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THE WORK OF WILLIAM MORRIS:

A CORD OF TRIPLE STRAND

WHEN WILLIAM MORRIS DIED in 1896, at the age of 62, an eminent medical man said: "The disease is simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men." This work is roughly classified in the title of the last two volumes of his collected writings which his daughter published: *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*. He did not fulfil these three functions successively. His life can not be divided like that of Matthew Arnold, putting the lyrical poetry early and the concern in prose with public affairs later. Artistry — the practice of design — and poetry ran all through his life. For the last twenty years he was involved in public affairs; for the last thirteen he was, to use his own description, a member of a Socialist propaganda.

This multiple activity makes it impossible for any one critic or biographer to write with authority on all the aspects of Morris's life and genius. There is — there probably always will be — a lack of balance in the most careful and informed treatment. His first biographers undervalued his socialism. They regarded it as freakish, extravagant, uselessly quixotic. Modern writers undervalue his poetry and his romantic prose; or, at best, they have difficulty with it. Much of it is now quite out of fashion. When poetry is out of fashion, it is not easy to read or to understand. Too little is expected of it. It is read too shallowly. It is too easily assumed that, because Morris's usual pace is leisurely, like Spenser's, he has no imaginative energy, and that, because he prefers a transparent, unambiguous diction, he had nothing much to convey or to conceal. This cannot be helped. Reading skills are not simply cumulative. We get fresh ones and lose the old. There are toll-gates on all the roads of knowledge. It must be granted that the first sight of Morris's poetry is discouraging to the modern taste. The bulk of it is romantic poetry, lyrical and narrative, with the narrative predominating. Morris was a lover of old

tales. He regarded them as part of the treasure of civilization, and as a fountain of refreshment. He refashioned medieval and northern tales, and classical tales seen through medieval eyes. At the end of his life he invented new tales in prose, with similar narrative motifs. All this large body of poetry ostensibly concerns the past, occasionally the specific past, more often the generalized and idealized past.

A very superficial description; but it serves the present purpose. Besides being at first sight discouraging, this poetry is also baffling. As we are told in the *Penguin Guide to English Literature*: "We almost always have the sense in reading Morris's poetry — and indeed his prose romances too — that what he is doing is quite marginal, quite apart from the main activities of his life." His latest biographer, Philip Henderson, writing of Morris's busy, restless hands and the many crafts he exercised, allows himself to include the writing of poetry, "which sometimes seems to have been almost another form of manual exercise."

This was not Morris's own attitude. He said the same thing about his poetry and his socialism: "I cannot help it." He said, in the Envoy to his *Earthly Paradise* that he trembled at what he could not choose but trust to his verse. One seldom trembles at what is marginal. He dictated the end of his last romance on his deathbed. We are bound to ask, what *was* this output, this flood of imaginative creation and recreation, for which he found himself obliged to make room in his crowded days? Morris once said that the only description he could give of genius was that it was "irresistible". This does not take us far. Some forms of mental illness are irresistible. Are we to regard this body of poetry as a neurotic overflow? or as a self-indulgent pastime? Are we to force ourselves, against the grain perhaps, to see it as his contemporaries saw it, as "full of the substance of human nature"? How and where in his earnest, passionately-occupied life does it fit in? How does it affect our view of him? These are far-reaching questions. This paper will be confined to illustrating some of the ways in which Morris's romantic writing, poetry and prose, does reflect the main activities — or at least, the main concerns — of his life, and is not marginal but central to them.

We are dealing, then, with a cord of triple strand — artistry, writing, socialism — and we shall see how the second strand is twisted with the other two — that it does not hang limp and unattached, but we must be reminded briefly, here and there, of the nature and course of the other two strands. The artist developed first. As a boy Morris showed a natural sympathy with medieval architecture, which extended to all other forms of medieval art, as

