

HISTORY AS FELLOWSHIP IN MORRIS'S LITERARY WRITINGS BY FLORENCE BOOS

Let us therefore study [the ancient work] wisely, be taught by it, kindled by it; all the while determining not to imitate or repeat it; to have either no art at all, or an art which we have made our own.

'The Lesser Arts', 1877

This quotation expresses a creative paradox of William Morris's lifework: his dual belief that we must study the past *with sympathy, in order 'not to imitate or repeat it'*. Morris was more preoccupied than other Victorian social thinkers – Engels, Ruskin, Arnold, Mill – with the need to preserve, even relive, the past; and more than other major poets of his age of 'medievalism' and 'Gothic revival' – Tennyson, Arnold, the Brownings, Rossetti, Swinburne, Hopkins – he drew extensively on histories, chronicles, and past literature(s) to construct his plots. Yet May Morris later quoted his advice to writers, to 'Read it [the earlier work] through, then shut the book and write it in your own way'.¹

Much of the poetry for which Morris is best known – *The Defence of Guenevere*, 1858, *The Earthly Paradise*, 1869-70, and *Sigurd the Volsung*, 1876 – clearly reflects his eclectic use of medieval European history and literature. The *Defence* recasts incidents from Malory and Froissart; *Sigurd the Volsung* extensively reworks the twelfth century Norse *Volsunga Saga*; *The Earthly Paradise*'s carefully described fourteenth-century Scandinavian 'Wanderers', in flight from the Bubonic Plague, tell medieval tales, and their Greek hosts retell medievalised classical ones. Relatively few of Morris's completed literary narratives were *not* set in the Middle Ages, but two of these – *The Pilgrims of Hope*, 1885, a tribute to the Paris Commune, and *News from Nowhere*, 1890 – exemplify the remark of a *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer in 1912, that Morris was

always concerned with the future even when he seemed most absorbed in the past. He turned to it, not to lose himself in it, but to find what was best worth having and doing now.²

The utopian socialist Ernst Bloch created a term for such historical searches for 'anticipatory designs' of a new order: he called such past traces of as-yet-unachieved ideals *novae*, and asserted that *we must understand and recreate them in our own present and future*.³ Morris explored such historical prototypes not only in his social-critical works, such as the 1887 essay 'The Society of the Future', and the final chapters of *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (co-authored with Ernest Belfort Bax in 1887 and issued as a book in 1893), but in much of his imaginative work as well. It is interesting to compare the 'utopian' Morris's consistent attention to detail with the relative vagueness of, for example, Tennyson's 'nobler modes of life', in the 'Ring Out Wild Bells' section of *In Memoriam*. Of Morris's poetic (near-) contemporaries in England, only Elizabeth Barrett Browning shared even a liberal version of Morris's radical advocacy of social change.

Morris's search for anticipatory glimpses of the future in the past, then, was paralleled and anticipated by the theoretical writings of Engels, Kropotkin, and others, but was poetically and imaginatively his own. It helped form a coherent framework for his sense of compassion and social justice, his belief in self-sacrificing action, and his reaction to immediate political events: the traits and responses, in short, which culminated in his commitment

¹ *Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris London, 1910-15, III, xxii.

² Anonymous reviewer, *TLS*, 8 August 1912, p312.

³ David Gross, 'Marxism and Utopia: Ernst Bloch', *Towards a New Marxism*, ed. Paul Piccone and Bart Grahl, St. Louis, 1978, p93.

to socialism. The narrative voice of his earliest juvenile fragments derived still-inchoate thoughts of 'what shall be'⁴ from meditations on medieval ruins and heroic deeds of the past, and the protagonists of the early prose romances sometimes think not only of their own people's future, but of a projected 'land of promise' as well.⁵ Morris himself later drew an explicit association between his love of history and his hopes for 'Social-Revolution':

To sum up, then, the study of history and the love and practice of art forced me into a hatred of civilization, which, if things were to stop as they are, would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a collection of the curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present . . .

So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilization the seeds of . . . Social-Revolution, were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery . . . and thus I became a practical Socialist.

How I Became a Socialist⁶

But why the *medieval* past? What motivations and temperamental attitudes shaped Morris's highly selective and emotionally charged interpretations of medieval life? I would like to suggest in what follows that Morris's medieval literary reconstructions served for him three separate but convergent purposes; and that failure to distinguish them contributes to the familiar charge that Morris's literary writings are 'escapist'.

First, and most concretely, Morris appreciated history as the record of the daily lives of past human beings, in as much density and detail as may have survived: their occupations, methods of labour, land divisions, dwellings, household ornaments, clothing, beliefs, customs, sicknesses, legends, art – anything in short which reflected the life of ordinary people, not orders in council, military victories, or dynastic successions. His efforts to find such information – whose remnants he also saw embodied in 'unrestored' architectural remains and artifacts – were at first more extensive than selective: he immediately absorbed motifs and episodes which intrigued him, and suspended judgement about the rest (another way in which one might 'close the book').

