

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE MIDDLE AGES:
TWO SOCIALIST DREAM-VISIONS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE MIDDLE AGES:
TWO SOCIALIST DREAM-VISIONS

by

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Abstract

William Morris was well versed in the history, literature, and material culture of the European Middle Ages, and of the fourteenth century in particular; his medievalism, however, was not purely nostalgic. In marked contrast to the prescriptions of other Victorian medievalist reformers, Morris never sought to bring back the social order of feudal England, but to build upon the organic traditions of a popular art and of mutual aid which he felt the art and certain democratic institutions of the Middle Ages embodied. His medievalism and socialism, far from being incongruous, were inseparable.

It was therefore only natural that Morris seized upon such medieval forms as the poetic dream-vision for his socialist propaganda. His two most important works for the socialist journal *Commonweal*, *A Dream of John Ball* and *News From Nowhere*, show not only a marked prevalence of medieval and mediievally-inspired forms of art and architecture, but are themselves an adaptation (rather than an imitation) of a fourteenth-century literary form. Moreover, it can be shown by reference to a selection of dream-poems, chief among them the poetic visions of Chaucer and the anonymous *Pearl*, that the literary form Morris chose was itself not dogmatic or prescriptive. In keeping with the nature of allegory, the dream-vision requires an act of interpretation on the part of the reader that is analogous to the act of interpreting real dreams. Morris adopted the dream-vision's evocation of an (earthly) real and a (heavenly) ideal in his utopian socialism and in his art. His medievalism was an attempt to evoke both the best of the past and the possibilities of the future; his dream-visions point toward an ideal society while acknowledging the real everyday necessities of life, work, and individual expression.

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Chapter One

William Morris and the Middle Ages

The literature of the Middle Ages comprised an important part of William Morris's reading from an early age – after all, his first published volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858), consisted almost entirely of themes and tales taken from Froissart and Malory – and the interest persisted to the end of Morris's life, when he wrote a series of long prose romances in the 1890s and published the Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer's works in 1896, the year of his death. It is significant that even during the later 1880s, when his life was dominated by his agitation for socialist change, his interest in medieval culture never flagged: J. Bruce Glasier, for example, fondly recounts how Morris would occasionally at Socialist League functions "relate one or two of the old Norse legends" (38). Morris's medievalism also colours many of his socialist history articles and fictional propaganda works for the Socialist League organ *Commonweal*, including "The Revolt of Ghent" (serialized from 7 July to 14 August 1888), "An Old Fable Retold" (18 September 1886), and the two dream-visions *A Dream of John Ball* (13 November 1886 to 22 January 1887) and *News From Nowhere* (11 January to 27 September 1890).

To see Morris's medievalism as existing apart from his socialism, as early scholars of his work such as J. W. Mackail did, is misleading. Morris saw in the Icelandic Alþing, for example, a form of mutual aid and democracy that he felt could be a partial model for a communist society. In the fourteenth-century European guilds Morris,

like his Russian anarchist contemporary Peter Kropotkin, perceived another nascent model of mutual aid that would be nipped in the bud by the onset of early capitalism¹ Moreover, Morris's interest in the art of the Middle Ages was not only aesthetic, but based on his conception of craftsmanship and of popular art, both of which he saw in medieval art and literature. In a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* dated November 17, 1883, Morris himself commented on the congruity of his medievalism and his socialism:

my life for upwards of twenty years has been one of combat against competitive commerce on behalf of popular art. It is this combat which has driven me into some knowledge of the methods of production both of the medieval and the workshop or 17th-18th century periods, and has finally forced on me the conviction that the fully-developed system of competitive commerce must be fatal to art, and that the remedy for this threat to civilization is not reaction, but the entire abolition of all class supremacy. (*Letters* 3: 247)

Morris came to socialism through Ruskin rather than through Marx, and viewed socialism through the eyes of an artist rather than those of an economist.

Morris's understanding of life in the Middle Ages was not restricted to an intimacy with Gothic architecture or a scholar's knowledge of primary texts, although he had that, too. Morris immersed himself in study of the concrete objects of everyday medieval life, and surrounded himself with them; as a result, he could write as a modern writer in an almost unstrained medieval idiom. The short story "An Old Fable Retold," later printed as "A King's Lesson" in one volume with *A Dream of John Ball*, is

significant for being the first of Morris's fictional medievalist propaganda pieces. The attention to detail is one of the charms of the piece:

Well, I judge it was late spring or early summer, and vines but just beginning to show their grapes, for the vintage is late in those lands, and some of the grapes are not gathered till the first frosts have touched them, whereby the wine made from them is the stronger and sweeter.

(Collected Works 16: 291)

When Morris writes about nature, he writes with a Romantic appreciation for its beauty, but he also has its usefulness in mind, and has a clear conception of the effect of the natural world on everyday life and work. This short sentence, merely a scene-setter, lays out not only the tale's time of year, but practical information on medieval farming and wine-making in a mountain thorp in Hungary, sensitivity to the significance of the seasons to the working vintner, and a final sensual appreciation of the wine itself. Morris's sensitivity to the everyday spills over into his description of his characters: the peasants, "men and women, boys and young maidens, toiling and swinking ... for the fruit they should never eat, and the wine they should never drink" (291-2)² and the lords in their "velvet cloaks ... and mantles of fine Flemish scarlet" (293).

The craftsman's knowledge of everyday household objects and clothes stands Morris in good stead in "A King's Lesson," enabling him to add authentic colour to his description of the medieval lord's "doublet of glorious Persian web of gold and silk, such as men make not now, worth a hundred florins the Bremen ell." That glorious doublet is made the occasion for some merriment, and for a dose of harsh reality, when its wearer is

given the task of “toing and froing up and down the hill with the biggest and the frailest dung-basket that there was” (293). The acknowledgement of the existence both of excrement and hard work is typical of Morris, who loved above all to recognize in his art the real as well as the beautiful.

Because of his immersion in medieval handicraft and literature and because he recognizes that the denizens of the Middle Ages were real human beings of flesh and blood, Morris’s medievalist writings have the ring of authenticity. Always, however, his work goes beyond its medieval inspiration. While certain poems in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, for example, have their origins in stories or even in asides by Froissart or Malory, Morris is certain in his retelling to make those stories his own. David Staines charts Morris’s use of Froissart and Malory in “Morris’s Treatment of his Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*,” remarking that “his poetry is almost hyper-Froissart in that it forsakes the rambling movement of the chronicle history to focus intensely on particular moments which, though they might have happened in the world of Froissart, would never have been recorded by him” (462). Thus a poem such as “The Eve of Crécy” is extrapolated from Froissart’s work even though no knight named Lambert is mentioned in the chronicle (Staines 457), and the poem’s irony relies upon the historical fact (presumably known to the reader) that the French are doomed to lose the following day’s battle.

Morris’s making the medieval aesthetic his own is evident throughout his career, not only in his poetry but also in his handicrafts and even in his particular brand of socialism. Margaret F. Grennan uses the example of Morris and Company stained glass:

His thoughts, like his stained glass windows, were frankly modern in design if medieval in inspiration. He worked in the tradition of his craft, but it would be an insult to his historic imagination and his grasp of the times to imagine him, either in art or social philosophy, to be content with a mere imitation. (49)

For all his use of medieval themes and genres such as the dream-vision, the prose romance, the morality play, and even of medieval techniques of dyeing and tapestry-weaving, Morris's primary aim was never to *imitate* the past, but always to work toward an aesthetic which would reflect its own historical position, simultaneously drawing upon the strengths of the past and hinting at the possibilities of the future. In his lecture on "Westminster Abbey" (delivered in June of 1893) Morris says of medieval artisans that "they were working under the influence of tradition unbroken since the very first beginnings of art on this planet; they were entirely unable to feign themselves other than they were, artists of their own day" (*Collected Works* 22: 414-15). Morris's words are simultaneously an argument for a popular art and a recognition of the individuality of each artist.

In his lecture "The Beauty of Life" Morris calls for an organic art of the people, "made by the people for the people as a joy for the maker and for the user," and he saw a clear manifestation of that organic and popular art in the art and literature of the Middle Ages. Following Ruskin, Morris saw the aristocratic classicism consequent upon the European Renaissance as an inorganic "break in the continuity of the golden chain" of a popular art (*Collected Works* 22: 58); significantly for Morris's adoption of Socialism,

that break in the “golden chain” occurred simultaneously in history with the rise of capitalism. Morris did not intend his own mediievally-influenced work to be an imitation of the medieval link in the golden chain, but to be a newly-forged link in its own right. If Morris often used medieval techniques of dyeing in the making of his tapestries, medieval tales of chivalry as the inspiration for his prose romances, and the medieval form of the dream-vision for his socialist propaganda, he was always certain to put his own stamp upon the old tales and formulas; this is, in fact, in the very nature of Morris’s concept of an organic “art of the people.”

