



Frontispiece: Illustration for *The Sundering Flood*, Kelmscott edition (1897).

HISTORY AND COMMUNITY

Essays in Victorian Medievalism

edited by
 Florence S. Boos



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**Alternative Victorian Futures:
"Historicism," *Past and Present*
and *A Dream of John Bull***

Florence S. Boos

European and American intellectuals have often debated the uses and abuses of "historicism," a term which has itself had a complicated history since Friedrich Schlegel first used it in 1789. At its broadest it simply records the truistic recognition that all human phenomena undergo historical change. Critics of "historicism" have long since exposed some of the more reactionary normative uses of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European developmental histories--crude causal or teleological models which made specious national or political unities "inevitable," and suppressed structural inequity and social conflict. More recently, Michel Foucault and his "new historicist" descendants have argued for an "archeology of the human sciences"--a metaphor that would have appealed to many Victorians--that would forego "uniform, simple notion[s] of. . . causality" for more holistic consideration of "dependencies" in "discursive formation[s]."¹ One such "discursive formation" might be found in the Victorians' tendency to find themselves prefigured in past cultures, or overshadowed by them.

Such instances of historical reconstruction and identification have sometimes been called "existential"; I will call them "projective." "Projective" historicism of this sort was one of the more pervasive aspects of Victorian literature: it can be found not only in historical novels and dramas, but also in a wide range of prose romances, essays, and poetry of the period. My attempts to understand this phenomenon will begin with a brief allusion to the ideas of one of its foremost continental proponents, the late nineteenth-century philosopher of "human studies" (*Geisteswissenschaften*), Wilhelm Dilthey. Against the background of these Diltheyan arguments, I will then ask why Victorian women were less ardent medievalizers, and examine some views of historical reconstruction in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. After this, I will examine two Victorian reconstructions in some detail: Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*, and one of the finest set pieces of nineteenth-century historicism, William Morris's treatment of the Peasant Uprising of 1381 in *A Dream of John Ball*. Finally, I will attempt a concluding evaluation of the range, limitations, and strengths of Victorian historicism as a whole, and consider some ways in which it might enlarge in turn our own sense of human identity and its future.

Victorian intellectuals notoriously encountered a decline of religious certainty and rise of scientific methods and disciplines (geology, physics) which seemed to ignore or deny the centrality of human concerns. One nineteenth-century response to these cultural modifications was to search for forms of historical and literary art which might preserve--in memory at least--certain

essentially unquantifiable human emotions and experiences.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was a metaphysician, historian of ideas, and professor of philosophy at the University of Berlin, who attempted to characterize "human"--as opposed to "natural"--studies, and argued that human beings organize their lives in patterns of interpretive ("hermeneutic") significance--legal codes, religion, myth, art, literature. We have a sense of the "value" of things in the present, he observed, and confront the future with "purpose," but ascribe meaning to human expressions most clearly in our evocations of the past. In one posthumously published essay, "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life Expressions," for example, he argued that a kind of "*Verstehen*" ("understanding") enables us to interpret expressions (gestures, works of literature, . . .) of other human beings in ways which deepen our own awareness of human identity. Actions can only be observed from the outside, and they express only part of our being. A "spontaneous expression of experience," by contrast, may be perceived directly, for "[a] special relation exists between it, the life from which it comes, and the understanding which grasps it."²

More significantly, he held that this "spontaneous expression" ". . . contains more of mental life than can be comprehended by introspection. It lifts mental life out of depths that consciousness cannot illuminate." In other words, projection and identification with the mental and emotional lives of others somehow create higher levels of awareness of our own nature, levels which no simple self-examination could provide. This claim also expresses one of the essential postulates of Victorian

historical reconstruction: that we *can* validly project our responses into the past in some way, and that when we do, we extend our own identities as well as mirror them in some infinitely refracting wavefront of widening empathy and mutual awareness. Dilthey correctly observes that such expressive projections are not "true" or "false," "but only sincere or insincere," a criterion one can attempt (with varying degrees of "sincerity") to apply to the intensely interpretive historical recreations of Victorian literature. Moreover, as Dilthey noted, such artistic projections can give rise to meanings *beyond* those which have been present to a given poet's or artist's consciousness, meanings which may acquire a valid aesthetic, psychological, and atemporal "reality" of their own, and become subject to subsequent (re) interpretations in their turn.

Dilthey also expressed another implicit assumption of (most) Victorian literary historical enactments, when he claimed that such "understanding" is ultimately *individual*: "the individual is an object of absolute value, and indeed. . . the only such object that exists." Note that this claim does not follow in any obvious way from a view that *consciousness* is the principal source and "object" of value, for "consciousness" might in some sense be communal or collective. Dilthey's "individualism"--which should not be identified with political "individualism"--owes much to Kant's view of the ideal integrity of the self and its ("pure") will, and appeals to it help make intelligible the motive force and vivid specificity of recreations found (say) in Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*. One consequence for Dilthey is that philosophical prob-

lems and the enduring enigma of other minds (and our own) remain sources of wonder and emergent value:

The secret of the individual draws us for its own sake, into ever new and more profound attempts to understand it, and it is in such understanding that the individual and mankind in general and its creations are revealed to us. . . . complete empathy is dependent on the possibility of the understanding following the order of the events themselves, on its advancing forward as the course of life itself advances. . . . To relive is to create in the same direction as the original events.

Compare this with the nineteenth century's many narratives of time-travel and historical utopias, among them two of the works we will later examine.