they became available to him. They were not very available in the 1840s. His father took him to see the old churches of Essex, where he lived, and, at eight years old, to visit Canterbury Cathedral, which made a deep impression on him, and the old priority church of Munster, which he remembered in detail years afterwards. Oxford, when he went up as an undergraduate, was still in substance a medieval town. At the age of twenty he saw Rouen, still within the circle of its medieval walls, and said a generation later, that it gave him the greatest pleasure of any sight he had ever seen, adding sadly, "and no-one can see it now." Graham Hough writes well of this imaginative reversion to the past, in his book *The Last Romantics*. He says that it has a deep and powerful psychological tap-root. It was a result of the immense acceleration of change, in consequence of the Industrial Revolution, a change that made people intellectually giddy, that was eating up the countryside, fouling air and water, tearing down beautiful old buildings, and confining men in what Morris was to call a "net of unrejoicing labour". Sensitive men looked back to comfort their imaginations with the image of a life that was more stable in its forms, more beautiful in its productions, and where change occurred at a more natural tempo, more in accordance with the changes in the life of nature and of the individual man. Morris was well aware of the violence and oppression of the Middle Ages; he did not regard its bloodshed as merely decorative; but he thought that the craftsman, with whom he had such keen sympathy, had greater freedom and greater joy in his art, and therefore a healthier and fuller life. He fed these thoughts on a second visit to the cathedrals, churches, and medieval secular buildings of Northern France in the long vacation when he was twenty-one, and he and his friend, Ted Jones—later the painter Edward Burne-Jones—walking on the quay at Le Havre, gave up their intention of entering the church and devoted themselves to art, to the reviving in the modern world, so famished for beauty and so destructive of it, not so much of the forms and organization of medieval art and architecture—this they knew they could not do—but of its spirit. Morris articulated himself to an architect, whose business lay much in the renovation of old churches in the taste of the Gothic Revival—a practice of which Morris later disapproved. Then he met D. G. Rossetti, who annexed him to study painting, and this first period of his life culminates in that happy summer of 1857 when Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones, with other young artists and friends, went to Oxford to paint the Union Debating Hall in fresco. They knew nothing of the technique of fresco, and the pictures faded—a lesson in first things that Morris never forgot. But they were richly occupied with art, friendship, practical

jokes, and the reading aloud of Sir Thomas Malory's beautiful and disorderly compendium of the Arthurian cycle, composed at the end of the fifteenth century, from which they took the subjects of their frescoes. They did not approach this book as an example of the courtly literature of entertainment, or as a stage in the rehandling in the literature of Western Europe of old and widely-diffused themes, with their roots in history or myth. To them it was a world of the imagination, in which they could wander absorbed, and with whose figures they could identify themselves. Stopford Brooke, a younger contemporary of these men, and later a friend of Morris, tells a pleasant tale of Rossetti and Burne-Jones ending one of their long Sunday walks in a pub, discussing the Quest of the Holy Grail. At Oxford they painted each other as Lancelot or Tristram or Palomydes, and they found a model for Queen Guenevere in the beautiful Jane Burden, daughter of a groom, whom Morris later married. And at night in their lodgings, they summoned Morris to read his poems. Between two and three years before, he had broken suddenly into a spate of romantic lyrics and short prose tales. Many of these he destroyed. What he saved were printed next year, 1858, in a volume called *The Defence of Guenevere*. However, before we look at that, we must turn back to see if we can pick up, in these years, the strand that was going to thicken into his socialism.

We have here to beware of hindsight, especially in interpreting his poetry. Romantic poetry of Morris's kind has lost the peculiar magic it had in its own century; it is no longer self-explanatory, but suspect. Naturally, therefore, scholars who are chiefly interested in Morris as the Father of English Socialism will endeavour to interpret it psychologically or sociologically. Both approaches are valid, if we are careful; but the endeavour to find social purpose and revolutionary meanings in *The Defence of Guenevere* is premature. It is true that Morris's Guenevere is not a mere reconstruction of Malory's Queen; but neither is she a medieval Mary Wollstonecraft. Nor is her defence a plea for the social and sexual freedom of women. She is a young nineteenth-century poet's conception of the sort of woman who could have done and been what Malory reports, and she is never outside the medieval frame. Then the collection ends with a heavy-hearted short lyric "In Prison". This has been explained as a symbol of industrial slavery, and in the present climate of criticism, it is always difficult to deny conclusively that an image is a particular symbol, since it may be displaced, inverted, fragmented or otherwise deviously dealt with. But Morris, who was always practical about the substance of his poems, would certainly have pointed out that the prisoner was a gentle-

man—a knight or a squire, no serf—since he was in the tower, where he could hear the wind in the banners; if he had been a peasant, he would have been in a dungeon. Primarily this is Morris experiencing imaginatively what it would be like to be a medieval gentleman in prison. It certainly has a psychological bearing; it is one of many images of imprisonment, inactivity, spellbound inhibition, in his first book, and these are of great significance.