A Dream of John Ball and *News From Nowhere* are certainly dream-visions in the medieval tradition, another attempt on Morris’s part to give new life to an old form.³ The *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English’s* entry on “dream-visions” briefly addresses the survival of the medieval dream-vision, stating that after the sixteenth century the genre “did not then vanish, but later dream-visions, like William Morris’s *News From Nowhere*, are usually the result of deliberate *medievalizing*” (274). The notion of “deliberate *medievalizing*” here is obscure: the writer may refer to a desire on Morris’s part to adapt a medieval genre for a modern purpose, to some supposed nostalgia on his part for the medieval era, or to the essentially medieval aesthetic of *News From Nowhere*. The first is a valid interpretation of Morris’s medievalism in light of his prior use, not only of medieval literary techniques such as the framing fiction of *The Earthly Paradise*, but of medieval techniques of dyeing and weaving in his handicraft. The second is a misinterpretation of the place of the Middle Ages in Morris’s theories, since Morris never longed for a return to the hierarchies of feudalism, or even for the

responsibility that the lord ideally took for his vassals (an important aspect of the social medievalism of Morris's mentors Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin), but only for the organic "art of the people" that the era signified for him. Nowhere's medievally-inspired fashions, architecture, and even language seem to lend credence to the third interpretation, but even here a particular aesthetic medievalism is hard to pin down, since Morris insisted that an organic tradition of art must be the particular product of its own times. For every bridge that the narrator "might have dreamed of ... but never seen ... out of an illuminated manuscript" (*News From Nowhere* 8) there is a great hall that "seemed to me to embrace the best qualities of the Gothic of northern Europe with those of the Saracenic and Byzantine, though there was no copying of any one of these styles" (24). The "deliberate *medievalizing*" of *News From Nowhere* derives not from any desire to bring back the Middle Ages, but from its author's intention of bringing the medieval spirit of art and artisanship forward into an organic art of the people.

The dream-vision genre that Morris adopted for his two socialist works reached its peak of popularity in the fourteenth century, Morris's favourite medieval era. Following upon the heels of the premier poem of the genre, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose*, the genre spread rapidly from France, where such writers as Guillaume de Machaut and Jean de Froissart wrote dream-visions, to England, to be adopted by Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Lydgate, and King James I of Scotland, among others. The genre was quickly adapted to numerous didactic purposes: while the *Romance of the Rose* was a love-vision, and many English writers also wrote love-visions (of which Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, written in the

early 1380s, is just one example), the anonymous late fourteenth-century *Pearl* is a vision of the next world and of the New Jerusalem as described in Revelations, and Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman* (ca. 1367-86) and its antecedent the anonymous *Winner and Waster* (1352-3) deal largely with social issues.

In the conventional poetic dream-vision the narrator, wrestling with a particular question, goes to sleep, has a dream in which he encounters a guide and an authoritative figure or figures who lead him through an sequence of events in a fantastic landscape (usually a garden) and explain to him the answer to his question. The framing fiction of the dream may be open-ended (either intentionally ambiguous, like *The House of Fame*, or fragmentary, as the unfinished *Winner and Waster* is) or, more often, closed by the dreamer's awakening and a description of his reaction to the dream. Significantly, the narrator is rarely completely satisfied with his dream, and often remains wholly mystified. The final meaning of the vision is left to the reader to interpret.

The dream-vision's usefulness for didactic purposes accounts in large part for its appeal among fourteenth-century poets. The people of the Middle Ages were accustomed to finding significance in their dreams, and an elaborate system of dream-theory had developed around such early works as Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* (ca. 410). Moreover, the fantastic events and characters of dreams were particularly congenial to the creation of allegory, a form which relies, like the act of reading dreams, upon the viewer's interpretation. Allegory is open-ended; it requires activity on the part of the reader. The necessity of the reader's involvement is compounded by the dream-vision's conventional narrator, who is naïve and consistently

fails to see into the deeper meaning of the events in which he takes part. The naïveté of the narrator sets up what Stephen J. Russell calls “the interpretive superiority of readers to dreamer in the dream vision” (25), which is itself instrumental to the reader’s involvement in extrapolating meaning from the allegory.

To frame one’s didactic lesson in the form of a “dream” is at once to give it the immediacy of personal experience and to place it in the nebulous realm of fantasy, a state of affairs that is complicated slightly by the reader’s suspicion that the dream portrayed in the poem may not have truly occurred at all, but is a fiction created by the author. A. C.

Spearing remarks that

Insofar as the dream is a vision, a *somnium coeleste*, it claims to convey absolute truth, unmodified by the personal consciousness of the visionary; insofar as it is a psychological product, a *somnium animale*, it must inevitably reflect the relativism of the dreamer’s point of view....

[F]ourteenth century dream-poems show a strong tendency to develop conflicts between absolutist and relativist conceptions of reality.

(*Medieval Dream Poetry* 72)

The dreamer, although aspiring to absolute truth, even to paradise itself, is bound by his human nature to the corporeal world, or earth. Kathryn Lynch, in her study of the fourteenth-century dream-vision, interprets the dream-vision as a liminal phenomenon, “an experience that happens to a man when he is between stable physical states – neither of the body nor removed from it” (49). Elsewhere, however, she speaks of the relationship between flesh and spirit in the dream-vision as an interpenetration (16),

which seems to me more apt. In *Pearl*, for example, the dreamscape seems to be a place between heaven and earth, partaking of both. Although the dreamer in *Pearl* cannot reach heaven from the garden, the poem's final image is of the sacrament ("Krysteȝ dere blessing ... in þe forme of bred and wyn," lines 1208-9), symbol of the interpenetration of the real and the ideal. In Morris's terms, the earthly paradise is just this: it partakes of the ideal, all the while remaining rooted in the real.

Although on the surface *News From Nowhere* follows the same patterns of sleep, journey, and waking that are found in *Pearl* or the poems of Chaucer, with guides, authoritative figures, and a beautiful dreamscape, Morris puts his own peculiar stamp on the genre no less than Chaucer does. Morris's dream-visions are turned to the didactic purpose of socialist propaganda, and they seek to invoke the achievement, in the past and in the hoped-for future, of his ideal of a popular art. Moreover, to mold the medieval convention to his own ends was, as he saw it, entirely within the tradition of the convention itself. *A Dream of John Ball* is the product of its author's desire to portray the place of mutual aid and "fellowship" in the Middle Ages and to discuss the "encouragement and warning" that history holds for the socialist; *News From Nowhere* holds out the promise that an organic tradition of art will be able to arise under socialism while hinting that history will not end but will also be organic; and the secular, religious, and political dream-visions of the fourteenth century pointed beyond themselves in a similar manner toward their own ideals.

Morris's socialism, like his medievalism, looks forward; it is preoccupied with the past not only for its own sake, but also and especially for the sake of the future. The

twentieth-century Marxist thinker who comes closest to Morris's thought is Ernst Bloch, for whom hope is a sustaining principle, whose attitude toward utopia is as open-ended as Morris's, and who acknowledges, as Marx and Engels fail to do, the importance of creative expression in society. Throughout Morris's lectures on art and socialism and throughout *A Dream of John Ball* and *News From Nowhere* echo what Morris characterizes as "the heroic struggles of the past to realize hope from year to year" ("The Aims of Art" 601). Morris's repetition of the theme of hopeful striving toward change foreshadows Bloch's similar treatment of utopia and wish-fulfillment in *The Principle of Hope*. In *News From Nowhere* Morris's concern is with "the future of the fully-developed new society" (3) and Ellen and Hammond make it clear in that work that history, far from having ended with the establishment of communism, will continue to progress, for good or for ill. Bloch, too, recognizes the non-static nature of any future society: behind his pronouncement "Thinking means venturing beyond" (*Hope* 4) lies the same insistence upon the individual's involvement that the allegorical dream-vision required of its reader and that Morris's *Nowhere* requires of its citizens, each of whom has a voice in the affairs of the community. In this view any individual's contribution, even a dissenting one, serves to strengthen the whole society.

Lawrence Lutchmansingh recognizes the similarities of Bloch's and Morris's thought (22), although he finds some differences in their approach to history:

Where Bloch locates the principle of disjunction between mankind's incomplete present and its future fulfillment, Morris finds it already evident in those times and places in which the workers seize the

opportunity of freedom and register in their production a condition of humanity in advance of the general historical condition. (24)

This is an intriguing interpretation of Morris's Marxism, and is borne out by those of Morris's articles on socialist history which find a form of early socialism in the guilds of the fourteenth century, of which his "The Revolt of Ghent" is just one instance. Significantly, however, even if Morris is correct in his interpretation of such historical trends as the rise of the guilds, they are only *forms* of early socialism, rather than precursors of a static "general historical condition." Moreover, while it is true that Bloch does not see the past in precisely the same manner as Morris does, Lutchmansingh may be overstating Bloch's commitment to "a radical *novum*" (Lutchmansingh 23). After all, Bloch points out that "real venturing beyond ... grasps the New as something that is mediated in what exists and is in motion" (*Hope* 4), and his *The Principle of Hope* and *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* include long catalogues of past artistic manifestations of utopian hope.