A last passage from Dilthey may help identify another motivation for nineteenth-century historicism--a desire to *escape* from the constraining "certitudes" of personality and time:

In this reliving lies an important part of the spiritual gains for which we have to thank the historian and poet. The course of life exercises a determining influence on every man [sic], by which the possibilities which lie within him are narrowed down. His present character determines his further development. In short, whether he is concerned with examining his own situation in life, or contemplating the form of his acquired life-complex, he finds that the prospects of a new outlook on life, or further inner development of his personal character, are limited. But understanding opens to him a whole new realm of possibilities that are not present in his everyday life. The possibility of having religious experience is circumscribed for me, as it is for most people today. . . . But I can relive it. . . . Man, who is bound and determined by the realities of life, is not only liberated by art--this has often been said--but also by the understanding of history.³

None of the authors we will examine could have read Dilthey. But both Carlyle and Morris's narrators are

troubled by something like the sense Dilthey describes, of entrapment within a culturally predetermined (and perhaps diminished) time.

Thus "historicism". . . . But why the Victorian fascination with *medieval* history? In part, at least, in simple reaction to the massive infusion of *classical* history and literature in nineteenth century education. Indoctrination in Greek and Latin literature made inevitable widespread use of mythological and Roman literary motifs, and encouraged attempts to adapt Greek prosody and dramatic structures to other aims. At the same time, however, instruction in the classical languages was specific to upper- and upper-middle class males; its inculcation in the schools was often numbingly brutal, and its cultivation in the universities banal and shallow. By contrast, Mediterranean settings appealed to the Victorian fondness for warmly exotic landscapes; Greek mythology was mildly sensuous, and provided one of the few officially sanctioned alternatives to the puritanical and dogmatic aspects of sabbatarian Christianity. Finally, the *pax romana* seemed to provide a much-praised exemplar for English territorial and imperialist ambitions.

One of the more appealing aspects of Victorian medievalism in its more *historical* (not Arthurian) forms was also its paradoxical mixture of concreteness and immediacy. Many literate Victorians could pursue medieval history informally, prompted and aided not only by their education, but also by vestiges of medieval building and culture which still surrounded them. Druidic and Celtic remains were long since few and hard to interpret, and Roman ones evoked a colonized and provincial past. Medieval remains, by contrast,

seemed to offer the Victorians a more authentic record of their "real" origins, and a convenient reinforcement of a sense of patriotic identity as well.

One should also remember that for the Victorians, the "medieval" period began with the fall of Rome, and extended well into what we would now refer to as the Renaissance. The "Middle Ages" seemed to them exactly that--a long stretch of eleven, even twelve centuries, between the "classical" age of Greece and Rome and their own "modern" one. So conceived, the medieval millennium suggested important contrasts with contemporary experiences of urbanization, industrialization, and immiseration, and provided very wide scope for alternate views of history. Systematic study of British antiquities--in such newly formed groups as the Camden Ecclesiastical Historical Society, the Scottish Folio Club, and the Early English Text Society--grew throughout the century, and new historical and critical methods opened exciting prospects for future study.

Medievalism and Victorian Women

Finally, some Victorian intellectuals--Carlyle, for example--may have found medieval history attractive for its avoidance of implicit issues of racial conflict, gradually more and more central to the rationales given for British imperial expansion. Others--among them both Carlyle and Ruskin--may have noticed with tacit approval the degree to which its available sources marginalized and romanticized the lives and social roles of women. In a period when a "reformed" Divorce Law (1857) permitted adultery to men but not women, portrayals of knighthood and chivalric paternalism

tended rather obviously to ratify and encourage a patriarchal model of the ideal Victorian family. Most writers concerned with improving the lot of contemporary women looked elsewhere for their models, and even Ruskin's great critiques of the degradation of the worker *never* saw women straight on, as the "workers" they have always been. Morris and Engels were partial exceptions to this pattern, but neither was a feminist in the twentieth-century acceptance of this word.

At best, therefore, male representations of women in medievalist poetry reflected *indirectly* something of women's subordination and discontent within Victorian society: many of its most empathetic and powerful literary evocations are of unhappy or tragically frustrated women. Alternatives to the dreary typology of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, with its submissively wifely Enid, conniving harlot Vivien, and destructively adulterous Guenevere, included Arnold's Iseult of Cornwall, Rossetti's Rose Mary, the suddenly-awakened Guenevere of Morris's early "Defence," the indomitable Gudrun of his *Earthly Paradise*, and Swinburne's tragically noble Iseult in *Tristram of Lyonesse*. One of the more sympathetic male Victorian poetic portrayals of a woman in an imagined historical setting is Robert Browning's "Pompilia" in *The Ring and the Book*, and it may not be coincidental that Browning's ideal woman finds no psychological home in the Italian Renaissance. Stabbed by her brutal husband at the age of seventeen, she awaits her early death as she reflects on a platonic ideal of spiritual union: "Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,/ Mere imitation of the inimitable:/ In

heaven we have the real and true and sure" (II. 1825-27).

Several of the small company of women painters of the period whose works have survived also employed medieval as well as Renaissance subjects to portray gallant or royal women--e.g., Joanna Boyce's "Elgiva" (1854) and "Rowena" (1856); Emma Sandys' "Portrait of a Saxon Princess" (1863); and Mary Newill's "Queen Matilda" (1893).⁴ It remains notable, however, that the most important women authors seldom sought medieval settings for their works. Perhaps what they found there simply seemed to them too bleak.

Christina Rossetti, for example, the younger sister of the translator of the *Vita Nuova* who was one of the century's most untiring painters and poets of medieval subjects, generally used contemporary or unspecific romantic and legendary settings for her poems. A few poems about unidentified royal families might have medieval settings, and the sonnet sequence "Monna Innominata" may involve Petrarch's Laura. But the speaker of the sonnets, like the unhappy heroines of Victorian male poets, expresses deep self-abnegation and frustration, and nothing in the sonnets themselves suggests any obvious historical context.