What we can safely posit of Morris at this time is a social malaise—the soil in which his later socialism was rooted. He was a country boy and well-to-do, but his chief friends came from Birmingham, and were not well-to-do. Through them he learned, and afterwards saw, the underside of the High Victorian Industrial Civilization. What he saw tied itself up with his concern for art and architecture, and with what he read in the chapter on the “Nature of Gothic” in Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*—the Bible of the group of Oxford friends. He read that the basic condition of good art is the pleasure and freedom of the workman in his art; good work of any kind is produced by men who enjoy their labour, accept its conditions, and have sufficient time over for rest and recreation. He did not see this, or anything like it, in the great smoky cities, with their soot-caked trees; and later he came to believe that no measure short of revolutionary re-organization of society, and the destruction of the profit motive, would give back natural human life to the labourer and his family. But that was not yet. As an undergraduate he thought in terms of Christian idealism, with a medieval colouring. The friends planned a celibate, semi-monastic order, living and working in the London slums. They called it the Crusade. But the need to earn their livelihoods, the marriage of one, the “doubts” of another, the growing sense of the weight of the problem, destroyed this theme even before the summer of the frescoes in the Oxford Union Debating Hall. Morris was left with the perception of an immense wrong, and his own helplessness. This was for twenty years the conscious background of his busy activity, and we may safely credit it with intensifying the melancholy and self-depreciatory elements in his temperament, but not with generating them.

These melancholy elements are strong in *The Defence of Guenevere*, and so are their opposite, vigour, confidence, happy activity. This brings us to the chief point about this collection of poems, that they are means by which this complex young man, with his restless, vigorous body and his hair-trigger sensibility began to understand himself. They are probably not conscious self-explorations, nor did he thoroughly understand all of himself that he expressed. Later he did; and that may be why he was so loth to have the book

reprinted. Most of the poems are objective at first sight. They are short medieval scenes, some hard-edged, some filmy; some lyrical, some dramatic; some grim and immediate, some delicate and remote, but all of an extreme spontaneity. The scenes, the figures, the words, the broken or vigorous metrical tunes seem to have arisen unbidden in his mind. We have some evidence that, in the beginning, this is more or less what happened. In the winter before he was twenty-one, he read to his friends "The Willow and the Red Cliff". They thought it was his first poem. This is not quite true; there exist boyhood verses, but "The Willow and the Red Cliff" was almost certainly the first of its kind, the poem of a young man, however immature, not of a boy. Morris listened to their excited praise and remarked: "If this is poetry, it is very easy to write" — mild words that have provoked a number of critical wise-cracks. We should ask what they mean. When is a poem, especially a first poem of its kind, very easy to write? It can only be when, like an intermittent stream, poetry has stored itself up in underground obscurity, until suddenly the moment of release comes and it pours into daylight. Such a gush of creation seems, at first, to be self-justified by its own vehemence. It is only later that the intellect begins to censor and control what the imagination has brought to light. Most of this first "spritely running" of poetry was destroyed by Morris. What we have in *The Defence of Guenevere* is chiefly some two or three years later, and has been consciously worked on. But it is possible to feel that the intellect is still not sufficiently master of the material offered by the involuntary parts of the mind. If, as Lawrence Durrell makes his Pursewarden say in *The Alexandria Quartette*, nine-tenths of writing is craftsmanship, and for the remaining tenth one must sleep-walk a little, then these are not the proportions of Morris's early poetry; the sleep-walking amounts to more than one-tenth.

