



To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss

William Morris's Radicalism and the Embodiment of Dreams

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ONE

William Morris's "Lesser Arts" and "The Commercial War"

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William Morris defended the "lesser arts" as peaceful sources of solace and inner fulfillment, but several of his better-known literary works – *The Defence of Guenevere*, "Scenes from the Fall of Troy," some of his later prose romances, and most conspicuously his sanguinary tragic epic *Sigurd the Volsung*, for example – were agonistic in the extreme. In this essay I will examine the apparent paradox of Morris's representations of violence, interpret them as sublimated expressions of personal and political conflicts, and argue that his increasingly explicit abhorrence of "commercial war" and British imperialism found resonances in his literary representations of warfare and peace.

Morris threw himself into political life in the late 1870s as an opponent of British plans to mount a war in support of Turkish colonial possessions. In his excoriations of "jingoism" (a newly minted word), he also condemned the slaughter of Zulus armed with spears in "Our Country Right or Wrong" (1880) as "a war of which the very soldiers are heartily ashamed"¹ and denounced Britain's military interventions in the Middle East in similar terms: "On my word I cannot explain the [Second Anglo] Afghan war ... if ever war was waged for war[']s sake that has been ... I can only say of it further, that the end proposed was ruinous folly, and the means employed villainous injustice."² Five years later, in the face of strong British sympathy for General Gordon, slain by supporters of the Mahdist independence movement,³ Morris and other members of the Socialist League passed a resolution condemning the invasion of the Sudan and drafted a quasi-"treasonous" proclamation that expressed their satisfaction at the fall of Khartoum.⁴

An avowed "anti-parliamentarian" socialist, Morris also published "The Pilgrims of Hope," an extended poetic commemoration of the doomed Paris Commune in *Commonweal* (1885-86), but he was painfully aware that the distinctions between "putsch," "revolutionary violence," and (what we would now call) "collateral damage" are readily manipulable. In "What We Have to Look For," for example, drafted in 1895, he suggested that a socialist revolution would not (and should not) occur through a staged war of revolution: "The idea of successful insurrection within a measurable distance of time is only [in] the heads of the anarchists, who seem to have a strange notion that even equality would not be acceptable if [it] were not gained by violence only."⁵

And in "Our Country Right or Wrong," he also observed that the first casualty of war is (and always has been) truth: "Yes, yes, how we wrap up facts in meaningless phrases till we forget most often what the facts are that they represent, and thus deaden ourselves to terrible realities. Say for instance a very common sort of phrase that is used in despatches of battles, and let us see what it really means: 'the enem[y's] skirmishers annoyed us a little as we advanced.' There's for you a phrase that does not stick in your memory two minutes as you read your newspaper in the morning train: if you had been among the 'annoyed,' a lifetime would not wipe it out from your memory."⁶

In his essay on "Equality" (1888), he sketched a plausible parallel between Britain and the Roman Empire, but qualified hopes for the former's "fall" with a sober (and perhaps prophetic) assessment which anticipated Orwell's parable in *Animal Farm*: "[W]here are the [']healthy barbarians['] to come from? From the democracy. I doubt it if things do not alter from what they have been; for surely all I have [been] saying tends to show that though the workers are more useful than the idlers, yet they too are corrupted and degraded by their position. No one can expect to find the virtues of free men in slaves. No[,] if the present state of Society merely breaks up without a conscious effort at transformation, the end[,] the fall of Europe[,] may be long in coming, but when it does come it will be far more terrible[,] far more confused and full of suffering than the period of the fall of Rome."⁷ Such remarks reveal Morris's reluctant, pained recognition that even revolutionary violence may bring harm.

In "Socialism" (1885), Morris appealed to his audience to seek forms of self-government which would (somehow) replace their exploiters with "the intelligent of the working classes and the honourable and generous of the employing class"⁸ - a relatively peaceful transition of the sort out-

lined in "How the Change Came" in *News from Nowhere* (1891). In this a revolutionary Federation of Combined Workers and Committee of Public Safety combined to minister to people's needs, as Old Hammond explains to Guest: "[T]he Committee of Public Safety began to be a force in the country, and really represented the producing classes ... now that the times called for immediate action, came forward the men capable of setting it on foot; and a new network of workmen's associations grew up speedily, whose avowed single object was the tiding over of the ship of the community into a simple condition of Communism."⁹

Morris's most critical assessment of the corruptive force of "revolutionary" as well as other forms of violence, however, appeared a year later in a critique of the "propaganda of the deed": "I do not believe in the possible success of revolt until the Socialist party has grown so powerful in numbers that it can gain its end by peaceful means, and that therefore what is called violence will never be needed ... And here I will say once for all, what I have often wanted to say of late, to wit, that the idea of taking any human life for any reason whatsoever is horrible and abhorrent to me."¹⁰

Patrick Laity has argued in his study of nineteenth-century peace movements that most opponents of wars in that period were not pacifists, but "anti-bellicists,"¹¹ opponents of specific wars. These took positions that roughly paralleled Morris's assertion in "Our Country Right or Wrong" that although some wars might be necessary or just, his century's British foreign wars were not among them.¹²