The wryest and most savagely funny satire of the worst aspects of *poetic* medievalism, in fact, was provided by one of the century's more clear-sighted poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Though she herself had included several medieval poems in her *Poems* of 1844 ("The Romaunt of the Page," "Lady Geraldine's Courtship") thirteen years later, in a brilliant passage from Book Five of *Aurora Leigh*, she commented sardonically on "poems made on. . . chivalric bones":

I do distrust the poet who discerns
 No character or glory in his times,
 And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
 Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
 To sing--oh, not of lizard or of toad
 Alive i' the ditch there,--'twere excusable,
 But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,
 Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
 As dead as must be, for the greater part,
 The poems made on their chivalric bones;
 And that's no wonder: death inherits death. (II. 1189-99)⁵

The pasts recorded by the great Victorian women *novelists*--the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, were generally within living memory, or extended no farther back than the late eighteenth century, a period which had seen the rise of the novel and of a culture more directed towards literate middle-class women. It may also be revealing that no Victorian woman novelist of greater stature than Charlotte Yonge was prepared to grant the dignity of idealization to "medieval" fiction, and that the major woman novelist who attempted the most radical critique of the Victorian class structure--George Eliot--sought her hero, Daniel Deronda, in a non-European and non-Christian historical tradition. Eliot's narrator describes respectfully the venerable antiquity of Daniel's aristocratic English heritage, but she invokes a quite different historical tradition for her critique of her society--messianic Judaism. Daniel's Zionist mission, like the journeys of Morris's *John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*, forms part of a futurist vision, in this case of a pluralistic and enlightened pan-cultural Jewish state.

Eliot's displaced idealism brought with it its own implicit dangers of sentimentalization and over-

simplification, and she avoided painful aspects of Rabbinical tradition (subordination of women, for example, and factionalist bigotry) which she refused to condone in her own British Protestant background. There is nevertheless something powerfully liberating in *Deronda's* use of a non-contemporary-English, non-Christian ideal as a framework for judgment of her culture. At its best, Eliot's attempt to present a fully developed alternate social, historical, and religious vision is akin to the most successful attempts by male Victorian medievalists to extend their conceptions of human identity and of the future--one of the few models for such attempts, in fact, which is not readily subject to some aspect of Barrett Browning's parody.

A sense of the "medieval" as *alternate culture* (at least for men)--alternative both to contemporary capitalist and imperialist *realpolitik*, and to the unrealities of their conventional classical education--may also have been brought home to the Victorians when they witnessed--before their eyes, in fact--the obliteration of the remains of past centuries, in the swiftest defacement of landscapes, buildings, and folk customs of earlier cultures, "modern" or "medieval," England had ever seen. As late as 1815, seventy per cent of the population of Great Britain lived in rural areas; by the end of the century, nearly three-quarters were crowded into a few enormous, squalid cities (Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, London), and the century's growing immiseration and class-oppression were manifest to any honest observer. One of these was the young Friedrich Engels, who composed the following impassioned description of urban alienation--one which would not now seem at all "radical"--in 1844:

Hundreds of thousands of men and women drawn from all classes and ranks of society pack the streets of London. Are they not all human beings with the same innate characteristics and potentialities? . . . Yet they rush past each other as if they had nothing in common. . . .

The more that Londoners are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and disgraceful becomes the brutal indifference with which they ignore their neighbours and selfishly concentrate upon their private affairs. We know well enough that this isolation of the individual--this narrow-minded egotism--is everywhere the fundamental principle of modern society. But nowhere is this selfish egoism so blatantly evident as in the frantic bustle of the great city. The disintegration of society into individuals, each guided by his private principles and each pursuing his own aims, has been pushed to its furthest limits in London. Here indeed human society has been split into its component atoms.⁶

A way of life which had arisen in a millennium of incremental growth, in short, had been exploded in three generations. More genteel architectural counterparts of this annihilation took the form of "restoration," which gutted buildings' interiors, and left parts of the facade intact. Such pious mutilation was especially inflicted on older churches, among the most enduring forms of public architecture. In reaction to the phenomenon, William Morris and others founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877.

Far from the static period fondly enshrined in twentieth-century folk history, then, the mid-nineteenth century was a period of rapid and ruthless change, and an urgent desire to preserve the remaining artifacts and expressions of a past culture underlay the near-elegiac tone of much Victorian historicism. Disaffected middle-class intellectuals, barely tolerated at the margins of Victorian commercial culture, were most likely to notice

its defacement of the historical past, and some of them responded with critical polemics of great rhetorical force and eloquence.

Thomas Carlyle's 1843 *Past and Present*, for example, was his response to the social unrest of the early 1840's. The so-called "Corn Laws" kept food prices so high that ninety-five percent of the population lived in poverty and squalor; those who did not die of starvation struggled to survive in hideous slums which prefigured those of today's Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Calcutta. Several strikes erupted in Manchester and other parts of the Midlands in 1842, the year Chartist petitions for universal manhood suffrage and other reforms also gathered more than three million three hundred thousand signatures in a country of twenty million, many barely able to sign their names. The petition was brought to Parliament, where it was derisively rejected. With most of his class, however, Carlyle opposed any form of worker autonomy, trade unionism, or broadening of the electorate, and in anticipation of a political line the Germans later called "national liberalism," exhorted the English middle-class to lead an industrial army of diligent workers, and seek direction from a heroic future leader and quasi-Hegelian world-historical-individual he called a new "Duke of Weimar."

Like the sarcasm of Karl Kraus or H. L. Mencken in the twentieth century, Carlyle's rhapsodic denunciation often seemed to purge more effectively because it was an unconscious part of what it attacked. His prose explodes in contrasting outbursts of ironic admiration, invective, exhortation, and celebration, and its referents sometimes pass all understanding. Little of the book is susceptible to adequate paraphrase, and

much of it is best understood as a kind of lightning rod, in which the tensions of personal restlessness and social discontent ran for a moment to ground.