We can put this to the account of a rich and complex nature, slow to understand itself and adjust to life; to a period when young people of Morris's class could be much more leisurely in growing up than it is easy to be now; and to the friends who were his first audience and who were so much in accord with his tastes and his reading, and so familiar with his very tone of voice, that he was not forced to apply himself closely enough to what we now call the technique of communication. You can test this simply by looking at the casual allusions in the Arthurian poems; Agravaire's fell blow; la fausse Garde; Sir Gareth; Dinadan; East Glatysaunt; the sister of Percival. There are no notes. You are expected to know them; they are sometimes important; the friends at Oxford had read their Malory and did know them; they all moved in one world of the imagination together. It was not, as it is sometimes

called, a vague and misty world; it was a world of colour, rapture, danger, and precise detail; but you need to know the field of reference. Nearly all the enigmas can be solved by reading what Morris read, and looking at the pictures he looked at. The detail is never laborious. It comes from knowledge of and familiarity with medieval art and life. It is lightly touched, the painted stone of the new chapel, the trailing sleeves of the ladies, the shapes and changes in the armour. We hear an old knight complain that he cannot adjust himself to the new equipment; the flattened *salade* rasps his head, and he longs for the old pointed basnet that gave him room. The very sounds are imagined, the splintering of the wooden lances, the tinkling to earth of the rings when the sword cuts through the coat of chain-mail.

So strong was the attraction of this medieval world to Morris that the stimulus of contemporary events ran into these channels. *The Defence of Guenevere* is full of fighting, not by any means always brilliant chivalric successes; more often failures, ambushes, untenable posts, imprisonments, and the obscure deaths of young men who would rather go on living. Morris began writing poetry in the year of the Crimean War, and Stopford Brooke wrote of its profound effect on national life. We do not have to guess. This is not a matter of politics. We do not know what views Morris held about the Crimean War between the ages of twenty and twenty-two. It is a matter of imagination and emotion, which was drawn from contemporary life, and poured into the accounts of the Crusades and the wars of Edward III in France, and vivified the pages of de Joinville and Froissart. *Sir Peter Harpden's End* is the death of an expendable young captain, left unrelieved in a crumbling fortress, refusing to surrender to du Guesclin, and hanged by him at twenty-five. In *The Wind* the dogs are howling for the men who went last month to the war, and are already dead. In *Riding Together* the sixty Frankish spears are overwhelmed at a bridge by a superior Saracen force. The speaker's friend is killed, and he himself is thrown into prison.

This is a young poet and artist, boisterous with robust physical vigour, already assured of remarkable mental capacities, but not assured of what he can do with them, or whether the world will let him do anything commensurate with his hopes. This is also the young amorous idealist, who hopes everything, and fears something, from the love he has not yet experienced. So we have, on one hand, the young men on top of their world—Sir Giles at the barriers, shouting his war cry like a college yell, because he has just had the luck to catch the wise old warrior Clisson off guard, or the rebellious vassal, riding through the floods to the Little Tower, and giving competent orders for

victualling the tower and obstructing the roads. On the other hand, we have the inhibition of action. Action is impossible, because the young man is in prison, or because he is spell-bound (a symbol he uses several times) or because action is futile—as in *Sir Peter Harpden's End*—or because it is somehow forbidden—as in *Rapunzel*. He is the lover before fulfilment—the Prince waiting at the foot of Rapunzel's Tower, “not born as yet, but going to be born”; Lancelot kissing the Queen for the first time. And he is the lover whose hope will not be fulfilled. The young French Knight dreams of winning Marguerite, but he dreams on the eve of Creçy. Jehane flees with Lord Robert, is overtaken, and sees him slaughtered at her feet. It is sufficiently clear how much this collection of bright fragments, based on Malory and Froissart, on chronicle and fairy-tale, tells us about the concealed sensibility of a young artist just launching out into the wildness and unpredictableness of life.

