose, idealism mark this threshold of revolt—excellent as typical of Morris’ art and his propaganda—but so short of satisfying as a glimpse of the living past. The full and usually undisciplined play of human effort seems lost. If Wat Tyler’s hurling time was ever heralded by such thoughtful and peaceful preparation as Morris pictures, there is no hint of it in any record that has survived. There was some plan, and undoubtedly similar, but far less orderly preparation, but *A Dream of John Ball* as a picture of the revolt is an idealization rather than a recreation. Whether it is wiser to drive a lesson by a selective arrangement of past events colored by a personal mood, or to make the point by giving the event in all its force, its narrowness and rudeness as well as its strength as in *Past and Present* is debatable, and dependent finally on the success of the individual effort. Morris chose the first way, and probably, as with Carlyle, the inevitability that seems to attend the union of talent and subject ruled that neither could do other than he did. But whatever the reason, the lovely *Dream of John Ball* (when viewed solely from its use of historical material) is a very limited imaginative picture of June, 1381. Morris is able to view the sheer physical detail of the past with the accuracy of a contemporary, but with a certain lack of historical sense—as though the very vividness of the past lost for him the perspective of the years. Perhaps this quality, paradoxically enough, is the result of his real medievalism—he seems to have caught the trick of the chroniclers, and sights, sounds and smells are magnified by his very nearness, but the final meaning of events blurs.

Not only is there too much order in the shire whose indictments read like a series of housebreaking charges and whose march from Canterbury to London was marked by destruction, but there is little in the chronicles to justify the main action of the piece, the armed combat in the meadows. With the gusto of a chronicler Morris describes a miniature Agincourt, where the bowmen win victory with the “message of death the grey goose bears between its wings.” We see the fight on the commons, with the rough and winding medieval road as the strategic point. We watch the cool and measured shooting and hear the satisfying “whir and plump” of the arrows. We follow billmen and bowmen as they leap the hedge for hand to hand combat with the safer but slower armored men. And then the fading of the bright scene comes with the suddenness of a transition in Froissart. Few would care, for the sake of accuracy, to sacrifice this chapter. As a description of a medieval fight, it is lively and thoroughly convincing. But as an imagined incident of the week of June tenth, it is highly improbable. There were few direct encounters such as Morris pictures. Either the rebels had the upper hand and were met with virtually no organized opposition, or, in the end, the odds were overwhelmingly against them, and what followed was a rout and not a contest. The king easily dispersed their band at Billericay and the warlike Bishop Despenser sent them wildly retreating over their wagon barricades at North Walsham. At the Abbey of St. Benedict de Hulm the monks fought all night to keep from entering four hundred insurgents under the leadership of the abbot’s carter. But for the most part, the peasants had their day, and except for Despenser, no one competent marshaled troops in an attempt to restore order until the leaders were taken, by guile and chance, quite as much as by force. So although no lover of the medieval would forego the fight of Will Green’s bowmen against Rafe Hopton and the Knight of the Three Red Kine, it is doubtful if such manly and open encounters characterized the skirmishes of 1381.

While the liberties Morris takes with historical characters and the time element little affect the literary success of the romance, they have some interest as indications of his use of material. It was Stowe who first recorded the story of the father who so “smote the collector with his lathing staffe that the braine flewe out of his head.” This was not Wat Tyler of Colchester, the spokesman at Smithfield, but another, John Tyler of Dartford. Morris uses the popular tale, but from the tone of the passage and his linking the tiler with Listler and the St. Albans’ rebels, he also, apparently, has made the popular mistake. He identifies the greater Tyler with the lesser, though Stowe distinguishes between the two. Apart from one other reference in which with dubious geography or knowledge of the path of the rebellion, Morris has the lords looking “to the north of the Thames for Wat Tyler and his men,” the chief is not mentioned again. So dominant a figure would have taken from the dramatic effectiveness of John Ball—a better spokesman for Morris’ views since he was connected with the inspiration of the revolt and its nobler aspects rather than with the practical management and the defeat.

John Wraw, the leader in Suffolk, is neglected and Geoffrey Listler is in Morris’ the John Listler of the *Chronica Angliae* and of The *Annales*, and not the William Lister of Froissart. It must have been with real pleasure that Morris, with his love of working in the dyeing vats, wrote of the northern rebel “wiping the woad from his arms as who would have to stain them red again, but not with grain or madder.” Morris is in the minority in viewing Jack Straw as a name assumed by several of the insurgents. The tall figure with the wisp of straw in his helmet and in the armor not made for a yeoman is one of “Three Jack Straws’ among the fellowship of the discontented, one of whom was over in Essex.” But Petit-Dutaillis inclined to think of him as an actual per-
son, and Oman identifies him with Jack Rakestraw. Among the medieval chroniclers it is Knighton who says “Jack Straw” is only another name for Wat Tyler himself. Sir John Newton, the knight who, Morris’ peasants think, may sally forth from Rochester Castle, has a variety of roles in the records of the revolt. In Walsingham and in Stowe he is its whose resentment at Tyler’s insolence starts the trouble that ends in the rebel’s death. Knighton does not mention him. In Froissart, he is the captured prisoner who is sent as the peasant’s spokesman. In Berner’s translation he is Sir Johan Moton, and Sir John Newton, in Johnes’. Morris intends him for the same role as in Froissart, for John Ball and the rebels plan “to put a word in his mouth to say to the King.”

We expect liberties with chronology when the poet supplants the historian, and Morris takes them. If John Ball were released from prison “Three days ago,” as he says in the speech at the Cross, there would be little need for “preparation” in the Kentish village. It would have been June fourteenth and Will Green and his men would have been at Mile End, face to face with the King. Or if the day of release was counted as one of the three, they all would have been at Blackheath and listening to a far different sermon. Or if Ball were released on the seventh instead of the eleventh (the more probable date) they would have been at Canterbury where they did “light the Archbishop’s house for the candle,” but did not release John Ball, as he says in his talk to Will Green’s men. The prison was at Maidstone, not Canterbury, and the release probably took place on the return march, that is, on the eleventh. With any possible arrangement of dates, John Ball certainly would have been far away from the Kentish village. It was Monday before the feast of Corpus Christi that the mob reached Canterbury. Three days later the revolt reached its climax. The scene Morris pictures should have been laid in the previous week, but there would have been the real difficulty of having the spokesman and leader still lodged in the Archbishop’s jail. Given his sources, Morris could have been accurate, if he cared about such a minor point. What he could not have known, since it is told in the Anonimale chronicle, was that Thomas Newton would not have been at home for the rebels. He had been effectively robbed of authority on June sixth when Robert Cave led the Kentishmen against Rochester Castle. With equal freedom Morris pictures the St. Albans riots and Litster’s rising as ready to break out; whereas the trouble in the abbey town began after Tyler entered London, and no signs of disturbance were seen in Norwich until the twelfth, and the actual concentration of rebel bands did not occur until the seventeenth.

But whatever may be said in criticism of Morris’ use of historical material—his mistaken estimate of cause and effect, his questionable assign-

ment of communistic motives, his underplaying of violence and exaggerating the openness of the contest, his liberties with time, event, and character—he succeeds where it is most needful. A Dream of John Ball is a beautiful and essentially true expression of the hopes and longings of 1881, of the inner drive that gave an emotional unity to the scattered events and made Trelveysian conclude that the revolt threw “more light on the aspirations and qualities of the working classes than any other record of medieval times.” The romance is the tribute to the better elements in the rising: the remants of order and purpose that relieve the darkest moments of the rebellion; the moderation that marked the peasants’ demands; the homely force and spiritual intensity of the cryptic messages of the fabulous Piers Ploughman, Jakke Trewnam, and Jon Nameless; and the moral earnestness of the real John Ball, to which the chroniclers are the reluctant witnesses. If the revolt has not as yet found the poet to bring out its depth and color, it has found in Morris the spokesman of its idealism.

In re-creating this spirit of dedication, which was undoubtedly present, Morris makes effective use of the enigmatic letters, mostly in verse, circulated by the revolutionists and preserved by the disapproving chroniclers. In spite of their crude expression, these little poems are frequently marked by exalted feeling and an intensely religious tone. No one who has read the medieval records misses the thrill of recognition that comes with Will Green’s question and the narrator’s answer:

John the Miller, that ground small, small, small . . .
The King’s son of heaven shall pay for all.

These lines are from the indictment of John Ball in the Chronicon Angliae, and they are also attributed by the continuator of Knighton to Jakke Mylner, who asked “help to turne hys mylnr aight.” The naturalness with which Morris turns the evidence of history to the imaginative uses of the romance is an illustration of the easy assimilation of facts that characterized his scholarship always. And it is an illustration too of the critical soundness that recognized the letters for what they were: true witnesses of the popular movement surviving in unfriendly accounts emanating from the opposite camp. There was a spirit afoot and Piers Ploughman was adopted by the rebels as its prophet. Oddly enough, the title character of a poem fundamentally conservative is met at every turn of the revolutionary road. He is joined by Jak Carter, Jakke Mylner, and their fellows, whose names are proofs of the propaganda that flourished in a group for the most part little educated and vigilantly watched, but alert to the power of song and symbol. Petit-Dutaillis says that tales of outlawry were much in vogue and that Ganelon and Robin Hood
were beloved figures. With the flexibility of the literature of the people, these messages of rebellion were, apparently, both sent as letters and sung by them all.

With his feeling for the traditional and the popular it is to be expected that this aspect of the revolt would hold a strong appeal for Morris—and it does. One of the loveliest scenes takes place in the Rose when the visitor from the Victorian world tells an Icelandic tale of hardy and free men and is answered by a ballad of Robin Hood. (Outlawry was one of the penalties for breaking the Statute of Apprentices, and this fact has accounted in part for the popularity of the tales of the forest.)

And he fell to singing in a clear voice, for he was a young man, and to a sweet wild melody, one of those ballads which in an incomplete and degraded form you have read perhaps. My heart rose high as I heard him, for it was concerning the struggle against tyranny for the freedom of life, how that the wildwood and the heath, despite of wind and weather, were better for a free man than the court and the cheating-town; of the taking from the rich to give to the poor; of the life of a man doing his own will and not the will of another man commanding him for the commandment's sake. The men all listened eagerly, and at whiles took up as a refrain a couplet at the end of a stanza with their strong and rough, but not unmusical voices.

This is more than wishful re-creation. There is ample evidence of how flourishing the songs were, and how the love of a gay strong tune was turned to help the cause.

One excellent touch in A Dream of John Ball likely to be missed by the reader unfamiliar with Morris' sources, occurs in the scene at the Cross before the speech of John Ball. "Suddenly from the new white tower behind us clashed out the church bells, harsh and hurried at first, but presently, falling into measured chime; and at the first sound of them a great shout went up from us and was echoed by the newcomers. 'John Ball hath rung our bell.' " Of course it was much more than the physical ringing of the bells that roused the people. One of the odd enigmatic letters, with queer, irregular rhyme, the letters "full of riddles and dark sentences," recorded with evident horror and disapproval by the annalists, contains the words:

Jon Balle greteth you wele alle and doth Yowe to understande, he hath rungen youre bell. Nowe 175t and my 3t, wylle and skylle. God spede every ydele. Nowe is yntyme Lady helpe to Ihesu thin sone, and thin sone to his fadur, to make a gode ende, in the name of the Trinite of that is begunne amen, amen, pur charite, amen."
strengthened by his sensitivity to the popular thinking expressed in the letters and songs. And there is no Lollardry in them.

Not only does Morris treat with sympathetic understanding the idealism present in the revolt and in the teachings of its leader, but he suggests a picture of the well being of the English peasantry at the close of the century that most would accept as essentially true. Of course there is the poet's heightened effect. It could be objected with justice that the medieval eyesores are strangely missing from the romance, and that the scene resembles some village from one of Morris' early printed books, a country counterpart of the town illustrations, for example, of his gorgeous *Eunuchus* of Terence. But there is nevertheless universal agreement that the period was marked by lower class prosperity. The people of Kent were particularly favored and it is well Morris chose that shire as the setting for the romance. They were also traditionally in a better position than other counties. According to the legendary tale, the men of Kent met William the Conqueror at Swanscombe and gave him the choice of the oak of peace or the sword of war—but their ancient laws must be guaranteed. Actually the story seems without historical basis—the strongest evidence in the Domesday Book merely granting special privileges to the four Laths in the east of Kent. But Morris makes effective use of it in John Ball's speech:

Men of Kent, I wot well that ye are not so hard bested as those of other shires, by the token of the day when behind the screen of leafy boughs ye met Duke William with bill and bow as he wended Londonward from that woeful field of Senlac.

Legally, too, the men of Kent enjoyed undoubted privileges and the sanction for them was historical as well as legendary. Vinogradoff says that "the basis of Kentish social law is the assumption that every man is entitled to be considered as personally free." This privilege "resulted in a greater development of individual freedom and a certain looseness of social relations." Lifting from the Kentishmen some of the agrarian burdens seemed to free them too for greater political action. They carried on their tradition in Jack Cade's rebellion in the following century, and commemorated it in a song that Morris may have known, in which their complaint is sung to a liturgical dirge, very much as John Ball's men in the romance sing revolutionary words to the plain chant of the church.

Certainly Morris' picture of the peasants of Kent as prosperous and revolutionary is fairly well borne out by the evidence—taking into account, of course, the freedom the poet must have in an imaginative recreation and a "dream." There is one flaw in the picture though. Why did Morris, who must have known that the special privileges of Kent freed them from most of the servile burdens of the agrarian system, still retain Rogers' theory that it was a return to servitude they resented? Their grandfathers had not been villeins and a return was therefore impossible. Fellowship with the other shires would have been just as effective in showing Kentish spirit, and accuracy need not have been sacrificed. Perhaps Morris' wish to generalize, to use the revolt as a lesson, caused him to ignore what he must have known: the highly political nature of Kentish aims. In the romance the King is referred to only once and John of Gaunt not at all. Yet it was the passionate loyalty to one and the just as intense hatred of the other that is recognized as the main motive in the uprising in that shire.

But after all the real triumph of *A Dream of John Ball* does not necessarily depend on its satisfying the sense of historical accuracy on particular points. The wonder of it lies in its embodiment of medievalism—the easy fusion into a unified picture of facts gathered through a lifetime. A turn of phrase, a snatch of song, a view of a newly carved rood screen sends echoes down the years of enthusiastic learning. Here is a knowledge of the Middle Ages that is warm, human, and sometimes fallible—important for its own sake, and for its evidence of the search of a later age to find in the earlier an answer to its own riddle. Here is all the grace of things known well and long familiar, where a word of Will Green's can suggest the poet's devotion to Chaucer as easily as an outright tribute. As naturally as he wears his medieval costume, the narrator fancies his resemblance to Morris' idol. Harry Bailey's genial self steps across the pages for a moment and is gone when the yeoman says "Look no more on the ground, as though thou sawest a hare, but let thine eyes and thine ears be busy to gather tidings to bear back to Essex—or heaven!