At Marlborough College, at Oxford, and later, he is reported to have read and sometimes reread thousands of pages of political and ecclesiastical history, theology, and collections of legends, including Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (6 vols), 1852 ed., Milman's *History of Latin Christianity* (4 vols), Cobbett's *History of the Protestant Reformation*, Holinshed's *Chronicles* (6 vols), 1807-08, Stowe's *Annales of England*, Neale's *A History of the Holy Eastern Church* (5 vols), 1847 ff., Sismondi's *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire* (2 vols), 1834, Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, Percy's *Reliques*, Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (3 vols), 1851, Carlyle's *French Revolution* (3 vols), 1837, Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (3 vols), 1851-53, Comynes' *Memoirs*, Froissart's *Chronicles*, and Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy and Golden Legend*. He also read Malory, Chaucer's *Troilus and Canterbury Tales*, and assorted quasi-historical works, such as Digby's *Mores Catholici* (3 vols), Scott's 'Essay on Chivalry,' and even Wilhelm Meinhold's potboiler *Sidonia the Sorceress* (highly recommended in Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood circles).

Even before he became a socialist, his priorities were clear:

[This is] a time when history has become so earnest a thing amongst us as to have given us, as it were, a new sense: at a time when we so long to know the reality of all that has happened, and are to be put off no



The Defence of Guenevere, first page of 1892 Kelmscott Press edition. The unexpected line breaks preserve a columnar, massed effect which Morris admired in late medieval books

4. 'The Banners', in *William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist*, ed. May Morris, Oxford, 1936, 1, p531.

5. 'Gertha's Lovers', *Collected Works*, I, p179.

6. The order of sentences in the original has been reversed.

OGIER THE DANE

And as they speak, and he shall discover
 An eager whisper now and then would come
 Upon the King's ear of some pain, delight,
 Some nice kinder name, and he would raise
 His weary head, and see the speaker gaze
 Like one about to speak, and soon again
 Lie down his head, and be about his pain.
 Nor think of these; who others in their turn
 Would sit and watch the woman's expenditure
 Around the clock of the quick-glimmering night,
 Until her neck the high stars glimmering light
 The fresh earth by its calmness repose.
 So passed the night, and now and then
 One from her place to do what might avail
 To still the new-born infant's fretful wail.
 Or through the abbey-ground down their long line
 Some nurse would rush, who, whispering low the name
 Of her whose turn was come, would take her place.
 Then would the king would turn a cunning face,
 And so her fellow whisper of the day
 And tell again of her just passed away.
 So passed the night; the moon arose and grew.

A page from 'Ogier the Dane', from *The Earthly Paradise*, 1868-70, hand-illustrated by William Morris

longer with the dull records of the battles and intrigues of kings and scoundrels . . .

'The Lesser Arts'

Very early on, he sought authentic evidence of past life in sources other than sycophantic accounts of these 'kings and scoundrels' progresses and intrigues; for example, in the work of past artisans and tellers of tales. In Morris's first essay for the undergraduate *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, 'The Shadows of Amiens', he notes each detail of carving or stained glass which reflects the social habits, dress, and (apparent) emotions of their creators – starving pigs, for example; three cripples; a new bishop receiving the news of his election; the grief of the Virgin mother burying her son. *The Defence of Guenevere* later offended contemporary reviewers with its 'sordidly' realistic physical details, and its portrayals of anxiety, torture, and sudden death. The *Earthly Paradise's* Greek Elders exclaim to the Wanderers, their story-telling guests. 'Such, sirs, are ye, our living chronicles . . .', and *The Earthly Paradise's* twenty-four classical and medieval tales present many careful, distinct tableaux of terrain, cities, and labourers at work. Consider, for example, the following passage, which is spoken by the poet at the beginning of *The Earthly Paradise*, and has often been dismissed as a paradigm of 'escapism':

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
 Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
 Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
 Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
 And dream of London, small and white and clean,
 The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green;
 Think, that below bridge the green lapping waves
 Smite some few keels that bear Levantine staves,
 Cut from the yew wood on the burnt-up hill,
 And pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,
 And treasured scanty spice from some far sea,
 Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
 And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne;
 While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
 Moves over bills of lading . . .

Morris's most painstaking reconstruction of 'medieval' life is probably his 1889 prose romance, *The Roots of the Mountains*, a loving documentation of the economy, kinship patterns, military preparations, music, tribal religion, and burial rituals of Germanic tribal life at the close of the Roman Empire. In general, Morris's early poetry and prose tended to emphasize the painful effects of violence and war on his protagonists, and his later works devote more attention to the arts of cooperation and peace.