These early poems are the most accessible to the modern reader. But the real test of my claim comes in the large body of narrative poems that Morris published in his thirties and early forties. Because it is so large and so little known, and, when read, mostly so superficially read, discussion will be confined to two or three points. But first the other two strands must be picked up. By 1870, *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* had won him a reputation, the artist in Morris was linked to practical business enterprise. With his friends he founded a firm dealing in ecclesiastical and secular decoration. They produced stained glass, wall papers, embroideries, furniture, glass, tiles, and (later) carpets, and finally printed books. For Morris, this involved design, research into and then the practice of various processes, organizations, and salesmanship. Because the aniline dyes did not suit his purpose, he revived indigo and weld dying, and went about stained blue or yellow to his elbows. He re-introduced high-warp weaving of tapestry, and had a loom built in his bedroom. He was a specialist in medieval manuscripts and himself an illuminator. It is easy to see all this in his poetry. He will always linger over the beautiful artifact, the figured cup, the heavy, gold-embroidered hems of the ladies' gowns that drag off the heads of the daisies. One can also see how he compensates for his failure as a painter of figures by the description in poetry of line and attitude, of grouping or distance. He thought he could never give movement to his painted figures, but a flowing, easy movement is one of the great characteristics of his poetry.

As his social malaise intensified, Morris became aware of the anomalies in his own position. His work, which he loved and lived by, can only exist as a luxury of the rich; and the luxury of the rich, he thought, should be a

social impossibility. But there is little or no hope in his outlook; he can find no party, imagine no political procedure, that will lead the way out of the labyrinth. This despair is felt behind the music of the romantic tales, but it is felt more as a key, or a mode, than as a theme. He had another permanent source of melancholy — a hatred of death; not a physical fear — he never dwells on the process of dying — but an intense reluctance to be deprived of all the beauty of the world, the counter weight to his strong vitality. It follows, then, that the sort of centrality we look for in *The Earthly Paradise* is a personal centrality, a matter of the individual life. We find it. Beneath the variety of source and scene and detail, for which these stories are so often praised, there is an obsessive repetition of theme, which I have not seen noticed, in what folklorists call the Fairy Mistress Tale. The beloved is not wholly human; she can only be enjoyed at a certain price, or if certain taboos are observed. If the taboo is broken, she is lost. A very widespread and ancient type of tale. In one, Pygmalion loves the statue he himself has made. In another, a medieval bridegroom jestingly puts his ring on the finger of a statue of Venus. The hand closes on it, and she obstructs his way to his bride-bed. In *Atalanta's Race* the beloved has been suckled by a wild beast, and is unapproachable; so is Rhodope, who is human, but cannot release her humanity into love, since she lives in what to her is the wrong country, the wrong life.

All these fairy mistresses, these half-human objects of desire can be taken, at an impersonal level, for symbols of that yearning for the better than the best, for the achievement and the delight, not limited by the conditions of earth — that is, by imperfection and transience — which is one pole of the continuous attraction and repulsion which C. S. Lewis calls Morris's dialectic of desire. The other pole is the familiar, the common, shared experience, what he came to call the life of the kindred. But the fairy mistress was also to be found embodied at the centre of Morris's personal life. Morris had married Jane Burden for her strange, enigmatic beauty. She was perhaps much simpler than her beauty. She bore Morris two daughters, and they never broke up house, although Janey, who had been hard to woo, withdrew into her inaccessibility. Morris also had to learn that the passions he had been unable to raise in her to a height that matched his own could be raised by another man, his friend Rossetti. Morris disclaimed all possessiveness in love, and tried to think only of his wife's happiness. But he felt all the emotions he disapproved of, even if he did not act on them. He felt — or entered imaginatively into — craving, which he called greed; shame that he had failed to hold his woman; shame that he sometimes seemed to himself an easy cuckold; jealousy; and that

impulse to blacken the beloved in the imagination, which he saw symbolized in the goat part of the Chimaera. He also felt that resigned tenderness, that liberality which allows the beloved to live her own life, that faint but never-dying hope for a renewal of love, at some level, however far in the future, which is just distinguishable from despair, and on which he acted. All these emotions are expressed in *The Earthly Paradise*, sometimes in anguished passages of lyrical or dramatic reflection, which go on too long, because the poet, like the nightingale, is leaning his breast against a thorn. Since Professor Oswald Doughty has presented the Rossetti-Morris triangle—in a somewhat extreme and literal, but fundamentally undeniable way—these passages have been observed. There is no space to select passages, nor any need, after the fashion of our modern critical dissectors, to drop the poems into an acid bath, in which all the *mere* flesh—the *mere* narrative—the *mere* surface shall be consumed, and we are left with the bones, the symbolic diagram. But it is important to show how Morris's affective and imaginative life—the inventive detail, the sense of truth in old stories, the gratitude to and respect for the old story-teller as well as, and as much as, the symbol—crystallized round this theme.