*A Dream of John Ball* is compounded of the artist's knowledge of beauty of line and color and delight in all the gear, tackle and trim of medieval life; of the poet's alertness to the living literature of the ballads and the peoples' songs of hope; and of the enthusiasm of the lover of history, catching in a phrase here and there the very likeness of the past. Certainly no admirer of the medieval would wish the romance undone, and he would gladly follow down the Roman road to Will Green's house. One last flickering of the critical spirit, however, might offer the suggestion to the dreamer that he remove his pen and ink case, the pouch embroidered very prettily "and made of hard leather chased with a hunting scene," and toss it over the hedge thick with white poppies. It would be better to enter a village of 1381 without it. The rebels had a disconcerting way with such owners. "They spared none whom they thought to be learned," says Stowe. "Especially if they found any to have pen and ink, they pulled off his hoode, and all with one voyce of crying: 'Hale him out and cut off his head.'"
THE HOLIDAY OF THE REFORMER: PROSE ROMANCES

“Truth lies hid in the trappings of a tale”

AY MORRIS tells how her father, with his insatiable appetite for stories of adventure, would frequently exclaim: “Why isn’t there some nice long Dumas novel that I haven’t read?” The answer would always be: “Well, you might write it yourself.” It seems as if one such desire for more of the things he loved did prompt him “to write it himself.” In a lecture given in 1887 he expressed his regret for the lost literature of early England: the local histories, the songs and chronicles that might have been if the influence of Rome had not checked the development of the vernacular—tales as dramatic as those of Iceland or Norway, but telling, rather, of “how the folk of Middlesex ate and drank and loved and quarreled in the tenth century.” Though he did not confine himself to Middlesex or the tenth century, but ranged from the fourth to the fourteenth and from Italy to Iceland, he did devote the scant leisure of the last nine years of his life to the composition of prose romances with more than a little of the spirit and style of those medieval originals that to his lasting joy did have the good fortune to be written. It was as if he were creating for himself a literature of which he could never have enough.

Unlike *A Dream of John Ball*, which began the period of prose romances, or *News from Nowhere*, the fourth in the series, the other eight were not written with a socialist audience in view. They were never intended to “delight the naive minds of the Victorian working classes.” Indeed, if the typical British worker could have found pleasure in them it would have argued one of Morris’ dearest aims accomplished: the restoration to the ordinary man of the joy in the legendary past. The stories were intended, rather, to delight William Morris and those who could follow him in his knowledge of the romantic tradition. The pleasure in reading them arises not from an ignorant and naive wonder but from the recognition of old motifs in a new setting. Here is the magic of the medieval world: shape-shifting and sleepthorns, spae-wives and fairy divinities, and curraghs moving swiftly, rudderless and oarless, to

the destined island. These romances are the record of a lifetime of reading and imaginative thought. Boyhood recollections appear side by side with the gleanings of mature study. The heroes ride through forests crowded with the thicket of hornbeam and beech Morris remembered from the days of Woodford Hall. Heroines swim to islands not far from shore and the reader feels the author is thinking too of the happy little island behind Water House. The stone circle at Avebury that fascinated the schoolboy Morris in his wanderings at Marlborough appears in the Valley of the Gwyntwethers in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. And at every turn there are evidences of Grimm, as the *Teutonic Mythology*, the book in which Morris in his maturity found so much of “the flavour of imagination,” provides the charm or the spell that smooths out tangles further the complications of the tale. The Norse studies furnish forth a new world with the details of saga life: shutbeds, hazellings, holmgangs, and thingsteads; and the characters move through country that at one time recalls the low-lying landscape Morris loved in his native England and at another the fiercer scenes of the Icelandic journey in the gloom of volcanic mountains rising in sheer cliffs from the sea, in the wastes of lava and blackened earth, and in milky rivers like the White-water of reality, cutting through narrow valleys. For the form of the stories as well as their content, Morris reaches back through the years—back to the endless tales of knightly adventure he told at Marlborough and to the prose of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.

These romances were written during the most difficult years of Morris’ life: when he was trying to share with men, to whom “the grey homes of their fathers had no story to tell,” his vision of the new world to be born of the best traditions of the old. To draw just enough from the well stored memory to enlighten and not to confuse is the teacher’s painful discipline, and it must have been a particularly hard one for Morris, whose creative power was at its best when free to range the centuries and to choose the illustration, however remote or curious, that to him was imaginatively satisfying. Making himself clear to workmen audiences was a serious problem in his socialist career. But the prose romances, the holiday work of the reformer weary of platform speaking, are like the opening of the flood gates. There is no need to convince, to persuade, or to clarify. The arid fields ploughed by party logic, with only here and there a green and flowery clearing formed by the large and more familiar patterns of the past, are now filled by a rush of memories. Seven volumes of the twenty-four in the complete works are devoted to this literature of “escape”—but it is escape to the poet’s larger world. It is unthinkable that they should have little to tell of the man, written as they were during the years when he lived most intensely. Yet they have been strangely
neglected. Too much discussion has centered on their expression—"Wardour Street" English or a legitimate use of archaic forms in a highly original prose—and too little has been said of the matter expressed. Eshleman did see, in A Victorian Rebel, the relationship between The House of the Wolfings and the poet's philosophy of history, but no attempt has been made to relate this great mass of writing to that vision of the world that is distinctively William Morris'.

And it is a distinctive world, as characteristic of the man as the universe implicit in Jude the Obscure is characteristic of Hardy. But Morris' is a golden vision, a picture of things as they might be rather than as they are seen. The world from which he drew his hope for the days to come lies beneath the surface of legend and romance, and to sympathetic and steady contemplation, it will reveal itself, just as the round towers of a sunken city will gleam beneath the waves for the patient watcher at Lough Neagh. At the heart of these prose tales is an earthly paradise in which life is not "too short for the deed that dies not," where men and women, always experiencing to the full the joy of changing seasons and the pleasure in growing things, live happily, "knowing nothing that is too far off or too great for the affections." It is a vision of purely natural happiness and its creator, as Yeats recognized, would never be among those who "would have prayed in old times in some chapel of the star, but among those who would have prayed under the shadow of the green tree and on the wet stones of the well among the worshippers of natural abundance." "The German student who solemnly listed the "flora and fauna" of the prose romances blundered close to the truth. There is a world here, real enough to have its flora and fauna catalogued and its cities described in some prophetic Baedeker. It encompasses what Morris thought good for man, realized in the best days of the past and coming again with the fulfillment of his "hope of the days to be."

It would be, however, a mind wilfully set in its determination to see socialism in everything that could find direct propaganda in these stories. One reviewer did attempt to read allegory into The Wood Beyond the World and Morris replied that there was "nothing didactic about it." "If I have to write or speak on social problems," he continued, "I always try to be as direct as I possibly can be. . ." But once we recognize the impossibility of separating his political from his creative experience, it would be equally mistaken to ignore the prose romances in any attempt to re-create Morris' larger view of which the obviously socialist writings are but the partial expression. Yeats, who once said The Sundering Flood and News from Nowhere were "the only books I ever read slowly so that I might not come quickly to the end," understood the connection between the political and what appeared to be the purely poetical in Morris' writing. It is significant that almost every point in that wise and beautiful essay "The Happiest of Poets" is substantiated by references to the romances. The Irishman, with the poet's penetration of another poet's final meaning, says:

His vision is true because it is poetical, because we are a little happier when we are looking at it; and he knew as Shelley knew by an act of faith that the economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like him, from the vision of the world made perfect that is buried under all minds.

It will be with this vision, born of love and knowledge of the medieval past and directed toward the Utopian future, that the following analysis will be concerned.

The House of the Wolfings was written at the end of 1888. It tells the story of a Germanic tribe somewhere in central Europe that has settled in three marks, or village communities, along the banks of the river called "Mirkwater." The interest centers in one great family of the Midmark, the Wolfings, in their leader Theocull, and in the part the House plays in repelling the Roman invaders who threaten to destroy the idyllic life of the folk. The setting is, of course, earlier than anything ordinarily recognized as medieval, but tribal Germanic life, with the tradition of freedom and communal holdings attributed to it, was the source, in Morris' opinion, of some of the best features of the later Middle Ages. The House of the Wolfings is the first of a series of pictures that illustrate the author's imaginative feeling for the continuity of history; and in the customs of the kindred he saw the roots of the medieval spirit of association. This romance is set apart from the others not only in its early and semi-historical background but in its form and tone. It is half in verse, half in prose, and the exalted strain accords well with the spirit of earnestness and dedication that characterizes this story of the defense made by a free people against the forces of a powerful yet servile aggressor. The struggle somewhat dims the golden light we usually associate with the prose romances—the more of the spirit of the northern saga here—but no less apparent is the vision of what Morris thought good for man.

Dreaming as he did of a society in the future living in communal simplicity, it must have been with particular delight that he turned to recreating from the facts and conjectures of his historical reading an example of a similar life in the remote reaches of the past. The people of Midmark hold in common the acres, the meadows, and the wood. They share the products of fields tilled and flocks herded by the united effort of the kindred. The handicrafts flourish. The women card and spin the
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wool and the great looms tell not only the stories of the Wolfings and their gods but of the joy in work freely done. At the Thingstead the assembled folk "hallow in" the Thing, and decide the course to be followed by the tribe in peace and in war. At night they gather in the great house, built "like a church of later days" and the archetype of the Comnunal Hall of Morris' Utopian Future. There is peace and plenty—satisfying work during the long day and simple pleasure at its end—as on the evening of summer before the messenger comes with the news of war, "when the wheat was in the ear but yet green; and the neat-herds were done driving the milch-kine to the byre, and the horseherds and the shepherds had made the night-shift, and the out-goers were riding two by two and one by one through the lanes between the wheat and the rye towards the meadow."

Round the cots of the thralls were gathered knots of men and women as the thralls and freemen, some talking together, some hearkening a song or a tale, some singing and some dancing together, and the children gambolling about from group to group with their shrill and tuneless voices, like young thrushes who have not yet learned the song of their race... Merry was the folk with that: fair tide, and the promise of the harvest, and the joy of life, and there was no weapon among them so close to the houses, save here and there the bore-spear of some herdman or herdswoman late come from the meadow.

Through every description of their life can be heard like a recurring theme: here is the "joy to be had in a society of equals." Among the Wolfings "all they of one blood were brethren and of equal dignity."

The need to defend their way of life deepens and clarifies the large and simple concepts of the tribe. The ideal at the root of the happiness they formerly accepted grows luminous under the challenge and the threat. Theirs is the "religion of courage" Carlyle recognized in the stories of Odin as hero, and Theodulf, their leader, is its embodiment. It is courage fed by the love of the kindred, felt by every member of the folk, and experienced as a sense of responsibility of man for man in the present and a debt to the men of the future cancelled only by such action as shall finally make the earth "quicken and kindle to springtide with the blood that lovers have shed." No one who has read Morris' socialist writings, if only the episode of the Paris commune in The Pilgrims of Hope, can doubt that the author's thoughts were not entirely concerned with the primitive Germans when he wrote:

for to the Goths it was but a little thing to fall in hot blood in that hour of love of the kindred and the longing for the days to be.

The Holiday of the Reformer

In Theodulf the love of the kindred unmistakably transcends even the tribal ideal. He has been given a dwarf-wrought hauberks by Woodsun, the demi-goddess he loves and the mother of Hall-Sun, the priestess of the Wolfings. It saves his life in battle but at the expense of removing him from the conflict at the hour of greatest need. Woodsun finally explains that the unconsciousness into which Theodulf has lapsed on two occasions is caused by the armour he wears. Theodulf then refuses to take the gift bought at the double cost of his own honor and the safety of the tribe. In the last battle he loses his life but lives again in the love of the kindred and in their gratitude for peace restored. The episode of the hauberks typifies that willing subordination of the individual to the group that results, not in the loss of individuality, but rather in its liberation. Wearing the hauberk and endangering his house, the less Theodulf he! In a final attempt to convince Theodulf that he should accept the dwarf's handicraft, Woodsun had revealed that the leader is actually not a member of the Wolfing tribe. Theodulf's answer, embracing a wider world than the one he knows, epitomizes the ideal of Fellowship upon which Morris' socialism is founded. It is the message of John Ball in the fourteenth century and the "Message of the March Wind" in the nineteenth. "I have lived with them, and eaten and drunken with them. ... Through them am I of the whole earth, and all the kindreds of it."

To the life and spirit of the kindred the Romans supply a dramatic contrast. They are seen first through the eyes of a few of the tribe who have been to the "cities of the plain" or who have secretly visited the camps of the invaders, or who have formed a picture of Roman life from the "South Welsh lays," tales of earlier conflicts of the people of the North with the strangers. There are unmistakably modern overtones in these descriptions of the aliens. The account Wolfkettle gives to his companions of the enemy, their chief city, and their far-flung kingdoms is virtually Morris' indictment of Victorian England. To men who have known "the joy to be had in a society of equals" the story of Rome, or of nineteenth century London, is alike incomprehensible, and the Wolfings, Beamings, and Elkings find it difficult to believe in the report of "unhappy freeman" and "do-nothing lords." Even in the "Welsh" army inequality is the rule. The captain forcibly disciplines his subordinates and they, "free men and mighty warriors,... endure it and smite not in return." The Romans have "forgotten kindred," Wolfkettle explains.

... And mighty men among them ordain where they shall dwell, and what shall be their meat, and how long they shall labour after they are weary, and in all wise what manner of life shall be among them; and though they be called free men who suffer this, yet may no
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house gainsay this rule and order. In sooth they are a people mighty but unhappy.

But in spite of the contrast between their lives and the men who lead them—the Roman captain “liefer to live for his own sake,” the Goth a man who leaves in his death “his life unto many a one”—the tribes find the aliens ruthless and efficient foes. Among the descriptions of battles in literature the many scenes in the prose romances must rank high. May Morris tells of the pleasure her father had in discussions of the “facts and probabilities of these great folk-struggles; how the Romans disposed their armies; how the men of the North theirs, what weapons each used.” Certainly his delight in re-creating such scenes is clear in the Battle on the Ridge, for example, where every moment is intense with imminent danger to the Goths, as the bright machine of Roman war with its precision-like advance of bowmen, slingers, horsemen, and spearmen, threatens to overwhelm the more spirited but less disciplined ranks of the kindred.

For Morris the Germanic setting must have provided a particularly congenial background for the expression of the ideal. This Teutonic attitude, which Mackail has said characterized the poet throughout life, was strengthened by the historical reading of his mature years. When he viewed the medieval scene, it was the northern heritage of earlier times that seemed to him most productive of good and he shared the dominant opinion of his day that the same strain in English history was responsible for the greatest national achievements. The North, so Morris thought, gave to the Middle Ages and to England the two salient characteristics of the Teutonic race, “the spirit of individuality and its spirit of association.” We have already noted his lament in Feudal England for the chance his country lost forever, with the Norman Conquest and its aftermath, of “developing into a Teutonic nation usefully intermingled with Celtic blood.” And in Early England he resents as much as the fairy visitor in Kilian of the Closes the shadow of Rome that similarly checked the natural development of the land into a “splendid branch of the Germanic people.” Like the historian Freeman, he probably would have fought if he could on the side of Harold at Hastings, and he closes his vain regrets with “Ah well—it is all whistled down the wind with the last shout of the axes at Senlac.” In spite of his love for continental romance he felt that the Conquest, except for its effect on architecture, did little for the real improvement of native literature or institutions, and “what was left of the tribal freedom of East England,” he says in “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” “sank lower and lower into the Romanized feudality that crossed the Channel with the Frenchmen.” This Teutonic bias is one of the few ideas in Morris with which the modern reader may feel an imperfect sympathy, but an understanding of it is essential in the reconstruction of his conception of the past. In the Germanic spirit, both in the Middle Ages and earlier, he found the historic expression of permanent values he felt good for any age. And we must remember that whatever its associations for the twentieth century, ironically enough the Germanist school of the nineteenth, in Vinogradoff’s words, “held very high the principle of individual liberty, had tried to connect it to the Teutonic element in history, had explained its workings in the society described by Tacitus, and had regretfully followed its decay in later times.”

