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Art and Society in the Late Prose  
Narratives of William Morris

One result of the current popularity of fantasy literature has been the rediscovery of William Morris's long-neglected prose fiction. During the last ten years of his life, Morris wrote ten book-length narratives. Until recently, only two of these--A Dream of John Ball (1886) and News from Nowhere (1890)--may be said to have escaped obscurity, largely because of their direct concern with socialist thought. Two others, The House of the Wolfings (1888) and The Roots of the Mountains (1889), semi-historical accounts of tribal warfare in second- and in seventh-century central Europe, are now virtually unread. But the remaining narratives have all reappeared, since 1969, in paperbound editions. These last--The Story of the Glittering Plain (1890), The Wood Beyond the World (1894), Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair (1895), The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1895), The Well at the World's End (1896), and The Story of the Sundering Flood (1896) -- are prolific adventure tales whose purely fantastic settings blend Faerie with the world of medieval romance or Icelandic saga. Whereas A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere have long been recognized as literary embodiments of Morris's socialistic and artistic vision, the majority of critics and literary historians have overlooked the many instances of his political, social, and aesthetic philosophy implicit throughout the narratives of the last decade.

The following quotation from Philip Henderson's biography is typical of such an attitude: "It is . . . quite untrue to think that Morris became any less of a socialist in his last years. It is simply that with his declining health he was unable to take such an active part in the movement as heretofore and that socialism can scarcely be detected in such works as The Water of the Wondrous Isles and The Well at the World's End."<sup>1</sup> But J.W. Mackail may be closer to the facts when he refers to the narratives as "not consciously socialistic."<sup>2</sup> Morris admittedly did not intend them to be so: when a reviewer in The Spectator attempted to read a socialist allegory into The Wood Beyond the World, Morris felt obligated to respond denying it. Indeed, none of the late narratives, with the exception of A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere, is either consciously or directly concerned with conveying a message.

Yet Morris was not a man of fragmented interests. His life was a successful merging of various disciplines. Poet, lecturer, philosopher, artist, student of architecture, designer, craftsman, and printer--he was always engaged simultaneously in a number of varied undertakings. It is said that he was able to leave one project for another, and return to it, hours or even days later, resuming exactly where he stopped, with no apparent cessation of interest or slackening of involvement. Accordingly, no facet of his creative genius may be viewed in isolation. As one critic has said, "To judge him by what he did in any one matter is, like judging a man's life by what he does on Mondays."<sup>3</sup> Neither was he, by any means, a poet of the ivory tower variety, refusing to mingle in the affairs of men. Instead, Morris believed, as he told the Birmingham Society of Arts in 1879, "it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion."<sup>4</sup> Morris composed the eight non-didactic narratives of his later years primarily for the sake of enjoyment and escape from the frustrations of life. He himself described his writing as "the embodiment of dreams in one form or another."<sup>5</sup> Yet there is implicit in the idealism of his late work much of his own humanistic and artistic vision; and his greatest dream of all--that of a serene and beautiful earthly paradise, free of greed, corruption, hatred, and inequality--is everywhere visible in the pages of these narratives.

Morris once termed art "the godlike part of man,"<sup>6</sup> and he regarded it, especially that branch of it concerned with making useful and beautiful objects, as directly related to the spirit of a civilization. Thus, he was particularly appalled at the lavish excesses of ornamentation to which the Victorian era was prone. He opposed the tendency to mass production, which divorced a craftsman from personal interest in the outcome of his work, transformed him into an indifferent, unhappy, assemblyline workman, and therefore resulted in inferior wares. He regretted the fact that art was lacking in the lives of the poor and was considered a commodity available only to the wealthy. All of this he saw as a direct outgrowth of the pervading sickness of his age, which a return to simplicity in living and a system of individual craftsmanship such as that of the Middle Ages could do much to cure.

In accordance with that belief, many episodes in the late narratives present creative art and craftsmanship taking place in simple surroundings at the hands of

an individual craftsman. Perhaps the most obvious instance is that of the heroine Birdalone's embroidery in The Water of the Wondrous Isles. Much of her early youth she spends alone in the forest teaching herself needlecraft. The process is natural and pleasant to her, as Morris felt all craftsmanship should be. She begins by making a pair of brogues:

. . . as she was sewing them a fancy came into her head; for she had just come across some threads of silk of divers colours; so she took them and her shoon and her needle up into the wood, and there sat down happily under a great spreading oak which much she haunted, and fell to broidering the kindly deer-skin. . . . But the days wore, and still she wrought on at her gown and her smock, and it was well nigh done. She had broidered the said gown with roses and lilies, and a tall tree springing up from amidmost the hem of the skirt, and a hart on either side thereof, face to face of each other. And the smock she had sewn daintily at the hems and the bosom with fair knots and buds. (XX, 12-15)