The fairy mistress can be benign or malign; she may be the helpless prisoner of her own nature, to be saved, if possible; she may be the unwilling instrument of tragedy; she may be vindictive; she may even for a moment be vicious. In *The Lady of the Land*, for one example, she is held by an ancient curse of Diana. She is sometimes a lovable woman, at others transformed into a dragon. No one who knows what the human imagination can do, in pain, to defile the image of the beloved, can dismiss this poem jocosely. As Morris wrote, in an unpublished poem he sent with *The Earthly Paradise* to Georgiana Burne-Jones, "Sunk in dreams I still must be,/Self-made about myself."

Had I time, I would trace in *The Golden Apples* and the two Bellerophon tales the growth of fortitude. This is a theme that runs through to the end of his writing life. He earnestly desired fortitude, and found the model from which he could learn in the Icelandic sagas. By the time he issued the last volume of *The Earthly Paradise* he was deep in Icelandic reading. He went to Iceland twice, and visited the saga sites, which to him were holy places, as his journeys were pilgrimages. He said the ancient, hard, wonderful land killed all querulousness in him.

In 1876, Morris published *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, retelling in long rhyming lines what he described as "the great story of the North, which should be to our race what the tale of Troy was to the Greeks." Was and is:

the *Iliad* is a public and national possession of the Greeks; a confirmation of identity. There are reports of Greek girls in concentration camps who were given fresh heart and endurance by repeating Homer. Morris found in the traditions of Iceland, its heroes and the way of life it originated, a way of confronting what the Icelanders called fate—the unalterable nature of the world and one's own individual life—and this without Christian hope, which he had lost. He found it supremely in Sigurd, the greatest hero of the Volsung race, the expression of what the North considered a man should be. The *Volsung saga* says of him: "Never did he lose heart, and he was afraid of nothing"—not even in those last phases of his life, when he has fallen into the net of the Niblungs, and been separated from Brynhild, and is waiting quietly in the Niblung hall for the inevitable end. As Morris said of his own later heroes and clansmen: "Life did not shame them, not death make them afraid." He had, then, a pattern of fortitude; but he did not start his poem until he began to have a hope for life on earth.

When he began *Sigurd*, it was still eight years before he joined the Social Democratic Federation. He was still a Liberal, and had only just begun to take a public part in politics, and to spread by lectures his conviction of the interpenetration of art and social conditions. But he had not lived in a political vacuum. He moved in circles where people thought boldly, and heard news from abroad. He had long made up his mind about mercantile civilization, about the results of the economics of free competition, about the distribution of wealth. He began to look for hope in the conception of a distant reorganization of society. He did not yet see how it could come, or think it near.

Those ancient tales live because they are based on what is fundamental in human nature and conditions. Later generations have to make contact with this through an incrustation of myth and fantasy. It is this nucleus of experience, embodied in a tale, that is permanent. The moral bearings, the applications and elucidations of symbols, will vary somewhat in accordance with the passing phases of civilization. Sigurd is not quite the same thing to Morris as to the writer of the *Volsung saga*, nor perhaps quite the same thing to Morris's Marxist commentators as to Morris himself. But there were meanings inherent and explicit in the tale, as the saga-man wrote it, which were completely relevant to Morris's convictions, and needed only a certain dilation to fit the modern world. Again, I can take only one, and let it be another dragon, since they are found to be such stumbling-blocks. The dragon lies on and guards his hoard of gold. It has been won by murder, violence, and robbery, and is accursed. In the *Volsung saga* the dragon was once a man, Fafnir, trans-

