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Title of Paper: **Rethinking the Politics of William Morris's Last Romances**

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Abstract:

In the summer of 1872 William Morris abandoned his attempt to write a novel, claiming in a letter to Louisa Baldwin that it was 'a specimen of how not to do it', being 'nothing but landscape and sentiment'. My article proposes that Morris's rejection of the novel as an unsuitable mode of expression for his own literary and artistic aspirations was also a rejection of what he perceived to be an essentially bourgeois literary form. Instead, Morris found in the literary romance a far more effective vehicle for conveying both his artistic and political ideals as reflected in his own term for *News from Nowhere*, a classic literary utopia which Morris nonetheless preferred to call a 'utopian romance'. This article will argue that Morris's choice of the romance mode was itself a political act which rejected the hegemony of the novel as the dominant Victorian prose form, whilst demonstrating how, in his very last narratives, Morris adapted the romance to suit his own political ends as a revolutionary socialist.

An extended version of this article will form a chapter in *'To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss': William Morris's Radicalism and the Embodiment of Dreams*, edited by Paul Leduc Browne and Michelle Weinroth, to be published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2014.

Keywords: Lectures, Literature, Novel, Politics, Radical, Revolution, Romance, Socialism, Victorian, William Morris

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In June 1872 William Morris sent his ‘abortive novel’ to Louisa Baldwin, apologizing: ‘it is just a specimen of how not to do it, and there is no more to be said thereof: ‘tis nothing but landscape and sentiment: which thing won’t do’. This was to be Morris’s first and last attempt at writing a novel, for he concluded his letter: ‘so there’s an end of my novel writing I fancy, unless the world turns topsides under some day’ (Kelvin 1: 162). It may seem surprising that a man with such literary ability who, in other areas of his life, demonstrated such commitment and perseverance, would abandon novel writing altogether on the basis of one slight and supposedly unsuccessful attempt. A clue might be found, however, in the words of the protagonist of one of Morris’s own early stories, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’ (1856), who claims: ‘I could soon find out whether a thing were possible or not to me; then if it were not I threw it away for ever, never thought of it again; no regret, no longing for that; it was past and over to me’ (*Works* 1: 309). Morris certainly did not appear to regret unduly his ‘failure’ as a novelist; in earlier years he had similarly discovered that he was not cut out to be a clergyman, an architect or a painter, and none of these revelations had a detrimental effect on his future work as an artist, writer and businessman. As the protagonist goes on to say in ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’: ‘But if it were possible, and I made up my mind to do it, then and there I began it, and in due time finished it, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left till it was done’ (*Works* 1: 309). If Morris abandoned one thing, it was because he saw something better suited to his needs and abilities, and one need look no further than the success of Morris and Co. or the time and energy Morris dedicated to the Socialist movement to find evidence of his commitment and perseverance to something he believed was ‘possible’.

Morris’s decision to abandon novel writing is interesting however not because it indicates a perceived lack of ability but because of what it tells us about Morris’s inclinations and motivations as a writer and about how these were influenced by his commitment to Socialism in the 1880s and 1890s. If Morris felt unable to write a novel in the 1870s, by the 1880s and 1890s the novel was unable to satisfy his own needs as a writer and a Socialist, necessitating the choice of what he believed to be a more dynamic and relevant mode of writing in both literary and political terms. In adopting the romance as a model for the stories he wrote in the last few years of his life, Morris found a more relevant and inclusive means of expressing what most interested and concerned him as a writer and a Socialist. A number of critics have tackled the undoubtedly thorny problem of interpreting the last romances as Socialist narratives, and it is not my intention to rehash these arguments here. My aim in this essay is rather to show how, in these final works, Morris was less concerned with demonstrating general Socialist principles in practice than with exploring the nature and challenges of political activism and defining the values that underpinned his personal engagement with, and commitment to, the Socialist movement. Examining the romances in this way offers an alternative and less restrictive means of accounting for them as narratives written at the end of Morris’s most active Socialist period, and, more importantly, enables us to understand these works not merely as literary reflections of Morris’s Socialism but as an integral element of his political praxis.

