

Rewilding Morris: Wilderness and the Wild in the Last Romances

In William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), Old Hammond describes England as 'a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt'. His companion Guest, a time traveller from the nineteenth century who has already been entertained with a brief tour of twenty-second-century London, questions this description. 'One thing, it seems to me, does not go with your word of "garden" for this country', he observes; 'you have spoken of wastes and forests, and I myself have seen the beginnings of your Middlesex and Essex forest. Why do you keep such things in a garden? And isn't it very wasteful to do so?' The explanation Old Hammond offers is that, as a society, Nowherians 'like these pieces of wild nature and can afford them, so we have them; let alone that as to the forests, we need a great deal of timber, and suppose that our sons and sons' sons will do the like.'¹ The wild thus has its place in *Nowhere*, serving both an aesthetic and a practical function. It meets, as Paul Meier observes, 'a dominating and impelling human need to draw from nature the means of existence as well as visual pleasure and healthy well-being'.² Living in an age in which, Morris claimed, 'if the air and the sunlight and the rain could have been bottled up and monopolized for the profit of the individual it would have been', it is no surprise that his vision of the future is one in which humanity has found a more appreciative and constructive engagement with the natural world.³

News from Nowhere is largely regarded as Morris's culminating, if highly personalized, vision of Socialist ideals in practice. In May Morris's words, 'it epitomizes so much' in terms of Morris's thoughts and activities as a political campaigner in the 1880s, offering an imaginative interpretation of the ideas he had explored in his political lectures regarding how human beings might organize their communities and their interactions with Nature in a post-revolutionary society

¹ May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 24 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910-15), XVI, pp. 72, 74. Further references will be abbreviated to *CW*.

² Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, trans. by Frank Grubb, 2 vols (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), II, p. 420.

³ 'The End and the Means', in May Morris, ed., *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), II, p. 430. Further references will be abbreviated to *AWS*.

liberated from the constraints and injustices of capitalism.⁴ *News from Nowhere* is not, however, Morris's final work of literature, although some critics seem rather to wish that it was. Between 1890 and his death in 1896, William Morris wrote six further stories: *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897) and *The Sundering Flood* (1897), the latter two being published posthumously. Now most commonly grouped together under the title of 'prose romances', they remain one of the most contested elements of Morris's literary legacy but also one of the most important, not least because in these stories Morris broadens his vision of the natural world and humanity's place within it. Whilst the Nowherians enjoy at leisure their 'pieces of wild nature', the protagonists of the last romances are forced to confront the realities of wilderness in all its awful splendour, and in doing so they learn what it means to be truly wild themselves.

I wish to propose in this chapter that understanding the last romances as wild works can generate a new appreciation of them in the twenty-first century, the early decades of which have seen a growing ecological and cultural fascination with wilderness and the concept of wildness. We have, in recent years, also witnessed the coining of a new term, 'rewilding', which relates originally to proposals for the rewilding of our landscapes but which has subsequently been applied more broadly to consider how we might re-energize our own overly regimented and largely urbanized lives. At the heart of the concept of rewilding is a desire to transform our relationship as human beings with the natural world. As George Monbiot, one of the most influential proponents of rewilding, has explained: 'Some people see rewilding as a retreat from nature; I see it as a re-involvement. [...] I see rewilding as an enhanced opportunity for people to engage with and delight in the natural world.'⁵ Mark Bekoff extends Monbiot's application of the term further, arguing that 'rewilding means appreciating, respecting, and accepting other beings and landscapes for who or what they are, not for who or what we want them to be.'⁶ With their ebullient celebration of the natural world and their protagonists' appreciative and respectful

⁴ *CW*, XVI, p. xi.

⁵ George Monbiot, *Feral* (2013), (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 11.

⁶ Mark Bekoff, *Rewilding our Hearts: Building Pathways of Compassion and Coexistence* (Novata, Cal.: New World Library, 2014), p. 13.

engagement with it, Morris's last romances might indeed serve as a manifesto for rewilding over a century before the term or the ideas and practices it denotes became part of our cultural discourse. With his political acumen, his awareness of historical processes and his understanding of social and cultural dynamics, Morris was often far ahead, rather than merely against, the age in which he lived, and we still have much to learn from his ideas regarding the inherent value of wild places and the need to remain open and responsive to the influence of the wild.⁷

Wild Writing

Wildness is not, admittedly, a quality we might readily expect from a writer or his works in his final years. As Edward Said observes, 'the accepted notion is that age confers a spirit of reconciliation and serenity on late works, often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of reality', as manifested for example in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*.⁸ Perhaps unconsciously motivated by such an expectation, several critics have identified these qualities in Morris's last romances. E. P. Thompson writes of their 'prevailing mood of calm and fulfilment'; Dorothy Hoare proposes that they exude a 'mature autumnal quiet', and Amanda Hodgson suggests that they move towards a 'point of rest' and a creative 'stasis'.⁹ There is certainly some material to support a 'Late Style' theory in the last romances: their magical elements, for example, gesture at Said's 'miraculous transformation of reality', whilst the quests of the protagonists invariably end in personal fulfilment and social reconciliation. But there is also a danger in interpreting the last romances exclusively in these terms: to do so is to suggest that they offer closure rather than inspiration, that they espouse rest rather than action, and that they have more to say about the end rather than the totality of life. We are hereby left uncomfortably close to George Bernard Shaw's reductive view of the romances as a

⁷ The phrase 'against the age' is taken from a letter by Edward Burne-Jones written in 1853 in which he refers to proposals for establishing a 'Brotherhood', to which Morris had already been enlisted, which would engage in a 'Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age'; see J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899; repr. New York: Dover, 1995), I, p. 63. Peter Faulkner borrowed the phrase for his own book on Morris – see *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980).

⁸ Edward Said, 'Thoughts on Late Style', *London Review of Books*, 5 August 2004, pp. 3-7 (p. 3).

⁹ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Revised Edition (London: Merlin Press, 1976), p. 680; Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 36; Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 197.

'refuge from reality', a position which enables us to forgive their idiosyncrasies and accord them an untroublesome minor place in the Morris canon.¹⁰

The last romances might indeed have received a rather more generous reception from some critics had they readily embraced such quiescence and offered their readers an escape from the world, rather than demanding a transformed engagement with it. But in the true spirit of wildness, the last romances refuse to conform to expectations and have, in consequence, generated a range of critical responses, from outright ridicule and bemused incomprehension to various attempts to justify or explain them away. A. T. Quiller-Couch, writing in 1896, concluded that they could only be 'preserved from general derision' by the fact that Morris must have 'a pathetic conviction that he is doing the right thing, odd as it may appear'; by 1977 Paul Thompson still felt able to dismiss them as 'gothic fancies of his old age, created for his own pleasure', whilst his more recent biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, suggests that we view them as 'dream worlds' which are 'out of place and out of time', thus saving us the trouble of trying to understand their relevance for Morris's own age or for ours.¹¹ This is not to say that the last romances are without their stalwart champions, for there have been many of them since these remarkable stories were first published. W. B. Yeats, one of their most enthusiastic readers, claimed that 'they were the only books I was ever to read slowly that I might not come too quickly to the end', whilst C. S. Lewis celebrated them as 'the real crown' of Morris's work.¹² In the last three decades of the twentieth century there was a renewed – if modest – flourish of interest in the last romances, possibly influenced by a burgeoning interest in literary fantasy more generally and Ballantine Books' decision to publish new editions as part of their Adult Fantasy series.¹³ Carole Silver and Joseph Dunlap edited a fine collection of essays in *Studies in the Late Romances*, published in 1976, and these works subsequently enjoyed a resurgence of sorts in terms of serious scholarly attention, as evidenced in various book

¹⁰ George Bernard Shaw, 'Morris as I Knew Him', *AWS*, II, pp. ix-xi (p. xxix).

¹¹ A. T. Quiller-Couch, 'A Literary Causerie. Mr. William Morris', *Speaker*, 14 (1896), 391-92 (p. 392); Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (London: Heinemann, 1967; repub. London: Quartet Books, 1977), pp. 178-79; Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 365, 364.

¹² W. B. Yeats *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), p. 174; C. S. Lewis *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 48.

¹³ Ballantine Books published editions of *The Wood beyond the World* (1969), *The Well at the World's End* (1970), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1971) and *The Sundering Flood* (1973).

chapters and articles. Happily, such appreciative scholarship continues in the twenty-first century, although in the broader context of both Morris studies and the field of nineteenth-century literary studies the romances remain something of a minority interest. Writing at the end of the 1960s, Norman Talbot exposed the 'inadequacy' of much of the criticism of these stories which focuses repeatedly on their supposedly awkward language and apparent lack of realism, and his comments remain relevant and instructive today. 'It may be true that they make special demands upon the reader', Talbot concedes, but then reminds us that so do 'many other works of extraordinary merits' which do not attract the same 'desperate partizanship'. Far from being a deluded attempt to 'escape from an undesirable world', as some critics claim, Talbot argues persuasively that these are stories that move us 'into a richer and more human world'.¹⁴

They also move us into a wilder, less predictable and less comfortable world, and they do this at the very level of form and language.¹⁵ Morris found himself temperamentally and creatively unable to write a realist novel, the dominant fictional prose form of the nineteenth century. The one he began writing in 1872 was abandoned after fifteen chapters, with Morris claiming it was 'nothing but landscape and sentiment', and consequently signified 'an end of my novel-writing'.¹⁶ Irrespective of the merits or otherwise of this unfinished work, Morris found in the romance a far more amenable vehicle for his fictional writing; *News from Nowhere* openly declares itself a 'utopian romance' and although Morris himself never specifically categorized them as such, the works of his final years have been readily accommodated under that title, with May Morris identifying them as a distinct phase of her father's 'romance-writing'.¹⁷ Indeed Morris's creative engagement with the romance began with his very earliest fictional works, the stories he wrote for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* published in 1856. These are stories in which, as

¹⁴ Norman Talbot, 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris', *Southern Review* (Adelaide), vol. 3 (1968-69), 339-57 (p. 339).