formed into a monster by greed, by solitude and what Marxists call "alienation". He does not impart his wealth or his wisdom to any. This is a condensation and figuring of universal experience. This alienation, this perversion, are always the result of greed, violence, useless wealth. Fafnir, the man dragon, was a simple type of greed in a society where the duty of the chieftain was to "scatter the rings" (the gold bracelets and chains in which so much wealth was secured). But it needs only a light stress to dilate this inherent meaning, to see the vast imbalance of wealth in Morris's world in the hoard of Fafnir and the desert round his den. It is the function of the hero to kill the dragon and scatter the rings. To see "that the sheaf shall be for the plower and the loaf for him that sowed", Morris never lets these meanings displace the tale; he is always primarily the tale-teller, and there are long passages, especially towards the end, which are dramatically worked art in purely human and individual terms. But the fact that these meanings were originally there—inherent not imposed—made the tale worth telling, and helps to account for the imaginative force with which it is told. Sigurd's journey to the dragon's den is over the burnt slag of ancient fires. He lies in a trench—a grave, Morris calls it—and the vast, black, stifling, choking bulk of the dragon rolls over him and seems to blot out life. Then he strikes the death-blow from below, as a revolutionary hero must.

The second part of the tale is the aborting of the hero's mission. He does not scatter the rings. He makes alliance with the great and rich Niblung princes, is beguiled by the old Queen to marry her daughter, and to win Brynhild for her son. When clear knowledge returns to him, all the seeds of tragedy are ripening in the Niblung hall. Sigurd's alliance with the Niblungs—the "masters of gain"—is another sublimation of Morris's position. He is in the net; he cannot break away; he has ties of marriage, kinship, and trust. He is not degraded; nevertheless his action is straitened, though not wholly inhibited; the fruits will take longer to ripen than if he were a free agent. But we must not stretch the tale too tightly on the tenterhooks of symbolism, or it will rend up the middle. This is the tale of one of the redeemers of the world; Morris uses the word, and never applies it to himself. The world needs many redeemers. Like Sigurd, they are betrayed to death, but their action is not futile. The oak is cut down, but the acorns are scattered, and in time fresh oaks will grow for the houses of men. This tale Morris projected into the modern world to shape its future. It had much less success than *The Earthly Paradise*, but he was content to have done his best.

No long poem followed Sigurd, and Morris, refusing to force himself,

hoped that he would not lose his imagination. Meanwhile the third strand of his life, the socialist strand, thickened. In 1883 (when he was just under 50) he joined the Social Democratic Federation, read Marx's *Capital*, and spared himself nothing in the way of exhausting and unpleasant work. He tried to make a total dedication of his writing and turned himself to directly purposive prose and verse, lectures, expositions, incitements, foreign news for the socialist papers, marching songs for the comrades. He supplied what was wanted. Some of his biographers say that in this work he first developed the full resources of his mind. Yes; if the mind is intellect. But no poet's mind is all intellect, and Morris once said that he hoped that civilization in the future would not develop too large an "intellectual paunch". In the end, he found the path back to his imaginative territories by way of a narrative he wrote for the Socialist organ, the *Commonwealth*. This was *The Dream of John Ball*. It was entirely educative and purposive in intent, but it released him into his beloved Middle Ages, and he immediately began the series of prose romances — nine completed and others begun — that extended to his death.

It seems fair to say that these late romances are something of a disappointment to his socialist biographers. Here is Morris out of his emotional doldrums, with his sails filled with a stiff Marxian breeze; here he is at last committed, with a hope, a cause, a direction for his conscious energy. He has put away self-pity. He seems to have put away childish things. And then, after nearly six years of devotion, the tiresome fellow returns to his vomit and starts off again on what might seem to be the old lines. Inside the skin of the revolutionary, there is still the romantic. Bernard Shaw spoke of these romances with genial tolerance, as if they were playthings that he could not grudge the aging fighter; he calls them troubadour romances, so he can not have remembered very clearly what they were like — or what troubadour romances were. They are not, indeed, very like anything before them, medieval or modern, though, of course, you will find the familiar decor, at times — castles and knights and wildernesses. He can have had no sense of guilt about them. He had done what he could and given all he ought to give. He did not withdraw from the struggle or bate a jot of conviction, but the time had come when his great strength was beginning to diminish. There was leisure for the romances.