Like Morris, Bloch recognizes that no matter how an art may use past styles, it will always reflect its own historical moment. In a chapter of *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* entitled "Art and Society" he writes that

unproductive groups comprehend the past only as clinging to the past and knowledge only as a recollection of humankind about that which they were. A significant architect, Gottfried Semper, realized more than a century ago quite correctly that style is the harmony of the appearance of a work of art with its historical origins. However, it was exactly because

Semper lived in the time of caricature, the time of historical masquerades, that he drew the wrong conclusion from his observations, which were nearly faultless. Thus, he actually prevented the kind of productivity he was discussing by asserting that the previous history of architecture had already provided the essence of all buildings Thus, the architect became the actor of history, that is, of its so-called treasure of forms, its 'eternal patterns.' (45)

This passage and the title of the chapter from which it is drawn are uncannily reminiscent of Morris's own thinking on art and history. For Morris, a popular art would draw upon the best arts of the past for inspiration, but it would be organic, the natural outgrowth of its own historical time and reflecting the aspirations of its designer: each link in the "golden chain" is a unique one. An artisan himself, Morris sought to realize a popular art in his own handicraft and to portray it in his fictional *News From Nowhere*.⁴

The failing Bloch identifies in Semper's theory – that Semper did not call for a new, living art, but rather for a stale academic one – is similar to the criticisms that Morris levelled against the nineteenth-century Gothic Revival and contemporary restorers of medieval architecture. His foundation of the Society For The Protection of Ancient Buildings (the S.P.A.B., or "Anti-Scrape," as it was affectionately called) is a metaphor for his attitude toward the art of the past. In his addresses to the annual meetings of the S.P.A.B. in 1879, 1884, and 1889 (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 1: 119-157) Morris reiterates his conviction that an ancient building

cannot be reproduced at the present day Wake up Theoderic the Goth from his sleep of centuries, and place him on the throne of Italy; turn our modern House of Commons into the Witenagemote (or meeting of the *wise men*) of King Alfred the Great; no less a feat is the restoration of an ancient building. (127-8)

Whatever reasons his fellow members of Anti-Scrape had for wanting to protect the venerable remnants of English architecture from the hands of restorers such as Gilbert Scott, this was Morris's: that the modern "restorer" was too much a part of his own time to be capable of "restoring" so much as a medieval barn.

Not only is academic wisdom fallible and therefore likely to introduce anachronism into the "restored" building but, Morris says, "no man, and no body of men, however learned they may be in ancient art ... can persuade, or bribe, or force our workmen of to-day to do their work in the same way as the workmen of King Edward I did theirs" (128). The disparity between the historical situations of the thirteenth-century worker and his nineteenth-century counterpart entails a radical difference in the manner in which they approach their work. Morris argues that the historical situation of the thirteenth-century stonecutter with regard to his work is far more conducive to the creation of art than that of the nineteenth-century factory worker. The one works daily on various tasks in the creation of art; the other toils at the same job day in and day out, without variety and without the freedom to contribute and innovate any detail of his product. To the increasing emphasis on the division of labour which would soon

culminate in the assembly lines of the Ford Motor Company, Morris opposed an integration of labour such as he believed had created the Gothic cathedrals of Europe.

Because Morris is so insistent on the necessity of an organic art and on the impossibility of the return of ancient art and architecture, it is difficult at first to accept his own use of medieval forms in art and literature. Morris and Company's Grail tapestries and stained glass windows and Morris's prose romances and poems from Froissart seem to belie his pronouncements on the resurrection of old art forms. If, as Bloch says, "Thinking means venturing beyond," a nineteenth-century dream-vision is anachronism plain and simple. However, neither Morris nor Bloch denies the influence of the past on present artistic striving. Morris's lecture on "Gothic Architecture"⁵ sets forth his opinion on an organic art's relationship with the past:

the style of architecture will have to be historic in the true sense; it will not be able to dispense with tradition; ... yet whatever the form of it may be, the spirit of it will be sympathy with the needs and aspirations of its own time, not simulation of needs and aspirations passed away. Thus it will remember the history of the past, make history in the present, and teach history in the future. As to the form of it, I see nothing for it but that the form, as well as the spirit, must be Gothic; an organic style cannot spring out of an eclectic one, but only from an organic one. In the future, therefore, our style of architecture must be Gothic Architecture. (*Artist, Socialist* 1: 285)

That the true organic style of a future society must necessarily be Gothic is debatable, although Morris argues at length in this lecture for its suitability to the English climate and temperament. It is the popular art's relationship with the past, however, to which he draws his hearers' attention in this passage. Morris again denies that a truly organic style can be a "simulation" of ancient forms, but he notes also that it "will not be able to dispense with tradition." It will rise from the older style as naturally as carven acanthus leaves from the capital of a column in Rheims cathedral.

In his use of the dream-vision, Morris was not attempting a simulation or resurrection of a medieval art form, any more than he was imitating fourteenth-century Flemish weaving in his Grail tapestries or Malory in his prose romances. In each of these areas, as with Gothic architecture, Morris saw within the organic medieval tradition the seeds of a new popular art. The "spirit" of Gothic architecture is, for Morris, the art of the people, and its "form" the natural manifestation of that spirit at any stage of the golden chain of the organic tradition. This is not entirely a "mythological" view of Morris's theories, although some scholars have made a case for such an interpretation,⁶ but is rooted in Morris's view of free artistic creation. R. Furneaux Jordan notes perceptively that

If Ruskin was the first to see that link between art and labour, then Morris was the first to see that it meant politics; to see that that link between art and labour was neither more nor less than a link between the dream worlds of the imagination on the one hand, and the hard facts of political

economy on the other. Morris was himself the consummation of the marriage between Romanticism and Radicalism. (24)

For Morris, the spirit of a popular art expressed itself in those times when the worker was as free as possible to create; that spirit would thus be most fully developed in a communist society, attaining to new and ever-varied forms. To Morris, all this was inherent in the medieval literary tradition itself; Morris's concern with the possibilities of life as they had been and as they might one day be in more creative epochs is a natural outgrowth of Morris's immersion in the art and literature of the Middle Ages and of the dream-vision's concern with the real and the ideal. The tangible relics of the past, the hopeful strife of the present, and the possibilities of the future combine in Morris's dream-visions, which are no more imitations of Chaucer than his socialism is an imitation of Marx.

¹ Morris even attempted to find continuity between these two examples of early socialism. In his address to the Society For The Protection Of Ancient Buildings, 1 July 1884, he says that “the guilds ... did not spring from ecclesiasticism, nay, in all probability, [they] had their roots in that part of the European race which had not known of Rome and her institutions in the days of her temporal dominion” (*William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* 1: 131). Compare Kropotkin’s obituary tribute to Morris, in which he writes that

Two tendencies struggle in present society. On the one side, the tradition of the centralised State of Imperial Rome and of the Church, built up on the same plan – the tradition of slavery, submission, oppression, military and canonic discipline; and, on the other side, the tradition of *the masses* who endeavoured to build up their society outside the State.

According to Kropotkin, “Morris entirely and unreservedly belonged to this second tradition” (400).

² This passage foreshadows the one in *News From Nowhere* in which Guest makes “a mental note to ask Dick how they managed to make fine wine when there were no longer labourers compelled to drink rot-gut instead of the fine wine which they themselves made” (38).

³ Stephen J. Russell is of the opinion that “the form [of the dream-vision] essentially disappears in the antiquarian voice of Edmund Spenser, to subsist marginally in the Renaissance and beyond as the bankrupt vehicle of ecstasies, mystics, and political activists” (*The English Dream-Vision* 19). Morris, on the other hand, would argue that

no example of an organic art form can be regarded as “bankrupt” unless it be imitated in an academic manner – that is, without anything of the author’s or artist’s own imagination and historically-situated consciousness in it.

⁴ Bloch, no craftsman but a philosopher, casts about for a solution to the inorganic art of our time:

the plain rectangulars seem, as they are polished, to vanish already, glazed bricks meditate, attractive vistas might appear at some point, factory wares are decked with flowers. But all this rarely happens anymore.... Indeed, it remains questionable whether artistic commercial things, individually decorated and luxurious, could ever again be created around us.

(Utopian Function of Art and Literature 81)

Morris, with the creative energy of the artisan and the zeal of the activist, threw himself into precisely this arena.

⁵ Since by architecture Morris characteristically means not only the shell of a building, but its furniture and ornament as well, we may expand his example here to include art and literature as well.

⁶ Carole Silver, for example, writes that “the dream-vision functions to bring together past, present, and future, and thus to create myth out of history” (*Romance* 125).

Chapter Two

The Didactic Nature of the Fourteenth-Century Dream-Vision

From *The Defence of Guenevere* to the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, Morris's favourite era of the Middle Ages was the fourteenth century, and his favourite writers of that era were Jean de Froissart and Geoffrey Chaucer, both of whom wrote dream-visions. Froissart was the author of the *Paradys d'Amours* and Chaucer of *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and a partial translation of *The Romance of the Rose*. Chaucer in particular was Morris's "Master," as Morris himself said in the envoi at the end of *The Earthly Paradise* (444), a long poem which uses a framework of storytelling not unlike Chaucer's own in the *Canterbury Tales*.

That Chaucer and Froissart wrote dream-visions does not establish them as being remarkable for their age. Stephen Russell claims rather extravagantly that the dream-vision was "the undisputed poetic fashion in France and later in England during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" (16). Certainly a large amount of dream-poetry was written in those countries during that period, beginning in the early thirteenth century with Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, an allegorical anatomy of courtly love which was extended later in the century by Jean de Meun. The courtly love-vision remained popular among English writers – Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* is one such poem – but the poetic vision form rapidly extended itself to other concerns as well. The anonymous West Midland *Pearl*, for example, is a religious vision of the soul after death

which also deals with the survivor's coming to terms with mourning; the anonymous *Winner and Waster* considers the social and economic differences between the old nobility and yeomanry and the rising merchant class and priesthood; and William Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman* considers both moral and secular questions as it moves through dreaming to waking and back to dreaming again.¹ In addition to its entertainment value, each of these dream-visions has a didactic purpose, whether it be religious or secular, moral or socio-economic. These poets are not "dreamers" in the sense of writing for the purpose of escapism, and neither is William Morris, who has been accused on occasion of being an writer of lulling fantasies.