But the clear ardour and consistency of Morris's "real-world" opposition to imperial British militarism foregrounds the apparent paradox sketched earlier: how did Morris reconcile his mature rejection of brute power in all its forms with stylized portrayals of individual combat and resistance? Was his ideal of "art" a marginal source of solace in his tales – or worse, an irrelevant decoration, like the elaborately engraved hilts of Anglo-Saxon swords? Did he intend them to be foils for deeper ideals of empathy, solace, and emotion recollected in tranquility? Or were they tacit acknowledgments that human beings may never settle into peaceful and mutual exchanges of the sort modelled in *News from Nowhere*, and that the "rings" of power, once sought and seized, suborn these ideals as long as we endure?

Critical answers to these questions range widely. In "The Measured Music of Our Meeting Swords': William Morris' Early Romances and the Transformative Touch of Violence," Ingrid Hanson argues that in early

romances such as "Gertha's Lovers," "the truth of the universe is discovered through manly physical passion, which shows itself in thwarted caresses, accomplished killing and gruesome death."¹³ On the other hand, a critic such as Eleonora Sasso, in "The Road of War' and 'The Path of Peace': William Morris' Representations of Violence,"¹⁴ interprets such representations of imaginary battles as idealized enactments of courageous resistance. And finally, in "Riot, Romance and Revolution: William Morris and the Art of War," Phillippa Bennett argues that "the tension between his stated religious hatred towards all war and violence and his emphasis on the value of the heroic spirit in political conflict" in his late prose romances was resolved by their "dramatic and conclusive processes of social transformation through the construct and activities of the [metaphorical?] battlefield."¹⁵

Keeping in mind Morris's mature conviction that "civil" capitalist society is itself a form of unacknowledged warfare, in what follows I will argue that

- Morris's view on violence *evolved* as he aged – as he perceived, for example, that revolutionary and counter-revolutionary conflicts might become as chaotic as their feudal counterparts;
- in keeping with this evolution, he also fashioned his accounts of violence as systematic *critiques*, which distinguished systemic violence from little-noticed heroic acts of individual resistance;
- throughout his life, he construed "the lesser arts" as gentle but enduring forms of such "heroic" resistance; and
- as he aged, he dwelt more and more on the *memorial* powers of the "lesser" and "greater" arts to honour such nameless heroism, give voice to the silenced, and provide way-markers to *News from Nowhere's* "epoch of rest."

Art and Solace

History, as Tennyson wryly remarked, is "so careful of the type ... so careless of the single life."¹⁶ Morris countered such cosmic detachment with a faith in "art for life's sake" – an impassioned belief that every remnant of preserved art, however modest its execution, and however venal and heedless its owners – embodied the lost ardour of forgotten consciousness. In his introduction to the Kelmscott Press edition of Ruskin's "The Nature

of Gothic," for example, Morris defined art as "the expression of man's pleasure in labour."¹⁷ In "Art and the Beauty of the Earth," he argued: "Time was when everybody that made any thing made a work of art besides a useful piece of goods, *and it gave them pleasure to make it ...* if I have any worthy aspiration, it is the hope that I may help to bring about the day when we shall be able to say, So it was once, so it is now."¹⁸ In "Art under Plutocracy," he wrote: "I want to take counsel with you as to what hindrances may lie in the way towards making art what it should be, a help and solace to the daily life of all men."¹⁹

In this and other essays, Morris also recurred to the notion of such solace and to art, and (artful) work, as its preferred instruments. In "Art and the Beauty of the Earth," he asserted that "life [in the past] was often rough and evil enough ... yet I cannot help thinking that sorely as poor folks needed a solace, they did not altogether lack one, and that solace was pleasure in their work."²⁰ And in *The Earthly Paradise*, the spokesman for his "Wanderers" begins:

Slowly as in pain,
And with a hollow voice as from a tomb,
[to tell] the story of his doom,
But as it grows and once more hopes and fears,
Both measureless, are ringing round his ears,
His eyes grow bright, his seeming days decrease,
For grief once told brings back somewhat of peace.²¹

"Peace," however, for whom, and "solace" for what? Violent loss, of course, is a major source of "grief," and Morris returned again and again to cathartic sublimations of violent struggle in his epic works.

"Commercial War"

What, one might well ask, were the origins of a preoccupation with violent conflict and self-sacrificial struggle in a man whose sole martial credential had been a brief membership in the quaintly named "London Corps of Artist Volunteers,"²² which prepared for a never-realized war with France in 1859-60? Like many other upper-class boys, Morris had been chafed and taunted in school – in his case Marlborough College – and, according to unused notes for J.W. Mackail's biography, "would

rush roaring – but only half angry – with his head down & his arms whirling wildly, at his tormentors.”²³ In early life he was also subject to intermittent “rages” of a sort that might now be diagnosed as *sequelae* of a mild form of neurological impairment, which he later construed (in different language) as a genetic forerunner of his daughter Jenny’s epilepsy.