The second motivation for Morris's fascination with history emerges rather clearly in *Roots*, and is also illustrated in miniature by the last quotation's detailed enumeration of what we are to 'forget': his desire to find some concrete realization in the past of a partial alternative to 'The Condition of the Working Class in England'. In this, he went beyond (e.g.) Ruskin's belief in the artistic freedom of Gothic architecture, and shifted attention from the results of medieval labour to its conditions:

... I repeat that for the workers life was easier; though in general life was rougher than it is in our days: that there was more approach to real equality of condition . . . as the distribution of wealth in general was more

equal than now, so in particular was that of art or the pleasure of life; all craftsmen had some share in it . . .

'Art and Labour' (emphasis mine)

This hypothesis about 'medieval' life — that it was not only more craft-based, but more communal and egalitarian as well — remained with Morris throughout his life. It was essentially a projection of his deepest emotional ideal of 'fellowship' (compare Kropotkin's 'mutual aid'): mutual love in service to a worthwhile shared cause. In Morris's early writings the conventional personal and sexual nature of these loyalties are more prominent; later, the configuration of mutual allegiance becomes wider, and friends and lovers in *The Earthly Paradise* and late prose romances are often representative members of their society.

Prose narratives which present politically idealized tribes or societies include the very early (1856) Scandinavian tale 'Gertha's Lovers', in which the rather self-consciously noble protagonists act selflessly in defense of their country and mutually-revered Queen, and the relatively late (1889) and more sophisticated Germanic romance, *The Roots of the Mountains*, in which a democratically-governed free tribe of 'Wolfings' rescues their kinspeople from slavery. The most moving and believable historical narrative of Morris's evolving ideal is *A Dream of John Ball*, in which the artisans of Kent rise up against unjust extortion and oppression. The final sermon of the doomed John Ball is an apostrophe of the continuity of 'fellowship':

Forsooth, brothers . . . fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane . . .

Therefore, I tell you that the proud, despiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he hath no fellow; and he that hath so hardy a heart that in sorrow he thinketh of fellowship, his sorrow is soon but a story of sorrow . . .

Morris's intense belief in 'the life that is in [fellowship], that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you a part of it . . .' also makes more intelligible, I believe, his early and late literary experiments with shifting narrators, multiple points of view, and sequences of interlocking frames, hearers, and narrators. These do not create greater narrative distance, but heighten the representative communal and shared features of his tales. Suffering as well as fulfilled love and artistic creation are shared by the witnesses and auditors with the protagonists and narrators, and most of Morris's narratives appropriately close with some form of public memorialization (burial, monument, legendary record) of what has occurred. Narrators, often speak directly to their audiences, and several narrators may share a tale, and even empathize with divergent accounts. The most striking examples of this occur in *The Earthly Paradise*, whose outer poetic narrator (the much-defamed 'idle singer') introduces twenty-four inner tellers ('Wanderers' and 'Elders') of inmost tales. Gradually, this interchange and superposition of narrators, tales, and audiences begins to create a sense of the shared importance of human cultures the tales transmit, and an implicit invitation to the various levels of auditors and readers to join in its processes of communal remembrance and creation of myth.

A partial bridge between the first two motivations of Morris's preoccupation with history — his love of the crafts and structures and artifacts of everyday life, and his intensely felt ideal of fellowship — is created by the third: his deep belief in the continuity

self rhymes, said I. So I thought, said he. Thine-
est thou any? Yea, & hunger, said I. And there-
with my hand went into my purse, and came out
again with but a few small and thin silver coins
with a cross stamped on each, and three pelfers in
each corner of the cross. The man grined. 'Ask'
said he, is it so? Never heed it, man. It shall be
a song for supper this fair Sunday evening. But
first, whose name art thou? 'No one a name, said
I, reddening angrily. I am my own master. He
grinned again. Nay, that is the custom of Eng-
land, as mine time will be. Methinks thou
comest from heaven down, and hast had a high
place there too. He seemed to hesitate a mo-
ment, and then leant forward and whispered in
my ear: JOHN THE MILLER, THAT
GROUND SMALL, SMALL, SMALL,
and stopped and winked at me, and from my lips
without my mind forming any meaning came the
words: THE KING'S SON OF HEAVEN
SHALL PAY FOR ALL. He let his bow
fall on to his shoulder, caught my right hand in
his and gave its great grip, while his left hand fell
among the grass at his feet, and I could see that he
had drew his knife. Well, brother, said he, stand
not here hungry in the highway where there is
flesh and bread in the "Rose" yonder. Come on.
And with that he drew me along toward what
was it only a wicket door, outside which men were
sitting on a couple of benches & drinking medi-

A page from the 1892
Keimscott Press edition
of *A Dream of John Ball*

and coherence of human emotions, across changes of culture and the collective silence of our individual deaths. Morris sometimes expressed this belief in literal form; in the early essay 'Shadows of Amiens', for example, he describes with sudden immediacy his relation to the builders of Amiens:

... those same builders, still surely living, still real men and capable of receiving love, I love no less than the great men, painters and poets and such like, who are on earth now; no less than my breathing friends whom I can see looking kindly on me now. Ah, do I not love them with just cause who certainly loved me, thinking of me sometimes between the strokes of their chisels?⁷

For Morris, such projections provide (re)assurance that one's own life will have (had) a retrospective purpose, and that effort even in failed causes may endure as a protest against the double annihilation of oppression and death. In effect, they create a secular community of – perhaps unrecognized – social and artistic saints.