Before considering the specific aspects of Morris’s final stories that support such an interpretation, it is worth considering briefly why Morris, as writer and



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Socialist, evidently found the romance a more amenable form than the novel. As a reader Morris was by no means averse to the novel. In his list of favourite books submitted by request to the *Pall-Mall Gazette* in 1886 there is a section on ‘Modern Fiction’ which includes Daniel Defoe, Dumas the elder, Victor Hugo and George Borrow, and in a marginal note Morris asserts: ‘I should like to say here that I yield to no-one [...] in my love and admiration for Scott; also that to my mind of the novelists of our generation Dickens is immeasurably ahead’ (*Kelvin* 2: 517). Nonetheless, the list of novels and novelists Morris considered worthy of attention is notably select in an age when the realist novel held such a dominant place in literary culture. Indeed, Morris appeared to find the subject matter of many contemporary novels at best uninspiring and at worst inflected with bourgeois capitalist ideology. In his 1888 lecture ‘The Society of the Future’ he bemoans the fact that the literary critics of the day spent their time ‘elevating mere rhetorical word-spinners and hunters of introspection above such masters of life as Scott and Dickens’, whilst anticipating how, in a post-revolutionary future, the new society ‘will no longer be able to have novels relating the troubles of a middle-class couple in their struggle towards social uselessness, because the material for such literary treasures will have passed away’ (*Artist* 2: 464-65). Morris re-expressed this contempt for the content of many contemporary novels even more vehemently in *News from Nowhere* (1890) when Ellen rebukes her grandfather for his interest in ‘the books of the past days’ – a clear reference to the nineteenth-century novel – noting how invariably:

towards the end of the story we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily in an island of bliss on other people’s troubles; and that after a long series of sham troubles (or mostly sham) of their own making, illustrated by dreary introspective nonsense about their feelings and aspirations and all the rest of it (*Works* 16: 149, 151).

The stories of most interest to the Nowherians instead appear to be those that adorn the walls of the Bloomsbury dining hall where Guest sits down to eat with Old Hammond, stories ‘full of incident’ with subjects ‘taken from queer old-world myths and imaginations’ (*Works* 16: 100). Such stories appealed to Morris as much as to the citizens of Nowhere, and they were not the stories being told by the nineteenth-century novel.

If Morris as reader thus had very real reservations about many of the novels being written in his era, as a writer he was unable to conform to the constraints of the realist narrative and, more pertinently, what he regarded as its political complacency. This was something which had perhaps already become clear to him when he abandoned his writing of what is now known as *The Novel on Blue Paper*, but which his later commitment to Socialism clarified and confirmed. Critics including Carole Silver, Patrick Brantlinger and James Buzard have discussed Morris’s rejection of the novel as an essentially bourgeois form, Brantlinger and Buzard both, for different reasons, describing *News from Nowhere* as an ‘anti-novel’ which critiques ‘a form whose day, it hopes, has passed’ (Buzard 47). Certainly by the 1880s and 1890s Morris’s political beliefs had made it impossible for him to write about the everyday trials, tribulations and triumphs of middle-class couples. Instead, he began in the final years of his life to write a series of stories that were, to use Old Hammond’s words, ‘full of incident’, and which simultaneously demonstrated the values and ideals he



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associated with Socialism. Morris himself referred to his final fictional works in his letters and diaries as simply ‘stories’ or ‘tales’, thus evading precise definition of them in terms of a specific literary form or genre, but inevitably there has been a desire to categorize them ever since. Fiona MacCarthy, Morris’s most recent biographer, refers to these narratives as his ‘1890s’ novels’, and, even more surprisingly, as examples of ‘early science fiction’, but they are neither (ix-x). *The Well at the World’s End* (1896) and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897) are certainly novel-length with fully developed, complex plots, and all these final narratives demonstrate the detailed attention to surroundings and the emotional and psychological realism we would expect from the nineteenth-century novel, but these aspects alone are not enough to justify defining them as such. Indeed they have as much in common with the fairy tale as they do with the novel, with their dwarfs, witch-wives and wise women of the woods, although May Morris recognized the problem in categorizing them narrowly in this way too, noting that these stories are ‘very human’ and that ‘the men and women in them are by no means dim and impossible figures going through their tricks in a land of magic’. Instead, she concludes, ‘they are the fairy-story of a modern mind’, incorporating ‘many subtleties’ not usually associated with the traditional fairy tale (*Artist* 1: 506).