There had been no 1848 revolution in Britain, and Carlyle's epigrammatic anger and contempt for humbug helped earn him the respect of a generation of restive young middle-class males, who did not necessarily share his obsession with "great men." His urgent exhortations to "work" were also quotable, in part, *because* they prescribed so few details; the socialist William Morris, for example, later acknowledged Carlyle as one of his two Oxford "masters" (the other was Ruskin), whose iconoclasm and sense of purpose gave him hope that some great social change might yet come.

Carlyle's historicist evocations of medieval England in the second book of *Past and Present* fit the political and rhetorical framework just sketched especially well. They provide the work's chief *exemplum* of just government, and are framed and controlled by an unusually careful and directive introduction and exposition, and a peroration which points their message for the present and future. In the introduction, Carlyle presents his narrator as an "Editor," who has discovered the interconnected spiritual meaning within historical process:

Out of old Books, new Writings, and much Meditation not of yesterday, he will endeavour to select. . . and from the Past, in a circuitous way, illustrate the Present and the Future. The Past is a dim indubitable fact: the Future too is one, only dimmer; nay properly it is the *same* fact in new dress and development. For the Present holds in it both the whole Past and the whole Future;--as the LIFE-TREE IGDRASIL, wide-waving, many-toned, has its roots down deep in the Death-kingdoms, among

the oldest dead dust of men, and with its boughs reaches always beyond the stars; and in all times and places is one and the same Life-tree! (42)⁷

(Romantic "Organicism," as remarked earlier, could hardly have found a more explicit Metaphor than this!)

Carlyle further devised a fictive medieval chronicler, Jocelin of Brakelond, whose imagined account, *Chronica Jocelini de Brakelonda, de rebus gestis Samsonis Abbatis Monasterii Sancti Edmundi*, is devoted to the administration and character of its similarly fictive Abbot Samson. Liberated from the drossy constraints of "assiduous Pedantry" and the "dry rubbish" of already-known history (53), Carlyle's narrator/"Editor" is free to create fictive but suggestive history, and blur together "representative" persons and events. Only the "Editor" is able to impose such interpretations, however; dry-as-dust cavilers in the audience cannot use the techniques of "assiduous Pedantry" to question the validity of his sources or his methods of appropriation.

The world of Jocelin's chronicle is both remote and paradoxically immediate, and completely subject to Carlyle's authorial control:

. . . now seven centuries old, how remote is it from us; exotic, extraneous; in all ways, coming from far abroad! The language of it is not foreign only but dead. . . . Jocelin of Brakelond cannot be called a conspicuous literary character; indeed few mortals that have left so visible a work, or footmark, behind them can be more obscure. (46)⁸

Jocelin's "obscurity," like a magic mirror which clouds before it reveals its mystery, quickly clears:

The good man, he looks on us so clear and cheery, and in his neighborly soft-smiling eyes we see so well our own shadow,--we have a longing always to cross-question him, to force from him an explanation of much.

A Diltheyan sense of exclusion from the past suddenly closes in, however:

But no; Jocelin, though he talks with such clear familiarity, like a next-door neighbour, will not answer any question: that is the peculiarity of him, dead these six hundred and fifty years, and quite deaf to us, though still so audible! The good man, he cannot help it, nor can we. (49)

This evocation of Jocelin's kindly, helpless silence becomes an even more poignant displacement of his own hypothetical identity:

Readers who please to go along with us into this poor *Jocelini Chronica* shall wander inconveniently enough, as in wintry twilight, through some poor strip hazel-grove. . . . across which, here and there, some real human figure is seen moving: very strange; whom we could hail if he would answer;--and we look into a pair of eyes deep as our own, *imaging* our own, but all unconscious of us; to whom we for the time are become as spirits and invisible! (55)

After this narrative *introit*, the reader's approaches to this desired medieval past become subject to the ambiguous "Editor"'s complete and rather arbitrary control. It should be no more than mildly surprising that this Editor sometimes assumes the persona of his vanished chronicler; that "we Monks of St. Edmundsbury" (73) include him in their number, and that he records answers to several questions he *personally* has asked the Abbot Samson. The narrator also merges with other persons mentioned in the chronicle, however, and at one point admonishes the Abbott in a distinct "Editorial" (authorial?) voice (" . . . right, Samson; that it [anger] may become in thee as noble central heat, . . . not blaze out. . . to scorch and consume!" (96).

Thus ambiguously merged with his no-longer-so-remote band of "brothers," the narrator finally discovers

the secret he seeks, when he learns that the deepest experience of Sampson's life--the "culminating point of his existence" (127)--is the latter's identification with *his* deceased predecessor, St. Edmund. In solitude, we see the Abbot worship Edmund's corpse, unwrap his shroud, take its head in his hands, and address to it a solemn prayer.

Carlyle's central tableau is thus a scene of relic-worship, in which a middle-aged man reverently caresses a corpse--a scene which might have seemed somewhat less eccentric to Victorians, accustomed as they were to worship from time to time in cavernous churches filled with elaborate funeral effigies of prelates. Lest we think the Abbott might better have sought his "right man" (125) among those still *living*, the narrator here insists that:

'We touch Heaven when we lay our hand on a human Body,'-- [the deepest mystery lies in the] Body of one Dead;--a temple where the Hero-soul once was and now is not: Oh, all mystery, all pity, all mute *awe* and wonder; *Supernaturalism* brought home to the very dullest; Eternity laid open. . . .

Only such solitary, recurrent spiritual identification with the unappreciated dead, Carlyle claims, can break us free of entrapment in a chaotic and purposeless present. (Anyone who has read Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Windhover" will recognize in this remarkable passage the cadences and sensations with which Hopkins's speaker addresses "my chevalier"). This strange scene can also be interpreted as another Diltheyan attempt to extend consciousness across a temporal divide, but here the central tableaux of the past have become an absence. In a curious way, the narrator has murdered a living past--narrowed it to a single scene of pious and

well-intended necrophilia--in order to render it more amenable to passive appropriation in the present.