¹⁵ For my own previous reflections on the form and language of the last romances see: Philippa Bennett, *Wonderlands, The Last Romances of William Morris* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 8-10 and pp. 194-197; Philippa Bennett, 'Radical Tales', in *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss: William Morris's Radicalism and the Embodiment of Dreams*, edited by Michelle Weinroth and Paul Leduc Browne (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2014), pp. 85-105 (pp. 85-91).

¹⁶ Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984-96), I, p. 162.

¹⁷ *CW*, XIV, p. xxiv.

Eugene LeMire notes, 'the conventions of medieval romance and courtly love' are 'deliberately evoked', both in their detailed attention to the colours, forms and textures of the 'accoutrements' of the Middle Ages and in 'the protagonists' heroic aspiration to achieve honour'.¹⁸ Nonetheless even in these earliest works Morris experiments with the traditional romance form, and these short stories read as strikingly modern with their intensely evocative dream-like and hallucinatory episodes, their uncompromising representation of the brutality of medieval life, and their stark emotional and psychological realism. Morris returned to the romance in the 1880s in *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), *The House of the Wolfings* (1889) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), its flexibility enabling him to combine imagination and historical documentation in recreating those earlier communal forms of social organization and social protest that had inspired him in his study of history and politics after joining the Socialist movement in 1883. The romance thus appealed creatively to Morris in different ways at different times of his life, but it is in his final prose works of the 1890s that he achieves his most fertile and accomplished relationship with the romance and demonstrates most profoundly its capacity to re-envisage and recreate the world on wilder terms.

The romance is by very nature a wild mode which refuses to be reined in. In its medieval form, as Eugene Vinaver observes, there is often 'no single beginning and no single end' to a story; knights 'are apt to abandon at any time one quest for another, only to be sidetracked again a moment later', and 'any theme can re-appear after an interval'.¹⁹ Such narrative dishevelment is anathema to the chronological precision, plot structure and thematic cohesion of the nineteenth-century realist novel, and whilst Morris's last romances certainly borrow something from the orderliness of the novel, they enthusiastically espouse the long journeys, interrupted quests and multiple adventures of the medieval romance. Similarly in terms of content, the romance challenges and discomfits its readers; Northrop Frye has described the world of the romance as an 'improbable, desiring, erotic, and violent world', a description readily applicable to Morris's final works which incorporate

¹⁸ Eugene D. LeMire, 'Introduction', in William Morris, *The Hollow Land and Other Contributions to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. xxviii.

¹⁹ Eugene Vinaver, *Form and Meaning in Medieval Romance* (London: MHRA 1966), pp. 12, 8.

magic, unabashed sensuality and the uncompromising conflict of battle.²⁰ But the wildness of the romance is expressed most significantly of all in what W. R. J. Barron calls its 'revolutionary instinct'.²¹ As Kathryn Hume observes, when popular realist fiction 'offers us a world whose values basically agree with our own, we feel no pressure to review our assumptions about reality'; in contrast the romance rejects complacency and conformity, and questions rather than confirms our understanding and acceptance of so-called reality by presenting us with 'an alternative model based on other ideals'.²² If we can be open and responsive to this alternative model, we can fully appreciate the purpose and power of the romance.

To appreciate fully the purpose and power of Morris's own romances does however require us to be open and responsive also to their language and style. For some critics the language of the last romances seems to be an insurmountable obstacle to the enjoyment of the stories. It is a 'language to be abhorred' declared one early critic, with several later ones concurring censoriously that the archaisms and 'wilfully unusual sentence-construction' render them very difficult, if not impossible, to read.²³ Those more attuned to the beauty of the language of the romances have offered an equally vigorous defence. H. G. Wells celebrated their 'clean strong sentences and sweet old words', claiming that the act of reading them served as a form of 'purification', and C. S. Lewis argued that their language and style are 'incomparably easier and clearer' than much modern prose due to 'their careful avoidance of rhetoric, gloss, and decoration'.²⁴ In an attempt to settle the matter of the supposed difficulty and obfuscation of the last romances once and for all, Norman Talbot provided an extensive and illuminating analysis of their language in an article in *The Journal of the William Morris Society* in 1989, and this is still the best resource for readers interested in understanding, in Talbot's words, 'how

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of the Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 61.

²¹ W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longmans 1987), p. 7.

²² Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 84; Barron, p. 7.

²³ Unsigned review of *The Sundering Flood*, *Academy*, 53 (1898), 304-5 (p. 305); Amanda Hodgson, *The Witch in the Wood: William Morris's Romance Heroines and the Late-Victorian 'New Woman'* (London: William Morris Society, 2000), p. 23. For other critical responses to the language of Morris's last romances see: Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*; Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), and Colin Franklin, *Printing and the Mind of Morris: Three Paths to the Kelmscott Press* (Cambridge: Rampant Lions Press, 1986).

²⁴ H. G. Wells, 'The Well at the World's End', Review, *Saturday Review*, 82 (1896), 413-15 (p. 414); C. S. Lewis, *Rehabilitations*, p. 39.

Morris's style works, and what it works at'.²⁵ Talbot notes that etymologically the romances employ 'a basically Anglian and Norse vocabulary' whilst stylistically they have 'no great care for when one sentence might stop, so that two or more sentences may make up one periodic structure'.²⁶ Morris also, as Dustin Geeraert has noted, 'uses features characteristic of Old Norse poetry such as kennings' and 'a great deal of alliteration'.²⁷ Why Morris chose to write in this way at the end of the nineteenth century remains open to speculation, but his choice of language certainly reflects his own interest in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literature and draws on his experiences of translating both *Beowulf* and the Icelandic Sagas.²⁸ There is also a vigour and simplicity about the style of the romances and a straightforward honesty in the conversations of his protagonists which are essential in conveying the spirit and purpose of these stories. In *The Wood Beyond the World*, for example, Walter tells the Maid only minutes after meeting her in person, 'thou art indeed my love, and my dear and my darling', and she in turn confesses, 'I also [...] have cast mine eyes on thee to have thee for my love and my darling, and my speech-friend'.²⁹ There is neither time nor inclination here for the tedious to-ing and fro-ing of an elaborate and extended courtship, only a forthright expression of feeling and intention.

In their language as well as form the last romances thus offer us a wilder type of narrative, invoking both the cultural and linguistic vitality of an earlier age and demonstrating how a dynamic language unfettered by grammatical niceties can convey the immediacy of human experience free from the 'introspective nonsense' and 'rhetorical word-spinn[ing]' which Morris so abhorred in the nineteenth-century novel.³⁰ We might consider Morris's mode of writing in the last romances therefore as an act of narrative rewilding – a means of rethinking and reinvigorating what we read and how we read it.

²⁵ Norman Talbot, "'Whilom, as tells the tale": the Language of the Prose Romances', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, vol. VIII, no. 2 (Spring 1989), 16-26 (p.16).

²⁶ Talbot, "'Whilom, as tells the tale'", p. 17.

²⁷ Dustin Geeraert, "'The land which ye seek is the land which I seek to flee from". *The Story of the Glittering Plain* and Teutonic Democracy.' *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, vol. XX, no. 1 (Winter 2012), 18-35 (p. 29).

²⁸ Morris's translation of *Beowulf* was published by the Kelmscott Press in 1895; Morris worked with the Icelandic scholar Eiríkr Magnússon on translating the Icelandic sagas and these translations were published under the title of the *Saga Library* between 1891 and 1905.

²⁹ CW, XVII, p. 33.

³⁰ *News from Nowhere*, CW, XVI, p. 149; 'The Society of the Future', AWS, II, p. 464.

Wild Places

In its flexibility, adaptability and expansiveness, Morris also found in the romance the ideal literary mode through which to explore the nature and experience of wilderness. Wilderness is the archetypal wild place, but it is also a problematic and contested concept for as Max Oelschlaeger observes, ‘a definitive idea of wilderness does not exist [...] the idea of wilderness is what anyone or group cares to think.’³¹ To speak of wilderness is to speak of the myriad of historical, cultural and economic processes that have shaped our conception of wild places and our relationship with them over thousands of years, and it is thus important to recognize that our understanding of wilderness at both the personal and the social level will inevitably be ideologically inflected and most likely influenced by a good dose of nostalgia. We also, according to George Monbiot, have conveniently short memories when it comes to our conception of wild places. Writing in twenty-first-century Britain, Monbiot laments that ‘the ancient character of the land, the forests that covered it and the animals that lived in them – which until historical times included wolves, bears, lynx, wildcats, boar and beavers – have been forgotten by almost everyone’, meaning that after centuries of clearing and exploiting the landscape, ‘open, treeless hills are widely seen as natural’. The consequences go far beyond perpetuating faulty memories; ‘spend two hours sitting in a bushy suburban garden anywhere in Britain’, Monbiot claims, ‘and you are likely to see more birds, and of a wider range of species, than you would while walking five miles across almost any open landscape in the uplands’.³² What we now travel to, photograph, picnic at and generally enjoy in our leisure time as a ‘natural’ wild landscape reconnecting us to an ancient past may well, in actuality, be a bleak memorial of ecological decimation on the part of humanity.