As for his social conscience, it may have been an unintended bitter cradle gift in reaction against William Morris *père*, a successful bill broker and mining speculator, who died unexpectedly in 1847, leaving Morris’s mother with shares in the Devon Great Consols mine valued roughly at £60,000. Morris described his namesake in an 1884 letter to the *Manchester Guardian* as “a city man and very ‘religious,’”²⁴ and Fiona MacCarthy has suggested an autobiographical interpretation of one of his *Commonweal* sketches, in which a scandalized father exclaims in horror that his rebellious son might possibly “turn Socialist when he grows up!!”²⁵

In the event, Morris was the only one of his relatives to “turn socialist,” and several of them invested heavily in Devon Great Consols. Perhaps at his mother’s urging, he served a brief term on its directorate from 1871 to 1875,²⁶ a position he held at arm’s length and from which he resigned in disgust in 1875,²⁷ two years before he became an active member of the first mass anti-war movement in British history.²⁸ This experience gave him an intimate knowledge of the practices of a major corporation, and may have prompted guilt; he told Rosalind Howard in 1874 (a year before his resignation) that “when I see a poor devil drunk and brutal I always feel, quite apart from my aesthetical perceptions, a sort of shame *as if I myself had some hand in it.*”²⁹ Somewhat later, he denounced Britain’s abortive plans to go to war against Russia,³⁰ and co-founded the architecturally reformist Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, advocating preservation rather than commercially driven “development.”

It took courage for Morris to defy his father’s example and his family’s financial and social expectations, as well as early Victorian notions of gentility (neatly expressed in D.G. Rossetti’s taunts at Morris’s role as the Firm’s businessman-manager).³¹ It took even more courage to attack directly the mining and high-corporate interests so closely associated with his family (who would of course have been aware of the publicity given his views) and the imperial wars in which his brother Arthur served. And it must have pained Morris when his socialist allegiances estranged him from former associates; among his friends only Philip Webb, Charles

Faulkner, and Georgiana Burne-Jones seem to have sympathized with his socialist commitments. In 1883, when epilepsy had begun to damage his daughter Jenny's mind, Morris wrote Georgiana that "anxiety ... has made a sad coward of me ... the grief aforesaid is too strong and disquieting to be overcome by a mere inclination to do what I *know* is unimportant work, [but] the propaganda ... is part of a great whole which cannot be lost, and that ought to be enough."³² Such efforts may have seemed to him modest counterparts of those "times of trial which either raise a man to the due tragic pitch or cast him aside as a useless and empty vapourer," as he wrote in an 1887 commemoration of the Paris Commune.³³

Morris also shared Pierre Proudhon's and Peter Kropotkin's view that unchecked economic competition is a form of systematic violence and "commercial war": "[The Greeks and medieval barons] made *war* and so does our modern capitalist ... this war is technically called competition, and of course you will hear it spoken of as a beautiful & providential thing[:] the stimulus to exertion, the friend of liberty, nay the very bond of Society itself: but don't be deceived by the mere words; for this Commercial war has all the essential elements of the gunpowder war in it."³⁴ In "Art under Plutocracy," he added: "I tell you the very essence of competitive commerce is waste; the waste that comes of the anarchy of war ... It fares with it as it does with the older forms of war, that there is an outside look of quiet wonderful order about it ... neat as a new pin are the storehouses of murder ... nay, the very orders for destruction and plunder are given with a quiet precision which seems the very token of a good conscience; this is the mask that lies before the ruined cornfield and the burning cottage, the mangled bodies, the untimely death of worthy men, the desolated home."³⁵

The violence and rapacity of these two "wars" reinforced each other, and cycles of production without distributive justice eventuated in a form of madness: "What! You have created too much wealth? You cannot give away the overplus; nay you cannot even carry it out into the fields and burn it there and go back again merrily to make some more of what you don't want; but you must actually pick a sham quarrel with other people & slay 100,000 men to get rid of wares which when [got rid] of you are still intent on producing with as much ardour as heretofore."³⁶

The embedded violence of this industrial Hobbesian war of all against all haunted him, and he responded in "Misery and the Way Out" (1884) with something very close to despair: "Here I stand before you, one of

the most fortunate of this happy class [the professional classes or hangers-on], so steeped in discontent, that I have no words which will express it: no words, nothing but deeds, wherever they may lead me to, even [if] it be ruin, prison, or a violent death ... I can only say we are driven by discontent and unhappiness into a longing for revolution: that we are oppressed by the consciousness of the class of toiling slaves below us, that we despise the class of idle slave-owners above us."³⁷ And, in "Art under Plutocracy," he writes: "Art [under capitalism] is doomed, and will surely die; that is to say, civilization will die ... [But] that change will be beneficent in many ways, so especially will it give an opportunity for the new birth of art."³⁸ The first passage was a cry *de profundis* and the second a striking evocation of chiliastic renewal from a secular humanist who had devoted himself to the preservation of historical artifacts.