Later in the narrative, when Birdalone travels to the City of the Five Crafts, she obtains permission of the guild to establish herself as an embroiderer, takes on apprentices, and earns a reputation for fine work--a clear example of the type of artist Morris described in the following passage from his lectures: ". . . a handicraftsman who shall put his own individual intelligence and enthusiasm into the goods he fashions. . . must know all about the ware he is making and its relation to similar wares; he must have a natural aptitude for his work so strong, that no education can force him away from his special bent. He must be allowed to think of what he is doing, and to vary his work as the circumstances of it vary, and his own moods. He must be for ever striving to make the piece he is to work at better than the last" (XXII, 115).

Other characters throughout the narratives are often portrayed as engaged in acts of craftsmanship. Hallblithe in The Story of the Glittering Plain first appears "smoothing an ash stave for his spear" (XIV, 211). Ralph in The Well at the World's End addresses an old

carline who is sitting before her doorstep, and, "she sang as she sat spinning" (XVIII, 73). And in The Story of the Sundering Flood, Osberne is not only a skilled metal smith, but also has a natural gift for creating impromptu poetry, in the same easy spirit with which Morris was said to have set down his own verse.<sup>7</sup> As Osberne tells Elfhild, "'At home they deem me somewhat of a scald, so that I can smithy out staves'" (XXI, 38).

Even more common are the careful descriptions of objects which show fine workmanship and have obviously been fashioned by master artisans. Morris portrays Osberne's sword, for example, with an eye for beauty and detail: "At last the hilts and the sheath showed naked: the pommel and cross were of gold of beauteous and wonderful fashion, such as no smith may work now, and the grip was wrapped about with golden wire. And the sheath wherein lay the deadly white edges was of brown leather of oxhide, studded about with knops of gold and silver, and the peace-strings were of scarlet silk with acorns at the ends" (XXI, 51). The description of the Hall-Sun, the great lamp in the long house of the Wolfings, is equally well visualized: "Over the dais there hung by chains and pulleys fastened to a tie-beam of the roof high aloft a wondrous lamp fashioned of glass, yet of no such glass as the folk made then and there, but of a fair and clear green like an emerald, and all done with figures and knots in gold, and strange beasts, and a warrior slaying a dragon, and the sun rising on the earth" (XIV, 7-8).

Morris as craftsman and artist is everywhere apparent in the narratives, and the art in them is what he wished it to be in real life--a living, integral part of society, lovingly produced by individuals happy in their work. Furthermore, every work of art which appears in these pages serves, as Morris felt all art should, a purpose of some sort. Even the rich tapestries and hangings in The Castle of Abundance (from The Well at the World's End) depict historical events, and thus serve as a monument to past civilization. Ideal art for Morris is not a thing to be removed from common experience or hidden away in museums, but rather an active, useful part of everyday existence. Such is the role it plays in the invented societies of Morris's late narratives.

Morris was not a political theorist in the most practical sense. He had no detailed knowledge of economics or sociology, no well formulated, scientific

plan for restructuring society. Once, at a lecture, when asked whether he believed in Marx's theory of value, he flew into a rage, shouting, "I'm damned if I know what Marx's theory of value is, and I'm damned if I want to know. . . . It is enough political economy for me to know that the idle class is rich and the working class is poor,<sup>8</sup> and that the rich are rich because they rob the poor." His socialism was founded not on laws and principles, but on a firm and simple faith in the essential goodness of mankind. He believed that if society could somehow cast off the artificial restrictions and corrupting influence of capitalism and the class system, then fellowship, harmony, and universal prosperity would naturally prevail. The means of attaining reform he knew little of, but the end of that reform he had clearly in mind.

News from Nowhere, a detailed portrayal of the workings of an ideal commonwealth, is the only one of Morris's narratives which is obviously and primarily utopian. There is, however, interspersed throughout his prose works, much evidence not only of Morris's utopian dream for mankind but also of his disapproval of certain types of society which he regarded as contrary to that dream. In The House of the Wolfings, for example, the encroaching Roman civilization presents an undesirable contrast to the simple communal system of the Goths. As the men of the Mark, a Germanic tribe, march to battle with the Roman army, Morris focuses on a conversation between two warriors--Hiarandi, a man of the Elkings, who has some knowledge of Roman society; and his companion, Wolfkettle, of the Wolfings. Wolfkettle, in his battle pride, remarks: "I have heard it said that they [the Romans] have more cities than one only, and that so great are their kindreds, that each liveth in a garth full of mighty houses, with a wall of stone and lime around it; and that in every one of these garths lieth wealth untold heaped up. And wherefore should not all this fall to the Markmen and their valiancy?" But Hiarandi corrects his friend, and in his description of Roman civilization Morris must also have had in mind the England of his own day:

Said the Elking:

"As to their many cities and the wealth of them, that is sooth; but as to each city being the habitation of each kindred, it is otherwise: for rather it may be said of them that they have forgotten kindred, and have none, nor do

they heed whom they wed, and great is the confusion amongst them. 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 amongst them; and though they be called free men who suffer this, yet may no house or kindred gainsay this rule and order. In sooth they are a people mighty, but unhappy." (XIV, 45)

In the ideal society depicted in News from Nowhere, the only government, the narrator learns, is that of the "Mote, as we call it according to the ancient tongue of the times before bureaucracy" (XVI, 88). As his interpreter explains, "a man no more needs an elaborate system of government, with its army, navy, and police, to force him to give way to the will of the majority of his equals, than he wants a similar machinery to make him understand that his head and a stone wall cannot occupy the same space at the same moment" (XVI, 75-76). Just such a form of government by majority is represented by the Mote scenes which occur in no less than five of Morris's lesser known narratives--The House of the Wolfings, The Roots of the Mountains, Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair, The Well at the World's End, and The Story of the Sundering Flood. The following episode from the latter work, in which Osberne is chosen captain of war, is representative:

Then spake the Lawman, after he had smiled on Osberne and laid his hand on the lad's shoulder: "Men of the East Dale, ye be met together to see if ye can in any wise help our friends and neighbours of East-cheaping, and ye have told off certain men to go in arms for their avail, and will have a captain over them. Now it hath been said to me that he who seems likeliest for the said captain is the young man Osberne Wulfgrimsson of Wethermel, and if this be so, let me hear your voices saying Yea. But even then there will be time for any man of you to name another, if it seem good to him, and that name will be also put to the Mote, and a dozen others if such there be. Now first, what say ye to Osberne Wolfgrimsson?"

Straightway arose a great cheer and the clashing of weapons, and well-nigh every man as it seemed cried out Yea. But when the noise and cry was abated, the Lawman bade any man who would put forth another name. No man spake for a little, till at last Surly John pushes forth to the front and says: "I name Erling Thomasson, a good man and true!" Brake forth then great laughter and whooping, for the said Erling was a manifest niggard, a dastard who sweated in his bed when the mouse squeaked in the wall a night-time. But one man sang out: "Yea, Lawman, and I name Surly John." Thereat was there fresh laughter, and men shoved John to and fro till they had hustled him out to the skirts of the throng, and there bid him go a wolf-hunting.

But now the Lawman takes Osberne by the hand and leads him to the edge of the knoll, and stands there and says: "Men of the Dale, ye would go to the war; ye would take a captain to you; ye would have Osberne Wulfgrimsson for your captain. All this ye have done uncompelled, of your own will; therefore take not the rue if it turn not out so well as ye looked for. But now I bid all them that be going this journey to lift up their right hands and swear to be leal and true to your captain, Osberne Wulfgrimsson, in all things, for life or for death." (XXI, 83-84)

The Well at the World's End, the richest of all the Morris narratives for variety of incident, contains much commentary on the diverse socio-economic structure of the cities Ralph, the young hero, visits during his journey. The kingdom of Upmeads, his home, is perhaps the ideal. Its citizens are independent men--"stubborn and sturdy vavassors, . . . [who] might not away with masterful doings, but were like to pay back a blow with a blow, and a foul word with a buffet." In Upmeads "was no great merchant city; no mighty castle, or noble abbey of monks: nought but fair little halls of yeomen, with here and there a franklin's court or a shield-knight's manor house; with many a goodly church, and whiles a house of good canons who knew not the road to



Rome, nor how to find the door of the Chancellor's house" (XVIII, 1). That Ralph, although a king's son, is accustomed to treat all men equally is obvious in his dealings with others throughout the course of his journey. And his parents, on his return, show no hesitancy at accepting the maid Ursula as his bride, although she is the daughter of an innkeeper.

The cities through which Ralph passes, however, vary greatly; and many are far from ideal. Wulstead, home of Clement Chapman and his wife Katherine, is simply a peaceful community of merchants. Higham is dominated by the Abbey of St. Mary in its midst, whose Abbot keeps a large standing army and rules the city and the surrounding countryside with a strong but just hand. The Burg of the Four Friths is a military state with elements of fascism about it. Its dark-haired people constantly prey upon the fair-complexioned race of a nearby countryside, killing or enslaving them. Ralph, to his surprise, is prohibited from purchasing a weapon in the market of the Burg, since he cannot present a license to do so. His actions are closely watched by the military police during his stay, and at last, when he is accused of being a spy, he barely escapes with his life.