In one respect The House of the Wolfings is closer to A Dream of John Ball than to the more golden romances that follow. It seems as if in the first two Morris had some plan of giving the poet’s interpretation of a particular aspect of history; it is possible to discover the nature of the reading that stimulated his imaginative efforts. Later, however, he cut free from any attempt to re-create a single event or period and the stories become vaguely medieval, a medley of fact and fancy, sometimes suggesting Plantagenet England, sometimes twelfth century Iceland, and sometimes frankly drawn from the fabulous country of romance. But The House of the Wolfings has a core of historic reality, or at least of historic conjecture, and like Apollonius we must “unweave the rainbow” and in the “dull catalogue of common things,” give some account of the scholarship that fed the vision. And it is particularly necessary since the point of view revealed has bearings not only on the setting of this romance but, by implication, on Morris’s conception of life in the later Middle Ages.

Dear to the heart of the Victorian historian was the mark, the ideal village community of primitive Germanic life, “the voluntary association of freemen, who laid down for themselves and strictly maintained, a system of cultivation by which the produce of the land on which they settled might be fairly and equally secured for their service and support . . . .” The second chapter of Kemble’s The Saxons in England describes such a community and The House of the Wolfings could be a poet’s version of the historian’s conjectures. In Midmark, as in the scholar’s reconstruction, there are the boundaries of the mark, heath, forest, fen or pasture, maintained “for the sake of mutual profit and protection”; the forests, whose holiness Christianity “destroys or diminishes” and in whose consecrated shade Woodsun appears to Theodulf; the self-sufficiency and the “primeval freedom” of the group; and the dominant family, the kin, descendants of the common ancestor or folk hero are members of the tribe by marriage or adoption, and like the Wolfings,
known to themselves and their neighbors by one general name." To the existence of the mark and its importation into England with the Anglo-Saxon colonization one group of historians in particular were committed. The nineteenth century witnessed the development of this school, who attributed to the Teutonic strain the best features in English history; who saw in the tribal life of "Old England," the continental home of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, the cradle of future institutions and liberties; and who were willing to concede to the Middle Ages a share in that freedom as a heritage from earlier times. Peardon in The Transition in English Historical Writing notes the tendency as early as Mrs. Macaulay, Mitford and Sharon Turner. Pinkerton in 1787 said of the Scythian Goths: "They were virtuous, wise, and courageous, even in their most barbarous days. Rome, Rome, what are thy laurels to these? Great and divine people!" The tendency to exalt Germanic origins grew steadily and reached a crescendo in Freeman, Stubbs, and Green.\(^9\) With these, and with Sir Henry Maine, who Ashley says "adapted Maurer's research in the German mark to England," Morris was thoroughly familiar.\(^9\) The House of the Wolfings and scattered passages through the socialist prose testify to how deeply their spirit and conclusions had penetrated his thought.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the enthusiasm with which the Victorian historians contemplated the question of national origins. Life on the shores of the Northern Sea became the occasion for lyric praise from the most sober. The Witan meeting on the moat-hill were the ancestors of "the wise men of later England" who meet "in Parliament at Westminster to frame the laws and do justice for the great commonwealth which has sprung from the little body of farmer-commonwealths in Sleswig.\(^10\) English history begins when Hengist and Horsa land at Ebbsfleet; and "no spot in Britain can be so sacred to Englishmen as that which first felt the tread of English feet." Kemble, with his -ing theory, was largely responsible for the fervor with which local place names were identified with those of continental legend and history, and as Canon Isaac Taylor boasted: "It is with a glow of patriotic pride that we note among these no fewer than five royal races as well as the noblest races of the Goths.\(^11\) Theories of survivals from Celtic or Roman cultures were unwelcome and there is a grim humour in the way the early Britons are exterminated or miraculously restored as the "Teutonists" and the "Romanists," who came to oppose them, viewed the same evidence. It is not surprising that the Germanist attitude became so entwined with national feeling that when it came to be challenged, the attack was felt to be something of a national affront; and significantly, a Frenchman, Fustel de Coulanges was in the vanguard. Freeman was im-

dignant at "the spritely youths" who "blow their trumpet somewhat loudly to say that what they are pleased to call the Teutonic theory is exploded." In his lectures on Western Europe in the Fifth Century he said to his students: "If I am set in this chair to strive to show that European history is one unbroken tale, I am also set in it to strive to show that Englishmen are Englishmen. I believe the latest theories of all go once more to set aside that doctrine as an old wives' tale....\(^12\)

This assertion, however, did not drive from the field the militant Romanists who entered the lists with their theories of coloni and Roman survivals in the manorial system, with their avowal of the disruptive tendency in the German national character, and with their war-cry: "The primitive free-mark community is a figment of the Teutonic brain.\(^13\)

At first glance it might seem as if the question as to how the English behaved on the banks of the Elbe and Weser in the time of Tacitus or even on the banks of the Humber and the Thames in the time of Alfred would have little bearing on the extent and nature of freedom in the medieval period—or on what is more important for my purpose, on the impression it would leave on the mind of an amateur historian like Morris. But the connection between views on the earlier and later periods is a vital one. The Middle Ages, as well as the less documented years of Anglo-Saxon history, became the arena for the battle between Teutonists and Romanists. Here were open fields, Lammashameadows, and common pastures, and occasional evidence of a freedom that was actually greater than the law would seem to allow. Were these medieval holdings communal in their very essence and, with their tendency to equalize shares, the witnesses of a system "more ancient than the manorial order"? Or were they survivals of a very different system, and those cases of individual liberty that appear now and again, the niggardly gains won by an originally servile population? The objection might be raised that the quarrel, as it affected the Middle Ages, was not over the extent of freedom but over the explanation of its presence—whether it was inherited or acquired liberty—and that therefore one could hold either view as to the Anglo-Saxon period and be in agreement as to medieval society. But historical evidence does not interpret itself, and the same document can tell two stories. Even in periods of abundant information the lacunae must be filled in or their nature suggested. The things left unsaid by history can be quite as important as the things recorded. A less favorable view of the earlier period is likely to result in a less favorable view of the later, where, in the opinion of the historian, a servile tradition provides the setting for the stones of evidence. With the Germanists, however, what Coulton has called the "imponderables" are
in favour of a tradition of freedom, and to Morris, for example, the
spirit of association in medieval guild and church would appear even
greater—arguing from such a Teutonic heritage—than the surviving
records would uncontestably allow.

The House of the Wolfings, then, far from being merely a tale of far-
off things, embodies the fundamentals of Morris’ Vision; and its picture
of the mark provides an important clue as to the nature of his historical
reading and the relation of his thought to that of his times.

In The Roots of the Mountains we move well within the golden
world of Morris’ ideal, into such a “popular land” as became for an-
other poet the ultimate description of human happiness. Perhaps here,
more than in any of the other romances, the Vision is sustained: its im-
age undisturbed for the greater part of the tale, troubled only at the vi-
olent climax of the battle scene, and at the end reflected once again, calm
and unmistakable, in this story of love and fellowship and the happy
life. Though, like its predecessor, The Roots of the Mountains deals
with the Gothic tribes, the action occurs much later in their history when
they have lived long and well in their pleasant valley and in remem-
brance drink the cup to their fathers and to “the days when the world
was wider to them, and their banners fared far afield.” Gone is the in-
tensity of The House of the Wolfings. The idealism remains but its set-
ing is now “that gladness which is made up of little matters” rather than
the life and death struggle for the survival of the kindred. The fierce
sense of dedication of the Wolfings is replaced by the joyous and con-
fident warfare of the children of the Facc. Hall-Sun, the virgin priestess of
earlier times, gives way to the Bride, beautiful and beloved of men, and
Theodulf, forty and tried in war, to Face-of-God, twenty and skilled in
the hunt. Even the gods, so close to the Wolfings in the sacred shadows of
the mark, seem far away from Burgstead. Though the Dalesmen still make offerings for the “Fruitfulness of the Year” and the “In-
gathering of the Increase,” in easy pagan forgetfulness they smile with
amused incredulity at Iron-Face’s tale of the Woodwights. Like the
Wolfings, however, the Burgdaler, too, have their enemies and formidable
ones—this time the Huns, who move like a blight across the land and
devour the peace and livelihood of people softened by years of pros-
perity. But the actual contest is away from the Dale, which never loses
its idyllic calm, and victory for the cause of Face-of-God is never doubted
in this war undertaken by the Dalesmen as much for the restoration of
rights to others as for the protection of their own. The mood of this ro-
mance is the mood of summer time, of ease and plenty in a land where a
man may have “that which he desireth save the sun and the moon in his
hands to play with.”

The Holiday of the Reformer

Burgdale is Morris’ Happy Valley. As in all the prose tales both ac-
tion and setting could be transformed into a series of pictures so lovingly
does he describe the visible scene: the tarn, the springs, the rocky places
the grassy swellings, and the fertile plain, “breaking like a green wave’
against the wall of cliff; the river that turns upon itself and encloses in
shining loop Burgstead and its houses set among gardens and orchards
The inhabitants are as lovely as the land in which they live. We recog-
nize them as the men and women Morris found easy to look upon in any
age, either the Gothic of The Roots of the Mountains or the Utopian o
News from Nowhere; and they are, in truth, of one kindred, Sunbean
and Ellen, Dick and Face-of-God, the children of a free and happy life.
They are all at least comely and many beautiful, and in describing their
Morris never hurries but gives details with the joyous scrutiny of the fil
describing Etain. The Bride with her abundant red brown hair, her
lips rather thin than full, her moulded chin, like the finest work of a
master craftsman is the first in a line of heroines, who quite apparent-
delight the heart of their Pre-Raphaelite and socialist creator. The Bride
is “a fair woman and strong—not easily daunted amidst perils: she is
hardy and handy and lightfoot: could swim as well as any, and could
shoot well in the bow and wield sword and spear: yet she was kind and
compassionate and of great courtesy, and the very dogs and kine trusted
in her and loved her.”

Such are the people who live in the Dale, and nothing suggests more
clearly what Morris wanted for the future than this glimpse of life in
the imaginary past.

Thus then lived this folk in much plenty and ease of life, though
not delicately nor desiring things out of measure. They wrought
wild their hands and wearied themselves; and they rested from their toi
and feasted and were merry: tomorrow was not a burden to them, no
yesterday a thing which they would fain forget: life shamed them nor
did death make them afraid. As for the Dale wherein they dwelt
it was indeed most fair and lovely and they deemed it the Blessing o
the Earth. They trod its flowery grass beside its rippled streams amidst
its green tree boughs proudly and joyfully with goodly bodies and
merry hearts.

In such a land the arts must flourish, and in the architectural skill o
the Dalesmen we see illustrated May Morris’ statement: that her father is
“his reading and eager sympathy built up the detailed life of the race
who were to become the great craftsmen of a later time—the builder
and artificers of the Middle Ages, the men of whom he spoke in th
young ardent days as his ‘breathing friends.’” The men of Burgstea
are “deft with the mallet and chisel on the face of hewn stone,” and
their structurally simple houses are beautified by the mason’s art. These
buildings are midway between the great hall of the Wolfings, reminiscent
of Heorot, and the dwelling of some prosperous medieval craftsman.
The farm hall and solar, with shut-beds, kitchen, buttery, and outbou-
ners—Morris found eminently satisfying whether in the fourth, the four-
teenth, or the twenty-first century. He once said to Yeats, “I decorate
modern houses for people, but the house that would please me would be
some great room where one talked to one’s friends in one corner and ate
in another and slept in another.” 14 The plan of the house of the Chi-
ldren of the Face—the hall “long and narrow, over-arched with stone
and not right high, the windows high up under the springing of the roof-
arch and all on the side toward the street”—can still be recognized with
modifications in surviving examples of medieval town architecture, and
its design is apparent in Guest House where Morris wakes in the world
of the future. The lesser arts, which he felt necessarily accompanied any
satisfactory development of architecture, Morris describes with equal
delight. The frequent allusions to early and medieval craftsmanship must
have been one of the greatest pleasures in writing the romances for the
man who was trying to recapture its spirit at Merton Abbey. When the
merchants come from the Cities of the Plain to the Spring Market at
Burgdale and set up their colorful booths, they win in return for their
wares the skill of the metalsmith in “fair rings with mountain-blue
stones, copper bowls, and vessels gilt and parcel gilt”; the skill of the
weapon-smith in swords like the one Iron-Face gives to Woodwise, “the
blade all marked with dark lines like the stream of an eddying river, the
hilts of steel and gold marvellously wrought”; and the craft of the weav-
ers, for “they were very deft weavers of wool and flax and made a shift
to dye the thrums in fair colors.”

Of course this detail is characteristic of Morris’ method everywhere.
Even the farm products of Burgstead sound like the trappings of a
poem: apples, pears, cherries, plums, chestnuts, wheat and rye, and
vines that yield good wine “both red and white.” Nor is food over-
looked. Coulton commented on the beauty, and the accuracy, of a media-
val repast in _The Earthly Paradise_. 15 Such descriptions occur frequently
in the romances and Morris’ travellers are always stopping in their ad-
ventures at some green clearing near a cool brook where they take their
meal, often simple, but unfailingly romantic, from a deftly turned wal-
et. The Dalesmen need not pull the string on the Land of Cockayne, for
it always snows meat and drink in their houses. When the Aldermen
make the sign of the hammer over the meat they “fall to with good
hearts” to a meal which Morris obviously enjoyed describing: “There
was enough and to spare of meat and drink. There was bread and flesh,
and leeks and roasted chestnuts of the grove, and medlars, sharp and
mellow: moreover, good wine of the western bents went up and down
the hall in great gilded copper bowls and in mazers gilt and lipped with
gold.”

Government is of the simplest and all important questions are settled
in the popular assembly of the Folknote. The same arrangement is
found in Morris’ dream of the future; and in his imaginary trip from
Hammersmith to the British Museum in the year 2000, one of the most
beautiful buildings he sees is the winter Mote House of the people of
London. In the summer they meet in the fields near the river opposite
Barn Elms, much as the Burghdars do at their Thingstede beyond the
gates. Unlike the Carlylean hero is Face-of-God’s characterization of a
leader of the folk. He tells the Friend that when she marries him and
goes to Burgdale, she must reconcile herself to a life where the exaltation
and strain of conflict are occasional and the gladness “made up of little
matters” is the rule:

When I drive the herds it shall be at the neighbours bidding whereas
they will; not necks of men shall I smite but the stalks of the tall
wheat, and the boles of the timbo tree which the woodreeve hath
marked for felling, the stilts of the plough rather than the hilts of
the sword shall harden my hands; my shafts shall be for the deer, and
my spears for the wood-boar, till war and sorrow fall upon us, and I fight
for the ceasing of war and trouble. And though I be called a chief and
of the blood of chiefs, yet shall I not be masterful to the goodman of the
Dale, but rather to my hound; for my chieftainship shall be that I
shall be well beloved and trusted, and that no man shall grudge
against me.