Much later, in "What We Have to Look For," the last essay he wrote and delivered in public before his death in 1896, Morris acknowledged that "almost everyone has ceased to believe in the change coming by catastrophe."³⁹ But he also admitted that "I have thought the matter up and down and in and out, and I cannot for the life of me see how the great change which we long for can come otherwise than by disturbance and suffering of some kind ... since war has been commercialized, I say, we shall as above said not be called upon to gain our point by battle in the field. But the disturbance and the suffering – can we escape that? I fear not ... Can that combat be fought out[,] again I say[,] without loss and suffering? Plainly speaking I *know* that it cannot."⁴⁰

As he approached the end of his life, then, Morris remained convinced that poverty, class division, and social injustice corrupted all who "benefited" or suffered from them. But he no longer believed – if he ever had – that a single uprising of workers and organizers would effect the social revolution he ardently sought. His descendants and those of his contemporaries, he feared, might traverse rivers of fire. But he also clung to a *hope* – not a certainty – that their descendants might commemorate the dead and emerge from a chasm of suffering into *News from Nowhere's* "new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness ... in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship."⁴¹

Early Writings

How can one reconcile the romantic battles of Morris's literary works with the "anti-bellicism" of his temperament and later convictions? In an effort to explore the origins of his aversion to "real-world" violence, I will consider a cross-section of passages from his juvenilia to the last prose romance he drafted before he died in 1896.

Morris's first known publicly submitted poetic effort was "The Mosque Rising in the Place of the Temple of Solomon," an unsuccessful entrant in the Newdigate Prize Poem contest for Oxford undergraduates in 1855. Its set topic may have attracted him in part at least for its double architectural references to a "mosque" and "temple." As William Whitla has observed in his edition of the poem,⁴² the topic was almost certainly intended to elicit a Christian imperialist vindication of Britain's current presence in the Crimea, and the two winners of the prize duly framed their soliloquies in such muscular-Christian terms.

Even at this early stage of his life, Morris, who had read widely in the scholarly histories of the period, would have none of it. In place of the expected Christian verities, he evoked sites and habitations ravaged again and again by religious warriors and the individual and collective grief of their inhabitants. The banners and the obeisances had changed, but the carnage was invariant. One of the poem's more vivid passages condemned European violence against Muslims:

Ah me! They slew the woman and the babe[,]
 They slew the old man with his hoary hair[,]
 Thy youth who asked not mercy and the child
 Who prayèd sore that he might see the sun
 Some few days more – *those soldiers of the Cross.*
*Pray Christians for the sins of Christian men.*⁴³

So much for chivalric mercy and the Sermon on the Mount. The bluntness of this passage was remarkable, the more so as Morris was a deep admirer of Amiens Cathedral, from which Peter the Hermit had led his followers to the allegedly holy slaughter of the First Crusade. Christians had also died in the conflict, of course, but their afterlife is uncertain:

The warriors who lay dreaming on the hills
 Lie dreaming now within their quiet graves

Or seem to dream, for there the white bones lie
With nothing moving them ...⁴⁴

Morris clearly expressed in this early poem his lifelong love of the architectural forms – but not the doctrines – of medieval Christianity, and he was soon to renounce his nominal intent to prepare for a career in the Church. His extensive readings in ecclesiastical history had convinced him that “religion” brought not peace but a sword, and its more hypocritical hierarchs were red in tooth and claw.⁴⁵ Thirty-three years later, he confirmed these views in “Equality”: “I repeat[,] the opposing idea [to egalitarian socialism] is that of a hierarchical government. An idea founded on the assumption of the existence of an arbitrary[,] irresponsible God of the universe[,] the proprietor of all things and persons, to be worshipped and not questioned: a being whose irresponsible authority is reflected in the world of men by certain other irresponsible governors whose authority is delegated to them by that supreme Slaveholder and employer of labour up in Heaven.”⁴⁶ Or, as he put it more bluntly in “Communism, i.e. Property” (1892): “Religion is gone down the wind, and will no more cumber us unless we are open fools.”⁴⁷

The end of “The Mosque Rising” appealed not to God but to the dome and the temple rock, conceived in Ruskinian terms as repositories of memory and “conquerors of the forgetfulness of men.”⁴⁸

Now all is changed – when will the Cross once more
Be lifted high above its central dome?
Never perhaps. Yet many wondrous things
The silent dome has looked on quietly.
And truly very many wondrous things
The rock on which the temple stood has seen.
I wonder what Araunah’s floor was like
Before the flood came down upon the Earth[.]⁴⁹

Also notable in this early poem were its temporal elisions – from temple to rock foundation to a pre-Christian threshing floor – and its ascriptions of quasi-panteistic wisdom to an architectural structure and an outcropping of rock – a wisdom notably unavailable to human viewers.

Much more could be said about Morris’s youthful effort in “The Mosque Rising.” Its refusal of direct narrative and prismatic attention to the dreams and memories of the slayers and slain, for example, fore-

shadowed the complex dislocations of the *Defence of Guenevere* and other works. It also suggested that a man repelled at twenty-two by "holy warriors" did not love the medieval period because he viewed it as a time of peace, but because it exemplified in stark temporal displacement the ravages of ideological violence and the solace of art.