Whitwall, the next settlement, is a fine large merchant town similar to Wulstead except for its size; but Cheaping Knowe, its neighbor, is tyrannized by a wicked dictator. As is common in Morris, the physical appearance of the town and its people is an indication of more deep-rooted troubles:

. . . they had passed through much fair country; but nigh to the walls [of Cheaping Knowe] it was bare of trees and thickets, whereas, said Clement, they had been cut down lest they should serve as cover to strong thieves or folk assailing the town. The walls were strong and tall, and a great castle stood high up on a hill, about which the town was builded; so that if the town were taken there would yet be another town within it to be taken also. But the town within, save for the said castle, was scarce so fairly builded as the worst of the towns which Ralph had seen erst, though there were a many houses therein. . . . Ralph deemed many of the folk fair, such as were goodly clad; for many had but foul clouts to cover their nakedness, and seemed needy and hunger-pinched. (XVIII, 248-249)

Whiteness, in turn, provides the contrast of a community under benevolent rule: "Yet was the town more cheerful of aspect than Cheaping Knowe, and the folk who came thronging about the chapmen at the gates not so woe-begone, and goodly enough. Of the Lord of Whitness, Clement told that he paid tribute to him of Cheaping Knowe, rather for love of peace than for fear of him; for he was no ill lord, and free men lived well under him"(XVIII, 255).

Finally, the city of Goldburg is an excellent example of Morris's social philosophy as visible in the narratives. It is ruled over by a kindly queen, yet most of its people are not prosperous, for the economic system which Morris outlines here is clearly capitalistic:

. . . though the tillers and toilers of Goldburg were not for the most part mere thralls and chattels, as in the lands beyond the mountains behind them, yet were they little more thriving for that cause; whereas they belonged not to a master, who must at worst feed them, and to no manor, whose acres they might till for their livelihood, and on whose pastures they might feed their cattle; nor had they any to help or sustain them against the oppressor and the violent man; so that they toiled and swinked and died with none heeding them, save they that had the work of their hands good cheap; and they forsooth heeded them less than their draught beasts whom they must needs buy with money, and whose bellies they must needs fill; whereas these poor wretches were 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 was a great many of them (XVIII, 261-262)

A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere have, over the years, received more critical attention than have all of Morris's other long prose works combined. While many biographies and critical studies of Morris and his work include lengthy analyses of the two better-known narratives, the other eight are most commonly dis-

missed with a passing reference or simply ignored altogether. Since they represent the greater part of Morris's literary output over the last decade of his life, this virtual disregard of their existence seems questionable. Their pseudoarchaic diction and syntax, lengthy and episodic plot structure, and vaguely fantastic settings must certainly have contributed to this neglect. Yet the fact remains that A Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere owe their relative prominence to their obvious socialistic content. These two titles, important not only as literary works, but as historical and social documents as well, are expressions of Morris's personal socialist vision and of the entire movement of which he was a part. Both, in short, are pragmatic, didactic works directly concerned, despite their dream framework, with the problems of the real world. Morris wrote them with a definite objective in mind--that of drawing attention to the evils of capitalism, the potential good which could come of eradicating that system, and the desirability of replacing it with a socialistic system of the type he envisioned. The other narratives, however, are not of the real world; and he wrote them with no purpose in mind save that of his own and his readers' enjoyment. They are pure escapist literature. Yet implicit in them is much of Morris's philosophy, not because he in any way intended them to be didactic, but simply because his ideal vision of human potential was so much a part of him that he could not avoid involving it in every aspect of his life and work.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>William Morris: His Life, Work, and Friends (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), p. 343.

<sup>2</sup>The Life of William Morris (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), II, 332.

<sup>3</sup>T. Earle Welby, The Victorian Romantics, 1850-70 (London: Gerald Howe, 1929), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>The Collected Works of William Morris, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1910-1915), XII, 47. Subsequent references to the Collected Works will be parenthetical.

<sup>5</sup>Philip Henderson, ed., The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends (London: Longmans Green, 1950), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>Letters, p. 158.

<sup>7</sup>Holbrook Jackson illustrates the manner in which Morris composed verse: "He would write his poems at odd moments on any handy piece of paper, and in any place--even a room full of talking people. On one such occasion the talkers stopped their talking when he started writing, stopped obviously out of deference to the act of poetic creation, but Morris begged them to proceed with their talk--'I am only writing poetry,' said he." All Manner of Folk (London: Grant Richards, 1912), p. 160.

<sup>8</sup>Henderson, Life, p. 269.