So peaceful is the life that the reader may well wonder what complica-
tion can arise to forward the action of the tale. But in all this loneliness
young Face-of-God feels a strange restlessness. It draws him to the woods
and there he meets a beautiful woman, the Friend, later called Sun-
beam, her brother, and their retainers, Children of the Wolf, who years
earlier have been driven from their homes in Silverdale and who have
lived meanwhile in the Shadowy Vale until such a time as they can re-
turn to their own land and rout the Huns their enemies. The Dalesmen
become their allies against the “Dusky Men,” who, it is clear, have now
learned of the riches of Burgstead and plan in their irrational lust for
conquest for its own sake to advance against it with the spring. Just as
the Roman civilization was the foil for the idyllic life of the Wolfings,
so the Huns provide the contrast for Morris’ Happy Valley. To anyone
familiar with the industrial history of the nineteenth century and with Morris' revolt against it so profound that it penetrated his entire being, there are unmistakable implications in the story of the Dusky Men and their treatment of their thralls. No strained analogies are necessary. What Morris thought as he wrote shows as clearly behind the web of romance as the real meaning of a letter from one well loved reveals itself to the sensitive reader.

One of the thralls recently escaped from Rosedale, a community taken by the Huns, tells of the ways of the conquerors: "... they had no mind to till the teeming earth or work in the acres we had given them, or sit at the loom, or hammer in the smithy or do any manlike work... our bodies were only so much our own as they were needful to be kept alive for labour." Dusky Men always end by enslaving those who temporize with them, and the people of Rosedale, following a policy of appeasement, learn the lesson at the price of their freedom. No compromise with the Dusky Men of any age was Morris' insistent message to the workers of England, no pact with the current commercialism; and those who tried it brought a part of their troubles upon themselves. This principle kept Morris aloof from the "gas and water" socialism of his own generation, with its acceptance of parliamentary reform and, therefore, its implied acceptance of parliament itself. When the thralls are brought back to Burgstead and the Bride questions Iron-Face as to the cause of their misery, his answer is something of a rebuke, not only to those responsible, but to the sufferers who are stronger "to bear" than "to do."

Daughter, thou sayest who clad these folk thus? It was misery that hath so dight them; and they are the images of what we shall be if we love foul life better than fair death, and so fall into the hands of the Felons, who were the masters of these men."

If Morris' revolt began in the sensitivity of the artist to the ugliness of the age, the sensitivity of a generous man who had lived well to the wretchedness of those who had not, confirmed him in his course. The cry of The Pilgrims of Hope must have been in his heart constantly during the years when the London of the working classes became familiar to him:

The singers have sung and the builders have builded
The painters have fashioned their tales of delight;
For what and for whom hath the world's book been gilded
When all is for these but the blackness of night.

The contrast between their lot and his moved him deeply. He spoke of the contrast in an address given in 1881 when he referred to the ruffianism, the "brutal reckless faces and figures" that passed his windows in Hammersmith as he sat quietly at work. Chance only had placed him "on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty streets, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings." With the same reaction the young chieftain of Burgdale, "when he is brought face to face with the sorrow of the earth," views the former thralls of the Dusky Men. As Dallach reminds him, he does not know "the heart of the thrall or the fear and doubt that is in it," or how little there is left in man when his liberty is taken. "And when he thought of the minutes that had made the hours, and the hours that had made the days that these men had passed through, his heart failed him."

When the Dalesmen see the thralls against the setting of Burgstead, when they note the marks of servility in their expressionless faces, in the crudeness of their manners and speech, in their fear and hesitancy, the Men of the Face need no further argument for war against the Huns. "Never," said the Dale-warden, "have men gone forth more joyously to merry-making than all men of us shall wend to this war." It is the Fellowship again: "Grief in thy neighbor's hall is grief in thy garth." When the power of the Dusky Men is broken and freedom restored in Silverdale and Burgdale, the Dalesmen do not count the cost too much but drink the "cup of memory" to "those who would never see the joy that was to be."

In 1890, the year after Morris wrote The Roots of the Mountains, News from Nowhere ran serially in The Commonweal. Though addressed to a popular audience and enlivened by its oblique comments on the contemporary scene and its ingenious plan of depicting a Utopia in a local setting, this view of the future has much in common with the tales of the past that precede and follow it. Its final concern is, after all, with the same type of world, the same men and women, and the same ideals.

In 1891 The Glittering Plain was published, the first book from the Kelmscott Press. It tells of Hallblithe, a young man of the House of the Raven, and of how the Hostage, his betrothed, is stolen from him by sea rovers and pirates from the Isle of Ransom. He journeys to this volcanic island, "dreary with its black rocks and black sand," Icelandic in its appearance and in the character of its people, whose foremeal of mead cakes and dried fish is followed by a feast that in its accompaniments of loud music, heavy drinking, and rough play would do justice to the most violent saga. Here he is persuaded to go to the Glittering Plain by the false promise that he will find the Hostage there. This romance,
like *The Wood beyond the World*, is on the periphery rather than at the center of the Vision. It seldom touches on the themes that always enforce deep harmonies in Morris and waken the overtones that vibrate and crumble the thin walls between past, present, and future. But it has a special interest in that its title is the name of an earthly paradise of the type commonly and mistakenly identified with Morris' ideal: "a land where it seemed always afternoon," where people live in ease and plenty and have but one fear, the fear of sorrow, and where the King's "face shone like a star . . . and when he spoke his voice was so sweet that all hearts were ravished. . . ." Outwardly it could be mistaken for a Morrisian Utopia. There are the usual tokens—the beautiful men and women, the leisurely pace, the visible loveliness of the world. But the inward grace is gone with the absence of struggle. There is no room for courage and the Fellowship, no place for humanity. The Glittering Plain is the traditional Land of Heart's Desire, which Morris as well as Chesterton recognized had only one weakness: "The heart does not desire it." Morris, sound in his humanity, rejects it with finality. He was never interested in "flat felicity," and not one of the romances is without its sorrow. Though his message was necessarily enveloped in the poet's dream, he felt he was dealing, fundamentally, with the soundest of realities. The Fellowship was not hidden beneath the sea, or on an island to the west, or in the mists of the plain. It was in the real future of a real world. At the beginning of the story three travellers ride to the gate of the House of the Raven, and in thin and feverish voices, cry, "Is this the land? Is this the Land?" Hallibithe must answer no. It is not the land of the self-centered dreamer where struggle and pain cease in the fulfillment of all desires. It is not the Acres of the Undying; it is merely Cleveland-by-the-Sea, with its landlocked harbor and its homes of the men of the spear and the plough, who "know not lord but live in good fellowship," and only long enough for "the deed that dies not." When Hallibithe is trapped on the Glittering Plain his cry sounds like the passionate rejection of all schemes bought at the cost of the perversion of ordinary human nature: "I seek no dream, but rather the end of dreams."

Published in 1894, *The Wood beyond the World* is even of less value than *The Land of the Glittering Plain* in reconstructing Morris' Vision, though it was in this romance that a reviewer saw an allegory of capital and labour. The story begins in Langton on Holm, a "great and goodly city by the sea," whose busy harbour and streets crowded with mariners and aliens Morris obviously delighted in describing. There Golden Walter, son of Bartholomew Golden, headman of one of the greatest Lineages and captain of the Porte, sees an apparition of a lady, a thrall, and a dwarf. When it appears to him again in another cheaping town, he is filled with the desire to seek the adventure it suggests in whatever distant land the three may live. The action shifts quickly from a fairly realistic medieval scene to a world of magic and intrigue where only guilt can conquer guile and ugliness in character and situation is heightened by the fairy tale setting. The wizardry has none of the happy magic of Hubandia in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The atmosphere is sinister and remains so until Walter and the beautiful thrall escape and make their way at last to Starkenwald. In spite of the strange custom of kingmaking by which Walter wins the crown, this city is more akin to Langton on Holm than anything encountered in the country of the Wood beyond the World. The fantasy of the central episode is thus framed by the glimpses of reality in two medieval towns. The son of the guildsman Bartholomew proves to be a good king. He opens the prison and feeds the hungry."Nor may it be said that the needy lamented him when he came to die: for no needy had he left in his own land."

Much closer to the center of the Vision, however, is the third of the shorter romances, *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*. In this retelling of the story of *Havelok the Dane*, only the skeleton of the original is left: the child king deprived of his heritage by the false counsellor the failure of the attempt to murder the boy; his growing to manhood in obscurity; his marriage to a young queen, arranged by another evil counsellor who takes literally, because it pleased him to do so, the final admonition of her dead father to marry his child to the strongest and comeliest of men; the final triumph of Havelok and Goldborough, or Christopher and Goldilind. In atmosphere and in detail the Middle English romance has been transformed; gone are all the evidences, in Morris' version, that betray its non-courtly origins. It is now Anglo-Norman rather than Anglo-Saxon in spirit, a graceful tale of Plantagenet England, with rebellious barons, outlaw heroes, and knightly encounters in a land of forests cleared here and there for abbey churches, cathedral towns, and royal cities. The trading town of Grimsby is replaced by a "merry little thorpe" in Oakenrealm, and Christopher's adventures, though rustic, are far different in character from Havelok's skill in carrying fish baskets and beer kegs and hurling the stone before the adoring boys of Earl Godrich's scullery. It is apparent that Morris is thoroughly happy in spinning his golden story and is no whit troubled by the liberties he takes with *Havelok the Dane*. And as usual when he is most at home in his material, he turns naturally, both in description and in situation, to his favorite pastime: seeing the timeless ideal in the medieval dream. The good life is life in Oakenrealm under the old king and it comes again with young King Christopher. The boy himself, at the
opening of the romance, is “such an youngling as most might have been in the world, had not man’s malice been, and the mischief of grudging and the marring of grasping.” As king, to no man did he “mete out worse than his deserts, nay, to most far better than he meted: no man he feared, nor hated any save the tormentors of poor folk; and but a little while abided his hatred of those, for it cut short their lives, so that they were speedily done with and forgotten.”

Nothing indicates more clearly the romantic nature of this story than the central episode of Jack of the Tofts. Jack is a nobleman who has been unjustly banished and who leads a Robin Hood existence with his seven sons and his loyal followers in a stronghold in the wasteland between Oakenrealm and Meadham. There the life is merry in contrast with the life of town and court “where king’s guile is not forgotten, and pride is alive, and tyranny, and the sword is whetted for innocent lives, and the feud is eke’d by the destruction of those who be sackless of its up-heaving.” Morris never lost a boyish delight in tales of outlaws. The Kentishman in the Rose sings, it will be remembered, a ballad of Robin Hood, and in almost every romance there is a Wood Debatable where these men live by preying on the rich while, as an old king reminds his son, “the lawful prey on the poor.” Amidst the feasting and fellowship of the long hall at the Tofts, Christopher’s Kingship is acknowledged, and with the help of Jack and his men, he regains his kingdom.

Began now fair life for the people of Oakenrealm; for Jack of the Tofts abode above the King in Oakenham; and wise was his counsel, and there was no greed in him, and yet he wotted of greed and guile in others, and warned the King thereof when he saw it, and the tyrants were brought low, and no poor and simple man had need to thrive. As for Christopher he loved better to give than to take; and the grief and sorrow of folk irked him sorely; it was to him as if he had gotten a wound when he saw so much as one unhappy face in a day.

The Well at the World’s End is the longest of the prose romances. Because of its size, two volumes, and the time devoted to its composition— it was begun immediately after The Glittering Plain but not published until 1896—Morris and his family, with humorously affection, dubbed it “The Interminable.” It shows the effects of intermittent effort. Though no story of his is characterized by a clearly developed plot—nor does the nature of the romance require one—“The Well” is more rambling than the others. The thread of interest almost breaks after the death of the Lady of Abundance, and again and again narrative within narrative checks the progress of the tale. But though it has lost the artistic effect of singleness of impression so well achieved in A Dream of John Ball or

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The House of the Wolfsings, it has gained subtilely as a revelation of ris himself. It is as though more of the man found its way into the that was with him so long and that must have been the reflection of moods. The Well at the World’s End could be his “Ideas of Good Evil.” Though the contrasts are as sharp as in the other romances, ham-on-Highway as remote from Cheaping Knowe as the Burg from the Dusky Men, there is also more of checkered light and shadow in-between-land of ordinary humanity. Even the sympathetic re-wonders at times if Morris’ characters, like the people of fairy, are capable of casting shadows, but here such suspicion is dispelled, as we know Ralph and Ursula, Clement Chapman and his wife Dame Kene are indeed the children of Adam. Perhaps they develop merely because we are with them longer, but these seem to be people who might have lived in the real Faringdon of medieval England as well as in the imaginary Walstead of Morris’ romance. The background, too, represents more fully than the other stories the scope of his enthusiasms: his love of the unquestioned beauty of medieval art and architecture, the equally unquestioned ugliness and brutality of features of the same life; his delight in the everyday existence of yeomen and guildsmen and in the adventurous tales of knight errantry, the happy reconstruction of the visible scene, based sometimes on the familiar setting of the English countryside, the real Uffington Church of Old Sarum, and sometimes, as in the Castle of Abundance, drawn from the wonderland of illumination and romance.

The ideal life of The Well at the World’s End, like Cleveland-by-Sea in The Glittering Plain, is not remote from the desires of ordinary men. In fact so simple and homely is Upmeads, its symbol, that yet Ralph and his brothers are restive there and must seek adventure, profit, in the countries beyond. It is with tender irony that Morris describes the difficulty of their lives in their straitened world:

For though they were King’s sons, they had but little world’s we save and except good meat and drink, and enough or too much the house-room of the best; fair friends to be merry with, and maidens to kiss, and these also as good as might be; freedom withal to come as they would; the heavens above them, the earth to bear them and the meadows and acres, the woods and fair streams, and the hills of Upmeads, for that was the name of their country and Kingdom of King Peter.

King Peter has no desire, nor freedom either, to “tax or tax on sturdy subjects. He lives peaceably and well with them and the canons, his neighbors, “who knew not the road to Rome, or how to
the door of the Chancellor's house." Upmeads pleases Morris well—how well we realize when we know that the King's House is none other than Kelmscott and that Ralph, in his journey to Wulstead and Higham-on-Highway and the downs beyond, is covering the same ground as the Morris family travelled yearly as they went south from their well-loved home.\(^\text{17}\) Once before Kelmscott Manor appeared in an ideal setting—in the famous description in News from Nowhere of the English countryside of the future. On the very spot where the harvesters land after their little voyage up the Thames in the Utopian romance, King Peter says farewell to his sons in this vision of wisdom and simplicity in the past. After his long and varied adventures, however, it is to Upmeads Ralph returns. Even before he drinks wisdom with his draught from the Well at the World's End he comes to understand and value the simple happiness of his father's kingdom. "When I have accomplished this quest," he tells the Sage of Swevenham, "I would get me home again to the little land of Upmeads to see my father and my mother, and to guard its meadows from waste and its houses from fire-raising: to hold war aloof and walk in the free fields, and see my children growing up about me, and lie at last beside my fathers in the choir of St. Lawrence."