A somewhat slighter early meditation on violence and the "lesser arts" may be found in "The Story of the Unknown Church," the first of Morris's prose tales for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.⁵⁰ Its first-person narrator is an initially unidentified master mason who has created a carved tomb for the west front of a cathedral that strongly resembles the cathedral at Amiens.

Morris had already described this edifice lovingly in an *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* essay on "The Churches of North France: The Shadows of Amiens," in which he praised its carvings at length as embedded dramatic narratives, and gave careful attention to its west front.⁵¹ Morris and his sometime employer G.E. Street, author of *Brick and Marble in the Middle Ages*, visited France together in 1856, and John Purkis has remarked that the two men shared Ruskin's view that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the high point of Gothic architecture.⁵² In keeping with this tenet, the master mason of the "Story of the Unknown Church" carved his masterpiece in the middle of the thirteenth.

One of three craftsmen among Morris's *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* protagonists (the others were Svend of "Svend and His Brethren" and Florian of "The Hollow Land"), the master mason, a man whose life has been blighted by the "collateral damage" of war, is driven to complete his renderings of "the faces of those I had known on earth," and dies lying "with my chisel in my hand, underneath the last lily of the tomb,"⁵³ an emblem of the passage of life into art. Speaking as a sort of ghost in an undefined atemporal realm, the mason's shade remarks that "it is now two hundred years since that church vanished from the face of the earth; it was destroyed utterly, – no fragment of it was left; not even the great pillars that bore up the tower at the cross, where the choir used to join the nave."⁵⁴ His lifework and with it all the meanings and memories he infused into it have therefore been effaced, for "no one knows now even where [the church] stood," and he himself, in the land of shadows, does not "remember very much about the land where my church was; I have quite forgotten the name of it."⁵⁵ It would be hard to imagine a starker representation of the oblitative violence of *war* as well as *time*. The heroes of these early writings, then, are artists who resist the destruc-

tiveness of history, eschewing religious and cultural wars to create encoded tributes to their own deepest emotions.

The Earthly Paradise

The epics of Morris's middle period celebrate narrative art in its various forms. *The Earthly Paradise's* sole artist-protagonist is a sculptor who crafts his ideal mate in "Pygmalion and the Image," one of the work's briefer tales. The artistic magus of the entire sequence, however, is the ostensibly "idle" Singer. His lyric interludes precede twenty-five tales, chosen from the lore of northern European, near eastern, and classical cultures, and *within* these tales, from time to time, "mighty men" "slay ... ravening monsters." The Singer, by contrast, slays no one. His poetic office is to represent human emotions:

Midmost the beating of the steely sea,
Where tossed about all hearts of men must be;
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,
Not the poor singer of an empty day.⁵⁶

He also calls attention to his irenic role in a statement of intent ("Apology"), an invocation to Chaucer ("The Author to the Reader"), and an introductory "Prologue: The Wanderers," which sets up the poem's cross-cultural oral recitation in twelve classical and twelve medieval tales. His deeper reflective role is to bind up the tales' wounds, so to speak, in his transitional lyrics, unexpected first-person intrusions into the tales themselves, and his farewells to the work as a whole (in the "Epilogue" and "L'Envoi").

Some of the work's protagonists – Perseus, Ogier and Bellerophon, for example – are "mighty" enough, but most of their feats are allegorical and spiritual rather than physical. Ogier returns from a life-beyond-time to save medieval France before he withdraws to this otherworld with Morgan Le Fay; and Bellerophon's most courageous act is to deflate an eerily amorphous "monster" who is, after all, but a "chimera." Other, more self-styled "mighty, men" turn out to be miserable failures ("The Writing on the Image," "The Lady of the Land," "The Man Who Never Laughed Again"), and one poem – "The Lovers of Gudrun," drawn from

the *Laxdaela Saga* – is a bitterly unheroic tale of fratricidal conflict between former childhood friends.

Many of the tales' most arduous pursuits, moreover – in "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," "The Lovers of Gudrun," "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," and "The Story of Acontius and Cydippe" – are searches for love and solidarity, conceived and portrayed as life's deepest achievements. Morris set aside, perhaps for personal reasons, "The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice," in which he drew together the themes of the entire cycle, and whose brave bardic hero embodied the full range of idealized Morrisian accomplishments – at once an arduous traveller, spiritual voyager (to the underworld), faithful lover, and lonely inditer of ever-beautiful songs.⁵⁷

The Earthly Paradise clearly abounds in images of the "lesser arts" and related crafts – temples, gardens, tapestries, cloths, weaponry, jewellery, letters and songs, as well as weaving, fishing, and riding. But its deepest conflicts are in counterfactual realms of moral and psychological insight, which "living not, can n'er be dead."⁵⁸ The Singer's final lines quietly reverse the "Apology's" self-deprecation ("No little part it was for me to play / The idle singer of an empty day"),⁵⁹ and convey the tenuous but persistent power of devotion and collective memory to bridge time and the river.