Whilst wilderness and what constitutes a truly wild space is thus clearly a complex and indeed emotive subject, the American writer and environmentalist Gary Snyder provides us with a cogent and concise working definition, proposing that ‘a *Wilderness* is always a specific place, and it is there for the critters that live in it. In some cases a few humans will be living in it too’. But defining wilderness is only the

³¹ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 281.

³² Monbiot, p. 69.

starting point; as Snyder concludes, 'such places are scarce and must be rigorously defended'.³³ The defence of the wilderness did in fact begin in earnest in North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the foundation of the first National Parks, the inaugural Yellowstone being established in 1872, and Rock Creek, Sequoia and Yosemite in 1890.³⁴ Motivated by the same desire to preserve the wild places of his homeland, the writer and environmental campaigner John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892, an organization still active in the U. S. today and whose website proclaims it as 'the nation's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization', successfully 'protecting millions of acres of wilderness'.³⁵ Britain witnessed a similar growth of interest in the preservation of open and wild places during the late nineteenth century and its own embryonic environmental movement found a voice and a purpose in organizations such as the Commons Preservation Society (now the Open Spaces Society), founded in 1865 to campaign against the enclosure and development of common land, the Kyrle Society, founded in 1877 to combat urban squalor and protect urban green spaces, and the National Trust, founded in 1895 to protect Britain's natural and built heritage and whose first acquisition was five acres of Welsh coastline .

Morris was actively supportive of the Commons Preservation Society and the Kyrle Society, attending meetings of both organizations and being invited to address the Kyrle Society in London and Nottingham in 1881.³⁶ A 'campaigner for the English countryside', as Martin Haggerty describes him, Morris raged repeatedly in his political lectures against 'common-stealers', 'railway Philistines', 'smoke- nuisance-breeders' and other greed-driven enemies of the natural world, and his contribution to the early environmental movement has seen him recognized in the

³³ Gary Snyder, 'Is Nature Real?', in *The Gary Snyder Reader* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1999), pp. 387-89 (p. 389).

³⁴ The designation of U. S. National Parks has continued into the twenty-first century and there are now 59 in total.

³⁵ <<http://www.sierraclub.org/about>> [accessed 11 July 2017].

³⁶ Martin Haggerty claims that Morris attended at least three meetings of the Commons Preservation Society in 1881, 1883 and 1884, the latter of which he mentions in his article 'Why Not?' in *Justice*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (12 April 1884), 2; see Martin Haggerty, 'William Morris – Open Spaces Champion', 28 November 2013, <<http://www.oss.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/william-morris-open-spaces-champion/>> [accessed 11 July 2017]. For Morris's addresses to the Kyrle Society and the Nottingham Kyrle Society see *AWS*, I, pp. 192-205.

twenty-first century as one of our most influential Green thinkers and activists.³⁷ Morris loved the natural landscape and the wild places of England with a fierce and visceral passion; when Ellen in *News from Nowhere* cries out ‘Oh me! Oh me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it’, it is Morris’s voice we hear as much as hers.³⁸ Nonetheless, Morris conceded that England is ‘a little land’ in the scheme of things; whilst the National Parks testify to the staggering variety of wilderness on the North American continent, from the tropical Everglades in Florida to the hot dry sands of Death Valley and the Gates of the Arctic in Alaska, England has ‘no great wastes overwhelming in their dreariness, no great solitudes of forests, no terrible untrodden mountains’.³⁹ In the future England he envisages in *News from Nowhere*, there has clearly been some rewilding of the landscape as the regenerated forests of Middlesex and Essex confirm, but Old Hammond’s reference to the ‘*pieces of wild nature*’ [my italics] the Nowherians enjoy is telling: rather like an orderly jigsaw, these pieces fit neatly into a land which by its very nature refuses the disorderly energy and boundlessness of wilderness – it is, after all, still a country ‘too much shut up within the narrow seas [...] to have much space for swelling into hugeness’.⁴⁰

It was in Iceland that Morris experienced at first hand the reality of finding oneself in the midst of a wilderness, with all the ambivalent responses that provokes. In the journal he wrote during his first visit there in 1871, he records how having left the Geysirs (which Morris scoffed at as a tourist attraction), he and his fellow travellers arrived at ‘a great plain of black and grey sand’ with ‘grey rocks sticking up out of it’ and ‘tufts of sea-pink, and bladder campion’; further on, there are ‘cliffs and mountains, whose local colour is dark grey or black (except now and then a red place burnt by old volcanic fires)’ rising up on each side, ‘an enormous wall-sided mountain with a regular roof like a house’ which ‘has never been scaled by anyone’, and, in the distance, ‘the waste of Long-Jokul, that looks as if it ended the world’; it

³⁷ Haggerty, <<http://www.oss.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/william-morris-open-spaces-champion/>> [accessed 11 July 2017]; ‘Art, Wealth and Riches’, *CW*, XXIII, p. 162. For recognition of Morris’s environmental activism see: ‘Earthshakers: the top 100 green campaigners of all time’, *Guardian*, 28 November 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2006/nov/28/climatechange.climatechangeenvironment>> [Accessed 9 July 2017]

³⁸ *CW*, XVI, p. 202.

³⁹ ‘The Lesser Arts’, *CW*, XXII, p. 17.

⁴⁰ *CW*, XVI, p. 74; *CW*, XXII, p. 17.

was, Morris, concludes, 'the most memorable first sight of the wilderness to me'.⁴¹ This is clearly a dramatic, alien and disorientating landscape for Morris; in his description of its constituent parts, his attention to the details of colour and texture, of shape and perspective, he is attempting to describe the indescribable and, in doing so, to accommodate and engage with the wilderness psychologically as well as physically, rather than being overwhelmed and intimidated by it.

With its structural organization around what Robert Fraser describes as 'the onerous journey across unchartered regions', the romance mode allowed Morris the opportunity to revisit the features of the Icelandic wilderness which made such a lasting impact on his imagination.⁴² We find them in the rocky wastes of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, the treacherous mountains of *The Well at the World's End* and the fierce eponymous river of *The Sundering Flood*, and we also find Morris's own psychological and emotional response to them replayed in the responses of the protagonists. In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, as Hallblithe pursues his quest to find the Hostage, he is compelled to leave the fertile lands of the plain and venture into the Icelandic-inspired wilderness of rock beyond. Sitting exhausted after walking for hours through gruelling terrain,

At last he looked, and saw that he was high up amongst the mountain-peaks: before him and on either hand was but a world of fallow stone rising ridge upon ridge like the waves of the wildest winter sea. The sun not far from its midmost shone down bright and hot on that wilderness; yet there was no sign that man had ever been there since the beginning of the world, save that the path aforesaid seemed to lead onward down the stony slope.

Hallblithe is initially overcome and demoralized by this vision, believing 'this was the last he should see of the Glittering Plain' and proclaiming aloud: 'Now is my last hour come'.⁴³ It is a response which revisits, if in rather more dramatic terms, Morris's own response at times to the landscape of Iceland; he wrote in his journal of the 'grisly desolation' of the Icelandic wilderness and understood the sense of

⁴¹ CW, VIII, pp. 75-76.

⁴² Robert Fraser, *Victorian Quest Romance* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 6.

⁴³ CW, XIV, pp. 279-80.

oppression and dread it could evoke. In letters to Aglaia Coronio written before his second trip there in 1873, Morris described how ‘Iceland gapes for me still this summer’, admitting ‘sometimes I like the idea of it, and sometimes it fills me with dismay’.⁴⁴

Despite his reservations about his second journey through Iceland, Morris told Philip Web that he hoped ‘to get something out of it all’, and assured Aglaia Coronio ‘tis pretty certain to do me good’.⁴⁵ There was something *necessary* it seems for Morris about confronting, traversing and inhabiting the Icelandic wilderness once more, and though he never returned after 1873, the profound influence of his time there, as his biographer J. W. Mackail notes, ‘can hardly over-estimated’, and ‘was not wholly intelligible’ even to those who knew him best.⁴⁶ The importance of experiencing wilderness first hand in this way was, however, entirely intelligible to Morris’s American contemporary Thoreau, who claimed ‘we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman’, and there is certainly in Morris’s Iceland journals evidence of the ‘attitude of reverence and humility’ which Greg Garrard identifies as the foundation of ‘a post-Christian covenant’ in which wilderness ‘holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth’.⁴⁷

Such an attitude is also displayed by the protagonists of Morris’s last romances, who move beyond seeing the wilderness as a hostile space to be endured and overcome, and recognize the need to respect and learn from it. In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Hallblithe eventually meets three wayfarers similarly stranded in the barren mountains and likely to perish there with him, but as one of the wayfarers notes, the way through ‘is not utterly blind’ for those who can read the landscape. Through close observation they find ‘a track that led through the stony tangle of the wilderness’, and eventually Hallblithe sees and hears ‘two ravens in a cranny of the stone, flapping their wings and croaking’; Hallblithe, whose clan is the House of the Raven, interprets this as a good omen, but he also understands that

⁴⁴ *CL*, I, pp. 178, 177.