What, then, is the appeal of the dream-vision form to medieval writers such as Chaucer, and even to later writers such as Bunyan and Morris? The answer may lie in its usefulness for didactic purposes. Peter Brown points out that

As a rhetorical device [the dream] has numerous advantages. It intrigues and engages the interest of an audience by appealing to a common experience and by inviting its members to become analysts or interpreters. It allows for the introduction of disparate and apparently incongruous material. It encourages and facilitates the use of memorable images. It permits the author to disavow responsibility for what follows.... It offers a point of entry into a representational mode (sometimes allegorical) which is less restrictive than, say, the conventions of realist narrative. (25)

The non-restrictive nature of that representational mode makes the dream-vision an ideal vehicle for a didactic core which deals with such intangible concepts as life after death (*Pearl*), conjecture as to the significance of the peasants' revolts of the Middle Ages to the socialist movements of the nineteenth century (*A Dream of John Ball*), or the appearance of a future socialist society (*News From Nowhere*). The link to allegory is also clear when one considers the very abstract and intangible nature of these concepts, for the dream-vision points toward an ideal (of behavior, of society, and so forth), helping the reader to come to a greater understanding of an elusive concept.

The dream-vision allows the poet to portray fantastic settings and occurrences without being accused of leading the reader into belief in their objective reality other than as a marker pointing toward an ideal. Conversely, the poet's conventional assertion of the dream as having actually come to him lends the air of a testimony to the poem. The English dream-poets use the verb "metten" to signify "to dream," and there is at least one instance in which Chaucer uses it ambiguously, evoking both its sense of "to dream" and "to meet or to find:"

I hope, iwis, to rede so, somday,
 That I shall mete some thyng for to fare
 The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare.
 (*Parliament of Fowls*, lines 692-4).

The ambiguity of dreaming – that the dream presents what is seen but not realized – serves to keep the visionary genre non-restrictive as far as the imaginative faculties of the poet go. The ambiguity of dreaming also keeps the didactic intention of the poet from

overwhelming the reader, who therefore has more freedom of interpretation than, say, the hearer of a sermon.

There are, of course, numerous dream-reports before the fourteenth century. A. C. Spearing cites, among others, the dreams of Pharaoh, Joseph, and Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible (*Medieval Dream-Poetry* 12), Bede's seventh-century account in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Drycthelm's dream (15), and Alanus de Insulis's *De Planctu Naturae* of the twelfth century (20). Steven Kruger characterizes the extant medieval material on dreams as "erudite works of theory, usually in Latin; vernacular popularizations of the theoretical material; and keys to various systems of dream interpretation." Significantly, however, Kruger notes that the poetic dream-vision constitutes a "separate, extremely popular, *literary genre*" (4, my emphasis) and that "literary depictions of dreams, even when directly invoking theoretical material [as, for example, Chaucer does when he considers the bewildering array of classifications of dreams at the beginning of *The House of Fame*], also depend on literary traditions and 'real-life' experience" (5). Although medieval dream-theory provides some context for the fourteenth-century dream-vision, it does not provide a context for the nineteenth-century dream-visions which are the focus of my last two chapters. Insofar as the literary traditions of the Middle Ages which are the main focus of this project are influenced by medieval dream-theory, one important example – that of Macrobius – will suffice to provide that context.

Perhaps the most important late-classical source for medieval dream-theory is Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, written at the close of the

fourth century. The *Somnium Scipionis* itself has parallels in certain aspects of the later poetic dream-vision; Kathryn Lynch enumerates among them “the dumbfounded dreamer, the ambition to present an encyclopedic or comprehensive survey of knowledge, and most centrally the concern with establishing in the dreamer a proper understanding of the relationship between his corporeal and spiritual natures” (52). Macrobius’s commentary on Cicero’s poem provided a framework for a taxonomy of dreams that was to become very important to medieval dream-theory. In the third chapter of the *Commentary* Macrobius speaks of five different types of dreams, arranged in a hierarchy according to their prophetic significance. The two types that for Macrobius are “not worth interpreting since they have no prophetic significance” (88), are the *visum*, or apparition which occurs between sleep and wakefulness, and the *insomnium*, or nightmare, neither of which applies to the later dream-vision convention since it relies upon the reader’s recognizing that it *is* significant and therefore worth reading. It is ironic that these, possibly the most common type of “real” dreams, play no central role in the fourteenth-century dream-vision, a fact which hints that perhaps a psychological inquiry into “real dreaming” is not the dream-vision’s primary concern.

Macrobius’s next three categories are, in ascending hierarchical importance, the *somnium*, or enigmatic dream, “one that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding,” the *visio*, or prophetic vision, which presages an actual event, and the *oraculum*, or oracular dream, “in which a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and

what action to take or to avoid" (90). Of particular interest to the study of the literary dream-vision are the *somnium* and *oraculum*, since they are so deeply concerned with gaining insight into moral or spiritual truths and with the "reading," or scrutiny, of dreams. They are therefore also closely connected with allegory, itself a key feature of most if not all medieval dream-vision poetry. Each of the dream-visions considered here can be placed in the context of Macrobius's taxonomy, being either a *somnium* or *oraculum*. Chaucer's dream-visions tend to be *somnia* since, like allegory, they encourage the reader's active interpretation of their messages, and do not deliver final pronouncements on proper behavior. *Pearl* is distinctly an *oraculum*, wherein the narrator receives a series of lessons from beyond the grave, delivered by his revered pearl. *Winner and Waster*, in which the struggle between two opposing forces (the priesthood and miserly merchant class, and the profligate yeomanry and nobility) is resolved by the stern words of King Edward III, is also an *oraculum*, even though the resolution is not strictly in favour of either side.

Certainly each author has a didactic purpose, but the dream-poem is also one which requires an act of interpretation on the part of the reader, as several recent critics have pointed out (notably Davidoff 107). Such an act of interpretation is analogous to the act of oneirocriticism: the reader of a literary dream takes on a role like that of the interpreter of a "real" dream. Spearing notes that,

as we have learned from Macrobius, it was expected that something could be learned from real dreams, and hence from literary dreams: advice or warnings about the future, or philosophical truths which it

would be important to know in waking life. This is a role which real dreams have played in many cultures, and it was a common role for medieval literary dreams. (*Medieval Dream-Poetry* 18)

Thus the reader of *Pearl* is meant to be inspired to inquire, along certain lines hinted at by the poem, into the religious significance of the loss of a loved one and of the soul's existence after death, the reader of *The Parliament of Fowls* and *Romance of the Rose* into the nature of love, and the reader of the anonymous *Winner and Waster* into a similar critique of the economy of getting and spending.

The reader's active role in the interpretation of the literary dream-vision is not only like the role of the interpreter of a "real" dream; it also parallels the active role of the reader of an allegory. Gordon Teskey remarks that

Allegory differs from the related forms, parable and fable, by including in its narrative conspicuous directions for interpretation (such as naming the serpent of *F[aerie] Q[ueene]* l.i.18 'Errorr'). Whereas in parable or fable we are offered a complete (and sometimes surprising) interpretation when the story is over, in allegory we find only the iconic rudiments of an interpretation we must build for ourselves, within certain constraints, as we proceed.

Teskey goes on to describe allegory as "a game designed by the writer and played by the reader.... The reader is to be morally changed not just by seeing examples of admirable conduct but by becoming engaged, through the play of interpretation, in the theory of virtue" (16). Allegory, parable, and fable, like the dream-vision (and like propaganda),

are essentially didactic forms, and didacticism is at its most effective when the reader is persuaded to work independently through the matter at hand. Contact with the reader can be established either through illustration, as it is in parable and fable, or through incitement to interpretative play, as it is in allegory and the dream-vision. Morris's "A King's Lesson," a fable, offers an illustration of socialist themes in a medieval setting, while *A Dream of John Ball* and *News From Nowhere*, dream visions, invite the reader to become involved in the process of interpreting the socialist lesson of the Middle Ages.

The poet, then, does not claim absolute authority, although his vision is laid out for his readers to consider; the onus is upon the readers themselves to extract meaning from the literary dream-vision. The matter of the poet's authority is central to several fourteenth-century dream-visions. Among such visions is *The House of Fame*, of which Spearing says that

the use of the dream-framework is frequently to evade the whole question of belief or disbelief. What the dream-poet implicitly says is not, 'This is true – I know, because I dreamed it – and therefore you must believe it.' It is, 'I truly dreamed it; but there can be no guarantee that a dream corresponds to the truth. You had better give it whatever credence you usually give to dreams.' (75)

In a sense, then, dream-visions are all *somnia*:² they are enigmatic and invite our interpretation. Dream-visions set up what Macrobius, after Virgil and Porphyry, refers to as a "veil" (92). Although Macrobius characteristically follows Virgil in claiming that the veil can be torn away (that is, that there *can* be a definitive interpretation of a dream),

he never suggests that the truth will be known during the dream by the dreamer. The fourteenth-century dream-vision, with its array of misapprehending narrators, is prefigured here; as Spearing comments, “discussions of the fundamental issue of the relationship between dream and truth come to form a regular part of the medieval English dream-poem” (73-4).