The general consensus in Morris scholarship is to refer to these late works as prose romances – a title applied to them by May Morris in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936) – and if we are to categorize and label these narratives, then they are certainly most closely aligned with the literary romance in terms of both content and structure. Carole Silver and Amanda Hodgson have indeed defined Morris’s entire literary oeuvre in terms of the romance, with Hodgson claiming that ‘his views and beliefs found natural and potent expression in this antiquated form’ (10). Hodgson’s description of the romance as ‘antiquated’ is however misleading; the romance mode, as W. R. J. Barron has emphasized, has always been endlessly adaptable and thus enduringly relevant – it is ‘always eager for new worlds to conquer’, and always willing to respond to changing social circumstances and ideals (*English* 7). Such adaptability meant that after he joined the Socialist movement in the 1880s Morris found the romance the best means of articulating his own political interests and concerns in literary terms. Indeed, Carole Silver claims that because of the influence of his politics, Morris’s final works constitute ‘a new literary genre’ which she calls ‘the socialist romance’ (‘Socialism Internalized’ 126). Whilst Silver’s term is in many ways a valid one, it inevitably tends to suggest that these stories serve as a vehicle for Socialist doctrine, and I would argue that their achievement is less prescriptive and more holistic than that appellation implies. Socialism was, for Morris, the means of becoming more fully human, and the romance was the mode which allowed the fullest exploration of what it means to be human, with all the challenges, aspirations, suffering, and achievements that entails. He did not in fact need to evolve a new literary genre because he found in the constituent elements of the romance and the values associated with it a pre-existing means of thinking through and commenting on the nature of his own commitment to Socialism and on the processes and values that underpinned revolutionary politics – the only politics for Morris that could establish a world in which everyone had the chance to develop their full human potential. Ultimately Morris recognized the romance as the literary form



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that was most open to the contemplation of possibilities and most interested in opportunities for transformation, both personal and social – an inherently radical form through which radical visions could be realized.

Such openness to possibilities is indeed inscribed in the very structure of the traditional quest romance with what Barron describes as its ‘open-endedness and infinite rewritability’ (*Arthur* 65). Eugene Vinaver has identified this as an essentially social aspect of the romance in its earliest manifestations, the intention being that writers would bequeath stories to their successors for them to continue, each narrative thread being capable of ‘further lengthening’, either by extension into the past or the future (12). The romance thereby anticipates a community of readers and writers – a community which extends through time as well as space – and it is easy to see how such communal inclusiveness would appeal to Morris as a Socialist. Indeed Morris’s own romances share this quality in varying degrees, not least because each tale effectively ends with the protagonists in their youthful prime, the latter years of their lives being narrated briefly in summary. We are thus told of Hallblithe and Puny Fox at the end of *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891) that ‘many deeds they did together, whereof the memory of men has failed’ (*Works* 14: 324); *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) concludes that ‘of Walter and the Maid is no more to be told, saving that they begat between them goodly sons and fair daughters’ (*Works* 17: 129-30), whilst the narrator of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* asserts ‘now when all this hath been said, we have no more to tell about this company of friends [...] save that their love never sundered, and that they lived without shame and died without fear’ (*Works* 20:387). There is clearly plenty of scope for sequels to all the last romances, and even prequels to some, lending these narratives that freedom from ‘limitation in time or space’ which Vinaver sees as characteristic of the medieval prose romance (12). By refusing the closure usually associated with the nineteenth-century novel these tales have the potential to be truly communal, shared and developed across generations of writers and readers – or indeed listeners. For in the last romances, as demonstrated by the narrative voices of their concluding paragraphs, there is a sense of these being tales to be told. The ‘memory of men’ having failed to hand down the tale of Hallblithe’s future deeds signifies Morris’s alignment of his story with the oral tradition of folk and fairy tales, a tradition reiterated in the closing chapters of *The Sundering Flood* (1897) which are related to the gathered folk of Wethermel by the Old Carline who tells her listeners: ‘I must pray your patience, as belike it may be somewhat long for a tale of one night’s hall-gee: and on this night must the tale be begun and ended. Hearken then!’ (*Works* 21: 196) This sense of tradition is intensified by the very language of the last romances, with their regular employment of archaic diction and syntax. As Norman Talbot has identified, the purpose of the archaisms in these romances is not merely ‘decorative’ but ‘highly functional’, establishing ‘a continuum’ of tellers and listeners and thereby identifying the stories as ‘communal property’ (17). These are thus tales ideally suited for telling in those thoroughly communal houses of the future which Morris envisaged in his lecture ‘Art and Socialism’ (1884), houses ‘planned in the rational ancient way’ with ‘a big hall’ in which the inhabitants would meet, eat and talk (*Works* 23: 199-200).