All that follows in Samson's life is anticlimax, in any case, and the Editor's record of his life-history concludes with the moral that "The hands of forgotten brave men have made it a World for us. . . ." (134). The real heroes of England, he adds, are those who through all the centuries have worked, "all the men [sic] that ever cut a thistle, drained a puddle out of England, contrived a wise scheme in England, did or said a true and valiant thing in England" (134-35) (Notice the casual sexism and gratuitous nationalism of his otherwise moving refrain.) The narrator's conviction helps assuage his fears that unrecognized work done in the *present* may not matter to the future:

Work? The quantity of done and forgotten work that lies silent under my feet in this world, and escorts and attends me, and supports and keeps me alive, wheresoever I walk or stand, whatsoever I think or do, gives rise to reflections! Is it not enough, at any rate, to strike the thing called "Fame" into total silence for a wise man? (135)

This near-ecstatic epiphany has one bittersweet quality, however: it actually heightens the sense of dislocation and deprivation he feels in the present. Like Dilthey, Carlyle's narrator especially notes the loss of past religious conviction:

But, it is said, our religion is gone: we no longer believe in St. Edmund, no longer see the figure of him "on the rim of the sky," minatory or confirmatory! God's absolute Laws. . . have become. . . computations of Profit and Loss. . . It is even so. To speak in the ancient dialect, we 'have forgotten God.' (139)

A moment's reflection suggests that a sense of elegiac estrangement from past beauty neither follows nor entails simplistic dichotomies of "God" vs. "Profit."

Morris expressed his own forms of yearning for lost beauty, but also sought more secular forms of "spiritual" experience in the past, which might provide some benediction for the present and direction for the future.

Past and Present closes with a rhetorically powerful, characteristically ahistorical exhortation to create an obscurely numinous alternative:

Chaos is dark, deep as Hell; let light be, and there is instead a green flowery world. O, it is great, and there is no other greatness. . . . The enormous, all-conquering, flame-crowned Host, noble every soldier in it; sacred, and alone noble. Let him who is not of it hide himself; let him tremble for himself. . . . O Heavens, will he not bethink himself; he too is so needed in the Host! In hope of the Last Partridge, and some Duke of Weimar among our English Dukes, we will be patient yet awhile. (294)

Once again, however, the incantatory surge of Carlyle's biblical rhetoric passes all Diltheyan "understanding." He *has*, however, rhetorically memorialized one fictional attempt to redeem an infinitesimal moment of lost time.

A more reflective and consistent Victorian historicist was William Morris, whose artistic life was devoted to contemporary realization of elements of medieval art and literature. One of his century's most innovative and influential decorative artists, he also created designs for stained glass windows, textiles, and wallpapers from medieval models. As a co-translator with Eiríkur Magnússon of the Icelandic sagas, he made a major medieval literary form available for the first time to English readers; and as the founder of the Kelmscott Press and pioneer of modern book design, he studied the early printed books of Caxton and other late medieval printers for principles which he embodied in

his own work. In his writings on art and socialism, Morris was also more preoccupied than other Victorian social thinkers--Engels, Ruskin, Arnold, Mill--with the need to preserve and recreate the past. In many wide-ranging essays--"The Lesser Arts," "Art and Labor," "Gothic Architecture," "The Gothic Revival," "Early England," "The Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages," "The Literature of the North"--he drew on valuable features of medieval culture to praise forms of art and labour which had been blighted by nineteenth century capitalism.

More than other major Victorian poets, even those who used medieval subjects--Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Rossetti, Swinburne, and Hopkins, among them--Morris also drew extensively on histories, chronicles, and past literature(s) to construct his plots. Much of the poetry for which he is best known--*The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), *The Earthly Paradise* (1867-70), and *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876)--clearly reflected his eclectic use of medieval European history and literatures. *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 rescuers and hosts tell medieval versions of classical ones.

Almost all of Morris's many prose romances are set in the Middle Ages, including his earliest tales, written in 1856 for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. Among the latter is "Lindenberg's Pool," in which a nineteenth-century narrator is temporarily transported into the thirteenth century. Two of Morris's later

romances, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888), and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), also provide fond but conjectural reconstructions of the economy, kinship patterns, military preparations, music, tribal religion, and burial rituals of Germanic tribal life at the close of the Roman Empire. But one of the nineteenth-century's most complex relationships between a contemporary narrator and medieval subject may be found in Morris's moving historical embodiment of the socialist ideal of "fellowship," the 1889 *A Dream of John Ball*.

Like Carlyle, Morris takes pains to dissociate his love of history from mere antiquarianism and uncritical acceptance of chroniclers' propaganda:

[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 longer with the dull records of the battles and intrigues of kings and scoundrels. ("The Lesser Arts")⁹

Morris even more thoroughly respected the efforts of Carlyle's medieval "workers," but always sought evidence of medieval life he considered more authentic, in sources other than the barren and distorted accounts of progresses and "intrigues" of "kings and scoundrels" he mocks here.

More deeply than for any other Victorian literary figure, Morris's use of medieval history was also motivated by a search for anticipations of the *future* in the past. A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer correctly observed in 1912 that he 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."¹⁰ Morris's fellow utopian socialist Ernst Bloch called historical traces of

as-yet-unachieved ideals *novae*, and he asserted--with Morris--that we should try to understand and recreate such "anticipatory designs" in our own present and future. Morris's desire to find such *novae*--concrete realizations in the past of partial alternatives to "the condition of the working class in England"--extended far beyond John Ruskin's reformism and celebrations of the artistic freedoms of Gothic architecture. Morris was as interested in the *conditions* of medieval labour, as he saw them, as in its *results*:

... 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")¹¹

This hypothetical "*nova*" of medieval life--that it was not only more craft-based, but more communal and egalitarian as well--was the mature realization in Morris's work of an ideal of "fellowship"--mutual love in service to a worthwhile shared cause (compare Peter Kropotkin's "mutual aid"). In his early writings, the conventional personal and sexual nature of these loyalties is more prominent; later configurations of mutual allegiance are wider, and friends and lovers in the later prose romances are often dedicated members of communitarian societies.