Sigurd the Volsung

By contrast, Morris's most obviously violent work, a "Northern" narrative which appeared in 1876, remained faithful to its familiar Germanic plot of jealousy, betrayal, dynastic pride, serial revenge, self-immolation, unrepentant murder, and relentlessly obsessive greed (a Nordic warlords' antecedent of "commercial war," so to speak). Morris was drawn in the mid-1870s – passionately and perhaps paradoxically – to the plot of the *Volsunga Saga*, which he described in the introduction to his co-translation with Eiríkr Magnússon as "the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks"⁶⁰ (another tale of wanton rapine and plunder). In their preface, the two men expressed a hope that prospective readers would find in it "such a startling realism, such subtlety, such close sympathy with all the passions that may move [them] to-day."⁶¹ Morris also described the *Saga* in two of his

letters – the first written two years before his death – as a narrative of “wonderful imagination and clearness of outline, without disturbance of the huge and vague figures of the earlier times,”⁶² and as a spare, dramatic work in which “nothing [was] repeated, nothing overstrained ... all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament.”⁶³

In another translation – of the Icelandic *Eyrbyggja Saga* – Morris addressed the nameless Icelandic *skáld* as a friend, and added the following prefatory verse-homage:

Yea, are we friends? Draw nigher then,
Thou tale-teller of vanished men, ...
Thou and thy brethren sure did gain
That thing for which I long in vain,
The spell, whereby the mist of fear,
Was melted, and your ears might hear
Earth's voices as they are indeed.

Well, ye have helped me at my need.⁶⁴

Was the melting of the “mist of fear” perhaps the courage to follow his principles amid an unregarding and resistant world?

Morris was not the only socialist to praise Nordic ur-prototypes of *The Lord of the Rings*.⁶⁵ In theory at least, Sigurd was a champion of justice who died at the hands of antagonists driven by lust for gold (“commercial war”), empire (“our country right or wrong”), and the inexorable power of the ring’s “thrice-cursed burden of greed.”⁶⁶ Most remarkable about Morris’s redaction of the tale as an allegorical cycle, however, was its systematic construction as a *saga*, with all its characteristic devices – echoing, contrasts, parallelism, compression, archaisms, inversions, caesurae, strongly metered lines and other attributes which Anthony Ugolnik has assimilated to Old Norse syntactical patterns.⁶⁷ Its stark but imbricated contrapuntal echoings and repeated invocations of songs past and future also called attention to the refracted nature of the story, for, as Herbert Tucker has observed, it is a very self-conscious tale, whose protagonists are liminally aware of their unchanging and unchangeable part in a climactic series of convulsions.⁶⁸

Though the Niblung/Volsung rivalry at its worst was surely a case of “ignorant armies clash[ing] by night” – or in updated language, “mutu-

ally assured destruction" – the extent to which the characters act roles confined to their scripted dynastic fates evokes a measure of sympathy and detached horror. Consider the murderous Gunnar, for example, an alienated artist and instrument of the warrior-ethic he exalts, who chants as he dies:

I have dwelt with the deeds of the mighty; I have woven the web
of the sword;
I have borne up the guilt nor repented; I have sorrowed nor spoken
the word;
And I fought and was glad in the morning, and I sing in the night
and the end ...

Odin, I see, and I hearken; but, lo ... the bonds on my feet,
And the walls of the wilderness round me, ere the light of thy
land I meet!
I crave and I weary, Allfather, and long and dark is the road;
And the feet of the mighty are weakened, and the back is bent with
the load.⁶⁹

Morris's poem thus preserves a measure of shared sympathy for *all* victims of violence, noting that those who perpetrate it and those who suffer from it are sometimes the same people. "Art" in this case has traduced itself, and the dirge of Gunnar's "huge and vague" *Untergang* becomes a dialectical foil to *News from Nowhere's* "epoch of rest."

The effect of this celebration of tragic loss garnered mixed responses; Morris's contemporary Theodore Watts remarked in an *Athenaeum* review that "a people cannot read itself into folklore," and the modern critic Anthony Ugolnik that "[Morris's] conscious effort to forge a new poetic language was successful in lending a vigorous Germanic diction to his verse and giving a more concise syntactical base to his narrative, but it simply could not re-create the effect of the earlier literature he so admired."⁷⁰

News from Nowhere

Morris' best-known work was suffused with tributes to his beloved "lesser arts." Nowhereans write historical novels, mount exhibitions,

prepare simple but elegant meals, fashion tapestries and murals, build and ornament stone buildings, enact historical pageants (to celebrate the Clearing of Misery), and design clothes, furniture, fine books, household utensils, silver ornaments, and their own dwellings. As oral storytellers and historians, Dick, Old Hammond, Henry Morsom, Ellen, and others also reflect on the violence of nineteenth-century capitalism and police repression as well as the twentieth century's "Great Change."⁷¹ (History too is a "craft.")