Whatever the author or reader may comprehend of the significance of the dream (or the dreamer comprehend in hindsight), the dreamer is certainly naïve when within the boundaries of the dream. Macrobius’s quotation from Porphyry states that “the soul, when it is partially disengaged from bodily functions during sleep, at times gazes and at times peers intently at the truth, but does not apprehend it” (92). Hence the array of blundering comments on the part of narrators in the dream-vision tradition, from those of the “joyleȝ jewelere” (“joyless jeweler,” line 252) in *Pearl* and of Geoffrey in *The House of Fame* to William Guest’s in *News From Nowhere*, all of which serve to undermine the “authority” of the narrator, and to set up a situation in which the *reader* is meant to determine the true significance of the dream.

The didacticism of the medieval dream-vision, then, is not framed in its preaching a sermon; instead, it points out a direction along which the reader can proceed in interpretation. But is the dream-vision geared *solely* toward conveying a political, religious, or moral message, toward the author’s establishment of “the iconic rudiments of an interpretation” and toward the reader’s interpretative play? Kruger does claim that the literary dream-vision depended on the real experience of dreaming as well as on the literary models of other dream poetry. Certainly the literary dream-visions follow the

same disjointed and often fragmentary path that real-life dreams do. In *Pearl*, for example, the narrator describes how he “hoped þe water were a deuyse / Bytwene myrþeȝ by mereȝ made” (“I guessed the water to be a divider / separating pool-side joys,” lines 139-140). In dreams a dreamer does often irrationally recognize the existence of unseen objects or barriers, and a dreamer may, like the jeweler, reach a point where he or she cannot physically enter a place. Chaucer’s *House of Fame* contains a similar situation in lines 2002-6: Geoffrey wishes to enter the spinning House of Rumour, and the eagle tells him that

but I bringe the therinne,
 Ne shaltow never konne gynne
 To come in to hyt, out of doute –
 So faste hit whirleth, lo, aboute.

Twentieth-century critics persist in attempting to find in medieval dream-poetry some insight into the nature of the dream-state, as though that were the true import of any poetry dealing with dreams. It is interesting to note, however, that an inquiry into dream-psychology never seems to be the stated aim of the poets themselves (as it never is Morris’s in his socialist dream-visions). Indeed, the very intricate allegorical nature of the dream-poems seems to argue for the dreams described in them being for the most part meticulous creations of the imagination rather than spontaneous creations of the subconscious, for all the poets’ claims that they truly “mette” them. As Spearing says, “such a delicate structure could not have been created by a poet who was truly in the dream-state in which he represents himself” (101). Of the dream-poets it is Chaucer who

comes closest to what we would recognize today as a psychological discussion of how dreams come about and how people perceive them, in his prolegomenon to *The House of Fame*:

God turne us every dreme to goode!
 For hyt is wonder, be the Roode,
 To my wytte, what causeth swevenes
 Eyther on morwes or on evenes,
 And why th'effecte folweth of some,
 And of some hit shal never come;
 Why that is an avision
 And why this a revelacion,
 Why this a dreme, why that a swevene,
 And noght to every man lyche even –
 Why this a fantome, why these oracles,
 I not (lines 2-12)

Chaucer here refers ironically to medieval dream-taxonomies laid out by Macrobius, Augustine, and others, and claims to be bewildered by them. But he is willing enough to attempt a partial list in the next few lines of the various causes of dreams. For the most part Chaucer claims that dreams arise from the events of everyday life having made an impression on the dreamer (such as “Prison, stewe, or grete distresse,” line 26, or being “to curiouse / In studye,” lines 29-30), a motif which, as we shall see, appears strongly in dream-visions from Cicero to Morris. He then addresses the

second part of his quandary, namely “why th’effect folweth of some / And of some hit shal never come,” and his conjecture arises naturally out of the question of the causes of dreams. Perhaps, he muses, “the soule, of propre kynde, / Be so parfit as men fynde / That yt forwote that ys to come” (lines 43-45) and sends the dreamer encouragement and warning. In the end, however, Chaucer is forced to admit – or, rather, seems pleased to admit – that he will have to leave the matter to the scholars, and wishes them luck (“Well worth of this thyng grete clerkys,” line 53). It is a far cry from his translation of the *Romance of the Rose*, which proclaims that “Whoso saith or weneth it be / A iape, or els nicete, / To wene that dremes after fal, / Lette whoso lyste a fole me cal” (lines 11-14), and is indicative of how independent Chaucer had become from purely imitative models of the continental dream-vision.

For all his conjectures about the causes of dreams, Chaucer’s main concern in the prolegomenon to *The House of Fame* is with the significance of dreams, and whether they really *mean* anything, either as prophecies or as enigmatic visions. Once again the question of the relationship between dream and truth is, as Spearing recognizes (74), an important one for the medieval dream-poets. The key to locating truth in medieval literary dreams lies in the reader’s relationship with the dream-vision, which, like the reader’s in Teskey’s model of allegory, is essentially an active one. The process of reading begins with what is (the poem), works through it, and ventures beyond it to find a lesson that is peculiar to each reader, although shaped by the boundaries of the poem. Because the boundaries are set by the poem itself (as Teskey says, the allegory includes “conspicuous directions,” such as naming one of its characters “Fame” or “Nature”), it

precludes the exercise on the poem of an uncontrolled subjectivity and ensures that the lesson found will still fit the general allegorical purpose.

The fourteenth-century dream-vision, for the most part, follows a pattern that is shaped to a certain extent by the real experience of dreaming. The events of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* epitomize the main points of the dream-vision, a pattern which moves from the everyday world, to sleep, to the dreamscape, to awakening. The poem begins by setting the scene: in *The Parliament of Fowls* the narrator is reading a book, appropriately enough "'Tullius [Cicero]: of the Dreame of Cipioun'" (line 31), which he proceeds to summarize for his readers' benefit. Many other dream-visions are even more specific in their scene-setting, evoking the season (often May, as in the *Romance of the Rose*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*) or even the precise date (*The House of Fame*'s is, famously, the "tenth day, now, of Decembre," line 63).

Dark falls as he is reading, so he can read no more, and goes to bed

Fulfilled of thought and besy hevenesse;

For bothe I had thinge which that I nolde,

And eke I ne had thyng that I wolde. (lines 89-91)

Such anxiety is common to many of the narrators of the dream-vision. The narrator in *Pearl*, for example, is mourning over the grave-mound of the pearl-maiden when sleep overtakes him and he dreams of her. In general, the distress or preoccupation of the narrator is linked to the subject-matter of the vision itself (in the case of *The Parliament of Fowls*, the nature of love) and sets the stage for the allegory. There is an important

tradition in the dream-poem wherein dreams reflect the waking concerns of the dreamer: after reading “Tullius: of the Dreame of Cipioun,” the narrator of *The Parliament of Fowls* proceeds to dream of Scipio Africanus, just as in Cicero’s poem the younger Scipio did after his late conversation with King Masinissa about “that excellent and invincible leader” (Macrobius 69).

Scipio Africanus (“Aurikan,” line 96) holds in *The Parliament of Fowls* an important role for the dream-poem, that of guide to the narrator. As the guide, his first action is to tell the dreamer that his long studies shall be rewarded: “Thou hast the so wel borne ... / That somedel of thy labour wolde I the quyte” (lines 109, 112). Whereas in Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* Africanus is, like the pearl-maiden in *Pearl* or Venus in *The Kingis Quair*, an authoritative figure who can explain the cosmos and prophesy the future, in *The Parliament of Fowls* he is merely the knowledgeable guide. The most authoritative character in the poem will appear later, in the person of Nature. Likewise in *The House of Fame*, the long-winded eagle is simply the vehicle by which Geoffrey ascends to the houses of Fame and Rumour, where the significant portions of his vision occur (and where, as will be seen, a truly authoritative figure is tantalizingly placed beyond the scope of the poem).

Africanus takes the dreamer to “a parke, walled with grene stoon” (line 122), over the single gate of which is written two conflicting signs, the one reading “Thorgh me men goon into that blysfyl place / Of hertes hele and dedely woundes cure” (lines 127-8), the other “Thorgh me men goon ... / Unto the mortal stroke of the spere / Of which Disdayne and Daunger is the gyde” (lines 134-6). This very dream-like paradox confuses the

narrator, so that Africanus “[him] hente and shoofe in at the gates wyde” (line 154), explaining that, as he is not a servant of Love, he has nothing to fear. The element of comedy in Chaucer’s treatment of the dream-vision genre would later be taken up to a certain extent by Morris in his own literary visions: in *A Dream of John Ball*, for example, the guide Will Green jokes with the dreamer that “thou art tall across thy belly and not otherwise” (227).³

The dream-vision undermines the “authority” of the narrator by comic scenes such as this one, as well as by artless comments on the part of the narrator. Usually such tactlessness is the cue for another character in the poem to set the narrator on the right path: the jeweler in *Pearl*, for example, is chastised numerous times by the pearl-maiden for selfishly mourning and for forgetting his spiritual duty to trust in God’s mercy. His words “To be excused I make request” (line 281) are echoed by one dreamer after another in the poetry of the fourteenth century. The narrator is regularly mystified by what he sees and hears; in fact, he often appears to be deliberately naïve. In *The Book of the Duchess*, for example, it does not even become clear to the dreamer until the end of the poem that the loss to which the knight refers is the death of his lover (“Is that youre losse? Be God, hyt ys routhe,” line 1310), although a perspicacious reader would have understood the knight’s hints much earlier in the conversation. The jeweler is equally obtuse: he ignores all his guide’s admonishments not to cross the river between earthly life and the next world, and suffers a rude awakening as a result.