⁴⁵ *CL*, I, pp. 195, 177.

⁴⁶ Mackail, I, p. 240.

⁴⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (1864), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 71; Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Second Edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 66.

the presence of the birds indicates that food and water cannot be too far away.⁴⁸ Thus attuned to the signals of the wilderness, Hallblithe finds his way to the fertile hinterlands of the plain and lives to accomplish his 'errand in the world'.⁴⁹

Reading and understanding the ways of the wilderness is also essential to the survival of Ralph and Ursula in *The Well at the World's End* as they move through the Thirsty Desert and the scattered bodies of those who have failed to traverse it. The Thirsty Desert is a similarly Icelandic-inspired 'stony waste' to that which Hallblithe encounters in that it 'lay in ridges as the waves of a great sea', although here 'the face of the wilderness was covered with a salt scurf', and has 'a sprinkling of small sage bushes'.⁵⁰ Even the small and seemingly insignificant details of the landscape are detailed by Morris, because wilderness is never merely a stage set for events in the last romances – it is as vital and individual as his protagonists, with its own distinct features to be known and understood. Arriving at a 'huge and monstrous tree', its fifty great limbs 'leafless', but 'behung with blazoned shields, and knights' helms, and swords, and spears, and axes, and hauberks', Ralph bends to drink from the pool of clear water at its foot.⁵¹ Ursula, having already noted that the faces of those who perished nearest to the Dry Tree were 'drawn up in a grin, as though they had died in pain', observes the pool more keenly than Ralph and calls out:

“O Ralph, do it not! Seest thou not this water, that although it be bright and clear, so that we may see all the pebbles at the bottom, yet nevertheless when the wind eddies about, and lifts the skirts of our raiment, it makes no ripple on the face of the pool, and doubtless it is heavy with venom”.

As Ralph draws back, a crow flies down to drink and immediately afterwards 'fell down stark dead', leading Ursula to exclaim, “Yea, thus are we saved from present death”.⁵² Ursula understands that the wilderness is not 'made' for the needs or service of humankind, it exists in and for itself, and if we enter it we must do so on its terms and not ours. The armour and weapons that hang from the lifeless tree testify

⁴⁸ CW, XIV, pp. 283-84.

⁴⁹ CW, XIV, p. 281.

⁵⁰ CW, XX, pp. 69-70.

⁵¹ CW, XX, pp. 73-74.

⁵² CW, XX, pp. 74-75.

to the failure of human beings to watch, listen to, feel and thereby understand the wilderness; it is the paraphernalia of human aggression and domination aimed at conquering rather than working with the natural world.

To work with rather than against the wilderness means not only surviving it, but also feeling oneself a fundamental part of it, with all the sense of privilege and reward that brings. Garrard warns of the ‘pernicious consequences’ of regarding the wilderness as something other, and believing that ‘nature is only authentic if we are entirely absent from it’. These consequences can be cultural and historical, as has happened at times with the ring-fencing of wilderness into designated protected areas; hence in the establishment of Yosemite National Park, Garrard argues, ‘this myth of an “uninhabited wilderness” meant that both the Ahwahneechee Indians and the white miners who had lived and worked there were expelled’.⁵³ But the consequences are also deeply personal and affect us all. Centuries of human exploitation and unsympathetic activity have undoubtedly ravaged the wilderness, but whilst excluding humanity from it as far as possible might seem a necessary if regrettable response, it risks perpetuating the idea that we exist apart from the natural world and leads ultimately to an impoverishment of human life.

The protagonists of the last romances in contrast understand their profound connection to the wilderness and indeed at times find in it a welcome home, for as Florence Boos notes, Morris consistently ‘offered a view of *the environment* as a social *dwelling*’ and ‘spoke clearly of the need for a proper harmony of people and the natural order they live in’.⁵⁴ Whilst the rocky wastes and deserts might not be readily hospitable territory, the vast wildwoods that populate several of the last romances are, and George Monbiot would be pleased to know that Morris was not one of those who had forgotten the history of the British landscape. As Old Hammond tells Guest in *News from Nowhere*, England ‘was once a country of clearings amongst the woods and wastes’ and in his final works Morris recreates that landscape in exuberant detail, with the opening lines of *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* describing how ‘of old there was a land which was so much a

⁵³ Garrard, p. 77.

⁵⁴ Florence Boos, ‘An Aesthetic Eco-Communist: Morris the Red and Morris the Green’, in Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston, eds, *William Morris: Centenary Essays* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1999), pp. 21-46 (pp. 44-45).

woodland, that a minstrel thereof said it that a squirrel might go from end to end, and all about, from tree to tree, and never touch the earth'.⁵⁵ Christopher has lived amidst this wildwood since childhood and has a visceral connection to it; hence having lain ill for several weeks following an assassination attempt, his joy at being able to travel back into the woodland is potent as he delights in

the fair show of the greenery, and the boles of the ancient oaks, and the squirrels running from bough to bough, and the rabbits scuttling from under the bracken, and the hind leaping in the wood-lawn, and the sun falling through the rustling leaves, and the wind on his face, and the scent of the forest, yea, and his fair companions and their loveliness and valiancy and kindness.

The movement and energy of the wildwood is captured for the reader in the momentum of the sentence which builds with its repeated conjunctions, each clause conveying the varied details of the woodland and the aesthetic and sensory pleasure Christopher derives from it. Notably, travelling with his companions contributes actively to this pleasure, the 'yea' celebrating their human presence and confirming that they belong here as much as the squirrels and the rabbits and the deer. For a man recently 'come from the peril of death and the sick-bed', the return to the wildwood signifies a return to life at its most vital, and to his own rightful place in the world.⁵⁶

The wildwood is also a significant landscape in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and of all Morris's protagonists Birdalone demonstrates the most profound connection with the earth and its creatures. Abducted as a child, Birdalone, like Christopher, is raised in the midst of a forest 'held to be mighty great, or maybe measureless' by those who do not know it, but Birdalone navigates it respectfully and intuitively, having from her earliest years 'wandered well-nigh as she had will, and much in the wood; for she had no fear thereof'. Entirely at home in the wilderness,

⁵⁵ *CW*, XVI, p. 72; *CW*, XVII, p. 133. See also James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* which describes how 'in the forest of Arden it was said that down to modern times a squirrel might leap from tree to tree for nearly the whole length of Warwickshire': J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1890), I, p. 57.

⁵⁶ *CW*, XVII, p. 167.

Birdalone also understands that this is shared territory and that she must inhabit it with due consideration for others, hence:

She learned of the ways and the wont of all the creatures round about her, and the very grass and flowers were friends to her, and she made tales of them in her mind; and the wild things feared her in no wise, and the fowl would come to her hand, and play with her and love her.⁵⁷

In both her imaginative and practical engagement with the wild, Birdalone recognizes the value and importance of plant and animal life, feeling a connection with the very ground she walks on. The relationship is mutually beneficial: the plants and wild creatures flourish free from harm and exploitation, whilst Birdalone finds in return that ‘the earth was her friend, and solaced her when she suffered aught’. In addition, Birdalone grows ‘hardy as well as strong’ in the wilderness, partaking of its resilience which serves her well as she endures the tyranny of the witch-wife, and when she matures to womanhood she is graced with the companionship of the wood-spirit Habundia, a relationship which symbolizes Birdalone’s affinity with the natural order.⁵⁸

‘The wild requires that we learn the terrain’, Gary Snyder writes, and ‘nod to all the plants and animals and birds’, an attitude and practice exemplified in Birdalone but demonstrated by all Morris’s protagonists who recognize the wilderness as shared space.⁵⁹ For Margaret Grennan, Morris’s last romances are ‘like a medieval Book of the Hours, coloured in green and gold and cinnabar, figured with flowers, birds and beasts – a hymn of praise to the things he loved in any time, past, present, or future’, a description that aptly conveys the variety of colour, texture and life in their landscapes and testifies to Morris’s celebratory and inclusive vision of the natural world.⁶⁰ It is a vision that acquires new relevance in the context of our own twenty-first century debates about rewilding and the often highly emotive and partisan responses generated by the suggestion that we might share our space

⁵⁷ *CW*, XX, pp. 1, 8.

⁵⁸ *CW*, XX, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Gary Snyder, ‘The Etiquette of Freedom’, in *The Gary Snyder Reader*, pp. 167-182 (p. 182).