But before he accomplishes his quest, Ralph must travel to the Wall of the World and beyond, through the down country of the shepherds, through Icelandic wastes of volcanic rock and blackened earth, through forests such as once provoked Pandulf to complain of the daily threat of violence and sudden death in the woods near Winchester; and through many a medieval city he passes on the way. Most of the romances have unforgettable towns but The Well at the World's End is characterized by their number and their individuality: Wulstead, the cheaping town where Clement Chapman and his wife live; Higham-on-Highway, the beautiful city of an efficient and beloved Lord Abbot; the Burg of the Four Friths, the cold unlovely city of a 'militaristic but prosperous people; Cheaping Knowe with its open slavery; Whiteness, with its half-timber houses clean and bright with the plasterer's brush; Goldburg, the unhappy city, half marble and half slums. The high place Morris assigned to the cities in the economy of medieval life we already know from his use of them in his propagandist writings. As a socialist he loved them for their spirit of association—Kropotkin's "Mutual Aid"—as an artist for the beauty of line and structure sometimes resulting from the happy, accidental growth of years, sometimes from deliberate plan. How erroneous it would be to claim town planning as a modern innovation we can judge when we read, as Morris once did, of the engineers of Edward I—"the most clever and able, and those who best know how to divide, order and arrange a new town"—and of their work, the beautiful

free towns such as Villefranche de Rovernge and Libourne, with their regular and open streets, well built houses, and parallelogram markets—surrounded by graceful arcades.\(^\text{18}\) To two similar towns of the period Morris makes specific reference in the medieval section of Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome—Winchelsea, whose excellently constructed vaulted cellars lasted down to Victorian times, and the beautiful Kingston-on-Hull. A medieval town had beauty and meaning for Morris, and we remember both when he amuses himself by re-creating the cities of this romance. Three have special interest: Higham-on-Highway, the Burg of the Four Friths, and Goldburg.

Higham-on-Highway is like one of the architectural dreams with which Morris tells us he was frequently blessed. As Ruskin reminded his contemporaries—when he noted the meanly decorated San Pietro di Castello on the outermost island of Venice, the cathedral is the key to the true state of the medieval city, and Higham has three churches—and all are beautiful. There is a spirit of festivity abroad on the midsummer eve when Ralph rides into the market square, "great and clean, paved with stones all over." "... Tall and fair houses rose up upon three sides of it, and on the fourth was the great church. ... Like dark gold it shone the evening sun, and the painted and gilded imagery shone like jewels upon it." Ralph shares in the hospitality of the Abbey Guest Hall (whose walls are hung with an array of the Pilgrimage of the Life of Man) and then he returns to the square, to the bale-fire hung with flowers and the crude stage built for the evening's merriment. In its pageantry the scene that follows is one of the loveliest in all the romances. With the holiday throng before the great church, Ralph views the miracle play of St. George and the Dragon given by the men at arms of the Lord Abbot. A monk then takes Ralph to the west tower of the church, where he looks down on the bale-fire dancers in the square below and then over the countryside as beacon answers beacon in the summer's night. Everywhere there is peace, courtesy, and well-being, and as Ralph rides through the faubourg the following morning he notices that there, too, the people seem strong and well-clad, and "made no great haste as they went but looked about them as though they deemed the world worth looking at, and as if they had no fear either of a blow or a hard word for loitering."

If Higham-on-Highway represents the best in the medieval spirit, the Burg of the Four Friths is like the preview of a later and more utilitarian age. It, too, is a prosperous town but everything in it is solid, serviceable, and unadorned. The church is small for a city of its size and no attempt has been made to grace its wall with ornament. The women Ralph sees are not much better favored than the men, and the men
themselves are hardened with the constant effort of their lives. There can be no question that they are a progressive people; material success is everywhere apparent. But their way of life is maintained at the cost of unceasing war. Ostensibly it is a free city but Ralph finds his liberties curtailed in little ways and the threat of greater encroachments somehow suggested. Though he is a stranger he is given no welcome and ‘he felt himself unfree therein.’ The Lady of Abundance describes these people as ‘men who have no friend to love, no broken foe to forgive, and can scarce be kind even to themselves: though forsooth they be wise men and courteous and well living before the world, and wealthy and holy.’ Eventually the wheat-weavers, whom the people of the Four Friths had enslaved, rise and defeat their enemy, formerly accepted as invincible, and new days come to the Burg and no one laments the passing of the old.

Particularly modern is the sad story of the third city, Goldburg, and of its people ‘who do not belong’—‘who have no master to feed them and plenty to replace them.’ Here are the contrasts of a later age—the High House of the Queen “like a piece of the Kingdom of Heaven for loveliness” and on the hillside the 1ath and plaster novels of the poor. At first only the beauty of the city is apparent: the vaulted double bridge, the water street with its arched passage like the ambulatory of an abbey, the houses “built of white stones and red and grey,” the shapely pillars, the fair gardens, and fountains of many coloured marble. But two nations live here and one is composed of “poor wretches,” “slaves without a price, and if one died another took his place on the chance that thereby he might escape present death by hunger, for there were a great many of them.” It is the story of this city, planned and half-built in a spirit of dedication but finished in selfishness and greed that prompts the Sage of Swevenham to give Ralph and Ursula this typical Morrison advice:

‘therefore I bid you be no tyrants or builders of cities for merchants and usurers. . . . But rather I bid you live in peace and patience without fear and hatred; and to succour the oppressed and love the lonely, and to be the friends of men, so that when ye be dead at last, men may say of you “They brought down Heaven to Earth for a while.”

Perhaps because its central figure is a woman and its setting the magic world of Grimm, one of the loveliest of the prose romances lends itself least easily to the analysis that would prove the relationship between the poet's holiday and the reformer’s serious plan. And yet the reader attuned to Morris' meaning recognizes intuitively that The Water of the

Wondrous Isles, in spite of shape-shifting, sleep-thorns, magic sending boats, and enchanted islands, is close to the center of the Vision and important indeed in revealing the mind and heart that, simultaneously with the Wonderland, evolved the dream of a socialist future. Yeats sensed this significance when he quoted so fully in “The Happiest of Poets” from the story of Birdalone. It does not seem at all forced that her strange adventures and those of her companions should be concluded with the words that epitomize Morris' wish for man in reality as in romance: “They lived without shame and they died without fear.” In its spirit of wonder The Water of the Wondrous Isles is like the sunshine of the ideal world, as necessary to its life but as elusive of exposition as it once was of the Schildburger’s baskets when they attempted to gather light for their darkened houses in the sunshine of the marketplace.

The story tells how Birdalone, as a baby, is stolen by a witchwife and taken to a clearing beyond the wood called Evilshaw. There she grows to young womanhood—the narrow and harsh training of the witchwife secretly supplemented by the kindness and wisdom of the woodmother, Habundia, of the race of faery. Birdalone is a typical Morris heroine, beautiful and compassionate, strong enough for charming, milking, and herding, and deft enough with the bow. Like Emer, she has the gift of embroidery. When the witchwife gives her a bolt of green silk, she makes a dress, and she “brodered the said gown with roses and lilies, and a tall tree springing up amidst the hem of the skirt, and a hart on either side thereof face to face of each other.” She finally escapes from captivity on a magic sending boat, and on the Isle of Increase Unsought (whose particular hell is that there no one can work) she meets the three lovely women who have been separated from their “speech-friends” by guile and enchantment. The reunion of the lovers and Birdalone’s part in it occupies the greater part of the tale. Once in her adventures, however, she moves from the world of romance to the reality of a medieval town, the City of the Five Crafts, “a great city with walls and towers, and a great white castle and a minster, and lovely houses a many.” Morris must have thoroughly enjoyed writing this interlude. For five years she earns her living by her unusual skill with the needle. She submits her work to the local guild, wins the approval of the master, and then in the Street of the Broderers, she supports herself and her apprentices.

Birdalone moves always in a pagan world. Here, as in all the romances, there are the outward signs of Christianity, the churches and their painted screens of the “Blessed in the Meads of Paradise,” but the inner life of medieval religion is never felt, and the saints in heaven have less reality than Steelhead and Michael of Higham, the Lady of Abundance and the Woodmother, obviously none of them of the children of Adam.
William Morris

If the socialist lectures reveal how complete was Morris' intellectual break with Christianity the prose romances show how, with equal firmness, he closed the door of his imagination on its emotional values. The religion, if such it can be called, that grew out of wonder at the beauty of the earth and the courage of men upon it, seemed good to him, and it is the only religion his characters know. The pagan naturalism of the stories is complete and pervasive. There is little rancor against any faith in them because the author is so calmly and finally through with all faiths. "In religion I am a pagan," Morris said, and the full truth of the statement can be felt only by the student of the romances.

The last of the prose romances is The Sundering Flood. The idea of a deep and impassable river separating two lovers was taken, May Morris says, from a modern Icelandic novel, and both that country and its literature are suggested by the tone and setting of the early parts of the story—by the realism of description, by the bleakness and frugality of Wethermel before Osberne's success, and by the stubborn spirit of freedom that makes the weaker demand of the stronger if help in war is asked "as from thrall or from friend." As in The Water of the Wondrous Isles, Morris is again as much concerned with the childhood as with the maturity of the central character. The little boy Osberne is portrayed with unusual understanding, and there are autobiographical touches, it seems, in his readiness to sing his "staves," verses born of the excitement of the moment, and in his response to the beauties of the church he visits in Eastcheap where the monks' singing leaves him scarce knowing "whether he were in heaven or on earth." With naturalness and delicacy Morris tells of the friendship between Osberne and the child Elfhild, and later of their love, until war in Westdale takes the girl out of sight as well as out of reach. For between Osberne and Elfhild runs the torrent that literally deserves its name, since no man dares cross it by boat or bridge. The boy on the east bank and the girl on the west have met hitherto at the Bight of the Cloven Knoll where the gorge is narrowest. Certain that only travel in the world to the south will bring about their reunion, Osberne leaves Wethermel and, after five years of adventure, reaches the City where the great river empties at last into the sea.

It seems fitting that the central episode of the last romance should grow out of Morris' abiding interest, his love of the medieval guild. The entire story was composed in the shadow of his growing weakness—the final pages were dictated to Sidney Cockerell when the poet was too ill to write—and many must have been his thoughts of past and future as he told how the lesser crafts rose against the greater and how commoners and craftsmen together, in a battle that recalls the Ghentish feuds, reaffirmed the rights of the worker and the spirit of democracy that Morris

loved to believe was the mainspring of guild history. Osberne, in the service of Sir Godrick of Longshaw, arrives at the City at a time of great disturbance. The lesser guilds have been denied the representation on the council to which their number entitles them. He becomes their champion; the monopoly of the Porte and the older guilds is broken; the king is deposed; and the people discover they can live very happily without a king in their lovely city at the end of the Sundering Flood. The defense of their liberties is made against a suitable background. In its planned loveliness (see the charming map and insert in the Collected Works), the city is reminiscent of Kingston-on-Hull except that it is well built on both sides of the river. For a time the King holds guildhall and palace, ships and quays on the west bank, which is joined to the east by two bridges of linked barges with castles at either end. With the description of the conflict on the east bank the reader moves within a medieval town. We follow the action as the North Gate is taken, as that quarter is strengthened by mound and wall, as the streets are cleared to the carfax and the enemy routed in the great square. It is not the more familiar view of the illuminations, with spires and gables rising in quaint perspective above the walls, but a three dimensional impression. For Morris the rise of the craft guilds was the high water mark of town life in the Middle Ages, and to describe this imaginary triumph in an imaginary setting must have been like contemplating for the last time the well loved features of the past.

Morris left several unfinished romances, but two have special interest in illustrating the theme of how the thoughts of the reformer are reflected in the holiday of the poet. Kilian of the Closes and The Story of Desiderius, unlike the others discussed, are marked by a touch of sadness, even of weariness, a tone which may explain why they remained fragments. It is as if the enchantment is at last broken, and Morris cannot completely escape from the lengthening shadows of reality. The mood of the first is one of melancholy. It tells of a man past his first youth whose ambition is thwarted by the dwindling fortunes of his house and by the prospect of a life that will never call into play his real gifts of generosity and courage. The pages of introspection in which Kilian analyzes his position are unusual in Morris and go back to the soul-searching of The Defence of Guenevere, a kind of writing he checked in himself in later years. Though the story is unfinished, what Morris intended for Kilian is clear. The town of Whatham, not far from the Closes, now has a tyrannous lord, whose cruel taxation threatens to destroy the crafts. The guildsmen protest but are told that their guildhalls, if he so wishes, will be kennels for his hounds; their cloth-hall, his stables. Friction between the town and the lord who lives without the
gates grows until it culminates in an open conflict in the market place, which finds the guildsmen sturdy in defence but unprepared, for "war was not their mystery." The Porte has followed a policy of appeasement, trying to hold the balance between lord and guild, with the usual unhappy results. It is clear that Kilian will offer himself as champion of the craftsmen and bring back to his father's house the glory of its "blossoming days," the time made possible by "all the fathers of the Kindred before him, and their doughty trustiness and their hot blood and wise hearts."

The second story is unique in its setting. It tells of a young man of a rich family, "who hath no toil to weary him and no hope to lighten toil, and who yet is not a fool to eat and drink and be merry without deeds." He lives in one of the Cities of the Plain, the land always contrasted with the free and happy life of the Kindred in The House of the Wolfings and The Roots of the Mountains. May Morris has said that The Story of Desiderius was probably intended as a pendant to the two Gothic tales. It is impossible to read the opening pages without being convinced that they were written in the full consciousness of parallels for nineteenth-century England. London and the countryside are unmistakably suggested in the town and suburbs of the Roman city. After describing its beauties, Morris turns to the ever-present and painful contrast of the nation within the nation—the poor. There is the usual lament, so familiar in the propaganda, for the apathy of the enslaved in the face of their difficulties.

Such were the noble buildings of this city, and well had it been if there had been no others. But well ye may wot that since there were rich men therein there were many and worse than these; lairs and dens for the poor folk to lay their heads, foul and close and of evil odours, burnt by the sun, made bitter by the frost and the wind. Ah, if the dwellers therein had only bethought them for once how many they were and how few their masters and yeomen! But out on it they knew nought of the joys of battle and the hope and the toil of the free- man; though of these were most free in name and were fed from time to time with dog's food and dog's bidding that they might lie quiet in the sun and huddle into warm corners when colder weather was to hand; nor even rise up and take the food from those who hoarded it and needed it not, and the houses from those who most leave them empty or fill them with poor clad in fair raiment—their slaves born in the house or bought with a price.

As in Kilian of the Closes Morris again seems more concerned than usual with the inner life of his characters, and shrewd and bitter are the comments on the Roman household. Certainly Aurelian, the father of Desiderius, could be Morris' generalized portrait of a Victorian manufacturer, "greedy of gain but open-handed when the gain lay in his coffers; not tyrannous himself but winking at the deeds of tyrants if it were for his gain." He had compassion for the poor and a story of injustice disturbed his sensibilities, but there was no change in the conditions responsible and "next week or next day would the same thing be done and merrily would go the mill that ground the gold."

