

SOCIALISM
and the **LITERARY ARTISTRY**
of **WILLIAM MORRIS**_____

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Introduction

A Dream of John Ball and *News from Nowhere* are only the best known of William Morris's many efforts to realize an ideal of humane and genuinely "popular" socialist art. As a restless liberal in 1878, he had written that "art so sickens under selfishness and luxury, that she will not live thus isolated and exclusive."¹ As a disaffected member of Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, he published the first version of *Chants for Socialists* in 1884, the year he joined with Andreas Scheu, Friedrich Engels, Eleanor Marx, and other SDF dissidents to found the new Socialist League. During his time as editor of *Commonweal*, the League's newspaper from 1885 through 1889, he also published the following works in its pages:

"The Pilgrims of Hope" (1885, in *Commonweal*), a narrative poem based on the Paris Commune;

A Dream of John Ball (1886, in *Commonweal*), his evocation of the Peasant Uprising of 1381;

The House of the Wolfings (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), idealized reconstructions of early medieval tribal and communal life; and

News from Nowhere (1890, in *Commonweal*), the "romance" of utopian anticipation that is probably his most widely read work.

In seven years of intense political activity, Morris also prepared several thousand editorials and short "political notes" for *Commonweal*; kept a "Socialist Diary" in the early months of 1887; wrote the comedy *Nupkins Awakened, or the Tables Turned* for performance by the League the same year; co-authored, again for *Commonweal*, twenty-one articles with Ernest Belfort Bax, which later appeared in revised form as the book *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1893); and drafted scores of other essays on labor and art, collected in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882), *Signs of Change* (1888; later reprinted in volumes 22 and 23 of the *Collected Works*), May Morris's two-volume collection *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936), and Eugene LeMire's anthology *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris* (1969).

1. "The Lesser Arts," William Morris, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915), 22:25; hereafter abbreviated as *CW*.

Despite the range and variety of Morris's socialist writings, two classes of critics have often dismissed them as irrelevant, naive, or worse. Apolitical commentators—some of them ardent admirers of his other accomplishments—have simply rejected much of his literature of the "Social Revolution" out of hand. Leftist critics, on the other hand, have often adopted a tone that might be called more-"scientific"-than-thou, and dismissed his socialist writings as a variety of bourgeois escapism at worst, and romantic anarchism at best. Morris intensely disliked the Victorian moralism and conventional realism of his time, and there is undeniably something lyrically counterfactual about all his work, including the socialist writings, for he strove throughout his life to blend psychologically liberating qualities of romanticism—subtle enjoyment of a kinetic beauty, and the restorative power of fluidity and fullness—with a growing respect for the quickening powers of human solidarity in sorrow and happiness, failure and success. More than his "scientific" critics, Morris also sensed—correctly—that the socialist commonwealth is a regulative ideal, a communitarian variant, in fact, of Kant's more openly counterfactual "realm of ends," and a visionary limit of the world as we know it.

Others have shared this vision, of course. In his 1976 postscript to *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, E. P. Thompson praised Morris's ability to create "Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*."² Marx himself was an ardent admirer of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy and German poetry who envisioned a "richness of *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, *senses* capable of human gratifications . . .," and remarked that "the world has long dreamed of something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality."³ Such appeals did not originate with Marx or end with Morris, for they are the essence of socialist humanism, and will survive its many distortions and betrayals. In "Marxism and Historicism," Frederick Jameson also appealed to such millenarian ideals when he summoned the past and a "Utopian future" to "judge" the present:

The past will itself become an active agent . . . and . . . come before us as a radically different life form which rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgment on us, and through us, on the social formation in which we exist. . . . This is the final reason why Marxism is not, in the current sense, a "place of truth," . . . only the Utopian future is a place of truth in this sense, and the privilege of . . . the present lies not in its possession [i.e., of the "truth"], but . . . in the rigorous judgment it may be felt to pass on us.⁴

2. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2d ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 791.

3. Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, May 1843, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (New York: International, 1967), 214-15.