⁶⁰ Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1945), p. 133.

more generously. Whilst the recent re-introduction of the beaver in certain parts of the UK might have been broadly accepted as a good thing, for example, the suggestion that we might re-introduce the lynx, the bear and the wolf – all previous inhabitants of the British Isles – is far more divisive and liable to provoke hysteria on the part of those who farm animals for human consumption and profit, those who wish to reserve the land for killing other creatures supposedly in the name of sport, and those who feel they have the right to enjoy a family picnic anywhere in ‘the wild’ without fear of finding themselves on the menu. As Toby Ackroyd from the organization Wild Europe notes, ‘in western countries people are no longer used to wild predators and that leads to a negative attitude’ – fears that the re-introduction of wolves would pose a significant threat to human life, for example, are clearly unfounded in view of the statistical evidence.⁶¹

Nonetheless our interaction as humans with the wild is complex, as Morris was well aware, and he does not offer a sentimental or simplistic representation of it in his last romances. In *The Sundering Flood* Osberne kills three large wolves ‘with gaping jaws and glistening white fangs’ that have been attacking his homestead’s sheep, and in *The Well at the World’s End* Ralph kills ‘a huge bear as big as a bullock’ when he attacks Ursula in the wilderness.⁶² When survival and livelihood are at stake, our relations with wild creatures can be ethically messy. But these creatures are still an essential element of the wild territory of the last romances – they are in and of its wildness – and whilst Morris depicts occasional conflict as inevitable, his protagonists do not wilfully pursue their wild neighbours nor seek their eradication. Thoreau lamented the extermination of what he termed the ‘nobler’ animals in parts of America during the nineteenth century, including cougars, panthers, wolves and bears, concluding: ‘I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed and, as it were, emasculated country’; to witness the selective extinction of certain animals was, he wrote, as if ‘some demigod had come before me and picked out

⁶¹ Mark Hillsdon, ‘Bear Country’, *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, vol. 35, no. 1 (January 2017), 74-80 (p. 79). In an article in *The Spectator* in 2016, Rod Liddle observes that ‘there have been only eight fatal attacks upon humans in all of Europe and Russia combined in the last 50 years’ from wolves, compared to ‘74 deaths in 15 years in the UK alone’ involving cows: see Rod Liddle, ‘Let’s bring the wolves back into Britain’, *The Spectator*, 1 October 2016 <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/10/lets-bring-the-wolves-back-into-britain/>> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁶² *CW*, XXI, p. 19; *CW*, XIX, p. 52.

some of the best of the stars'.⁶³ Whilst England no longer had creatures of that order to protect, having driven them to extinction centuries before, Morris lamented in a similar vein the loss of natural habitat in his own country and was particularly vocal in his criticism of the clearings and other changes taking place in Epping Forest which, as Mackail writes, 'smoothed down the characteristic wildness of the forest'.⁶⁴ Appalled that the authorities might want to 'landscape garden it, or turn it into golf grounds', Morris argued that 'not a single tree should be felled, unless it were necessary for the growth of its fellows', demanding: 'We want a thicket, not a park, from Epping Forest'.⁶⁵ In his last romances Morris rejects the anthropocentric approach to the environment that rampant nineteenth-century industrialism, capitalism and tourism promoted with their scramble for resources and profit, and reclaims the diversity and dynamism of the wilderness as a good in its own right. These stories are his own way of saying, along with Thoreau, 'I wish to know an entire heaven and an entire earth'.⁶⁶

Wild Selves

To know an entire earth is to know and delight in its wild places, and in doing so to know our own wildness, what Thoreau calls 'the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigour of Nature in us'.⁶⁷ In his last romances, Morris's protagonists respect and learn the ways of the wilderness, but they also respond to it at an instinctive and primal level, recognizing the chance it offers them to enact and accomplish their own wild selves. We see this in Hallblithe's response to the ocean in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, when 'his heart swelled with joy as he sniffed the brine and watched the gleaming hills and valleys of the restless deep'; we see it in Ralph's response to the Wall of the World in *The Well at the World's End*, a terrifying and seemingly impassable range of mountains which nonetheless make Ralph's heart 'rather rise than fall at the sight of them', and we see it in Osberne's early attraction to the vast and rapid river in *The Sundering Flood*, 'for ever the wondrous

⁶³ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal 1837-1861* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2009), pp. 372-73.

⁶⁴ Mackail, II, p. 315.

⁶⁵ *CL*, IV, p. 269.

⁶⁶ *The Journal 1837-1861*, p. 373.

⁶⁷ *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), vol. 9, p. 43.

stream seemed to draw the lad to it'.⁶⁸ In each case the wildness of the natural world speaks to the protagonists of a more vital and authentic life, and they are compelled to listen.

To reconnect with our wildness as human animals, as Ralph's rising heart and Hallblithe's sniffing of the brine imply, means in the first instance relearning how to be attuned and responsive to our physical being. Morris's protagonists find a home in the wilderness, but they also find themselves fundamentally *at* home in it, and simultaneously at home in their own bodies. In her memoir *Wild* (2012), Cheryl Strayed records how covering miles of wilderness each day at walking pace as she hiked the Pacific Crest Trail allowed her 'to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets'. She recalls feeling 'more alive to my senses than ever', believing that 'it had always felt like this to be a human in the wild, and as long as the wild existed it would always feel this way'. Strayed describes a 'powerful and fundamental' connection with the environment through which she moves, but also with her own physical being, noting how 'I walked with a kind of concentration I'd never had before, and because of it I could feel the trail and my body more acutely, as if I were walking barefoot and naked', an unfettered state she enjoys literally at a small creek where she sheds her boots and clothes and sits 'naked in the cool shallow water, splashing it over my face and head'.⁶⁹ Alone in the wilderness, Strayed undergoes a personal rewilding, opening herself to what Thoreau calls 'our life in nature', a life in which each day we are brought into direct contact with 'rocks, trees, wind' and come to know in all its glorious details 'the *solid* earth! the *actual* world!'⁷⁰

The youthful and energetic characters of the last romances undergo a similar personal rewilding in the wilderness, their senses are heightened, their bodies are active and they relish moving naked in the world. In *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, on escaping her imprisonment in the Castle of Greenharbour, Goldilind takes a horse and 'sped along, half mad with joy at the freedom of this happy morn',

⁶⁸ CW, XIV, p. 297; CW, XVIII, p. 303; CW, XXI, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012, repub. 2015), pp. 207, 143, 156, 85.

⁷⁰ *The Maine Woods*, p. 71.

heading deep into the woods until she finds ‘ a clear pool amidst of a little clearing’. Both exhilarated and exhausted from her ride in the heat of the day,

she rubbed her eyes and smiled, and turned to the pool, where now a little ripple was running over the face of it, and a thought came upon her, and she set her hand to the clasp of her gown and undid it, and drew the gown off her shoulders, and so did off all her raiment, and stood naked a little on the warm sunny grass, and then bestirred her and went lightly into the pool , and bathed and sported there, and then came onto the grass again, and went to and fro to dry her in the air and sun.⁷¹

Goldilind responds instinctively and spontaneously to her environment, unrestrained by conventional codes of modesty and decorum which are entirely redundant in the woods. The sensory and sensual delight of the experience is clear: Goldilind lingers unselfconsciously to enjoy the sunshine on her bare skin before taking pleasure in the water then takes time to play as well as bathe in the pool, indicating that this is more than a merely functional exercise. Nor does she hasten to cover herself when she leaves the water, allowing herself instead to enjoy her nakedness a little longer and the pleasurable sensation of drying naturally in the warm air.

Nakedness represents the ultimate wild state, a literal stripping away of the protective but encumbering layers of civilization to move into raw and unmediated contact with the land and the elements, and most of Morris’s protagonists willingly espouse it. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* Birdalone, like Goldilind, chooses to ‘put off from her her simple raiment’ in the heat of the Summer forest, ‘that she might feel all the pleasure of the cool shadow and what air was stirring, and the kindness of the greensward upon her very body’, and in *The Well at the World’s End*, having drunk from the eponymous well, Ursula asks Ralph “‘shall we go hence and turn from the ocean-sea without wetting our bodies in its waters?’”, in response to which ‘they were speedily naked and playing in the water’.⁷² In his romances, Morris thus found a means of enacting in compelling and evocative terms what he called in his

⁷¹ CW, XVII, pp. 173-74.

⁷² CW, XX, p. 15; CW, XIX, p. 84.

1885 lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live' the 'eager life' – a state of being in which we are able:

To feel mere life a pleasure; to enjoy the moving one's limbs and exercising one's bodily powers; to play, as it were, with sun and wind and rain; to rejoice in satisfying the due bodily appetites of a human animal without fear of degradation or sense of wrong-doing; yes, and therewithal to be well-formed, straight-limbed, strongly knit, expressive of countenance – to be, in a word, beautiful [...].⁷³

Morris's eager life is the wild life – a life which he claims as the birthright of all men and women, and which he looked to see restored in a post-revolutionary Communist society.⁷⁴ Ellen, his most enigmatic character in *News from Nowhere*, is attractively suggestive of such future wildness with her unconventional beauty and restless energy, rowing athletically and moving always with grace and strength, 'her face and hands and bare feet tanned quite brown with the sun', and in the romances that followed the healthy and good-looking protagonists rise admirably to the physical challenges of their individual quests, riding, swimming, rowing and running their way through the world.⁷⁵

They also satisfy 'the due bodily appetites of a human animal' free from any sense of transgression, even without the involvement of a church or what Morris's early readers would have recognized as a formal wedding ceremony, and the romance form, as Amanda Hodgson suggests, clearly 'provided for Morris a freedom of expression that no other fictional form could have allowed him' in depicting scenes of 'unabashed sexual activity'.⁷⁶ In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, for example, a reunited Birdalone and Arthur are 'breathless' with 'longing' for each other after being so long apart, and after much kissing and holding consummate their relationship in the cottage in the wildwood, Birdalone asserting with no sense of shame "here

⁷³ CW, XXIII, p. 17.

⁷⁴ I do not shy away from using the word 'Communist' here. Morris himself saw Socialism as the means to achieving true Communism and called himself a Communist, and it is important to reclaim the integrity of the concept as Morris and his colleagues understood it, despite its subsequent misappropriation in the twentieth century. See Morris's lecture 'Communism', CW, XXIII, pp. 264-276.