Buzard asserts that in *News from Nowhere* the telling of stories is deemed an ‘eccentric hobby or childish pastime’, making Nowhere ‘a place inhospitable to story-



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telling' (465). If the status and function of stories are somewhat ambiguous in *Nowhere*, it is however worth remembering, as the subtitle proclaims, that this is 'An Epoch of Rest', after the turmoil of revolution, a period in which a relatively new-found ability to enjoy the details of everyday life predominates. It is interesting to speculate whether the future *Nowhere* might be more hospitable to the craft of tale telling, not least because in the romances Morris wrote immediately after *News from Nowhere* he is keen to emphasize the fundamentally social aspect of story-telling and its role in fostering a sense of a truly communal heritage and culture. Nonetheless Morris's last romances are written in and for a pre- rather than post-revolutionary society and there is a clear political dimension to his narrative approach in these works; the 'tale' is the form of 'the folk', and hence what Frederic Jameson describes as 'the irrepressible voice and expression of the underclasses of the great systems of domination' (105). In drawing upon these narrative traditions in his final works Morris sought to restore the social nature and function of story-telling whilst recognizing its subversive and revolutionary potential. He understood that stories have the capacity to inspire and transform, and to tell or listen to the tale can thus become an alternative yet powerful mode of political expression and engagement.

The stories best suited to this revolutionary purpose were, for Morris, as 'full of incident' as those depicted on the walls of the Bloomsbury dining hall in *News from Nowhere*, and here again he found the romance an appropriate vehicle. One of the characteristic features of the romance is its focus on action fuelled by a spirit of adventure, an attribute celebrated by Robert Louis Stevenson in his article 'A Gossip on Romance' published in *Longmans Magazine* in 1882. Stevenson laments in this article that:

English people of the present day are apt, I know not why, to look somewhat down on incident, and reserve their admiration for the clink of tea-spoons and the accents of the curate. It is thought clever to write a novel with no story at all, or at least with a very dull one.

It is a preference all the more surprising in that the traditional demand in literature for adventure, for 'fit and striking incident', is, Stevenson claims, as fundamental to the human condition as 'the desire for knowledge' and 'the desire for meat' (73, 74). It is the romance that best fulfils this need for Stevenson, although he also observes that it is the romance's willingness to depict the 'brute incident' which often appeals to the supposedly civilized reader (69). Nonetheless, in Morris's final narratives violence is never the aim of the protagonists, necessary though it might at times be, for these young men and women are motivated simply by a strong sense of adventure and a desire for new events and new calls to action; in *The Wood Beyond the World* an unhappily married Walter calls to mind 'that the world was wide and he but a young man', telling his father 'I would depart [...] and see other lands' (*Works* 17:2), whilst Ralph in *The Well at the World's End* is anxious 'to seek a wider land, and a more stirring life' than he has at Upmeads (*Works* 18: 3). This firm reliance on a spirit of adventure goes some way to explain the enduring appeal of the romance for Morris and in his final narratives May Morris observes how 'a large part of the reader's



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pleasure in these tales' comes from 'the narrator's enjoyment of the steady flow of romantic adventure and invention' (*Works* 17: xvi). Morris recognizes in these works that the adventure story is primarily about opportunity; to embark on an adventure is to relinquish what is safe and known in order to pursue new experiences and be receptive to new possibilities – to put oneself in the way of something better.