The more astute representatives of the new society actively loathe the violence they associate with their own (pre)history. When Guest asks his equable guide whether Nowhere has need of prisons, for example, Dick recoils in horror: "Man alive! How can you ask such a question? ... [H]ow could [people] look happy if they knew that their neighbours were shut up in prison, while they bore such things quietly? ... Prisons, indeed! O no, no, no!"⁷²

More critically, Ellen considers what her fate would have been in the "other country" Guest has described: "I think I have studied the history [of those past days of turmoil and oppression] to know pretty well. I should have been one of the poor, for my father when he was working was a mere tiller of the soil ... therefore my beauty and cleverness and brightness ... would have been sold to rich men, and my life would have been wasted indeed ... I should have wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or by luxury. Is it not so?"⁷³

Consistent with Morris's conviction that a people's art reflects its society (and conversely), Old Hammond tells Guest that "You must not suppose that the new form of art was founded chiefly on the memory of the art of the past,"⁷⁴ though paradoxically "old forms, revived in a wonderful way during the latter part of the struggle, especially as regards music and poetry,"⁷⁵ and townspeople and country dwellers teach one another "arts of life which they had each lost."⁷⁶

So greatly have things changed since Nowhereans "cast away riches and attained to wealth,"⁷⁷ in fact, that Ellen reflects: "I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past ... Who knows? Happy as we are, times may alter ... many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid."⁷⁸ And when Guest broods on the waste of life throughout history, she responds, "So many centuries ... so many ages!"⁷⁹ Even in the new so-

ciety, then, genuine art – “lesser” as well as “greater” – has a dual role: to enhance the happiness of the present and preserve the memory of the past.

Morris's Final Prose Romance

A partial gauge of Morris's final views about the interrelations between courage, violence, and “the lesser arts” may be found in his unfinished last romance, *The Sundering Flood*, dictated in part to Sydney Cockerell during his final illness. Possible antecedents for *The Flood*'s plot included Jean Ingelow's “Divided” (1863), in which two lovers are severed by a widening river,⁸⁰ and Jón Thoroddsen's *Piltur og Stúlka* (1850),⁸¹ a respected Icelandic novel to which Morris may have been introduced by Eiríkur Magnússon. The story of two lovers who journey in search of each other also reworked some of the motifs of *Love Is Enough*, though the locale was quasi-Scandinavian and more detailed (the 1898 Kelmscott Press and Longmans editions even included a map).

As Carole Silver has observed, Morris's final romances embodied “socialism internalized” in their respectful treatment of ordinary people, untrammelled by class and legal restrictions, who dedicate their lives to the fellowship of their communal societies.⁸² But unlike his last female-centred fantasy, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, *The Sundering Flood* focused on a male protagonist's involvement in a protracted war.⁸³

As Morris fashioned it, this war “was” a quasi-socialist uprising of the guilds of the “Small Crafts” against the King and City, and Morris infused into it some of his political skepticism, his strictures against war, and his contempt for gain-driven and self-interested conflict.⁸⁴ He also wrote into the tale his lifelong belief that the state of the “lesser arts,” practised here in Wethermel and the Masterless Wood – farming, foraging, travelling, weaving and carving, as well as singing, playing, and composing – offer an accurate measure of the well-being of its people.

The Sundering Flood's hero Osberne is a poet, and his poems are interspersed throughout the first part of the romance. Had Morris lived longer, his protagonist might have continued his spontaneous composition of “staves” in war and peace alike, like Thiodof in *The House of the Wolfings*. As it was, Morris composed a four-stanza song for Osberne's courtship of his beloved Elfhild (chapter 10) and a song of celebration and leave-taking on the occasion of his departure from Wethermel at the age

of eighteen (chapter 36).⁸⁵ Elfhild, a shepherdess, also pipes and tells stories in her own right.

Osberne, a member of a self-governing and egalitarian tribe or community who have "neither King, nor Earl, nor Alderman,"⁸⁶ has been given a powerful sword, with the condition that it not be used "in behalf of any tyrant or evil-doer."⁸⁷ On maturity, he leaves home to defend his relatives and neighbours against the marauding warriors of a southern king, who has held the inhabitants of a port city against their will. He attaches himself to the resistance leader, Sir Godrick ("good realm"), who strives with his bowmen from the Masterless Wood to liberate the town workers of the Small Crafts and, eventually, the Great Crafts, in a series of events that re-enact pastoral variants of Old Hammond's account of "How the Change Came" in *News from Nowhere*.⁸⁸

Before agreeing to serve under Godrick's standard, Osberne subjects Sir Godrick to a rather stringent interrogation. Has Godrick taken any of his property from others? How does he treat and protect non-combatants? For whom does he fight, and for what ends? Godrick assures him that he has fought and will fight under "just" principles: no looting, humane treatment of non-combatants, punishment of crimes against the populace, and support of a democratic government. All this is good, of course, but it also recalls the words of Jonathan Dymond, the nineteenth century's best-known assailant of the notion of a "just war": "In the fury of slaughter, soldiers do not attend, they cannot attend, to questions of aggression ... Moralists may talk of distinctions, but soldiers will make none; and none can be made."⁸⁹ Similarly, when Osberne asks him what he would do "if those gilds of craft aforesaid should rise up against their King and the tyrants of the Porte, and ... sent to thee for help," Godrick replies that "I [will] go to them with all mine and leave house and lands behind, that we may battle it out side by side to live or die together."⁹⁰