Morris once said that socialism was a religion. We can consider the propaganda as his catechism; the lectures on art as the rubrics of a new and universal liturgy. But the prose romances are like a medieval Book of the Hours, coloured in green and gold and cinnabar, figured with flowers, birds, and beasts—a hymn of praise to the things he loved in any time, past, present, or future. To ignore them is to know one half or less of the man who created the Vision of a society of equals and to whom the religion of inequality was anathema—a creed whose

... Amen were the chuckling of the rich over the poor and the Mass sung therein they offered to a sack stuffed with gold, and the Host and the daily victim was the life of the poor, and the Bread and Wine of Communion was the thankless labour of the poor and the blood of the thrall and the tears of his day that gaineth naught and his night that knoweth no rest—How long, O Lord, how long?
A VICTORIAN FORECAST

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Morris' wide historical reading in both primary and secondary sources had the not uncommon effect of leaving him permanently skeptical of the finality of any picture of the past, however vivid the delineation, however accurate the individual facts. But infinitely greater, he believed, were the difficulties encountered when a man attempted to think himself out of his own times and into the future, where for facts fancies were substituted—conjectures based on "nothing but mere abstract deductions from historic evolution, the logical sequence of which may be interfered with at any point by elements whose force we have not duly appreciated." Even when the writing was frankly utopian—and Morris warned that "the only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author"—it might give false ideas of socialist doctrine, or repel younger minds by too careful an analysis of the dream. In addition, the imagination, bound by a world of inequality, could not conceive, he felt, the release of spirit possible in a world where each receives according to his reasonable needs, and therefore it rested content with "a skeleton of the full life" to be realized in the days to come. Finally, the duty of reform was action not prophecy, he warned. But though he recognized the dangers of forecast, Morris also knew its value. It could give a man the incentive to find the reasonable grounds for his hope, and—more humbly—"give him the courage needed," as he once said, "to wade through studies, which as the Arab King said of arithmetic, would otherwise be too dull for the mind of man to think of." So in spite of his conviction that we must content ourselves with approximations of what has been and visions of what shall be, he persisted, to the gain of literature, in satisfying his own need for pictures of the past and future, and in satisfying as well the needs of others like him, to whom the colder dogmatism of analytical socialism was somewhat repellent.

This prophetic urge grew out of a much more fundamental need, however, than that of softening the aridities of socialist schoolmen. It was the reflection of a profound uneasiness about the prospects of the world which Morris shared with many of his contemporaries, but which is particularly marked in the medievalists since the anticipation of future difficulties was largely responsible for their return to the past. From Cobbett to Belloc, they waited with varying degrees of hope and fear, but always with certainty, for the inevitable transformation of modern society. In the Colloquies, Southey expects before long a snarl in the transcendental yarn whose unravelling makes the history of the race, the hidden pattern "for accomplishing a perfect state of civil constitution." By Morris' time, however, the faint heralding of change has reached a crescendo and the yarn has stretched to the breaking point. Nor is the future any longer made terrible by the possible triumph of the "levelling spirit of democracy," which Montesinos describes to the ghost of Thomas More. At the close of the century the triumph of political democracy has been accepted and economic democracy is the idea with which a reluctant world must become familiar. Where Southey feared, Morris welcomed the coming contest between "mastership and fellowship" and the Great Change that involved readjustments as far-reaching as those that marked the transitions from the classical to the medieval and from the medieval to the modern period. Neither is the new dispensation now known to the few; its approach is generally recognized. "All society feels it," Morris said in "The End and the Means." "We feel ourselves to be living between the old and the new," he said in "The Dawn of a New Epoch," "... and each of us, if he does not look to it and learn to understand what is going on, may find himself fighting on the wrong side, the side with which he really does not sympathize."

From the time of the Norse studies until the adoption of socialism it is possible to trace Morris' thought as it moves from the hope for change to the need of it, and finally to its inevitability. In March, 1874, he expressed a vague wish that "some great and tragic circumstances" were in store for the country, "so that if they cannot have a pleasant life which is what is meant by civilization, they may at least have a history, and something to think about." Again in July, probably thinking of the doom of the gods, he writes of the "troubles and terrors" he would have welcome in the hope that "once again life would be beautiful and dramatic withal." With each year the theme grows in intensity until the desire of 1879 that people "will try to lead less muddled and unreasonable lives" becomes the conviction of 1881 that "a great change is slow-coming over the world." With the formal adoption of revolutionary socialism, this sense of a changing world is confirmed by a history, and the socialist tracts are full of passages—usually vivid and hopeful, but sometimes reminiscent of the gloom of ragna rok—that suggest
parallels between the decay of older civilizations and the disintegration of the present order.

From John Ruskin to the dock-labourer at a meeting of the League or the Federation: from the ultra-radical artisan to the pessimist prig who has written a bad novel to prove that some new and vague form of Toryism is the only thing that can save us, all are discontented, all are taking it for granted that something is going to happen. In short, while constant change is the condition of man's society, there are some periods in which men are conscious of the changes of the world, both those which have lately happened and those that the present time of change points to in the future; such a period was that immediately preceding the French Revolution, and such a period is that in which we live. In spite of the disappointed hopes of the early part of the century we are forced to hope still because we are forced to move forward: the warnings of the past, the tales of bloodshed and terror and disorder and famine, they are all but tales to us and cannot scare us, because there is no turning back into the desert in which we cannot live, and no standing still on the edge of the enchanted wood; for there is nothing to keep us there, we must plunge in and through it to the promised land beyond.  

To those who had turned from the desert, but who were hesitating on the edge of the enchanted wood, Morris offered his version of the Land of Heart's Desire beyond. Compounded as it was of the realization of all he loved and the rejection of all he hated, it was a land deeply coloured by his personality. It was the vision of "days of peace and rest, and cleanliness and smiling goodwill" that sustained him in the difficult present of party politics. Not surprisingly, the pictures of the future drawn by him and his fellow medievalists, though they agree in certain fundamental patterns, are as characteristic of their authors as their readings of the past. Southey sees society redeemed through a "pure creed, a reformed ritual, and a tolerant church." Pugin sees England in the rosy glow of a Second Spring, with Rome triumphant and the land resplendent with spires and the pointed arch. Carlyle, never as enthusiastic a lover of the Middle Ages as the others, borrows considerably less. His remedies are largely Victorian—emigration and education—realized, however, in a hierarchical world. Ruskin's forecast reveals the richness of his many-sided nature and at the same time the paradoxical double strain that runs through the entire movement: the frequent union of thoroughly radical social thought with highly reactionary politics. It is the dichotomy found in revolutionary Spain where the ideal of medieval economy and the communal life of the medieval Spanish village fed the Carlism hopes, but the same ideal served—and again this is characteristic of the movement that included Morris and Carlyle—as the rallying point for the anarchists.

Ruskin's plan for the future, so strikingly opposed politically to Morris' new world, is an excellent illustration, too, of the popular, though not wholly accurate view, that medieval schemes are likely breeding places for fascist tendencies. To the man who said, and not without seriousness, that the main purpose of his life was "to grow pinnips, and its chief hope to see kings," there was one thing needful in the new society: "There shall be no equality in it." Children will learn to "obey orders with the precision of slaves"; the commandants of the Guild will be veteran soldiers; "artists, schoolmen, tradesmen, and inferior labourers, will form a body of honourably paid retainers, undisturbed in their duty by any chance or care relating to their means of subsistence"; the dress in all classes will be "as determined as the heraldry of coronets"; government will be in the hands of an aristocracy who elect an "absolute chief," who is to be "implicitly trusted and accurately obeyed" since "he cannot lose time in contention or persuasion." "His authority over them," Ruskin says, "must correspond precisely, in the war against poverty and vice of the state, to that of a Roman dictator, in his war against external enemies." From the rich harvest of Ruskin's thought, Morris very carefully separated these tares. Perhaps he was thinking of some such passage in Fors Clavigera, when the narrator in News from Nowhere eagerly questions Old Hammond in their discussion in the British Museum:—"Have you come to mere dictatorship, which some persons in the nineteenth century used to prophesy as the ultimate outcome of democracy?" But whatever differences of opinion there might be among the medievalists as to the ideas that would mould the lives of men in the future, they were at one in renouncing modern industrialism and all its works and pomps. "I do verily perceive and admit, in convinced sorrow," said John Ruskin, "that I live in the midst of a nation of thieves and murderers." To Morris legal robbery was the rule of society and the whole structure of the capitalist order rested "on its power to compel the mass of people to work unhappily on pain of death by starvation." No one in the group needed lessons in invective, and it would be difficult to decide whether the system itself or its outward signs in the growing urbanization of the world were more passionately attacked. Modern society was, according to Eric Gill, "irrational and demoniac," "diabolic in its direction and destructive of the very nature of man"; and the industrialized town, according to Vincent McNabb, "an occasion of sin," and as such to be fled by men of good conscience. It was no accident in the divine plan that Christ was born in a village, for "Jesus . . . seeing the city,
wept over it.” Modern life was so constituted that it automatically destroyed a normal sense of values; “... and so, naturally, we think that to make England ‘the workshop of the world’ is a much higher ambition than to make England a kind of New Jerusalem—and that a ‘green and pleasant land’ is well lost in exchange for Newport, Cardiff and Swansea, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds.” These “muck-heaps” of industrialism, “mere masses of sordidness, filth, and squalor,” so oppressed Morris that he found the only parallel for their horrors in the most vividly conceived hell of the theologians. He could not believe that men living in a future of order and peace would understand the cities of his own century, in which people were deprived of their birthright of joy in physical surroundings—“the common people have forgotten what a field or flower is like.” To him the “grossest state of savagery” was preferable to that view that ensured material comfort at the price of covering the earth with places like Manchester.

Most of the medievalist programs included a back to the land movement. St. George’s Guild was organized with the express purpose of buying land and settling “young and healthy persons” on it in the hope that their example would prompt others of the British nation, “now paying taxes to cheating capitalists” to do likewise; and sixty years later, the Distributists hailed a socialist prime minister’s Ruskinian pronouncement that “land is returning to the life of England” and that “he looked forward to a well thought out and adequately supported scheme” for the return of thousands of families to the soil. Arthur Penty, Guild Socialist, hoped for a land movement, too, provided it was preceded by a stabilization of prices. Morris, with his “intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells,” welcomed the thought of a future flight from the cities. He repeatedly charged modern society with deliberate destruction of the beauty of the world, and passage after passage in his prose carries the message of the following excerpt from “The Prospects of Architecture”:

... Time enough there may be for many things: for populating the desert; for breaking down the walls between nation and nation; for learning the innermost secrets of the fashion of our souls and bodies, the air we breathe, and the earth we tread on: time enough for subduing all the forces of nature to our material wants; but no time to spare before we turn our eyes and our longing to the fairness of the earth; lest the wave of human need sweep over it and make it not a hopeful desert as it once was, but a hopeless prison. ... 

The central portion of News from Nowhere, the long discussion between Hammond and the narrator, represents with very little romantic height-
the dismal road of peasant proprietorship... a miserable makeshift—a piece of reaction leading nowhere, save down the hill.”

If Morris could have attended a debate held forty years after his death between Vincent J. McNabb, Distributist, and John Strachey, Communist, held in Central Hall, Westminster, he would have found his principles and attitudes divided between them rather than inherited by either. “I believe undoubtedly,” Strachey challenged McNabb, “the journey to Canterbury in the time of Chaucer was more satisfactory; that it made better people, who enjoyed themselves more over their pilgrimage than we do in the somewhat glum hour and a half that we spend in the train getting to Canterbury today. But I would submit that railway trains have been invented; that it is now economically but also psychologically impossible to go travelling to Canterbury by mule.”

Such an “impossibility” Morris would refuse to recognize. The society of the future will be “conscious of the wish to keep life simple,” will be willing to sacrifice some of the acknowledged mechanical gains for a greater return in humanity. Railroads need not go, he said, but when we wish to take a journey, we “may indulge our personal inclinations and travel in a tilted wagon or on the hindquarters of a donkey.”

But neither is it possible to engraft at this date the pleasures of a Canterbury pilgrimage on a society of private property, and however much is to be said for the nineteenth-century distribution, we cannot,” said Morris, “turn our people back into Catholic English peasants.”

Yet another group claimed Morris—the Guild Socialists—in part because of his conjectures as to the government of the future, anti-statist and medieval in theory. Although Morris nowhere gives as detailed a plan as would compare with the regulative guilds of Arthur Penty or the great national organizations of G. D. H. Cole, he saw the revived institutions as sharing the sovereignty with the local governing bodies, which themselves resembled the folk motes of the saga. The guild would be the unit along occupational lines, the town along geographical, and these units of administration, industrial and political, would be small enough for each man to feel his responsibility. “Individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the state.”

Nations as we now know them, Morris felt, would cease to exist. The differences bred of varying climate and background, however, far from being discouraged, would be fostered, and those who felt “they naturally form a community” could govern themselves under one name if they chose. But the artificial rivalries of nationalism would disappear “in a world federation whose virtually independent members would unite for definite ends, particularly arrangements of production and distribution.” The central body—“the great council of the socialized world” would have as its main function guarding the principles of socialism seeing that nowhere among the individual communities the ideal equality was jeopardized. The communities themselves might be represented, but not by delegates with any general powers; only the “business in hand” would be their concern. But centralization would be discouraged—a reflection perhaps of Morris’ interest in the times that preceded the rise of modern nationalism—and even locally, government would become increasingly automatic.

In Morris’ mind one change in the future world, however, surpassed all others. “As we turn away from the flagstaff where the new bann has just been run up,” he said in “Art of the People,” “as we depst our ears yet ringing with the blare of the heralds’ trumpets that he proclaimed the new order of things, what shall we turn to then, what must we turn to then?” His answer was: “To what else, save to our work? to our daily labour.” The change in the conditions of labour is at the core of the new life—“all advances outside working hours are superficial compared with it, made possible only because of it. When in News from Nowhere Hammond explains the “conscious pleasure in the work itself” that is the common experience of the twenty-first century, the guest asks for further explanation. “For, to speak plainly,” he says, “this change from the conditions of the older world seems to me far greater and more important than all the other changes you have told me about as social politics, property, marriage.” And as always when Morris’ conviction ran deepest, in his discussions of work in the new world he appealed to the medieval past—to the standard of harmonious and cooperative effort maintained at the high point of guild development by medieval craft men, who, whatever other disabilities they may have suffered, were at least in their work. But the return would not be regression, he insisted, only a temporary retreat to the point where the tradition of free labour had been broken, so that we could again advance from there, the more mindful of whatever real gains were made in the modern era, fortifying it with an ideal that had once been actually realized.

“To labour is to live” could be Morris’ version of the monkish consolation and his approach to the problem of work in the world, nothing less than his individual reply to the question, “Quid est homo?” Man, as is defined and again by implication in Morris’ prose, is an animate and lifelike being of alternate effort and leisure, the periods of energy sweetened by the exercise of the creative faculty, the periods of rest made meaningful by the contemplation of the resultant product. “Work,” said Antoinin, political economist and saint, “is man’s duty, perfection, and happiness
and with this and much else in the Florentine's thought, Morris could agree. Only in a world that had forgotten the nature of man could the modern heresy, supported by theorists who knew little history and less art, flourish: that we work merely to earn our leisure. Work, in Morris' opinion, was as natural to man as flying to the bird or hunting to the dog. It was the "universal" gift that the commercial age, alone of all the ages, had rejected and earned thereby the curse of "vicarious life." We have become "wretched lop-sided creatures" "without the interchange of interest," "the knowledge of human necessities and the consciousness of human good will" that were the lot of others who, among their many disadvantages, had the one advantage of being men, and not the "sentient parts of a machine" or their hardly less unhappy employers. "I say further," Morris stated in "The Revival of Handicraft," "that the worst tyrants of the days of violence were but feeble tormentors compared with those Captains of Industry who have taken the pleasure of work away from the workmen." "You may tie a man by the ankle and flay his back with whips," said Eric Gill, "and yet leave him a responsible workman, a man responsible for the quality and not merely the amount." Against this greater slavery Morris, the Communist, and Gill, the Catholic, believed the effort of the world must be directed.