Morris was aware by now of his double nature. He was fully aware when he wrote the tale of the *Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon* in the *Earthly Paradise*. It has a frame. Gregory, King Magnus's man, is both a good craftsman and fisherman and a poet and star-gazer. He dreams that

he hears a minstrel tell the court the tale of John and the Swan-maiden; then he dreams that he is the minstrel, and finally that he is John. In between his dreams, he goes about his business. This continues Morris's procedures. The inveterate poet and dreamer was in the same skin as the whole-hearted socialist, and his old tastes and needs persisted. Probably, their well-being was interdependent; and Morris the socialist would not have been able to sustain his labours had Morris the dreamer not had his own world to refresh himself in.

These romances, moreover, are still central to his concerns. Again, to take only one example, the first romance, *The House of the Wolfings*. This has a shadowy historical setting, as it deals with the encounter of a Germanic tribe with the Romans. The war-leader is Thiodolf. When he leads the kindred against the Romans, he is persuaded by his fairy mistress to wear a magic coat of mail that is impervious to blows. He hesitates, but for love of her, and for the good of the Wolfings, he does do so. It troubles him, and he leaves his head uncovered and goes without a shield. But this does not compensate, for the mail coat is the work of the dwarfs, the amoral smiths and producers of wealth, and it cuts Thiodolf off from comradeship and reality. He falls into dreaming activity in battle. "Within me was the world, and naught without me." He ceases to love the kindred; he is alienated from their struggle. When he lays the coat from him, reality, joy, and comradeship return; he dies defending the house of the Wolfings — a fruitful death.

Morris seems never to have started from an abstract figure or a generalized theme. Here he started from an old legendary subject, and a phase of history that had always interested him strongly, the meeting of the Romans and the Germanic tribes — he called them Goths. But he himself inhabited his story. He entered into the figure of Thiodolf, and betrays this by giving him his own remarkable growth of hair, thick, very strong, dark, lying in rings with a metallic glint. He carried into his tale his trouble about his own coat of defence, — the money and position that he could not discard. He said once that he thought he could live on £4 a week; but then there was Janey, and his beloved and epileptic elder daughter, and — we may add without cynicism — Kelmscott and his medieval illuminated manuscripts. He knew that he could not be hurt as the poor men in the Socialist ranks could be hurt. He could try to compensate, as Thiodolf did, by leaving his head uncovered — by risking his name and reputation, the disapproval of friends, the withdrawal of customers. But it hardly served. The public and the newspapers responded by distinguishing between Mr. Morris, the poet, and William Morris, the socialist, who appeared in police-courts to bail out the comrades, and once or

twice got involved in scimmages. He said that the *House of the Wolfings* was about the merging of the individual in the community. He could not quite merge. Like his hero, Thiodolf, he was a stranger. But Thiodolf could drive things to conclusions. He could pull off the dwarf-wrought byrnie, and merge with the community in their heroic fight and in death. That is the purgative power of such tales. William Morris could not divest himself of his adventitious safeguard.

Henry James once declared: "Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of 'liking' a work of art or not liking it; the most improved criticism will not abolish that ultimate test." "Liking" is geared fairly closely to one's period and its intellectual pressures. There are now more difficulties in the way of liking these romances than there were when I was young and many more than when Morris wrote them. There are still those who delight in their solemn beauty, but they are a small minority. Modern critics find their language repellent, but it does not seem to me anything like as repellent as the quasi-scientific vocabulary of some criticism. I have not, at any point, argued about taste, and I am ready to make large concessions. I would agree that Morris never laid the whole of his mind, energy, and nature to anything he wrote — not even *The Dream of John Ball*. All his writings are, in that sense, partial. I would agree that his kind of poetry can never be the best kind. It is too permissive, too selective, too much of a lenitive. What I do not admit is that it was marginal to his chief concerns. In his early work, he explored his own nature. In the work of his middle life he first expressed his most intimate grief, then declared an ideal of fortitude, and finally pointed to a hope for man's life on earth — a tragic hope, because it is costly. In his romances, he gave shape to what he had concluded about love, about death, about the joy of the earth, and about the necessity of comradeship. They filled Yeats with deep delight, in his old age, and he was not afraid to read them alongside Swift and Nietzsche, which is exposing them to a very tough test. E. M. Forster read them in Alexandria during the Great War. They are both escapes and affirmations; as escapes, they were necessary to Morris's nature; as affirmations, they were central to his experience.