In the event, the city is liberated, and its workers claim the right to elect representatives and form a republic:

[The departed king's] back being turned upon his once subjects, many men began to think that belike they might do without him once and for all, when they cast up the use he had been to them in times past. And this imagination grew, until at last a great Mote was called, and there it was put forward, that since the City had a Porte and a Great Council, and a Burgreve [Godrick, elected by

popular vote] under these, the office of King was little needed there ... and next, with little gainsaying, they did away with the office of King altogether, and most men felt the lighter-hearted therefor[sic].⁹¹

Godrick endeavours to avoid needless quarrels, and when challenged to a joust replies bluntly that "this is an evil custom."⁹² He would also abandon willingly the instruments and battlements of war, for: "See thou, lad, those fair and beauteous buildings ... were the work of peace, when we sat well beloved on our own lands: it is an hundred of years ago since they were done. Then came the beginning of strife, and needs must we build yonder stark and grim towers and walls in little leisure by the labour of many hands. Now may peace come again, and give us time to cast wreaths and garlands of fretwork round the sternness of the war-walls, or let them abide and crumble in their due time."⁹³

After the conflict is over, Osberne refuses to accept a reward of knight-hood for his military services, for "his kindred are not and were not of the knighthood, albeit men of honour"⁹⁴ – a choice which echoes Morris's own disdain for distinctions of rank or class. At the height of his reputation, Osberne makes known his desire to leave warfare altogether and seek Elfhild, his lost love, whose wanderings (with a "Carline" conveniently endowed with magic powers) are also given equal prominence in the last fifth of the tale.⁹⁵

Had Morris lived, *The Sundering Flood* might have become a double romance, rather on the model of some of his earlier proliferating tales for the *Earthly Paradise*. In a last personal encounter, Osberne encounters Godrick on his way to another skirmish and reluctantly offers his services, but Godrick, remarkably, declines, "for I have seen thee in a dream of the night and in a dream of the day living at Wethermel and dying on a field near the City of the Sundering Flood." Said Osberne: 'And shall I choose dishonour then?' 'Nay,' he said, 'where is the dishonour?'"⁹⁶

Osberne's pointed renunciation of military life has no counterpart in Morris's earlier romances, and there is a glow in the dying Morris's description of his and Elfhild's life together: "But surely about both of them there was then and always a sweet wisdom that never went beyond what was due and meet for the land they lived in or the people with whom they dwelt. So that all round them the folk grew better and not the worse."⁹⁷

Conclusion

As he aged, Morris gradually sharpened his views on the relationship of violence and art, distinguishing between systemic and individual violence, expressing abhorrence of the former and proscribing the latter except under severe restraints and for communitarian ends. Most of his protagonists, in fact – early and late – were not soldiers by trade, but masons, poets, sculptors, teachers, tellers of tales, and seekers after peace and justice. Those with whom he identified most deeply, moreover, were singers, time travellers, and “guests,” who meditated on their own failures and achievements as well as those of their fellows.

Again and again, Morris sought to find cyclical continuities in which the defeats of selfless heroes – such as Thiodolf in *The House of the Wolfings*, or the eponymous hero of *A Dream of John Ball* – might be seen as anticipations, not of a “heaven on earth,” but of a more Nowherean “earth on earth.” If so, he could take a measure of comfort in a secular eschatology he offered Ball in the little country church: that “though I die and end, yet mankind yet liveth, therefore I end not, since I am a man.”⁹⁸

The best way therefore to reconcile the implicit conflicts between Morris’s condemnation of imperial wars and “reasons of state,” and the sublimated quasi-allegorical struggles in his poems and prose romances, may be to focus on the allegory and the sublimation. Morris had always viewed armed violence through a lens of strong moral disapprobation in his earliest (and presumably most “naive”) writings. More precisely, he construed moral courage as a self-sacrificial willingness to oppose the strong bearing down on the weak; concluded that the “lesser arts” in all their forms are a saving grace; and decided that anything which affords this grace has the dignity of a “lesser art.”

By the time he dictated *The Sundering Flood*, two decades of historical study and political activism had further convinced him that:

- resistance has often evolved into what it resisted;
- the “lesser arts,” in all their benign forms, are what keep us “humane”; and
- without them we are like John Ball’s “proud despiteous rich man,” who is “in hell already, because he hath no fellow.”⁹⁹

After two “world wars,” several incontestable genocides, and a long and lengthening series of “commercial wars,” in a time when asphyxiat-

ing oil spills and death by unseen drones are journalistic banalities, it is painfully clear, therefore, that we still search for the secular saving grace of "fellowship" and its "lesser-artistic" handmaidens.