The poet of *The Earthly Paradise*, for example, has begun his tales in the apprehension that he may be an 'idle singer', born 'out of my due time'; and the poem's 'Wanderers' fear, similarly, that they have wasted their lives in vain efforts to find an elusive Earthly Paradise. But after they have told their tales to their sympathetic audiences of Greek 'Elders' and their children, the 'Wanderers' face death with greater equanimity, 'for grief once told brings somewhat back of peace';⁸ and by the end of his great epic, the 'singer' has also taken heart, from the simple realization that his ancestors had likewise suffered, failed, hoped, and struggled to leave a few traces of their loyalties and passions:

And these folk – these poor tale-tellers who strove
In their wild ways the heart of Death to move,
Even as we singers, and failed, e'en as we,
Surely on their side I at least will be,
And deem that when at last, their fear worn out,
They fell asleep, all that old shame and doubt,
Shamed them not now, nor did they doubt it good,
That they in arms against that Death had stood.

'Epilogue'

Drawing by Edward Burne-Jones to accompany the poem 'Womanly Noblesse', in the 1896 Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer



⁷ *Collected Works*, I, p.349.
⁸ *Collected Works*, III, p.5.

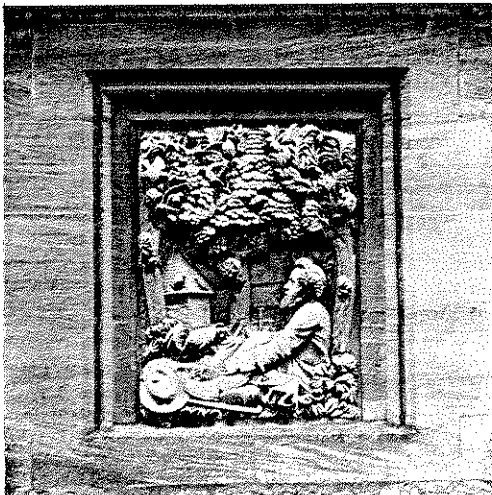
Throughout Morris's poetic career, he praises the value of hearing and identifying with old tales; almost all his worthy characters remember and tell tales of the past, and hope to bequeath some extension of them to the future. Morris seldom idealized the outcome of his 'escapist' tales: few of his protagonists readily attain the objects of their loves or their heroic struggles, and almost all his tales and romances express the frustrations inherent in searches for unattainable ends. Often, their only real solace emerges in the poet's confidence that their examples of endurance have been worthwhile, not *despite* but *because* of their heroes' grief, pain, and inadequacies. Morris understood, in other words, that we may not be able to preserve the past, or construct the ideal social orders we can envision; but he believed that we can achieve the tenuous ideal order of our *efforts* – social as well as personal – to attain these unattainable ends.

It seems appropriate, therefore, that Morris's historical narratives so often close with direct or indirect appeals to action. Just as we must again and again 'close the book' of history to write the future, so Morris's speaker bids farewell in the conclusion of *The Earthly Paradise* to his cycle of stories of the dead:

And thou, O tale of what these sleepers were,
Wish one good-night to them thou holdest dear,
Then die thyself, and let us go our ways,
And live awhile amid these latter days!

Ultimately, Morris's social activism, communalism, and belief in the continuity of art did all converge in his aspirations to 'fellowship', and his vision of history as its sometimes-unwritten expression. In his final sermon, John Ball expresses this vision as a moral imperative:

- ① Yea, forsooth, once again I saw as of old, the great treading down the little, and the strong beating down the weak, and cruel men fearing not, and kind men daring not, and wise men caring not; and the saints in heaven forbearing and yet bidding me not to forbear; forsooth I know once more that he who doeth well in fellowship, and because of fellowship, shall not fail though he seem to fail to-day, but in days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be helpen by them to strive again and yet again; and yet indeed even that was little, since, forsooth, to strive was my pleasure and my life
- ② ... it is for him that is lonely or in prison to dream of fellowship, but for him that is of a fellowship to do and not to dream.



Morris in the Home
Mead, carving by
George Jack from a
sketch by Philip Webb,
on the 'Memorial
Cottage', Kelmscott
Village, 1910