Morris's delight in the adventure story was complemented by his tendency to conceive and approach his own varied projects and endeavours in this way. He memorably referred to the Kelmscott Press as his 'little typographical adventure', and his approach to Socialism was construed in a similar vein (*Kelvin* 3: 252). The process of social revolution was an 'enchanted wood' which Socialists must traverse if they were ever to reach 'the promised land' of Communism (*Artist* 2: 422), and in his poem 'The Message of the March Wind' (1885), the wind's message is that Socialists should 'Rise up on the morrow/And go on your ways towards the doubt and the strife', for ultimately this 'uprising to deeds shall be sweet' (*Works* 9: 123). And Morris desperately wanted to be part of such uprising to deeds, writing excitedly to Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1885: 'I rather wish I were thirty years younger: I want to see the game played out' (*Kelvin* 2: 426). Embarking on the 'adventure' of social revolution was thus in many ways an exciting and invigorating process for Morris, but he by no means underestimated the difficulties and sacrifices it would involve. It would mean leaving behind the secure and familiar – a rejection of the status quo in the pursuit of something better. The newly recruited Socialist would, Morris knew, have to relinquish the comfort of conformity and face disapproval and rejection for their commitment to the cause. 'You will run the risk of losing position, reputation, money, friends even', he warns his audience in his lecture 'Art and Socialism'; 'nor can I assure you that you will for ever escape scot-free from the attacks of open tyranny'. If they are prepared to join him in the Socialist movement, he affirms:

I can offer you a position which involves sacrifice; a position which will give you your America at home and make you inwardly sure that you are at least some use to the cause: and I earnestly beg you, those of you who are convinced of the justice of our cause, not to hang back from active participation in a struggle which, whoever helps or whoever abstains from helping, must beyond all doubt end at last in Victory!
(*Works* 23: 214)

Morris spoke from his own experiences as a prominent public figure who had adopted a highly unorthodox position which entailed attacking the very class into which he was born, but he also spoke from a more emotionally intimate perspective. His close friend Edward Burne-Jones 'always regretted that Morris joined the Socialist Body', and indeed reflecting on his lack of support for Morris's political activism after his death, Burne-Jones claimed that it was 'the only time when I failed Morris'. Fortunately, as his wife Georgiana observed, 'Morris was strong enough to pursue his way alone' (2: 97).

His last romances allowed Morris to explore in fictional terms what it meant to commit unwaveringly in this way to a chosen course, despite the hardships it entailed, for as Northrop Frye has demonstrated, the romance contains 'a world of exciting adventures', but these adventures invariably involve 'separation, loneliness,



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humiliation', and even 'pain' (*Secular Scripture* 53). Several of the protagonists commence their adventures through acts of rebellion and departure which drive them from familiar territory and companions into personal journeys fraught with danger and uncertainty, as well as great personal suffering. Walter's adventures in *The Wood Beyond the World* and Ralph's quest in *The Well at the World's End* are indeed initiated by deliberate acts of disobedience. To reach the eponymous Wood, Walter must first abandon his position of authority amongst his father's men and the duty of avenging his father's death, whilst also rejecting a warning by the old man who has been there that he 'try no such adventure' as traversing the mountain pass that leads to the Wood (*Works* 17: 21). Similarly, Ralph leaves Upmeads surreptitiously and in direct defiance of an agreement that he will stay at home to fulfil the duties of a son and prospective ruler, confessing to his friends Clement and Katherine: 'my father and mother would have me stay at home when my brethren were gone, and that liketh me not; therefore am I come out to seek my luck in the world' (*Works* 18: 13). In each instance, these acts of rebellion move beyond the merely reactionary dynamic of adolescent disobedience and become the positive expression of the protagonists' determination to engage actively with their worlds – to risk the trials and rewards of the adventure.

This engagement expresses itself in the last romances through commitment to a particular quest and it is the quest, with its emphasis on progress towards a vision or objective, which forms the organizing structure and rhythmic momentum of these narratives. Here again Morris's literary and political affinity with the romance is evident in that the quest also provided a useful metaphor for Morris in defining the Socialist mission, and the virtues and attributes associated with the quest – action, commitment, sacrifice, courage, perseverance – were the virtues and attributes he regarded as essential for the political activist. And what motivates both the political quester and the questers of his last romances in their commitment to the task and the practice is desire. Gillian Beer claims that the romance 'remakes the world in the image of desire', a claim which emphasizes its close relationship with the utopian tradition in literature (79); A. L. Morton has written in similar terms that 'utopia is an image of desire', in that 'it will always be based on something that somebody actually wants' (11), and Morris himself acknowledges the close association between the two genres in calling *News from Nowhere* a 'Utopian Romance'. This alignment with the literary utopia through the central dynamic of desire reveals the political potential of the romance with its shared interest in transformation, and this was surely another of its attractions for Morris for whom the desire of a world transformed was the lifeblood of Socialism. Morris's political lectures are aimed at stirring such potent desire and concomitant action in his listeners – at what Miguel Abensour calls 'the education of desire', their purpose being, Abensour observes, to encourage their audiences 'to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire otherwise' (145-46).