Morris's literary descriptions of idealized medieval societies, sketched above, ranged from the early Scandinavian tale "Gertha's Lovers," whose rather self-consciously noble protagonists act to defend their country and a mutually-revered queen, to the already-mentioned *The Roots of the Mountains*, in which a some-

what more historically plausible tribe of "Wolfings" rescues kinspeople from slavery. The fourteenth-century England of *John Ball*, Morris's carefully researched account of the 1381 Peasant's Rebellion, is a better documented and more realistic reconstruction than his Scandinavian and Germanic tales, and his conjectures about it are correspondingly deeper and more reflective. *A Dream* is the most directly polemical and visionary of his historical projections, but it also provides his deepest and most searching analysis of the complex forms of historical sympathy and social consciousness the ideal of communal fellowship will require.

Morris joined England's first socialist party, the Democratic Federation, in 1883; during the next thirteen years of his life he devoted much of his enormous energies to the advocacy of socialism. *A Dream of John Ball* embodied one of Morris's attempts to educate himself and his literate working class audiences about their common history, expose the sources and mechanisms of inhumanity and injustice, and explore historical antecedents which might provide models for pride and emulation. *John Ball* first appeared in 1889, in installments in *Commonweal*, the socialist newspaper Morris edited, interspersed between parts of "Socialism From the Root Up," a brief survey of economic history and the rise of socialism by Morris and his collaborator Ernest Belfort Bax. In context, *A Dream* provided a fuller and much more eloquent literary parallel to the economic arguments with which it was juxtaposed.

The active British socialist movement in the late 1880's was desperately fragmented and small (about 600 members), and worked under constant threat of repression or arrest. This tiny band of socialists and anarchists

could not look back on any successful or completed revolutions, and the ruthless suppression of the 1870 Paris Commune loomed as a warning of the likely consequences of isolated revolt. Against this background, *A Dream of John Ball* asked the obvious painful question: "Can there be any hope for future attempts to effect social change, when so many heroic efforts have failed?" In contrast to the directive "Editor" of *Past and Present*, Morris' narrative voice persuades with eloquence and grace; it offers a much clearer and more accessible image of the imagined past; above all, it invites a dialogue between reader and narrator, as both interpret their shared historical epiphany.

John Ball's analogue of Carlyle's Editor is an autobiographical narrator, a struggling nineteenth-century socialist who is "[S]ometimes . . . rewarded for fretting myself so much about present matters by a quite unasked-for pleasant dream." When his stirring dream ends, he must return to the "row of wretched-looking blue-slatted houses," harsh winds, polluted air and river, and "that sense of dirty discomfort which one is never quit of in London," where he hears the factory whistles which call his fellows inexorably to their repellent and underpaid machine labor.

The dream-past of Morris's narrator is a place of apparent peace, beauty and near-preternatural clarity, a much more sensuously appealing environment than the "Editor"'s regulated monastery in *Past and Present*:

I see some beautiful and noble building new made, as it were for the occasion, as clearly as if I were awake; not vaguely or absurdly, as often happens in dreams, but with all the detail clear and reasonable. (16: 215)

. . . [In] the village. . . I did not see. . . a single modern building, although many of them were nearly new, notably the church,

which was large, and quite ravished my heart with its extreme beauty, elegance, and fitness. The chancel. . . was so new that the dust of the stone still lay white on the midsummer grass beneath the carvings of the windows. (16: 218)

The grace of Morris's careful descriptions of the medieval environment has often been remarked, but equally important in *A Dream* are his descriptions of *people*. The narrator describes the inhabitants of late-fourteenth-century Kent, as first they repair tools, eat and drink, congregate at the marketplace, and greet friends and family; and later as they gather for battle, fight, and mourn their dead.

All his descriptions are suffused with obvious emotion. When the narrator sits with his friend Will Green, and mourns several yeomen who have been killed, he feels again a kinship with the people and scenes around him:

Thus we sat awhile, and once again came that feeling over me of wonder and pleasure at the strange and beautiful sights, mingled with the sights and sounds and scents beautiful indeed, yet not strange, but rather long familiar to me. (16: 259)

Later, shortly before he leaves, he will take a last look back at the long-vanished Kentish village:

. . . as we passed up the street again I was once again smitten with the great beauty of the scene; the house, the church with its new chancel and tower, snow-white in the moonbeams now; the dresses and arms of people, men and women. . . ; their grave sonorous language, and the quaint and measured forms of speech, were again become a wonder to me and affected me almost to tears. (16: 257)

As the dream begins, Morris's autobiographical narrator shyly approaches his fourteenth-century comrades in the guise of a plainly attired, itinerant Essex "scholar" and poet. His language is tentative, and

reflects the double consciousness of his "sending" from the remote future:

"I knew somehow, but I know not how. . . ." (16: 222)

"My mind was at strain to remember something forgotten, which yet had left its mark on it. . . ." (252)

"I . . . looked back. . . with a grief and longing that I could not give myself a reason for, since I was [presumably] to come back so soon. . . ." (261)

"I felt strangely, as though I had more things to say than the words I knew could make clear: as if I wanted to get from other people a new set of words." (257)

One measure of the townspeople's perceptiveness is the degree to which they recognize his displacement; some recognize that the "scholar" is clearly not from their region, but only John Ball is fully aware that he is a literal *revenant*--a "sending from other times."