Justice to labour, therefore, was to be the foundation of the new society and Morris was always explicit as to what that virtue involved. First, no one willing to work "should ever fear want of such employment as would earn for him all the due necessaries of mind and body." And second, there were certain essential conditions to be met: the work must offer sufficient variety; it must provide for the exercise of the creative faculty, without which we are less than men; it must be carried on in decent and preferably pleasant surroundings; and it must be met with the reward of a full and unanxious life—not difficult in a society where from each is taken according to his talents and to each given according to his needs.

Morris liked to imagine the workman of the future mastering several crafts, and alternating between outdoor and sedentary labour, and wandering, if he chose, like the medieval journeyman, from place to place. He fancies himself a shoemaker in his future world: "It by no means follows," he says, "that I should always be obliged to make shoes in one place; a due amount of conceivable arrangement would enable me to make shoes in Rome, say, for three months, and to come back with new ideas of building, gathered from the sight of the works of past ages, amongst other things which would perhaps be of service in London." To those who objected that anything approaching the simplicities of a medieval economy would be insufficient to meet the production needs of the modern age, he gave the same answer that the Distributists did after him. We could manage well with one fourth of the present production if waste were eliminated; the waste involved in the making of luxuries and makeshifts; and the waste necessarily associated with commercial war where the end of excellence is profit and not use. "Production," warned Antoninus of Florence, "is on account of man, not man of production." To the realists who asked what would become of the rough work of the world, Morris acknowledged that it would still be with them ("I was crazy or dreaming else") but he felt that it "need not be by any means degrading," and that it would no longer be foisted on a single class, but be shared by all alike or performed on a volunteer basis. If any work were too repellent, Morris had a simple answer—"Well, then, let us see if the heavens will fall on us if we leave it undone, for it were better that they should." As for any special rewards for labour, he thought the reward of the medieval craftsman would again provide sufficient stimulation, the pleasure of creation and the certainty of the intelligent understanding of a fellow-worker—the carpenter's appreciation of the goldsmith's skill.

And the revival of art will follow inevitably the return of pleasure to the ordinary work of men. Art will become once more, as it was in the Middle Ages, not the exclusive possession of the few, but the daily solace of all; and no respecter of persons or places, it will reveal itself in the town hall of the future or in the farmer's simple shed. It will not be the art of national galleries or of esoteric groups. It will conform, rather, to Lethaby's definition—"The well making of what needs making"—whether that be the making of a "house, a knife, a cup, a steam engine," as Morris said in "The Socialist Ideal," or the creating of a full life as he implied in "At a Picture Show" when he said, "We must all be artists. I mean that we should all be able to look with reverence and understanding on the aspect of nature and the deeds of men on earth, that we should take/a deep and thoughtful interest in life in short, and not merely be drifted helplessly hither and thither by the force of circumstances as we too often are." The aim of art will be to make "work happy" and "rest fruitful" for the first time since the "death sleep" that followed the Renaissance. Once again an art of the people will flourish, but it will lack the incompleteness of the old since no longer an art of "instinct and ignorance," it will grow from the fulness of knowledge. What Morris means by popular art can be gathered from this excerpt from "Art and the People."

And a great gift such an art seems to me; an art made intelligently by the whole body of those who live by their labour: instinct with
their thoughts and aspirations, moving whither they are moving, changing as they change. The genuine expression of their sense of beauty and mystery of life: an art born of their joy and outliving their sorrow, though tinged by it: an art leaving to future ages living witness of the existence of deft hands and eager minds not too proud to tell us of their imperfect thoughts and their glimpses of insight into wonders and terrors, as they passed amid the hurly of their daily work through the sunshine and shadow of their lives.\^\textsuperscript{14}

The future will heal what Morris called “the fatal schism between art and daily life.” In a world where every worker is an artist and every artist a workman, the masters will not be obliged to “whisper under their breaths” to the comprehending few. They will not suffer the fate of the medieval masters in a gallery of the present where the average man stands dumb and unresponsive as “Holbein shows them the Danish princess of the sixteenth century yet living on the canvas, the demure half-smile not yet faded from her eyes; when Van Eyck opens a window for them into Bruges of the fourteenth century; when Botticelli shows them Heaven as it lived in the hearts of men before theology was dead.”\^\textsuperscript{15}

Gone will be the day when the possible audience for a work of art eliminates most of humanity, and the artist, without the tradition of understanding that is built of all men working intelligently and pleasurably, succeeds but rarely and finds at last that the art in which he took his seclusion pleasure, is already half corrupt. Coulton’s charge, that while the standard of craftsmanship was universally high in the Middle Ages, few rose above their fellows, may again be true in the future. But to Morris such a statement was complimentary rather than otherwise. He thought perhaps we had had enough of “geniuses,” and that the excessive praise given the individual artist was only a commentary on the scarcity of beauty in our day. It will be different when the “beehive creatures” of Industrialism, as Eric Gill called them, are transformed into “a nation of artists from the graveldiggers to the poets”—that is, men doing their work as men and not in “the office of cogwheels and cranks.”

So Morris looked to a world where a man would not be forced to blunt his sensibilities in self-protection so that the ugliness and vulgarity of his surroundings might not madden him, and he be driven “to kill some obnoxious person and so be hanged for it.” His greatest emphasis in these discussions of art in the future was on the lesser arts, since, as he once said, “I have erred in the aim of my whole life or the welfare of these lesser arts involves the question of the content and self-respect of all craftsmen.”\^\textsuperscript{16} But his interest extended to other forms, and not surprisingly, he had something to say of the coming literature. Again he hoped that the older types, more objective and more direct in their appeal to the senses, would supplant the dreamy introspection of the moderns. “Surely here again all will be changed,” he wrote in Commonweal, “and our literature will sympathize with the earlier works of men’s imagination before they learned to spin out their ‘insides like silk worms into dreary yarns of their sickly feelings and futile speculations.’ “Masters of life,” like Chaucer, will again assume their rightful place. But this transformation will not come easily. There will be rough days ahead, and many failures, before art becomes once more simple, sensuous and passionate. But it will “gather its strength in simple places,” Morris said, and out of the material of the new life fashion its own record. “How could we keep silence of all this? and what voice could tell it but the voice of Art: and what audience for such a tale would content us but all men living on the earth?”\^\textsuperscript{17}

It is apparent that Morris never looked for the revival of art by way of the Arts and Crafts Movement which he himself indirectly fostered and with which, not without irony, his name is persistently associated. He thought it at best a feeble protest against modern industrialism, dangerous in its search for the production of beauty for its own sake and likely to become the fetish of privilege and another source of commercial profit. Separated from a revolutionary social program, he saw the movement, however laudable in its original intentions, doomed to futility and to the expression of “mere reactionary sentiment.” “You cannot have happy villagers living in pretty houses among the trees,” he said, in “Art and Its Producers,” “doing pretty-looking work in their own houses or in the pleasant village workshop between seed-time and harvest, unless you remove the causes that have made for the brutal slum-dweller and the starving field-labourer.” Though Morris supported the movement by the part he took in the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions and the Art Worker’s Guild, it was chiefly for its value in preserving the traditions of the older art, but with little hope for its seriously fostering the new.

Typical of the medievalist attitude toward machinery is Father Vincent McNabb’s remark: “Every time-saving contrivance should be closely scanned for social contraband” for the “Hurry State is the Servile State.”\^\textsuperscript{18} Morris shared in this sentiment and even admitted that he “rather overdid” his hatred of the mechanical. But with whatever satisfaction he looked forward to the day when machine production would be greatly curtailed, he had too firm a grasp of the complexities of the present system to expect its elimination by means of such a universal Luddite riot as is half-suggested in the veiled threat of Fort Clavigera. Morris’ view was not as unrealistic as is popularly supposed. His enemy, as he was careful to note, was, after all, the mechanical principle under-
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lying modern society, rather than this or that “tangible steel or brass machine.” There would be no sudden or total abolition of machines. He did not share Arthur Peney's feeling of need for frantic haste: “The clock must be put back before it is put back by catastrophe.” At times he even anticipated the expansion of machinery to such a point that life would again be simplified, and men would turn naturally and with no undue force, to the handicrafts once more. Or again he felt that there would be great improvements in some essential machines and the voluntary dropping of many others. But whatever the survivals, many or few, they would be in the future labour saving devices, that is, for the saving of labour and not merely the costs of it. They would relieve men of work either mechanical or repellent by nature. And though in his opinion a perfectly reasonable man would stop with a water-wheel, he thought even a factory, in a properly ordered society, might have its compensations. As he knew from his own Merton Abbey, a factory could be spacious, airy, and of simple design and set amidst pleasant surroundings—perhaps even ornamented, he suggests in “A Factory as It Might Be,” in emulation of the “monks and craftsmen of the Middle Ages” who decorated their places of work. It could be a clearing house of trade information and a place of education for the gifted apprentice. It could even offer the “opportunities for a full and eager social life surrounded by many pleasures,” like the “banded workshops” of News from Nowhere. But with the fear of starvation gone, as it would be before long in the new society, handicraft would assert itself again by virtue of the pleasure it gives to maker and user alike.

Prophecies in miniature, born of the earnestness of his wish for change and often of weariness with his own efforts to effect it, are scattered throughout Morris' prose, and from them have been reconstructed his attitudes toward work, art, and the beauty of the earth in the days to come. But in criticizing Morris, too systematic an approach is, perhaps, doubtful wisdom and destroys, in attempting to analyze, the special merit of his vision. His simple and generous thought is at its best when as the poet he allows himself the luxury of a dream; and therefore it is, in the end, from News from Nowhere, rather than the sober forecast of socialist lectures, that we must turn to discover his hope for the future. To expect a blueprint is to court, again, Vida Scudder's correct but limited conclusion: Morris is no thinker. The Utopian romance gives, quite literally, a local habitation and a name to a few fundamental concepts—seldom subtle perhaps but always drawing their power from the passion and integrity of the man who held them.

Morris was always homeloving, and perhaps it is never more clear than in News from Nowhere when the freedom with which he permits his thoughts to range in time is curtailed in the realm of space to the surroundings of his everyday life. It may be the twenty-first century but it is London and not Atlantis; it is Piccadilly and Kensington and the familiar Thames. The story begins on the site of his own suburban home, and ends at Kelmscott Manor, on the upper reaches of the river, in the beautiful house he shared for a while with Rossetti, and in the friendly room hung with the faded tapestry and within the sound of the doves from the dovecote opposite. His ride with Dick through London of the future from Hammersmith to Bloomsbury is a reflection of his daily experience and thoughts—his impatience with the Renaissance style of St. Paul's, serving in the romance only as an oddity and a foil to the new buildings; his distaste for the pseudo-Gothic of the Houses of Parliament, now a subsidiary market and storage place for manure, and his affection for the British Museum, whose treasures compensate for its unsatisfactory architecture and account for its survival. The three day trip up the Thames with Ellen, Dick, and Clara, is one Morris often made with his own family, and a world of biographical meaning could be read into his comments on the scenes between London and the well-loved house in Oxfordshire. They pass Hampton Court, still pleasing in its combination of late Gothic and seventeenth century styles, and Windsor and Eton, once ruined by restorers. They see the spires of Oxford in the evening sunset, Hinksey Hill, and Port Meadow; and Morris thinks with interest “how its name and use had survived from the older imperfect communal period, through the time of the confused struggle and tyranny of the rights of property, into the present rest and happiness of complete Communism.” They come to Wallingford and Abingdon, once lovely medieval towns vulgarized by commercialism, but now in their original beauty again, and to the sight of Berkshire Hills, always an inspiration to Morris, with their memories of Alfred and Ashdown and the legend of the White Horse. The physical details of the life about him seem inextricably woven into his thoughts, and the principles of the new society are seen only as they are embodied in the lives of men and the things they make or love. Morris belonged, as he said, to the visionaries, the “practical people” who used their eyes at least as much as their minds, and he left to the intellectuals the doubtful joys of building systems.

“News was brought to lovely London” was a song Burne-Jones liked to hum as he painted, and it is from such a lovely London that Morris brings his tidings of a new order realized. All signs of modern industrialism have disappeared in this vision of the twenty-first century: there is no sound of hammering on the wind, no darkening of the air by smoking chimneys, and the river is so clean that the salmon nets once more are

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stretched along its banks. “This is not,” says the character, “an age of inventions.” No longer the sprawling “brick and mortar desert” of the nineteenth century, the city is a Distributist paradise. It has given up its ambition to be the center of world trade and the great docks of the modern period have largely fallen into disuse. The old character of London has reasserted itself, and it is once more composed of separate districts, each with its own Mote-hall and Market, and each set “among wide sunny meadows and gardenlike tilage”: Hammersmith with its buildings suggesting Gothic combined with the vitality of the best in Byzantine and Saracenic; Kensington with its pretty wood; Piccadilly with its gay booths, still the shopping center; Trafalgar Square, the scene of so much bitterness in Victorian Socialist struggles, whose genteel slope and bright openness have now been converted into an orchard; Bloomsbury, where the beauty of the gabled market overshadows the classic portico of the British Museum. The whole country, Morris is told, has been similarly converted. Manchester has completely disappeared. The ancient villages have become as populous as Cottet once dreamed they were. New ones have been founded and equal in loveliness those like Oxford and Abingdon that retained something of their charm even in the commercial period. There are no longer distinctly “country people” like the sad Haymakers Morris described in “Under the Elms,” whose sorry state he contrasted with the free craftsmen and with King Alfred’s men, and whose only hope he felt lay in another Ashdown. And everywhere there are evidences that men feel once again what Morris thought was inseparable from the life worth living—love of the beauty of the earth. On the trip along the Thames he notices that each curve of the river bank has been carefully tended (yet without the “game-keeperish look” that once marred the scene), and the willows in the neighboring fields have been properly and carefully pruned. Where once it was a “country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling dens surrounded by illkept, poverty-stricken farms,” England is now a garden.

From the sight that first attracts the narrator—the bridge across the Thames, as beautiful as an illumination and lovelier than the Ponte Vecchio in Florence—until the final scene in Oxfordshire, reminiscent of the early church-ales, the reader is reminded again and again of the Middle Ages. The characters too, not surprisingly, betray a Morrisian attitude, and when the guest ironically presses the superiority of the Victorian period, Dick, who has previously noted the contrast between the commonplace objects of the queen and the leopard and fleur-de-lys designs of Edward III, confesses that he “dons’t quite see it.” That the nineteenth century has sunk in the scale (in the opinion of the twentieth) is again apparent from the boatman’s comments on the feudal houses that once stood in Holburn. Morris concludes that his own times evidently “counted for nothing in the memory of this man, who had read Shakespeare and not forgotten the Middle Ages.” Old Hammond shares his great grandson’s strange perspective. Oxford of the nineteenth century, he feels, was “but a poor sequence to the aspirations of the ‘barbarous Middle Ages’”; and he assures his guest that though the classical spirit is “gone past recovery,” the medieval spirit is now “more akin to our way of life.”

The narrator finds that his familiarity with medieval art prepares him at every turn for appreciation of the forms of the new world: the household furnishings, few but sturdily built and well ornamented, yet without the “commercial finish” of the modern period; the pottery of glazed earthenware and the glass, “elegant and quaint,” but “bubbled and hornier” than the nineteenth century product; the dress of both men and women, rich in texture, gay in color, and finely embroidered, suggesting in its beauty of line the simpler styles of the fourteenth century. Machine printing, he hears, is beginning to die out, and people delight in writing and painting their own books when many copies are not needed. The old tales, once more, are the best beloved, and Bloomsbury Market Hall, Morris finds, is decorated with wall-pictures of “The Seven Swans,” “The King of the Golden Mountain,” and “Faithful Henry.” “It is the childlike part of us,” says Hammond, “that produces works of the imagination.” Later that evening Morris sits in the Hammersmith Guest House and listens to stories “with no other light but that of the summer moon streaming through the beautiful traceries of the windows as if we had belonged to times long passed, when books were scarce and the art of reading somewhat rare.”