⁷⁵ CW, XVI, p. 148.

⁷⁶ *The Witch in the Wood*, p. 22.

tonight we shall lie”⁷⁷. A similar lack of sexual inhibition characterizes Ralph’s relationships in *The Well at the World’s End*; when the Lady of Abundance has helped Ralph to escape from her tyrannical husband she leads him to a clearing in the wildwood and ‘fell to kissing him long and sweetly’, and in response:

He drew her down to him as he knelt there, and took his arms about her, and though she yet shrank from him a little and the eager flame of his love, he might not be gainsayed, and she gave herself to him and let her body glide into his arms, and loved him no less than he loved her. And there between them in the wilderness was all the joy of love that might be.⁷⁸

There is none of the moral angst or self-recrimination we might expect from the pages of a nineteenth-century realist novel in response to an illicit liaison and the betrayal of a marriage vow. For Ralph and the Lady this is an inevitable and entirely natural expression of their mutual attraction, for as the Lady tells Ralph, “What else did I desire but to be with thee?”⁷⁹ After the death of the Lady, and many subsequent trials, Ralph and his new beloved Ursula are similarly eager to consummate their relationship, although Ursula prefers some semblance of a ceremony. Having met the messengers of the Innocent Folk sent to help them in the wilderness, Ralph is keen to ask whether ‘knowing each other carnally’ would hinder Ursula and himself in their quest to find the Well, and is assured by the Elder of the Folk, ‘we hear not that it shall be the worse for you in any wise that ye shall become one flesh’. Indeed the messengers are ‘joyful’ to find such love between them, and after the construction of a special shelter in the meadow and a feast under the open skies, Ralph requests that the messengers ‘bear witness that they were wedded’ whilst he and Ursula depart readily ‘to their bridal bower hand in hand through the freshness of the night’.⁸⁰ There is clearly no place in the last romances for the ‘respectable commercial marriage bed’ or ‘mingled prudery and prurience’ of the nineteenth century as described by Old Hammond in *News from Nowhere*; instead Morris demonstrates in these relationships his belief that the sexual act was integral to a

⁷⁷ CW, XX, pp. 351-52.

⁷⁸ CW, XVIII, p. 145.

⁷⁹ CW, XVIII, p. 144.

⁸⁰ CW, XIX, pp. 58-59.

‘decent animalism’ and even had ‘something sacred about it’ in its own right if it was ‘the outcome of natural desires and kindness on both sides’.⁸¹

Responding to our wild nature invariably demands that we renew our relationship with our own bodies – that we delight in physical movement and expression and tap into that restless underlying energy that compels us to leave our desks and our sofas. But personal rewilding also requires a psychological renewal, a transformative shift in perspective that enables us to see the world in a new way. In *Feral* (2013), Monbiot talks of undergoing such an experience, describing his sudden realization one ‘grey day in Wales’ that:

I could not continue to live as I had done. I could not continue just sitting and writing, looking after my daughter and my house, running merely to stay fit, pursuing only what could not be seen, watching the seasons cycling past without ever quite belonging to them.

Monbiot expresses a sense of stagnation and of alienation which will be all too familiar to many readers, concluding ‘I was, I believe, ecologically bored’.⁸² Whilst ecological boredom might be an ailment privileged only to the twenty-first-century middle classes, several of Morris’s protagonists similarly chafe against their social and domestic responsibilities, feeling themselves restrained and prevented by them. Carole Silver rightly notes that these characters manifest something of ‘the simplicity, vitality, and sense of duty to home and kindred of the barbaric peoples’, but this sense of duty is by no means an unquestioning or unambivalent one, and their own desire for self-determination more often than not wins out.⁸³ Hence in *The Well at the World’s End* Ralph refuses to stay at home as requested by his father and mother when his elder brothers leave to travel, telling his friends ‘that liketh me not; therefore am I come out to seek my luck in the world’; Ralph feels the impulse of his own wild nature in ‘the blood running hot in his veins’ which compels him to travel and see new lands and new societies.⁸⁴ Likewise in *The Wood Beyond the World*, when Walter’s ship is blown off course, preventing him from returning to avenge his

⁸¹ *CW*, XVI, pp. 62-63; *CL*, II (1885-88), p. 584.

⁸² Monbiot, p. 7.

⁸³ Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 161.

⁸⁴ *CW*, XVIII, p. 13.

murdered father, 'his heart was lighter than it had been since he heard of his father's death, and the feud awaiting him at home, which forsooth would stay his wanderings a weary while, and therewithal his hopes'. Now Walter finds 'he needs must wander', and though he grieves for his father he welcomes the reprieve from an unhappy duty and the chance to pursue a different destiny that moving in accordance with the wind and the waves offers.⁸⁵

To respond to the call of our own wildness in this way is not to seek an escape from life and its responsibilities, but rather to renew our commitment to our own life and to transform the way we live it. Indeed in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Hallblithe chastises the Sea-Eagle for seeking to escape his own mortality on the Glittering Plain at the cost of his autonomy, for the King of the Plain expects subservience in return for the gift of endless life: 'Whose thrall art thou now?' Hallblithe challenges Sea-Eagle; 'the bidding of what lord or King wilt thou do, O Chieftain, that thou mayest eat thy meat in the morning and lie soft in thy bed in the evening?'⁸⁶ Wildness requires us to take, rather than relinquish, responsibility for our own lives, to refuse to accept without question the dictates of authority and the claims of experience, to find out for ourselves what our place and purpose in the world is. Ralph in *The Well at the World's End* understands this when he resists the pressure put on him by a monk of the Abbey at Higham on the Way to abandon his travels early and pursue a potentially lucrative career in the service of the Lord Abbot. Ralph scorns the monk's warning that if he is 'set on beholding the fashion of this world' then 'most like it will give thee the rue', refusing comfort and cowardly self-preservation in favour of adventure and the right to choose his own way.⁸⁷ To follow the promptings of our own wild nature might well mean foregoing stability and security – the very things we are so often encouraged to aspire to as we mature into adulthood – but the potential rewards outweigh the sacrifices. Hence in *The Sundering Flood*, when Elfhild warns Osberne that in leaving the safety of the Dale 'thou art going into peril of death, and thou so young!', he asks 'how might it ever come about that we might meet bodily if I abode ever at Wethermel and the Dale in peace and quietness, while thou dwelt still with thy carlines on the other side of this

⁸⁵ CW, XVII, p. 12.

⁸⁶ CW, XIV, p. 256.

⁸⁷ CW, XVIII, p. 36.

fierce stream?’ To reach Elfhild on the other side of the river, Osberne is prepared to ‘learn the wideness of the world’ and risk ‘chancehap and war’, proving himself a worthy successor to the heroes and heroines of the Icelandic sagas – stories which Morris celebrated as ‘a glorious outcome of the worship of Courage’ and whose ‘active heroes’, as John Purkis notes, had a deep and lasting influence on him.⁸⁸

To honour our wildness thus sometimes calls for the courage to travel alone. Such travel might well be literal if, like Strayed, we find ourselves drawn to a solitary journey through the wilderness in order to find our way to a more authentic and purposeful life. Indeed Strayed talks of the ‘radical aloneness’ she experienced whilst walking the Pacific Crest Trail, truly understanding for the first time ‘the world’s vastness’ and ‘occupying it in a way I never had before’.⁸⁹ In Morris’s romances, each protagonist spends such time alone in the wilderness and, as with Strayed, the experience is invariably transformative, broadening their vision of the world and their understanding of how they too might occupy it by releasing them into their own wildness. But travelling alone can also be understood metaphorically in terms of having the courage to pursue a different course in life to the one we expected to take, and more often than not that others expected – and perhaps wanted – us to take. It might mean abandoning the conventional goals that our culture deems worthy to seek more valuable aims and enriching experiences. Morris knew well enough what the consequences of taking such a decision were, having abandoned a conventional middle-class political position to join the embryonic Socialist movement in the 1880s, an act which E. P. Thompson declares ‘may be counted among the great conversions of the world’.⁹⁰ In his 1884 lecture ‘Art and Socialism’ Morris warned those who chose to follow him that they would ‘be mocked and laughed at’, that they would ‘be looked on coldly by many excellent people, not all of whom will be quite stupid’, and that they would ‘run the risk of losing position, reputation, money, friends even’. Such experiences, Morris admitted, ‘try the stuff a man is made of’, but they were more than outweighed by the integrity of purpose and sense of contribution that joining the cause ensured.⁹¹

⁸⁸ *CW*, XXI, p. 80; *CL*, I, p. 344; John Purkis, *The Iceland Jaunt: A Study of the Expeditions made by William Morris to Iceland in 1871 and 1873* (London: William Morris Society, 1962), p. 5.

⁸⁹ Strayed, p. 119.

⁹⁰ E. P. Thompson, p. 243.

⁹¹ *CW*, XXIII, pp. 213-14.

In his last romances, Morris repeatedly enacts such processes of renunciation and sacrifice whilst affirming their importance in achieving a more fulfilling life. Each of his protagonists, either through choice or necessity, leaves family and homeland to travel alone, at least for a while, in pursuit of something lost or something better. In doing so they must often contend with the disapproval or scorn of those who would stop them, or those who lack the courage to challenge social convention or indeed themselves. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, when Birdalone escapes in the Sending Boat across the vast waters of the lake without clothes or provision, the witch-wife who has raised her and tyrannized her cries: “Go then, naked and outcast! Go then, naked fool! and come back hither after thou has been under the hands of the pitiless!” But Birdalone sails on, ‘nor so much as turned her head toward the witch wife’, for wildness does not yield to threats nor is it restrained by fear.⁹² Instead, the last romances demonstrate Mark Bekoff’s claim that ‘rewilding is a transformative and personal process. It is a call to action, but primarily to action within our own lives’.⁹³ Like Hallblithe in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, it asks us to find and accomplish our own errand in the world.