The narrator is greeted with cordiality by all the townspeople he meets, but feels closest to two of them: the artisan, Will Green, for whom he comes to feel "no little love" (253); and the revolutionary priest John Ball, whose "face [is] [like Morris's] not very noteworthy but for his grey eyes," which "look as if they were gazing at something a long way off, . . . the eyes of the poet or enthusiast" (228). Together, Morris's nineteenth-century narrator and fourteenth-century visionary will struggle to understand and reconcile the paradoxical patterns of their shared past and future.

Midway through the work, Ball delivers a memorial sermon for his slain "brothers" at the village cross, which is one of the great set pieces of late-nineteenth-century literature:

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 hath so hardy a heart that in sorrow he thinketh of fellowship, his sorrow is soon but a story of sorrow. . . . (230-31)

The book's climax, "Betwixt the Living and the Dead," is a conversation between Ball and the "scholar," set in the village church, which lasts through the night before Ball's departure for London and death. The cadences of their language resonate with echoes of Christ's farewell meal and speech on the road to Emmaus.

Ball asks the strange "sending" what is to happen to him, and to his followers, and the narrator tells him, with sadness and deep respect: "If I know more than thou, I do far less; therefore thou art my captain and I thy minstrel" (268). They have already confronted the difference between the narrator's secular faith and Ball's orthodox Catholic one, in their quiet conversation about those of Ball's comrades who have died:

[John Ball] said, "Yea, forsooth, and that is what the Church meaneth by death, and even that I look for; . . . that hereafter I shall see all the deeds that I have done in the body, and what they really were, and what shall come of them; and ever shall I be a member of the Church, and that is the Fellowship; then, even as now."

I sighed as he spoke; then I said, "Yea, somewhat in this fashion have most of men thought, since no man that is can conceive of not being; and I mind me that in those stories of the old Danes, their common word for a man dying is to say, 'He changed his life.'"

"And so deemest thou?"

I shook my head and said nothing.

"What hast thou to say hereon?" said he, "for there seemeth something betwixt us twain as it were a wall that parteth us."

"This," said I, "that though I die and end, yet mankind yet liveth, therefore I end not, since I am a man. . . Is the wall betwixt us gone, friend?"

He smiled as he looked at me, kindly, but sadly and shamefast, and shook his head. (265)

Further apprised of his coming death and the bitter failure of his movement, the saddened Ball responds with dignity and courage, confident that the justice of his cause will somehow, eventually, prevail. Harder for him to understand is the stranger's yet-grimmer message from the future, that greater production will someday bring even greater misery and inequity. To the news of successive forms of supposed "progress"--enclosures, industrialism, use of machinery to sequester wealth, "freedom" which brings wage slavery, helplessness of the workers thus "freed"--he responds with a mingled incredulity, anger, and grief which is much more urgent and more intense than his sadness at the "scholar"'s disbelief in the fellowship of the true Church. Morris clearly expects his audience to share the narrator's "shamefast" response to Ball's aggrieved astonishment that workers of 1887, unlike those of 1381, have not yet risen up to rebel against these new, infernally subtle and barely comprehensible forms of oppression and poverty.

When the priest finally learns the ignominy that nineteenth-century capitalists will make a "principle" of setting people against their fellows, he can bear no more:

"Now am I sorrier than thou hast yet made me," said he; "for when once this is established, how then can it be changed? Strong shall be the tyranny of the latter days. . . . Woe's me, brother, for thy sad and weary foretelling! . . . Canst thou yet tell

me, brother, what that remedy shall be, lest the sun rise upon me made hopeless by thy tale of what is to be?" (284)

As the last night of Ball's life wanes, the narrator now struggles to answer Ball's anguished question. Can he offer no adequate comfort to him as he goes to his death, no assurance that the point of his failed uprising will not be doubly dissipated by political and technological changes beyond his comprehension? Does he *himself* truly believe that failed revolutions have served a purpose?

In effect, he must clarify his earlier response to the priest's sermon at the market cross: his insight that

. . . men [sic] fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. . . . (231-32)

He begins with a lyrical image of changing light in the darkened church, which suggests the processive complexity of their shared hopes:

"Look you, a while ago was the light bright about us; but it was because of the moon, and the night was deep notwithstanding, and when the moonlight waned and died, and there was but a little glimmer in place of the bright light, *yet was the world glad* because all things knew that the glimmer was of day and not of night. . . . Yet forsooth, it may well be that this. . . dawn [shall] be cold and grey and surly; and yet by its light shall men see things as they verily are, and no longer enchanted by the gleam of the moon and the glamour of the dream-tide. By such grey light shall wise men and valiant souls see the remedy, and deal with it, a real thing that may be touched and handled, and no glory of the heavens to be worshipped from afar off." (285)

This, then, is the narrator's central response. History is *not* without collective purpose, but that purpose is manifold and contingent, and the victories and defeats

of one epoch may be more subtly recapitulated in the next. There will be many dawns and many dusks. The only consolations he can offer are that kindred souls will honor the *memory* of Ball's movement (a self-referential prophecy), struggle toward the essential ideals for which he had died, and preserve their common hope that liberation and social justice will someday prevail: in effect, that "We shall overcome. . .":

"The time will come, John Ball, when that dream of thine that this shall one day be, shall be a thing that men shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about, . . . therefore, hast thou done well to hope it; and, if thou heedest this also, as I suppose thou heedest it little, thy name shall abide by thy hope in those days to come, and thou shalt not be forgotten." (285)

Oppression will always win most of the battles. But the spirit of his movement will *not* fail, because it is the resilient spirit of all human beings at their most humane:

"Yet shall all bring about the end, till thy deeming of folly and ours shall be one, and thy hope and our hope; and then--the Day will have come." (286)