This imperative to desire – but also to desire better, more and otherwise – is powerfully articulated in the last romances. For Northrop Frye, 'the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self', and in Morris's final narratives desire is shown to be a powerful stimulus and motivation in the quest (*Anatomy* 193). But desire can also be problematic, as Fredric Jameson observes, in that in certain



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manifestations ‘desire, like its paler and more well-behaved predecessor wish-fulfilment, remains locked into the category of the individual subject’ (68). This is best exemplified in *The Well at the World’s End* in which Ralph, arguably the most desire-driven of Morris’s protagonists, finds that his desire has to be re-educated and refocused in order to transcend a potentially destructive individualism and achieve a more constructive and social focus. Ralph’s initial desire to leave his homeland and achieve great things in the wider world is temporarily but powerfully overwhelmed by his desire for the Lady of Abundance who he meets early in his journey. This is a desire which is intensely personal and sexual, and in which Ralph’s own sense of purpose and identity is subsumed, so much so that on the Lady’s death he withdraws into a self-absorbed grief and tells Richard the Red: ‘I desire to die’. The perceptive and more experienced Richard replies: ‘That way is open for thee on any day of the week. Why hast thou not taken it already?’, and when Ralph cannot reply, he observes: ‘Is it not because thou hopest to desire something; if not today, then tomorrow, or the next day or the next?’ (*Works* 18: 212) Richard recognizes that desire is a fundamental part of the human condition – that even when desire seems dead, the hope of desiring again remains. Ralph’s desire is eventually re-educated through his re-union with Ursula and his continuation on his quest for the Well at the World’s End. Whilst the waters of the Well restore vitality and confer longevity, both clearly individual benefits, Ralph’s immediate desire having drunk from the Well is to employ its gifts in action and service. ‘I am grown eager for the road’, he tells Ursula, having dreamed of his homeland, concluding of the dream: ‘surely then it is calling me to deeds’ (*Works* 19: 86).

Morris’s last romances do not therefore advocate the sublimation of personal desire but rather the successful integration of this desire within the context of the social. It is in this fusion of the personal and the social – in the effective re-educating and re-focusing of desire – that Morris’s adaptation of the romance to articulate his Socialist ideals is most clearly demonstrated. As Carole Silver notes, Morris ‘dismisses the alternative aims of questers – treasure and empire – as unworthy of socialists’, thereby distinguishing Morris’s quest romances from those of contemporaries such as Robert Louis Stevenson or H. Rider Haggard (*Romances* 162). The aim of Morris’s quests is rather to accommodate and apply personal achievements in processes of communal restoration and integration. Whilst the questing protagonists invariably achieve union with the beloved, those unions hold only limited value or meaning unless they lead to social engagement and social contribution, as demonstrated in the conversation between the Maid and Walter in *The Wood Beyond the World* when they have escaped from the enchanted Wood and the potential danger of the Bear Folk and are re-united in the wilderness. Walter is loathe to leave this wilderness, being on the brink of achieving his dominant desire of union with the Maid, asking her: ‘where shall we find any place sweeter or happier than this?’ But the Maid rejects what essentially constitutes a withdrawal from society, stating:

Beloved, I have deemed that it were good for us to go seek mankind as they live in the world, and to live amongst them. I will tell thee the soothe, to wit, that I long for this sorely. [...] I need the comfort of many people, and the throngs of the city (*Works* 17: 114).



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For the Maid, it is only through engagement with the social world, whatever its dangers, that she and Walter can fully achieve their personal potential and, more importantly, make a proper contribution. When they subsequently meet the warriors of the city of Stark-wall, Walter fears that life in the city ‘shall be tangled unto us’, to which the Maid retorts: ‘then shall thy valiancy prevail to cleave the tangle for us. Or at the least, it shall leave a tale of thee behind, and I shall worship thee’ (*Works* 17: 115). The emphasis for the Maid, as for Morris in his political lectures, is on doing and contributing, even if that is at great personal cost.