4. Frederick Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History* 11 (1979): 70-71.

Such “judgment[s]” especially informed Morris’s historical meditations, in which he blended ideals of past-in-future and future-in-past in complex ways. Recall again, for example, the famous exchange that concludes *News from Nowhere*. Ellen, in the “present” of the twenty-first century, tells “Guest” (Morris) to “Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship—but not before.” Guest replies: “Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.”⁵

Morris’s utopian communism also reflected a mature and unillusioned appraisal of the nature of art in an exploitive society: once, for example, he closed a letter to a cautious social democrat with a wry but cheerfully blunt denunciation of “the Monopolists and their parasites—of which I am one.”⁶ He clearly saw in recorded and unrecorded history unending patterns of injustice and repression, and strongly believed that much serious art is inherently tragic. Among his longer works, *The Roots of the Mountains* and *News from Nowhere* are more “utopian” (meliorative; hopeful), while “The Pilgrims of Hope” and *The House of the Wolfings*, by contrast, are more “tragic.” *A Dream of John Ball* is a complex and poignant mixture of the two: witness, for example, the priest’s lovely final sermon, which modulates vindication of the doomed uprising into a kind of plagal cadence:

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

Therefore, I tell you that the proud, despiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he hath no fellow; and he that hath so hardy a heart that in sorrow he thinketh of fellowship, his sorrow is soon but a story of sorrow.⁷

Not “escapism” but clear-sighted realism prompted Morris to look beyond the nineteenth century for the historical ironies and contrasts he sought to portray.

The aesthetic qualities and stoic historicism of Morris’s socialist writings also refined forms of sensibility and awareness that had been present in his poetry

5. CW, 16:211.

6. Letter to James Mavor, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 2, pt. 2 (1885–1888), 644.

7. CW, 16:233, 231.

from the first. His first major work, *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), strained against the conventions of a romantic "medievalism" largely accepted by his predecessors and contemporaries (de la Motte-Fouqué, Scott, Tennyson, Rossetti); a similar ambivalence toward conventional heroism is also manifest in *The Life and Death of Jason*, in which the chief argonaut never reconciles his inconsistent desires for simple life and heroic reputation. Closer prototypes of Morris's later communist literature also appear in *The Earthly Paradise* (1870-1871), whose complex narrative texture blends the tales of several cultures and centuries in a communal vindication of human desire, effort, and loss. The tales are not narrated by a single "objective" author, but by a chorus of medieval speakers; their complex patterns of mutual empathy and recognition are reflected in the work's complexly echeloned frame-structure, simpler versions of which appear in *A Dream of John Ball*, *News from Nowhere*, and "The Pilgrims of Hope." *The Earthly Paradise's* narrators are painfully aware of the heedless brutality of "great" historical events, and conscious also that they can only struggle to understand such events, admire those who have struggled well, and envision possibilities for future tranquility.

At some point, moreover, between his work on *The Earthly Paradise* and his visit to Iceland (1871-1873), Morris began to take personal comfort in a paradoxical, near-mystical belief in isolated instances of selfless action, as continuing sources of strength and solace, and to see such lost epiphanies, in effect, as a form of secular redemption. His curiously eloquent tribute to the doomed hero of his joint translation (with Eiríkur Magnússon) of the *Grettissaga*, for example ("Nay with the dead I deal not; this man lives"), anticipates not only his later, more serious eulogy of John Ball, but also the redemptive rhetoric of still later and more obvious resurrection myths:

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, / Alive as you and me. . . .
Says I, "But Joe, you're ten years dead" / "I never died," says he.