Wild Societies

Reclaiming our wild selves is thus essential to a process of rewilding that may begin with protecting designated landscapes and re-introducing their lost inhabitants but which then proceeds to re-establish our own fundamental connection with the wild on an individual basis. However, for a truly comprehensive, meaningful and constructive vision of rewilding we must also reconsider and rework how we live together as human animals, for if we are wild creatures in body and spirit we are also social and increasingly urbanized creatures, now living in a world in which it is near impossible to escape the influences of twenty-first civilization. Nor would most of us wish to abandon the benefits of that civilization, for whether we live in a hamlet, village, town or city, we benefit, albeit in varying degrees, from the technological

⁹² CW, XX, pp. 51-52.

⁹³ Bekoff, p. 8.

advancements, transport networks and multifarious conveniences that are the hallmark of 'civilized' societies, and even those who dwell in rural areas feel entitled nowadays to a reliable mobile phone signal and superfast broadband. How wildness and civilization might be brought into a harmonious and complementary relationship is perhaps the ultimate challenge for proponents of rewilding, for centuries of cultural conditioning have led to an assumption, in Western societies at least, that the two are irreconcilable and the triumph of one means the inevitable demise of the other.

It was in Morris's own age, Carolyn Merchant proposes, that this division between the wild and the civilized became particularly entrenched in the Western imagination. Merchant explains how in the nineteenth century:

The emerging bourgeoisie adopted a new secular narrative that legitimated the changes wrought on the earth. Capitalism's origin story moves from desert wilderness to cultivated garden. In the new story, undeveloped nature is transformed into a state of civility, producing a reclaimed Garden of Eden. The wild is tamed, the wilderness subdued.

The conversion of the wilderness 'through science, technology, and capitalism' is the myth 'into which most Westerners have been socialized', Merchant argues, 'and within which we live our lives today'.⁹⁴ In consequence, our relationship with the natural world, as R. P. Harrison laments, is based on 'mastery and possession' and we value it largely for what we can take and use from it.⁹⁵ Such an approach had its critics already in the nineteenth century, with Frederick Engels exposing the fallacy of the idea that we 'rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people' rather than understanding that we 'belong to nature, and exist in its midst', and Morris himself publically mourned the loss of 'the brown moors and the meadows, the clear streams and the sunny skies' which had been plundered, built over and polluted by Capitalist endeavours and now partook of the 'hideous squalor' of industrialism.⁹⁶ Both Engels and Morris early understood how prioritizing the interests of civilization

⁹⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 68.

⁹⁵ R. P. Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 121.

⁹⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974-2005), vol. 25, p. 461; 'Art, Wealth and Riches', *CW*, XXIII, p. 159.

above the interests of the wild leads only to an impoverishment of both – how, as Oelschlaeger argues, ‘humankind’s apparent success in dominating and transforming wilderness into civilization not only endangers the web of life itself but fundamentally diminishes our humanity, our potential for a fuller and richer human beingness’.⁹⁷

One response by those appalled at this appropriation and despoliation of the wild has been the reciprocal denigration of modern civilization; for the proponents of this position, as William Cronon writes, ‘wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives’. From this perspective it is in the wilderness, and not the city, that ‘we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are – or ought to be’.⁹⁸ Whilst there is much to sympathise with in this position in view of the environmental devastations and mass extinctions perpetrated by the forces of technological, industrial and economic progress, ultimately it serves only to reaffirm the seemingly irreparable break between civilization and the wild, and leaves the prospect of their reconciliation bleak. The wilderness undoubtedly offers an invaluable opportunity for self-renewal and the opportunity to reconnect with our own wildness, as discussed earlier in this chapter, but most of us must sooner or later return to our towns and cities and resume our civilized lives (nor is it likely nowadays that we entered the wilderness without the essential trappings of modernity in the form of rucksacks, weatherproof clothing, navigational aids and camping equipment). To move beyond the unhelpful and indeed often destructive dichotomy of wild and civilized, we must think more creatively and have the imagination and the will to conceive how, in Monbiot’s words, we might ‘enjoy the benefits of advanced technology while also enjoying, if we choose, a life richer in adventure and surprise’; it is through developing a comprehensive vision of rewilding, Monbiot argues, that we can begin the process of reconciliation, because ‘rewilding is not about abandoning civilization but about enhancing it’.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Oelschlaeger, p. 2.

⁹⁸ William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness’, in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 69-90 (p. 80).

⁹⁹ Monbiot, p. 10.

Morris himself freely admitted his own ‘hatred of modern civilization’ as it defined itself in the nineteenth century, but he would have readily agreed with Monbiot that the solution is not to abandon it.¹⁰⁰ For Morris, however, what was needed was not merely an enhancing of modern civilization but a transformation of it, and in his Socialist lectures and articles, together with *News from Nowhere*, he discusses in informed and persuasive detail what such a transformation might mean in social, environmental and economic terms, and what methods are most likely to achieve it. The last romances do not serve the same purpose as these more overtly political writings but they still contribute significantly to Morris’s vision of how we might live, rather than how we live now, in their compelling depictions of wilder, more dynamic societies which are transformed and reinvigorated by the presence of their wild protagonists.

The societies which these protagonists come finally to inhabit maintain an active and meaningful relationship with the wild in that the boundaries between the human built environment and the wilderness are invariably permeable. Thoreau celebrated such permeability in *Walden*, writing:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness — to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground.

For Thoreau, the vitality of individuals and of human societies more generally is dependent on moving easily and regularly between the communities in which we live and work and the wild landscape beyond; to live truly and fully as members of society ‘we must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigour’ and ‘witness our own limits transgressed’, something only the wild can bestow.¹⁰¹ As Don Scheese notes, Thoreau was also quick to emphasise how ‘living in or near civilization, one can still without much effort cross a border into wildness’, and such crossings are a

¹⁰⁰ ‘How I Became a Socialist’, *CW*, XXIII, p. 279.

¹⁰¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (1854), (New York: Dover, 1995), p. 205.

characteristic feature of Morris's romances.¹⁰² In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, the town of Utterhay where Birdalone and her companions finally settle is 'hard on the borders' of the vast wood of Evilshaw, and at the start of the tale we hear how 'few indeed had entered it, and they that had, brought back tales wild and confused thereof'.¹⁰³ But as Norman Talbot observes, 'an evil wood, for Morris, is a contradiction in terms', and those who fear Evilshaw demonstrate the limitations and ignorance of the civilized world view in which the wild is a problem rather than a necessity.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, at the end of the story we are told that: 'As to the wood of Evilshaw, it was not once a year only that Birdalone and Arthur sought thither and met the Wood-mother, but a half-score of times or more, might be, in the year's circle', whilst their friend Atra would regularly 'leave Utterhay and her friends and fare lonesome up into Evilshaw, and find Habundia and abide with her in all kindness holden for a month or more'. For Atra in particular, journeying into the wildwood is the 'tonic' Thoreau identified, for we are told that in the days before she leaves Utterhay she would 'fall moody and few-spoken', whereas 'she came back ever from the wood calm and kind and well-liking'.¹⁰⁵ The wildwood restores and revitalizes Atra, who recognizes when contact with the wild is essential to her physical and psychological wellbeing. Donna Seaman claims that 'our longing for wilderness increases in direct proportion to our eradication of it' and that 'people who live wholly urbanized lives, spending little time outdoors and rarely stopping to notice life that is not human-made, suffer emotionally and spiritually'; in her ability to move between town and wilderness, Atra in contrast accommodates the needs of both the civilized and the wild self and in doing so avoids the sense of loss and alienation that lack of regular contact with the natural world can engender.¹⁰⁶ It is also significant that in traversing the threshold between civilization and wilderness, Atra, Birdalone and Arthur achieve some modest success in changing social attitudes in Utterhay, for we are told that 'amidst all these comings and goings somewhat wore off the terror of Evilshaw'; whilst many still feel the need for a companion or 'something holy' to accompany

¹⁰² Don Scheese, *Nature Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 59.

¹⁰³ *CW*, XX, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Talbot, "'Whilom, as tells the tale'", p. 19.

¹⁰⁵ *CW*, XX, p. 387.