Morris’s last romances in this way demonstrate how the concerns, desires and achievements of the individual can only be effectively expressed and consummated within the context of the social. In doing so they manifest what Ernst Bloch defines as the ‘warm stream’ of Marxism, ‘that homeland of identity, in which neither man behaves towards the world, nor the world behaves towards man, as if towards a stranger’ (1: 209). Ruth Levitas has noted the close connection between Morris and Bloch in this regard, in that the ‘goal’ of both is ‘the transcendence of alienation’, and such transcendence is clearly manifested in the last romances in which each of the protagonists ultimately confirms their identity in terms of both sexual union and social contribution (*Concept* 110). Furthermore, their ‘homeland of identity’ is, with one exception, found finally within the context of their original geographical homelands; Marcus Waithe observes that ‘Morris unashamedly emphasizes the continued importance of the home and the household in the utopian situation’, and home serves as the exemplar of the social in his final works (197). Hence, whilst Walter and the Maid construct a new homeland for themselves in Stark-wall, all the other protagonists of these narratives conclude their quests in the places of their birth. Hallblithe, sailing away from the Glittering Plain, rejoices ‘that he was going home to his Kindred and the Roof of his Fathers of old time’ (*Works* 14: 297), whilst Christopher in *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* is ‘eager well nigh unto weeping to behold his people that he should live amongst’ on his return to Oakenrealm (*Works* 17: 251). In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* we are told how Birdalone, on hearing of the town of Utterhay from which she was abducted as an infant, is aware of ‘some memory of the earliest of her days’ stirring within her and ‘began to have a longing’ to go there (*Works* 20: 262), whilst Osberne in *The Sundering Flood*, having helped to secure a new social order in the City of the Sundering Flood, requests of Sir Godrick: ‘let me go back to my folk, and the land that I know and that endures before me when others have faded out’ (*Works* 21: 184). The values of home and fellowship are thus articulated in these romances as both instinct and choice – as unconscious longing and conscious pursuit. It is a combination expressed potently through that dream of Upmeads that drinking of the Well at the World’s End inspires in Ralph, and his subsequent declaration to Richard the Red:

Where then should I go save to the House of my Fathers, and the fields that fed them? What should I do but live amongst my people, warding them from evil, and loving them and giving them good counsel? (*Works* 19: 137)

In these last romances Morris invariably presents the dynamic of the return as progression rather than regression, for returning home always entails moving forward



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into new spheres of action and responsibility for his protagonists. If Morris's protagonists express themselves initially in acts of rebellion and departure, their quests invariably define their progress from positions of social alienation to social integration, and Morris emphasizes how their hard-won autonomy ultimately finds its most effective and dynamic expression within the social structures they transform and revitalize.

The last romances end with the completion of the quest, the fulfilment of desire and the establishment of social stability. Thus, a critic might argue, these are stories with fairytale endings, if not fairytale characters – and fairytale endings are not the stuff of politics. This was certainly George Bernard Shaw's view of Morris's final narratives, as expounded in his essay 'Morris as I Knew Him' (1936). Morris 'needed a refuge from reality' claims Shaw, particularly 'when his Socialist duties involved some specially grimy job in the police court or at the meetings of the [Socialist] League', and he admits 'I have used the Morris stories in that way myself, and found them perfectly effective' (xxix). But Shaw misses the fundamental point of these narratives. They are not about escape, they are about hope, an altogether more radical and constructive concept. If desire is the central motivation of Morris's quests, hope is the foundation on which it is built, for as Richard the Red suggests in his words to Ralph, hope - including the hope always to desire something - endures longer than any particular individual desire. The irrepressible energy of Morris's romances is to a large extent the irrepressible dynamic of hope and this hope is presented as a radical force in that it motivates the protagonists into revolutionary action in order to fulfil their desires. This union of hope and desire reaffirms the shared territory of the literary romance and the literary utopia. Levitas argues that 'utopia's strongest function, its claim to being important rather than a matter of esoteric fascination and charm, is its capacity to inspire the pursuit of a world transformed, to embody hope rather than simply desire' ('For Utopia' 28). It is an argument as relevant to Morris's last romances as it is to *News from Nowhere*, but one which also has deep significance for Morris's political as well as literary endeavours.