If the dream-vision form is truly a didactic one, the narrator’s naïveté would appear to be out of place, unless it is meant as a negative *exemplum* or signifies a

novelistic preoccupation with point-of-view. However, the “conflicts between absolutist and relativist conceptions of reality” which Spearing recognizes as an important aspect of the fourteenth-century dream-vision (72) offer a more complex reading of the blundering dreamer. Spearing’s model takes into account both the medieval reliance on an absolute world-view and the dream-poets’ recognition of the complex nature of personal experience. The medieval dream-vision is concerned not only with the interpenetration of flesh and spirit, but with the relationship between the real and the ideal, itself a key theme for the socialist dream-visions of Morris. As I will show, *Pearl* is another dream-poem which can be seen to develop a tension between absolute (the heavenly ideal) and relative (the earthly real), a tension which will be resolved in the narrator’s mind at the end of the poem.

Chaucer’s dream-visions are far less concerned than *Pearl* is with actually resolving that tension, even going so far as to undermine the authority of the vision’s “true” authoritative figure. Nature in *The Parliament of Fowls* is among the most authoritative figures in Chaucer’s dream-poems, as she oversees the noisy discussion of the birds and bids them choose their mates. However, her authority in the poem is undermined from the start, since she is but “the vyker of th’almyghty lord” (line 379), and her role is simply that of moderator, for the birds choose their mates of their own accord (or even choose to delay their decision, as the formel does in lines 639-54).

The House of Fame is an even more striking example of Chaucer’s undermining those characters which could be said to have authority. Not only is the dreamer confronted with a series of authority figures who do not give him concrete lessons (the

eagle, fickle Fame, an anonymous guide), but just as a seemingly real authority arrives on the scene, the poem ends very abruptly. The narrator, in fact, appears to be entirely unsure why he has entered into the dream. When he is asked what he is doing at the house of Fame, where he has seen some despicable people exalted for no reason at all and numerous worthies unfairly forgotten, the dreamer answers, in magnificently vague and stumbling verse

that wol y tellen the,
 The cause why y stonde here:
 Some newe tydinges for to lere –
 Some newe thinge – y not what –
 Tydinges, other this or that,
 Of love, or suche thynges glade. (lines 1884-8)

His new guide states with startling certainty that “wel y se / What thou desirest for to here” (lines 1910-11), and proceeds to lead the narrator to an even more confusing place, the house of Rumour. Here the narrator finds such tidings as he seeks, for “never rest is in that place, / That hit nys filde ful of tydinges” (lines 1955-6). There are so many tidings, in fact, and they are so contradictory, that it is impossible to pick out the true or useful ones among them. When finally he comes to the place where the tidings of love are, he finds that everyone else is running in the same direction and seeking the same thing, in full rout:

And whan they were alle on an hepe
 Tho behynde begonne up lepe,

And clamben up on other faste

And up the nose and yen caste

And troden fast on other heles

And stampen, as men doon aftir eles. (lines 2149-54)

These riotous lines, with their impetuous short second syllables, are offset by the long third syllable of the line 2155, in which the chaos slowly begins to be resolved:

Attelast, y saugh a man

Whiche that y nat ne kan,

But he semed for to be

A man of grete auctorite (lines 2155-8)

And it is precisely there that the extant poem ends. Spearing proposes that “*The House of Fame* might be seen as a mock-*oraculum*, setting forth the full meaninglessness of earthly renown and leading up to the non-delivery of doctrinal truth” by the enigmatic figure (82). This is not to say that *The House of Fame* is meant to be a grand joke on the reader in the postmodern tradition, for the poem does seem to hint that truth can be attainable. Although, as Sheila Delaney puts it, “it is difficult to imagine any figure of authority sufficient to overcome the impact of the rest of the poem” (108), to me it seems unlikely that the “man of grete auctorite” is meant to be a misleading figure. The narrator’s relief at seeing him is too manifest in the last four lines of the poem as I have cited them above for him to be a fraudulent authority. It is significant, however, that the poem closes in the act of pointing beyond itself, inviting the reader’s interpretation. If Fame and Rumour are too baffling to be interpreted completely by any reader, that is

simply part of the nature of allegory, for no two readers will see those characters the same way anyway. In the end, dangling the possibility of heavenly truth before the dreamer is as faithful to the dream-vision convention as is frustrating his earthly attainment of it.

In *The Book of the Duchess*, one passage which could offer a comprehensive answer to the poem's central question of how to deal with mourning is the knight's and the narrator's discussion of Fortune. But the knight will not allow the idea that his loss was the fault of fate to comfort him for his deprivation. Furthermore, the discussion, as Helen Phillips notes in her introduction to the poem, is "offered briefly in the middle of the work, not integrated into a conclusion" (37) as it might have been in a simple moralistic tale, and all that comes of it is the narrator's exasperated changing the subject:

"Loo, [how] that may be," quod Y,

"Good sir, telle me all hooly:

In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore

That ye have thus youre blysse lore." (lines 745-8)

The single-minded man in black refuses, in fact, to be comforted in any way in his mourning, and it seems to be with a palpable air of relief that the narrator, having run out of sympathetic phrases (in the end, all he can say is "by God, hyt ys routhe," line 1310), hears the sound of the trumpet announcing the end of the hunt and the return of the hunters.

The end of *The Book of the Duchess* is abrupt – "This was my swevene; now hit ys doon" (line 1334) – and fails to include any of the narrator's thoughts on the dream's

significance or of his opinions on the behavior of the black knight. The last word is left to the work's readers; one can almost imagine a scene from Castiglione (for Chaucer is a courtly poet) in which the courtiers, having had the poem presented to them, discuss the courses of action open to the knight. By way of contrast *Pearl*, a poem on the same theme of bereavement, explicates in its last stanza the lesson that the narrator has learned and the dream-vision's effect on his behavior afterward:

Ouer þis hyul þis lote I laȝte,
 For pyty of my perle enclȝin,
 And syþen to God I hit bytaȝte,
 In Krysteȝ dere blessing, and myn,
 þat, in þe forme of bred and wyn,
 þe preste vus scheweȝ vch a daye.

("On this hill I learned my own fate as a result of mourning for my pearl; and since then to God I have left it [the pearl] in [my] memory and in the dear blessing of Christ of which the priest reminds us every day in the form of the sacrament.") (lines 1205-10)

Unlike the black knight in *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator of *Pearl* has come to terms with his loss, through the vision of the next world proffered him by the very authoritative pearl-maiden. *Pearl* is closer to the mystic tradition of visionary experience (as it appears in, for example, Julian of Norwich's *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*) than it is to the rather worldly dream-visions of Chaucer. Even in *Pearl*,

though, there is no definitive attainment of the next world. The pearl-maiden leads the narrator verbally through various aspects of the afterlife, but when, in the end, he attempts to cross the river and join her on the other side, he awakens suddenly, and it is clear that his awakening is the result of trying to rend the veil that obscures the truth.

Rapely þerinne I watȝ restayed,

For ryȝt as I sparred unto þe bonc,

þat brathe out of my drem me brayde.

þen wakned I in þat erber wlonk.

(“Immediately in my attempt I was restrained: for as soon as I leapt to the [stream’s] bank, that violent act pulled me from my dream, and I awakened right there in the arbour” where he had fallen asleep.) (lines

1168-71)

In a precipitate transition from the *somnium coeleste* to the *somnium animale*, the narrator is abruptly returned to the world of flesh and blood. Indeed *Pearl*, the highest-striving of these poetic dream-visions and the one most intent on bridging the gap between heaven and earth, does not pretend to absolute knowledge any more than the more earthbound works of Chaucer do.

Kruger identifies in fourteenth-century dream poetry what he calls “middle visions,” and he includes the *Romance of the Rose*, Chaucer’s dream-visions, and Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in this category, noting that they “evok[e] the possibility of revelation even as they nervously question their own reliability.” The middle vision, he claims, “offers a way of exploring the connections between the world in which we find

ourselves and the transcendent realm for which we yearn" (130). *Pearl*, in spite of – or perhaps even because of – its preoccupation with the relationship between the real and the transcendent spheres (indicated in these two passages by the juxtaposition of the two sides of the stream, and of the earthly sacrament with the holy blessing that it embodies), belongs with the other poems in the tradition of the middle vision.