Ultimately, this projection of faith becomes a clear secular counterpart of Ball's hope that he will rejoin his "fellows" in death--the "religion of socialism." As the deeds of future generations have vindicated John Ball's sacrifice, so must nineteenth-century and future audiences redeem that faith. Indeed, the priest finally understands that his visitor maintains a secular counterpart of his own vision--"secular" also in the literal sense of extending across centuries and cultural divides--which he earlier expressed in the hauntingly beautiful analogy of his sermon at the market cross:

"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 seems to fail to-day, but in days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be holpen 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." (233)

John Ball's final farewell to his strange friend across the divide of centuries also suggests a "greatness" of shared purpose which is deeper and more genuine than anything Carlyle's "new Duke of Weimar" and his followers might offer:

"I go to life and death, and leave thee; and scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of the days beyond thine to tell what shall be, as thou hast told me [cf. *News from Nowhere*], for I know not if that shall help or hinder thee; but since we have been kind and very friends, I will not leave thee without a wish of goodwill, so at least I wish thee what thou thyself wishest for thyself, and that is hopeful strife and blameless peace, which is to say in one word, life. Farewell, friend." (286)

Earlier in this essay, I remarked on the unconscious omissions and exclusions of all but the best nineteenth-century "medieval" literature--inevitable, perhaps, in historical reconstructions by educated middle-class men for a readership of five percent of the English population. Most Victorian authors of such historical reconstructions (like most Victorian writers of any persuasion) tended, for example, to neglect the poor; Morris was an honorable exception. Most disregarded Jews and non-Europeans; members of sexual minorities; and most conspicuously, women. More realistic studies of the Middle Ages by anthropologists and economic historians have long since undercut any lingering

tendency to identify the deeds of Carlyle's "heroes" with Morris's "kings and scoundrels"; a victory there. "History" itself has become a more complex entity in the process. More depressingly, the capacity of twentieth-century militarism and technology to alienate *literate* individuals from their history has also made it more difficult than ever to believe that there may once have existed, 700 years ago, or ever, a world which reflected more cohesively the social, aesthetic, and intellectual capacities of its inhabitants.

In any case, the obvious limitations in inclusion of Victorian historicism need not eclipse its insights into the essential communality and continuity of life. At their best, Victorian searches for historical alternatives to personal and social alienation evoked persuasive models for future integration of aesthetic and social identity, among them Morris's (and John Ball's) regulative ideal of "fellowship."

Most of their future, after all, is ours as well. In a contemporary society which faces *global* economic inequities even greater than the *national* ones Morris condemned, along with the subtle tyranny of military technocracy and catastrophic threats of nuclear destruction, we struggle to preserve some sense of historical continuity, as a ground of conscience and of self-respect. Whether we try to extend Dilthey's *Verstehen* to the past or the future, to repressed or simply foreign cultures, 'historicist' abilities to identify with others across the enclosures of our spatial, temporal, and cultural environments will be essential if we hope to negotiate a future worthy of our past.

The fictive "heroes" of *Past and Present* assured Carlyle that a natural force united his past and future.

Morris's "natural forces" are more social, but also more genuinely historical. *Past and Present's* medieval "workers" provided a model for Carlyle's conception of future heroism. John Ball and Morris's narrator share a deeper faith, in the continuity of "the life that is in [fellowship], that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it," (230) a faith which enables his narrator and hero to endure apparent failure and defeat.

A Dream's conclusion is also more participatory and inviting than *Past and Present's* demanding final exhortation. In Morris's vision, the power to effect social change derives not only from a sense of one's own just cause, but from a loyalty to those who have struggled for other such causes, and may have to struggle again--solidarity, in effect, with a community of secular saints. This is essentially a vision of counterfactual dialogue and invitation, which affirms John Ball's insight that we *should* sustain an ideal of communitarian "fellowship," *because* it may be as remote as Kant's "kingdom of ends." For so we remain human.

More than Abbot Samson's solitary worship of the body of the dead St. Edmund, the meeting of the narrator and John Ball thus reclaims for a secular age some of the images of continuity provided for Ball by his religion. Readers of Carlyle's book cannot really share the experience which forms its central tableau, for its remote and figurative representation of a union of heroes effectively silences its audience. Morris's participatory narrator, by contrast, subtly enacts the central conviction of his life, that history can be rendered meaningful by a counterfactual "friendship" and communion of persons across time. *A Dream of*

John Ball's complexly loving interchange with the past is one of his century's fullest expressions of a genuinely empathetic and imaginative historicism, which witnesses its narrator's belief in the continuity and coherence of human emotions, and his faith in a bonding of often-unrecognized social and artistic saints, across changes of language, culture, and the collective silence of our individual deaths. The priest's sermon once again conveys best Morris's testimony to his audience, and to us:

... 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. (234)

NOTES

1. "History, Discourse, and Discontinuity," *Salmagundi* 20 (1972): 232.
2. Dilthey, *Collected Works*, Stuttgart: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, vol. 7, trans. J. J. Kuehl, in *Theories of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner, New York: Free Press, 1965, 213-225.
3. Dilthey, *Ibid*, in Gardiner, 219, 221.
4. See Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, London: Virago, 1989.
5. *The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.
6. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Stanford University Press, 1968, 30-31.
7. *Past and Present*, edited Richard Altick. New York: New York University Press, 1977, 42. Hereafter references to this edition are cited in parentheses after the quotation.
8. Compare G. M. Hopkins, "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire": "Squadroned masks and man-marks / treadmire toil there / Footfretted in it."
9. *Collected Works*, 24 vols., edited May Morris, London: Longmans, 1910-15, XX: 8. Subsequent quotations from this edition are referenced in parentheses by volume and page number.
10. *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August, 1912, 312.
11. *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, edited and compiled by Eugene D. LeMire, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969, 104-105.