Hope was a crucial aspect of what Morris describes as his 'conversion' to Socialism as he emphasizes in his article 'How I Became a Socialist', written for *Justice*, the journal of the Social Democratic Federation, in 1894. Prior to joining the movement, Morris describes how he had 'a brief period of political radicalism during which I saw my ideal clear enough, but had no hope of any realization of it'. He continues:

That came to an end some months before I joined the (then) Democratic Federation, and the meaning of my joining that body was that I had conceived a hope of the realization of my ideal (*Works* 23: 277).

Morris recognized hope as an essentially active rather than passive force, a force which, as Levitas notes, seeks nothing less than transformation, 'for when people want a better life,' he wrote in a letter of 1891, 'I feel sure that they can have it' (Kelvin 3: 310). Here again the connections with Bloch are clear, in that Morris anticipates Bloch's emphasis on hope as a vital and dynamic force in shaping human experience. Hope 'is in love with success rather than failure', Bloch asserts:

Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people



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broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong (1: 3).

Bloch's emphasis on hope as necessarily allied to action is exemplified in Morris's own commitment to the Socialist movement. In a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1883 he reassures her that she 'need not be anxious' about him joining the Democratic Federation, as it was then called, explaining how 'those who are in the thick of it, and trying to do something, are not likely to feel so much of the hope deferred which hangs about the cause as onlookers do' (Kelvin 2: 223). Hope was essential for the work of the Socialist, just as it was essential for the work of the artist, the craftsman and the writer – indeed the central criterion in distinguishing 'useful work' from 'useless toil' for Morris was the fact that 'one has hope in it, the other has not' (*Works* 23: 99). In his last romances Morris purposefully created work that had 'hope in it' and that would thus align his artistic and political ideals. Such stories affect the reader, Morris claimed, by 'raising his life above the daily tangle of small things that wearies him, to the level of the heroism which they represent' (*Works* 22: 176). In doing so, they serve as inspiration rather than escapism – as a call to engage rather than to withdraw.

This call to courageous engagement demanded by hope was perhaps the most important and enduring of Morris's messages as a writer and a Socialist, and it is thus appropriate that it finds its most poignant expression in his very last story, *The Sundering Flood*, which he worked on in the final days before his death. Osberne and Elfhild have 'lived on in hope' that one day they would be united, despite the Sundering Flood, but Osberne recognises that it is only by translating that hope into action that it has any chance of being fulfilled (*Works* 21: 242). He thus determines to leave his homeland and undertake a perilous and uncertain quest in order to find Elfhild who dwells on the other side of the impassable river, asking her: '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 fierce stream?' (*Works* 21: 80) As the Old Carline later relates, it is their 'truth and good-faith and constancy' but also their enduring 'hope without reward' which sustains them through great personal danger and suffering over the five years they are separated, and which secures their eventual union; in the days of joy that follow Osberne tells his kinsfolk, 'now forsooth is no hope in my heart, for all the hope has budded and blossomed and fruited' (*Works* 21: 190-91, 245).

Morris's last romances are his final statement, as a writer and a Socialist, on the necessity of hope, and they are no less worthy of consideration than *News from Nowhere* in that they show that hope 'budded and blossomed and fruited' rather than deferred. Converting the majority of men and women to Socialism was, Morris acknowledged in his lecture 'Communism', 'such a big thing to bring about, that it will take a long time to do so', but did that mean Socialists were 'to give up all hope' of educating people in Socialism? 'Surely not', concludes Morris; 'let us use all means possible for drawing them into Socialism, so that they may at last find themselves in such a position that they understand themselves to be face to face with



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false society, themselves the only possible elements of true society'. Indeed, Morris goes on to assert: 'I must hope that we can instil into the mass of people some spirit of expectation, however vague, beyond the needs of the year' (*Works* 23: 266, 269, 270). For Socialists, Morris thus insists, hope is not a choice but an obligation, a point reiterated more recently by Raymond Williams who, in his assessment of the progress and setbacks of Socialism in the twentieth century, concludes: 'We must speak for hope' (322). It was a willingness not only to speak for hope, but also to act for hope, that defined Morris's Socialism, and in his last romances he shows us what that might mean.

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