Finally, Morris's socialist poems and other writings are distinguished most sharply from the hortatory prose of other well-known Victorian polemicists (not only Arnold and Ruskin, but also Marx and Engels), by their personal speaking voice. When he turned to a socialist audience of people who shared, or at least recognized, the goals he himself embraced, Morris's voice naturally assumed the infelt "we" and "you" of John Ball's "fellowship." The resulting straightforward speech is both resonant and intimate, and the mixture itself adds urgency and beauty to its rhythms:

Art is long and life is short; let us at least do something before we die. . . . One man with an idea in his head is in danger of being considered a madman. . . . ten men sharing an idea begin to act, a hundred draw attention as fanatics, a thousand

and society begins to tremble, a hundred thousand and . . . the cause has victories tangible and real; and why only a hundred thousand? Why not a hundred million and peace upon the earth? You and I who agree together, it is we who have to answer that question.⁸

Similar instances of even-tempered encouragement and poignant doubt, historical distance and personal immediacy, suffuse all of Morris's socialist writings. They underlie their sensuous celebration of "The simple joys of the lovely earth";⁹ their sense of compassion and conviction that shared effort and perception can be purposeful and renovative in themselves; their grief for failed revolutions, and ethical insistence on impassioned commitment; and finally, their persistent, equally impassioned hope that "we" may someday, after all, "answer that question." Far from "escapist," Morris's utopian communism was always tempered by many clear-eyed doubts, but sustained by the redemptive ideals he expressed in the climax of *A Dream of John Ball*:

John Ball, be of good cheer. . . . thy name shall abide by the hope in those days to come. . . . 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.

. . . 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.¹⁰

Gary Aho's *William Morris: A Reference Guide* lists 497 entries from the decade 1973-1982, and the last two decades have seen a sustained resurgence of interest in all aspects of Morris's work. The ten essays in this volume testify to the range of this interest.

The opening essay, Lawrence Lutchmansingh's "Archaeological Socialism: Utopia and Art in William Morris," provides a thorough analysis of Morris's deeply held views about the nature of work and its relation to artistic creation.

Five essays on *News from Nowhere* follow. Laura Donaldson's "Boffin in Paradise, or the Artistry of Reversal in *News from Nowhere*" argues that Morris's re-creation of a character from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* undercuts the social conventions of the nineteenth-century novel; Norman Talbot's "A Guest in the Future: *News from Nowhere*" considers Morris's subtle merging of frames and narrators. Lyman Sargent's "William Morris and the Anarchist

8. "Art under Plutocracy," *CW*, 16: 191.

9. "The Society of the Future," in May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), 2:454.

10. *CW*, 16:284-85, 234.

Tradition" compares the socialist commonwealths implicit in *Nupkins Awakened*, *A Dream of John Ball*, and *News from Nowhere*, and comments on the anarchist as well as socialist elements of Morris's utopian communism. Alex MacDonald's "Bellamy, Morris, and the Great Victorian Debate" surveys responses to Bellamy's work, and examines Morris's work as a countermodel to dystopian aspects of Bellamy's projections. Darko Suvin's "Counter-Projects: William Morris and the Science Fiction of the 1880s" identifies two examples of contemporary science fiction that included Morris as a *character*, and two other works, Edward Dering's *In the Light of the Twentieth Century* (1886) and Walter Besant's *The Inner House* (1888), whose structural features may have contributed to some aspects of Morris's plot.

Two essays consider other prose romances. Michael Holzman's "The Encouragement and Warning of History: William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*" interprets Morris's work in the light of contemporary political conflicts, the histories available to him of the 1381 peasants' uprising, and his own parallel historical accounts, published in *Commonweal*. Carole Silver's "Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris" defines several ways in which Morris's final, "escapist" prose romances continued to reflect essential elements of his socialist beliefs.

Finally, two essays discuss Morris's socialist poetry. Chris Waters's "Morris's 'Chants' and the Problems of Socialist Culture" offers the first sustained analysis of the substantial contemporary importance of Morris's socialist hymns, and examines the inherent limitations of literary and musical efforts by middle-class revolutionaries to speak for the working class. In "Narrative Design in *The Pilgrims of Hope*," I examine the complexities of the poem's narrative voice and feminist implications in the monologues spoken by the narrator's wife, and argue that the poem's political eloquence is strengthened, not weakened, by the elegiac subplot for which it is often criticized.

In order that this collection might serve as an introduction to its subject, I have also added a brief bibliography of complementary articles, book chapters, and dissertations. It is my hope that the collection as a whole reflects something of the freshness and innovation with which Morris managed to blend artistry and conviction in his socialist literary work.