¹⁰⁶ Donna Seaman, 'On the Edge of Wilderness', in *In Our Nature: Stories of Wildness*, Selected and Introduced by Donna Seaman (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2002), pp. 5-13 (pp. 7-8).

them in travelling there, some progress at least has been made in reclaiming the wildwood from fear and superstition.¹⁰⁷

Regular contact with the wild is essential also to Osberne in *The Sundering Flood* who, on returning from his quest and assuming the governance of his community, is repeatedly drawn to the uncultivated territory beyond his homestead. In the closing stages of the story we are told that:

once in every quarter Osberne went into that same dale wherein he first met Steelhead, and there he came to him, and they had converse together; and though Osberne changed the aspect of him from year to year, as for Steelhead he changed not at all, but was ever the same as when Osberne first saw him, and good love there was between those twain.¹⁰⁸

Steelhead is seemingly ageless, one of ‘the warriors of while ago’, and mentors Osberne as a child, imbuing him with bodily strength beyond his years through the ritualistic bathing and blessing of his naked body, and affirming his attraction to the eponymous river when he tells Osberne: ‘when thou mayest, seek thou to the side of the Sundering Flood, for meseemeth that there lieth thy weird’.¹⁰⁹ We might indeed understand Steelhead as a manifestation of the spirit and the values of the wild in Morris’s final story: he fosters Osberne’s affinity with the raging waters of the river (unlike his grandparents who warn him to avoid it), he enhances the animal strength of Osberne’s naked body, and he confers the sword Boardcleaver on him that he might cultivate a purposeful and adventurous life. In addition, he himself remains eternally young and vigorous, a symbol of the undiminished energy of the wild, of what Seaman describes as the ‘vitality that charges our minds and sustains our souls’.¹¹⁰ In his regular visits to the Dale to meet Steelhead, Osberne, like Atra in her meetings with Habundia, thus responds to a primal and instinctive need to sustain his own wild nature in the midst of his everyday social and domestic life – to celebrate wildness as fundamental to his humanity.

¹⁰⁷ CW, XX, p. 387.

¹⁰⁸ CW, XXI, p. 250.

¹⁰⁹ CW, XXI, pp. 53, 26.

¹¹⁰ Seaman, p. 6.

Restoring the balance between our wild and civilized selves, acknowledging them as equally valid aspects of our human nature, and ensuring we meet the needs of both, is one way of transforming our over-civilized lives. Moving as freely and frequently as we can between urban and wild landscapes enables this, but we can also make contact with the wild in the very midst of our towns and cities. As Snyder explains, '*Wild* is the process that surrounds us all, self-organizing nature', and we can choose to see, feel and appreciate it day by day no matter where we live, something Thoreau understood when he declared: 'I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of Concord'.¹¹¹ Wildness can be found in the swathe of wild flowers growing in the suburbs of a city, in the bird of prey hovering over a town, or in the fox moving stealthily across an urban garden. We can experience it even more readily and regularly, like Morris, in the intense 'green green green!' of the grass in Springtime or in a simple profusion of dandelions, and we can nourish our own wild nature, as Morris tells us in his 1881 lecture 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth', by learning 'to love the narrow spot that surrounds our daily life for what of beauty and sympathy there is in it'.¹¹²

In the last romances, Morris's protagonists demonstrate just such receptivity to the wild in their midst. Ralph in *The Well at the World's End* loves the house in which he lives 'and all that dwelt there', including 'the martins that nested in the earthen bottles, which when he was little he had seen his mother put up in the eaves of the out-bowers'.¹¹³ Here the wild finds its place at the centre of human domesticity and is both welcomed and appreciated as part of the home, something we see also in *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* in which Joanna and David nurse the wounded Christopher in the house at Littledale 'and decked it with boughs and blossoms' from the wildwood for their shared delight.¹¹⁴ That we can invite the wild into our lives at any time is symbolized also in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* when Birdalone throws open her window in joy and 'looked out on the beauty of the spring' as it manifests itself in the very heart of the City of the Five Crafts. The market-wains moving through the city on that spring morning as she looks out from above also 'brought to her mind the thought of the meads, and the streams of the

¹¹¹ 'Is Nature Real?', p. 389; *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 9, p. 43.

¹¹² *CL*, IV, p. 154; *CW*, XXII, p. 170.

¹¹³ *CW*, XVIII, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ *CW*, XVII, p. 168.

river, and the woodsides beyond the city', the sights, smells and sounds of Spring thus establishing a literal connection between the city and the countryside beyond its walls, but also one based on memory and imagination.¹¹⁵ This imaginative connection with the wild is also exemplified in the art and architecture in the last romances. In *The Story of the Glittering Plain* Hallblithe notes appreciatively the carvings above the shut-beds in the house on the Isle of Ransom which have 'flowery grass and fruited trees all about', and the house of Ralph's friends Clement and Katherine in *The Well at the World's End* is described as 'goodly' with its windows glazed with 'flowers and knots and posies in them'.¹¹⁶ Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* likewise takes inspiration from the wildwood in her embroidery; she decorates the shoes the witch-wife allows her to make with 'oak-leaves [...] and flowers, and coneyes, and squirrels' and embroiders her new dress with 'roses and lilies' with 'a tall tree springing up from amidmost of the hem of the skirt, and a hart on either side thereof'. Even her smock receives careful and loving attention, being 'sewn daintily at the hems and the bosom with fair knots and buds'.¹¹⁷ Seaman observes that 'the arts, humanity's flowers, are inextricably rooted in the wild', a claim supported by their various manifestations in the last romances which recall Morris's own textile designs with their proliferation of natural motifs.¹¹⁸ Linda Parry notes that one of the primary reasons for Morris's success as a designer was the fact that 'he had knowledge, understanding and a deep love of all natural things – flowers, trees, insects, animals and birds – and used these motifs with authority gained from observing nature at first hand'.¹¹⁹ The profusion of leaves, stems, berries and flowers that characterise Morris's designs, the 'vivacity of all the elements' as described by Caroline Arscott, pay homage to the energy, colour, resilience and ebullience of the wild and reveal our need and our desire as human beings to respond, like Birdalone, creatively as well as physically to its variety and its vitality.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ CW, XX, p.276-77.

¹¹⁶ CW, XIV, p. 234; CW, XVIII, p. 10.

¹¹⁷ CW, XX, pp. 13-15.

¹¹⁸ Seaman, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (New Jersey: Crescent Books, 1994), p. 8.

¹²⁰ Caroline Arscott, *William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 31.

Such creative endeavours are a valuable means of expressing our fundamental connection to the wild as civilized creatures, but we can do this also in the way we choose to live our lives and interact with others on a daily basis. Allowing our wild selves to inform our sense of purpose in life and our understanding of the role we might play in our communities is perhaps the most challenging means by which we can rewild our societies, but also the most essential in terms of achieving social transformation. In *The Wood Beyond the World* this is exemplified in one of the rituals involved in the choosing of a new King in Stark-wall, in which Walter must choose between a robe 'glorious and be-gemmed, unmeet for any save a great king', and a suit of armour, 'seemly, well-fashioned, but little adorned [...] worn and bestained with weather, and the pelting of the spear-storm'; Walter's 'heart arose in him' at the sight of the armour and he readily chooses this to the delight of the Elders of the city who immediately confer the kingship on him.¹²¹ His choice signifies his determination to act in accordance with his own wild nature – a nature which directs him to be an active, energetic and selfless ruler who serves his kingdom and his people, a leader who seeks to contribute to his community rather than one who seeks merely to enjoy the wealth and comfort that his position confers.

Cronon asserts that central to our relationship with wilderness is the need to consider 'what it can tell us about *home*, the place where we actually live', and the need to ask 'how can we take the positive values associated with wilderness and bring them closer to home?' He suggests that 'in reminding us of the world we did not make, wilderness can teach profound feelings of humility and respect as we confront our fellow being and the earth itself'.¹²² Such humility and respect is demonstrated by Walter when he chooses service rather than reward, and it is characteristic more generally of the protagonists of the last romances in the positions they ultimately assume within their respective communities. Arthur and Hugh in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, for example, similarly accept the offer of a leadership position in defending the town of Utterhay from its enemies, telling the town's governors that 'it was well their will to dwell there neighbourly, and do them all the

¹²¹ CW, XVII, p. 119.

¹²² Cronon, p. 87.

help they might', and whilst they are happy to accept the honour of their new position in the town, they also commit wholeheartedly to 'the work that should go with it'.¹²³ In *The Well at the World's End* Ralph does not forget those who fought with him to save his kingdom of Upmeads from its enemies, however humble they may be, for 'ever was he a true captain and brother to the Shepherd-folk, [...] and were there any scarcity or ill hap amongst them, he helped them to the uttermost of his power', whilst in *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* 'to no man did Christopher mete out worse than his deserts, nay, to most far better he meted', and 'the tormentors of poor folk' have no place in his land.¹²⁴ In each case these new leaders gradually transform their societies, eradicating poverty, inequality and injustice and liberating their fellow citizens to live their lives free from fear and want, and in response the people of their homesteads, towns, cities and kingdoms, as Osberne and Elfhild find in *The Sundering Flood*, 'grew better and not the worsen'.¹²⁵

Morris's heroes and heroines are young men and women whose experiences of the wilderness and whose own wild natures thus come to full fruition in the societies they inhabit. They inspire and change those societies with the energy, generosity, inclusivity, and endurance of the wild and in doing so they challenge our preconceptions and assumptions regarding the supposedly insurmountable boundaries between civilization and wilderness, between public duty and personal fulfilment. Northrop Frye identifies 'the polarizing in romance between the world we want and the world we don't want', and if the world we want is a wilder world, as the current burgeoning interest in rewilding suggests, then we can readily find in Morris's last romances a vision of what that world could be.¹²⁶ In these narratives of rewilding, Morris shows us just what Cronon means when he pleads: 'if wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world'.¹²⁷

¹²³ CW, XX, p. 386.

¹²⁴ CW, XIX, p. 243; CW, XVII, p. 261.

¹²⁵ CW, XXI, p. 246.

¹²⁶ Frye, p. 58.

¹²⁷ Cronon, p. 90.

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