The juxtaposition and even interpenetration (Lynch 16) of flesh and spirit in the dream-vision naturally brings to mind the theme, so important to Morris's work, of the earthly paradise.⁴ The real and the transcendent appear mingled in many dream-visions in the form of a garden, more beautiful than terrestrial gardens yet not tied to the sublunary seasons, which occupies a middle ground between earth and heaven. In *The Romaunt of the Rose*, a garden of just this sort awaits the narrator, in which "th'erthe was of suche a grace / That it of floures hath plente / That bothe in somer and wynter be" (tr. Chaucer, lines 1428-30). The garden in *The Parliament of Fowls* is based very much on that in the *Romance of the Rose*:

The eire of that place so attempre was
 That never was grevance ther of hoot ne colde.
 Ther wex eke every holsome spice and gras.
 No man may there waxe seke ne olde.
 (*The Parliament of Fowls*, lines 204-7)

The garden is certainly part and parcel of the wonders the dream-vision promises, like its cousin the romance, to deliver ("never, sith that I was borne, / Ne no man elles me before / Mette, I trowe stedfastly, / So wonderful a dreame as I," *The House of Fame*,

lines 59-62). But it plays a deeper role in dream-poetry than that of a mere sensational or sensual image, a “wonder” in the conventional sense, or even as what Spearing hazards a guess is “a place of the mind, a universal psychic archetype” (17). As I have hinted, its association with both the everyday world of living things (earthly) and the celestial realm of soul and of truth (paradise) makes the dream-garden both a possibility and an ideal.

Significantly, few of the poetic dream-visions, no matter how idealistic they are, portray the dreamer’s actual attainment of the transcendent realm. The *Kingis Quair* of James I of Scotland is a notable exception, which goes so far as to give the dreamer certainty (a sign in the form of a white dove and a golden message) of the divine nature of his dream (lines 1240-53): “that certainty, of course” notes Spearing, “is unChaucerian” (*Medieval Dream-Poetry* 182). The dream-vision’s landscape may not, as the narrator of *Pearl* discovered, contain a gate into heaven, but even the landscape of the visionary portion of *Pearl* is, like the garden in the *Romance of the Rose*, an earthly paradise. The earthly paradise in medieval dream-poetry partakes of the ideal, and as such is not attainable in the “real” world. However, the unattainability of the earthly paradise is not meant to discourage the reader, for it is possible (even necessary) to *learn* from the vision, and to strive for some realization of it, no matter how imperfect. This is the principle of hope to which Bloch refers.

We have already seen how the narrator in *Pearl* came through his vision to a realization of his own fate after death and of the way in which the earthly partakes of the transcendent, symbolised by the sacrament. The thoughts of the narrator upon waking are important to the dream-vision convention, and offer the reader some hints as to how

the vision's lessons should be interpreted and worked into everyday life. That is, in Teskey's terms, they help to lay out the rules of the allegorical game. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator's first impulse is to write down the dream, which has the effect of introducing the reader as a participant in the process of learning from the vision. This may be as much the effect of Chaucer's own tastes, which lean toward a very modern sensitivity to the writer's place in the work, as of the didactic nature of the dream-vision.

The last lines of *The Parliament of Fowls* comprise the most bookish of Chaucer's endings:

And with the showtyng whan hir song was do,
 That foules made at her flyght away,
 I wooke, and other bookes toke me to,
 To rede upon, and yet I rede alway.
 I hope, iwys, to rede so, somday,
 That I shal mete some thyng for to fare
 The bet, and thus to rede I nyl not spare. (lines 688-94)

The upshot is that the narrator has learned *something* from the book and the ensuing vision, but not quite enough: the *Somnium Scipionis* and the *somnium* it inspires have merely whetted his appetite for further reading and further experience. There is no sense here that the dream-vision's lesson is incomplete, however, only that it is part of a process. The exempla of more books and more dreams bring the reader or dreamer closer to the good, to an earthly approximation of the ideal. Note also the manner in which the song of birds awakens the dreamer: there is some ambiguity as to whether the birdsong

occurs solely in the dream, or in the waking world as well. The birdsong in *Parliament of Fowls* marks the closest these dream-poems come to the lowest of Macrobius's categories, the *visum*, since it often happens in "real" dreams that a dreamer will be awakened by an outside stimulus which affects the final events of the dream. Morris would later use this motif in the ending of *A Dream of John Ball*, in which the light of morning becomes brighter and brighter in the church in the dream until the narrator awakens in his own bed, with the sun streaming through the curtains.

Judith Davidoff notes that "dream visions ... necessitate an explicit close to the framing fiction and, as a result, the audience receives a much fuller and richer picture of how one might respond to a lesson that one has great need to learn" (80). Davidoff rightly puts a great deal of emphasis here on the reader's active role in the dream-vision convention and, also rightly, on the dream-vision's essentially didactic nature. Moreover, she is correct in her hint ("how one *might* respond") that the lesson inherent in a dream-poem is not presented as absolute truth (*oraculum*), but as gentle guidance or enigmatic aid (*somnium*). The dream-vision, like allegory, demands serious consideration on the part of its reader, and rewards thought with an insight into its particular concern (whether that be the nature of mourning, as in *The Book of the Duchess* and *Pearl*, or the distribution of wealth and work, as in *Winner and Waster* and *News From Nowhere*) that is thus individualised. It is easy to see how Morris, who was of the opinion that the first duty of the Socialist League was education – "to make Socialists" ("Where Are We Now?," *Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 517) – saw in the dream-vision a didactic convention that nonetheless was directed toward making the reader think independently.

¹ The framing fiction of *Piers Plowman* at once recalls the conventional dream-vision's pattern of the dream limited by waking moments and discards that pattern by means of its frequent and rapid transitions between dream and waking. Most other English dream-poems of the time are more conventional, offering the reader only one dream at a time. For a partial list of Middle English dream-visions, see Davidoff 74-77.

² Although the narrator of the *Romance of the Rose* claims that "in that sweuen is neuer a dele / That it nys afterwarde befall" (tr.Chaucer, lines 28-9), which sets up the fiction of a *visio*, his claim does not preclude the whole vision's being classified a *somnium*, since the supposedly foretold events occur entirely outside the body of the work.

³ For a similar gibe, see Chaucer's *House of Fame*, in which the eagle chides Geoffrey: "Seynt Mary, / Thou art noyouse for to cary!" (lines 573-4).

⁴ Roderick Marshall finds in the theme of the earthly paradise a continuous thread throughout Morris's life and art. Marshall says of the last romances and of the Kelmscott Press books, for example, that they "were the most satisfactory and rewarding Earthly Paradises he had ever created, and he had been testing one variation after another of the Edenic theme all his life" (304). My argument, however, is that the ideal in Morris's works – the true "Golden Age" – stands always outside the text, and that even the generally idyllic *News From Nowhere* is no exception.

Chapter Three
An Architectural Dream of the Past

In *A Dream of John Ball*, we do not see a concrete vision of a golden age, nor even what Michael Holzman has called “the earthly paradise of fourteenth-century Kent” (“Encouragement and Warning of History” 116). The hoped-for truth or the earthly paradise – called in *A Dream of John Ball* the “Change Beyond the Change” – stands, as it does in *The House of Fame* and even in *Pearl*, outside the events of the text. Even the dialogue between the narrator and John Ball fails to prove conclusively which of the two is the dreamer and which the authoritative figure who will provide an omen of victory for the movement or some hint as to the shape of society after such a victory. Fellowship, indeed, the two rabble-rousers may find with each other, but the disclosure of past and future history can provide nothing more than “encouragement and warning” (“Socialism From the Root Up” 497)¹ for each of the two activists.

Morris chose for the backdrop of his first socialist dream-vision the failed English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, and one of its leaders, the priest John Ball, for his chief protagonist. The immediate cause of the revolt was an unpopular poll-tax, and it was not only the labouring classes who threw in their lot with the rebels; but the descriptions in the chronicles (which include Morris’s perennial favourite Froissart) seem to support to a certain extent Morris’s approximation of the revolt with a socialist-style uprising. Froissart, for example, describes the historical John Ball as saying: “Ah, ye good people, the matters goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall do till everything be common, and

that there be no villains nor gentlemen, but that we may be all united together [*tout-unis*], and that the lords be no greater masters than we" (qtd. Dobson 371).² Whether Morris was historically accurate in his interpretation of the revolt has been the subject of some debate among scholars. Margaret Grennan, writing in 1945, notes that several aspects of Morris's interpretation of the 1381 revolt were later disproved by the historical scholarship of the 1890s (94) and that "many more levels of society were involved than the term 'Peasants' Revolt' suggests" (87),³ while Rodney Hilton, in the 1989 Kelmscott Lecture, claims that "in examining the rising and John Ball in the light of new research, we do not correct Morris, but justify and expand his vision" (8-9), although he does not address any of Grennan's specific criticisms.

A Dream of John Ball, however, is not historical scholarship but a fictional work, a dream-vision that, like allegory, points beyond itself toward certain conclusions on the tendencies of history and on the possibility of socialist fellowship. The action also follows the pattern of the dream-vision. The narrator (a type of William Morris) has a dream in which he finds himself in Kent in 1381, a few days before the climactic events of the Peasants' Revolt. There he meets a guide, stout Will Green, and an authoritative figure, John Ball, whose speech at the village cross contains Morris's most eloquent call for socialist solidarity, or "fellowship."⁴ The dreamer is witness to a short skirmish, unrecounted in the chronicles, in which the fellowship of rebels is victorious. The vision culminates in a series of dialogues between the dreamer and John Ball, first on the fate of the revolt and finally on the fate of all those who work toward social change. The dialogue form of the last chapters is a significant transformation of the dream-vision's

conventional treatment of the authoritative figure, for in those dialogues John Ball learns hope from his time-travelling visitor and the narrator learns the lesson of fellowship from his counterpart in the past.