These people most reveal their kinship with the medieval, however, in their architectural sense, both in the usually accepted meaning of the term and in its widest application, for to Morris it meant no less than “the moulding and altering to human needs of the very face of the earth itself.” His view was the antithesis of the Frenchman’s, who said a “house is a machine to live in.” Architecture is, rather, the “art of creating a building with all the appliances fit for carrying on a dignified and happy life.” Such building he finds in the new world. In its freedom and vitality it suggests Gothic, but it is never merely imitative, and many of the houses are reminiscent of the earlier style in principle rather than in execution. The pleasant low-lying red-bricked dwellings, tile-roofed and set among continuous gardens, remind the reader of Red House, designed by Philip Webb, and one of the first structures to testify to a domestic revival opposed to the current academic formalism. And the
field-labourers' house that Ellen points out to the guest is frankly functional, yet in no way like the "grim bastilles" conceived of as desirable for the Victorian worker, even by such generous and right-minded philanthropists as Octavia Hill. But most of the houses unmistakably suggest the Middle Ages; the lovely octagonal theater in Hammersmith like the Baptistery at Florence; the long, graceful arcades of the main street at Piccadilly like "some of the old Italian cities"; and the timber and plaster houses, like yeomen's dwellings, that made Morris "fairly feel as if we were alive in the fourteenth century." Whatever these people fashioned, Mote House or Hall, revealed that harmony of form and function that Lethaby says characterized the best of the medieval buildings, since all, whether cathedrals or village churches, were constructed as "directly for their purpose as a cart or a boat would be."

Dick is the spokesman for this genuine revival of Gothic principles. Indeed he confesses that he is a "little cracked on this subject of fine building." He can see no limits to the possibilities of architecture and he believes, with the narrator "that the energies of mankind are chiefly of use to them for such work."

The universal enthusiasm for good construction is charmingly illustrated by the incident of the "Obstinate Refusers." To the amusement of their friends, this little group living in the neighborhood of the Berkshire Hills forego the holiday spirit and "easy-hard" labour of hay-making, and persist in their own work of erecting a house where once stood an ugly nineteenth century villa. They are making it of ashlar—a plan of which Dick is faintly critical—but their purpose justifies the choice of material. They intend to transform the soft stone into a wreath of flowers entirely encircling the house. Phillips, one of the three women on the project, who says "we masons" with a touch of conscious pride, is their best carver, and she barely stops in her well-loved task to acknowledge the greetings of Dick and Clara. As the guest departs he hears the tinkle of the trowel in the summer air just as the voyager of the Earthly Paradise once heard the sound of the monks at work on the high towers of Peterborough.

News from Nowhere is the serious theme of the socialist propaganda transposed into an imaginative key, and even more clearly than in the other romances, we can see what Morris thought good for man. The first principle of this new world is equality—equality of condition, that is, for Morris conceded willingly that "it is no more possible that men should be equal in capacity or desires or temperament than that they should be equal in stature or in weight." But equality has not been purchased at the price of dull uniformity. There is variety both in people and in places and even eccentricity has not vanished. There is room for the Dickensian Mr. Boffin who writes reactionary novels and for the grumbler, Ellen's grandfather, a persistent praiser of times past, who believes the secret of zest in life to be found in the energies released by the competitive system. It is a world in which decentralization has been carried to an extreme and government has almost reached the automatic state. And yet it is not an anarchist paradise, for no matter how closely Morris skirted the anarchist position, he was always careful to make it clear he never supported it, both by direct rebuttal in the pages of Commonwealth and indirectly and humourously in the romance through Hammond's discussion of majority rule and democratic procedure. It is a world where joy in labour has been rediscovered and art has lost its name since it is merely the reflection of that joy. The food men eat, the houses they live in, the clothes they wear, the earth they till—from these they draw their pleasure and their life, and whatever they have beyond and above them, at least this much is secured to them. Ruskin would have been an uneasy companion for Dick, Clara, and Ellen, had he joined Morris on this Thames boat ride of the twenty-first century, and yet he had more to do with their creation than perhaps he would comfortably contemplate. "Simplicity in life without coarseness," he said in Fors, "and delight in life without lasciviousness, are, under such conditions, not only possible to human creatures, but natural to them." And it is an ideal not too remote from the Nowhere Morris describes.

This melody of the future is too persistently played in the major key, too unvarying in the repetition of its simple theme, to suit all tastes, however. Cole was sung into socialism by it, but Yeats, for whom Morris was "the chief of men," nevertheless found its fundamental concepts unsatisfying. In a discussion of the loss of strength in literature since ideas of innate evil have gone out of fashion, he says that Morris "blots out half of life" by refusing to recognize the obstacles in the way to man's happiness here on earth. "And how that strong rich nature would have grasped and held the world had he not denied all that forbade the millennium he longed for?" Similarly Chesterton finds that Morris closes his eyes to the explosive qualities in human nature, the evil ye'cher of the Hebrew commentators, the original sin of Christian theologians. Morris does not accept, of course, the curse with which Yeats says all Irishmen are familiar from their cradles. "Men are not generally malicious or ill-natured or even hard-hearted." But neither does his optimism grow from any blindness as to the probability of conflicts of passion in his best of possible worlds. "The world will be the world still," he says, "I do not deny it." It is, rather, that his own temperament, and in his opinion,
the needs of the times, required a different emphasis. The terrible apathy in which he found the workmen was, he believed, the greatest obstacle in the way of arousing them to a sense of their position. Hopelessness and acceptance were to be met only by hope and revolt. We may agree with Yeats that human nature and its eternal antagonist, evil, make for subtler drama and perhaps for truth, but perfectibility, at least in the nineties, made socialists.

It is not without significance that the account of the Great Change in News from Nowhere is perhaps less vividly conceived than the sections treating of the ideal society already realized. Morris was always stronger in picturing the End than in prescribing the means, believing as he did that men would take the necessary steps once they really apprehended the goal. Convince the majority of the desirability of socialism, he felt, and they themselves will decide on the methods best suited to their needs and times. But if the account of the revolution is less imaginatively satisfying than the descriptions of the society it created, it has an interest of its own: it represents the concession Morris was willing to make to the prophetic powers of his opponents within the fold—the state socialists. Their form of socialism, and not Morris’ follows upon the present order. That the movement of events favored such an arrangement Morris very reluctantly concluded after years of thinking otherwise. For a brief time under Hyndman in the Social Democratic Federation, he did favor State Socialism, but with the founding of the Socialist League he took his stand on the possibility of immediate communism on the break up of the old system. At most he conceded that state socialism might be the transition between capitalism and inevitable communism, but he was unwilling to admit that it was a necessary transition, and he urged repeatedly, until 1887 at least, that revolution could perform the change without the intervention of what he considered the machinery of socialism deprived of its spirit. But the waning of his own hopes and his keen observation of current tendencies forced him to confess that whatever one might say about the reception of ideal socialism or communism, the movement was in the direction of state socialism. May Morris says that in the last year or two of his life, her father showed sympathy with Blatchford and his work in The Clarion and watched with interest the new developments in the rising Labour Party. But it is the interest of a man who recognized as dead the plans he once thought possible for England.

Though Morris conceded the day to his opponents, the majority in the party, he thought theirs a doubtful victory. He saw trouble ahead for State Socialism in its necessary policy of compromise. He continued to think that the better means would have been the development outside of parliament of a vast labour organization, capable of keeping “the two camps of labour and monopoly as distinct as possible.” “Everything that tends to mask that opposition, to confuse it, weakens the popular force and gives a new lease of life to the reaction.”

His conviction that State Socialism was coming and his doubts as to its success are blended in Hammond’s narrative of the Great Change. Its advent and its inadequacies are recounted, and the cause is finally saved by those labour organizations that have developed independently, that have kept their aim clearly before them, and that have provided education in socialism for their members.

In a utopian romance, events can so resolve themselves and the ideal communism issue from the difficult days of revolution. But in reality, as his lectures reveal, Morris was not always so hopeful about the end product of State Socialism. He thought it might cause men to remain content with the accidents and to forego the substance. Even after he admitted that the Socialist Party in England had no choice but to move along lines of legislation, he questioned—“Socialist machinery, yes, but is it socialism?” He doubted the value of reforms such as the County Council and housing bills as measures “bringing us further on the road to a really newborn society, the only society which can be a new birth, a society of practical equality.”

He felt too that palliative measures postponed the inevitable revolution and only would make it more trying when it came. Easing the difficulties of the present system dulled the longing for change and so the change itself—slow in coming—“can only come through a period of great suffering, misery, and by the ruin of our present civilization itself.” He conceded that certain reforms might be educative in that they gave to the worker some conception of what his life could be if more were granted, but he always felt that the means of bringing about the change, or in ushering in the inevitable, was not, ideally, through legislation. Of passing bills there is no end, and Morris believed that English socialism was in danger of running into the sand if it allied itself with mere political radicalism. Palliation, in his opinion, had damped the fires of Chartist earlier in the century. His uncompromising attitude set Morris apart from the Fabians and the Socialists of the Social Democratic Federation. It accounts for what many would call the “practical” failure of his socialist career but it also accounts for the integrity that gives the failure something of the glory of the unsuccessful revolts of history he was so fond of recalling.

This same spirit, united to the sense of dedication that breathes through the words and actions of these years, gives Morris' socialism the drive of a religion, and indeed he stated frankly that the founding of a
William Morris

religion of socialism was his aim. "Toward which end," he said, "compromise is of no use, and we only want to have those with us who will be with us to the end." He believed that no "economy" should be used in presenting the tenets of the faith to possible converts. No man mildly interested in Socialism was to be introduced to part of the truth in the hope that he would swallow the rest in time or in ignorance. Morris welcomed the term "sect" as applied to the socialist body, and found it more descriptive of their aims than the word "party." Sects—and one in particular—had transformed the world before this. The intuitive and emotional strain, so strong in Morris, may account in part for his frequently placing the exposition of his principles against the more congenial background of the Ages of Faith—though he rejected that faith as unequivocally as Carlyle did Abbot Samson's. Shaw was profoundly right when he called Morris the "Saint of Socialism," though one point might be added: the church is never so Catholic as when she names her saints. There is room for Aquinas and Francis, for the schoolman and the visionary, and in the Socialist hagiography, for Morris as well as Marx, though the one is as far removed from the other as the dream of the pauperello from the subtleties of the Dominican.

Like the primitive Christian expectation of the advent, the English socialist hope for revolution in the near future ran highest in the party's early history. Hyndman even imagined it possible on the centenary of 1789, and Morris too believed for a while in the "inevitableess of a sudden and speedy change." The first lectures are full of intimations of its imminence. He concluded a lecture in 1884 with the words: "Who knows but that even as I speak to you the dawning may be at hand." As late as 1887, in contrasting in "Feudal England" the position of the serfs planning hopeless revolt with that of the modern worker cheered by the coming of revolution, he said, "With us it is different. A few years of wearisome struggle against apathy and ignorance; a year or two of growing hope—and then who knows? Perhaps a few months, or perhaps a few days of open struggle against brute force, with the mask off its face, and the sword in hand and then we are over the wall"—to the "end of mastery and the triumph of fellowship." But time brought soberer views. In the annual lecture to Anti-scarpe in 1889, it is "another hundred years at most" that will bring the desired change "so great in this country that we shall hardly recognize it for what it is now." And in one of his last lectures he significantly sets no limit on the period necessary for the slow progress of education for revolution.

But late or soon, Morris never lost faith in the wisdom of his vision of the future, and that vision continued to reveal itself to his contemplation clothed in the well-loved forms of the past. He once described a visit to Peterborough in the north, the Medhamstead, or "abode of the meadows" of the early Middle Ages. As he walked through the shabby, nineteenth century town with its houses of ill-burnt yellow bricks and thin slate roofs, he suddenly lifted his eyes to see before him the great facade of the cathedral that gave the city its present name. The spire towered over the shoddy mass of commercialism huddled at its base and they dominated the impoverished countryside. Past and Present met for an instant in this symbol of the aspirations of the fourteenth century Morris saw in his mind's eye the little walled houses of the first settlement on the banks of the Nene, whose waters the "oars of the Norsemen have often beaten white." He saw the coming of the monks, and the erection of the first church, the golden shrine later destroyed by English and Danes. There followed in the thirteenth century the building of the cathedral itself by the guilds of craft who wrote thereby the record of their real but limited freedom. Swiftly he traced the long road down with the waning of the social spirit of the Middle Ages and the rise of capitalism. But, he remembered, St. Peter's still stands in the northern city, a token of the lasting good from which it grew and to which men can return—not regretting but taking up the tradition once again at that point where it was unwisely dropped, and carrying it forward in the light of later times and later hopes.

It is not so hard now to picture to oneself those grey masses of stone which our forefathers raised in their hope, standing no longer lost and melancholy over the ghastly misery of the fields and the squalor of the towns, but smiling rather on their new-born sisters the houses and hall of the free citizens of the new Communes, and the garden-like field about them where there will be labour still, but the labour of the happy people who have shaken off the curse of labour and kept it blessing only. Between the time when the hope of the workman disappeared in the fifteenth century and our own times, there is a great gap indeed, but we know now that it will be filled up before long, and that our own lives from day to day may help to fill it. That is no little thing and is well worth living for, whatever else may fail us."
NOTES

CHAPTER I

8. For the part played by Manners, Smythe and Faber in the Young England Movement, see Lord John Manners and His Friends, Vol. I, passim.

CHAPTER II

2. For the biographical facts of this chapter, I am indebted to John William Mackail's The Life of William Morris, The Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones by his wife, the introduction to the Collected Works by May Morris, and also her two volumes, William Morris; Artist; Writer; Socialist.
6. Holland, Memoir of Kenelm Digby, p. 78.
17. David Alec Wilson, Carlyle in Old Age, London, 1894, p. 245.

Notes for Chapter 3

24. Ibid., p. 120.
29. Ibid., p. 161.

CHAPTER III

10. Ehleman, A Victorian Rebel, pp. 335-336. Ehleman's point is weakened, however, by his evident misunderstanding of the word residuum as used in Morris' day. See Ashley quotation below, Chapter III, p. 68.
17. Morris, Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome.
22. Ibid., p. 61, p. 89.
Chapter IV

12. See Sotheby’s Catalogue (December 5, 1898) for the record of the sale of Morris’s library.
13. Morris uses in his romance the rebel letters Knighston has preserved.
23. This chronology follows Oman. There is fairly general agreement that the mob reached Canterbury on the tenth, where they burned the Archbishop’s house, and released Ball on the eleventh on the return trip to London. Froissart, however, has John Ball at Canterbury on the tenth—equally difficult to reconcile with Morris’ timing.
27. Ibid., p. 140.
28. Ibid., p. 199.

Notes for Chapter 6


Chapter V

18. Morris knew Parker’s *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England*, with its descriptions of medieval town planning. See above, footnote 3, Chapter IV.

Chapter VI

19. Ibid., p. 484.
24. Yeats, If I Were Four-and-Twenty, Dublin, 1940, pp. 15 ff.

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