Because neither of the central figures is meant to have the final word, *A Dream of John Ball* (a dream about John Ball, or John Ball's dream) is no *oraculum*, but a *somnium*, enigmatic, in the tradition of the most ambiguous of the fourteenth-century dream-visions. The engagement between the two perspectives of the medieval priest and the Victorian socialist in the dialogues which comprise the second half of the work are meant to engage the reader just as allegory does in Teskey's model. The reader gradually becomes aware not only of the simple parallels between the peasants' revolt of 1381 and a modern socialist movement, but of a theory of history which owes something to the Marxist view of the inevitability of social change and even more to Morris's own conception of history as organic. So in the dialogues between Ball and the narrator we learn that the two characters find each other to be kindred spirits in their quest for justice (in other words, that fellowship can exist even across the centuries) and still more importantly that the ideals of a free society held by the socialists in late Victorian England have not just antecedents but *roots* in the hopes and fears of fourteenth-century artisans and peasants. This is the true significance of the oft-quoted passage in *A Dream of John Ball* wherein the narrator ponders "how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name" (231-2). Feudalism ended in spite of the defeat of the 1381 rebellion, but

it was replaced by competitive capitalism instead of by co-operative “fellowship,” and the activists of the 1880s were, in Morris’s opinion, fighting for fellowship under the banner of socialism.

Morris believed that history was not cyclical but organic; his medievalist socialism was not the ordinary “Whiggish celebration of the antiquity of British freedom” (Chandler 2), but symptomatic of a socialist faith in the inevitability of historical change, linked in turn with his own conception of a co-operative “art of the people.” The problem with Chandler’s interpretation in her chapter on Morris is that, while she effectively highlights Morris’s revolutionary medievalist message in *A Dream of John Ball*, she fails to recognize the complex nature of his medievalism, the “pragmatic concern for the past for the sake of the present and future” which Margaret Grennan points out (20). For, in fact, *A Dream of John Ball* is not simply a register of the similarities between John Ball’s message – as it is conveyed by Ball’s few letters and by Froissart’s reactionary interpretation of the revolt – and Morris’s own; it is about holding out the message of hope (encouragement and warning). The past is, in this case, a basis for what is to come.

Moreover, Morris always had a firm sense that medieval men and women were not simply characters in a romance, or history, or tapestry, but real people. Like Thomas Carlyle, who pointed out in *Past and Present* that “these old Edmundsbury walls ... were not peopled with fantasm; but with men of flesh and blood, made altogether as we are” (54), Morris recognized that

the men of those times are no longer puzzles to us; we can understand their aspirations, and sympathize with their lives, while at the same time we have no wish (not to say hope) to turn back the clock, and start from the position which they held. ("Preface to Steele's *Medieval Lore*" in *Artist, Writer, Socialist* 1: 287)

Accordingly *A Dream of John Ball* is also, besides being a socialist dream, an "architectural" dream (*Dream* 215), conscious always of the flesh-and-blood nature of medieval men and women and their needs and desires. When Morris refers to architecture as he does in the prolegomenon to *A Dream of John Ball*, he is not referring to the mere shell of a building: "A true architectural work," he says, "is a building duly provided with all necessary furniture, decorated with all due ornament, according to the use, quality, and dignity of the building So looked on, a work of architecture is a harmonious co-operative work of art" ("Gothic Architecture," *Artist Writer Socialist* 1: 266). The same impulse had been at work when Morris and his friends began the outfitting of Red House in Kent, the project that launched him on his arduous voyage into the realm of the decorative arts. Since healthy art was for Morris symptomatic of a healthy society, the importance of the characterization of *A Dream of John Ball* as an "architectural dream" should not be underestimated.

William Morris had immersed himself so fully in medieval art, architecture, and literature that he could imagine with utmost ease the practical details of an entire medieval town, down to the "big salt-cellar of pewter" (258) which adorns the middle of Will Green's table and affirms the simple prosperity of fourteenth-century Kent. Hand in

hand with Morris's recognition of the denizens of the fourteenth-century as human beings of flesh and blood goes his feel for practical details. He had, after all, a knowledge of medieval dyeing techniques, of calligraphy, of stained glass, and of tapestry which was not simply the connoisseur's, but the artisan's own.

Thus it is with zest and not a few wry comments on his own times that Morris describes his architectural dream of the Middle Ages. The dream is full of detail, from the inscription upon the cup in Will Green's house (260)⁵ and the girdle-book ("a book in a bag," 228) at John Ball's side, to the "unhedged tillage" (217) of the Kentish village's agriculture which is, of course, an incidental criticism of the enclosed and covetous nature of farming practices in Morris's day. No detail is too small for Morris's architectural eye: the chancel of the church, "so new that the dust of the stone still lay white on the midsummer grass beneath the carvings of the windows" (218), attests both to Morris's awareness that a medieval church was built piecemeal and his recognition of the artisan's silent role.

The trope of the "architectural dream" is in a sense a camouflage disguising the vision's socialist core, part and parcel of the dream-vision narrator's pretensions to modesty of purpose. As is well known, however, Morris followed Ruskin in his perception of a clear link between a society's architecture and its health. "[T]he essence of what Ruskin taught us," he claims in "The Revival of Architecture," was simply "that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life" (*Collected Works* 22: 323), and it was no secret to anyone who knew him that he saw the art of the fourteenth century as being far more healthy than that of the nineteenth. The art of the

fourteenth century was not only an “art of the people,” but it was organic, a link in the golden chain of the Gothic tradition of art and artisanship. As such, it was tied very clearly in Morris’s mind to the art of socialism, expressing the freedom of the artisan as well as fellowship among artist-workers.

The ideals of egalitarian fellowship are, of course, laid out in *A Dream of John Ball* in John Ball’s speeches at the cross; but Morris also asserts those ideals in the frescoes above the chancel arch, which figure forth “the Doom of the last Day, in which the painter had not spared either kings or bishops” (263). His architectural dream therefore includes both freedom (to paint as one wishes) and fellowship (in the form of the frescoes’ egalitarian sentiment). A similar levelling appears in the third book of Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, in which Geoffrey, too, has something of an architectural dream, fantastic architecture being one of the promised wonders of the fourteenth-century dream-vision. Geoffrey sees the slope of the icy rock

ygrave

With famouse folkes names fele
 That had iben in mochel wele
 And her fames wide yblowe,
 But wel unnethes koude I knowe
 Any lettres for to rede

.....

So unfamouse was wox hir fame. (lines 1136-41, 1146)

Indeed, the scene Morris's unsung artist paints for the reader in the chancel, although not immediately recognizable as any one particular surviving medieval painting, is true in spirit to this egalitarian passage in Chaucer (with its pervading sentiment *nihil est quod perstet in orbe*), as well as to those passages in *The Kingis Quair* describing the wheel of Fortune (stanzas 159-72). In stanza 162 of that poem the poet describes how

So many I sawe that than clymben wold,
 And failit foting, and to ground were rold.
 And othir eke that sat aboue on hye
 Were ouerthrowe in twinklyng of an eye. (lines 1138-41)⁶

In its medieval form the painter's having "not spared either kings or bishops" is a reference to all men's being equal in the eyes of God and fate; in the eyes of the nineteenth-century socialist, the inference is that authority will be overthrown, and that all men are and will be equal.

In the prolegomenon to *A Dream of John Ball*, the narrator sets up the expectation of "an architectural dream," discussing the varieties of architecture which please him best and which he claims to have seen from afar in previous dreams: Elizabethan houses (like Kelmscott Manor), fourteenth-century churches, even once an entire medieval city "untouched from the days of its builders of old" (215-16). The progression from least pure to purest (the Elizabethan house with its later additions, the scattered fragments of medieval domestic architecture, and finally the untouched city) is obvious, and this particular dream's actualization of the Middle Ages is the natural final step in the series. The prolegomenon also sets up the expectation of a socialist dream, however, in the

intervening comic *insomnium* of the narrator's speaking engagement ("the earnest faces of my audience ... who ... were clearly preparing terrible anti-Socialist posers for me," 216). These are the two preoccupations – architecture and socialism – which the prolegomenon arranges as the subject-matter of the dream-vision, just as the opening lines of *The Parliament of Fowls* figure forth the theme of love which is to be the major concern of the narrator's vision.

"I got up," says the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball*, "and looked about me, and the landscape seemed unfamiliar to me, though it was ... an ordinary English low-country" (216). The dreamer undergoes a displacement similar to Geoffrey's in *The House of Fame* ("certeynly, I nyste never / Wher that I was," lines 128-9), preparing the reader for the marvels soon to be encountered. In *A Dream of John Ball*, those marvels are first architectural (the medieval town), then social (the discovery of fellowship with the rebellious peasants of fourteenth-century Kent); in *The House of Fame*, they follow the same pattern, beginning with Geoffrey's finding himself in a "temple ymade of glas" (lines 120) and ending with his allegorical visions of the houses of Fame and Rumour.

If the pattern of the high medieval dream-vision is to be faithfully adhered to, the reader familiar with its conventions will expect the entry of an authoritative figure or guide soon after the architectural scene is set in *A Dream of John Ball*. Such an expectation is not frustrated, for as soon as the dreamer is acclimatized, we are introduced to Will Green. Will Green, like certain of the characters in Morris's later dream-vision *News From Nowhere*, seems to intuit that the dreamer is not entirely of his world –

“‘Well, friend,’ said he, ‘thou lookest partly mazed’” (219) – and acts as the narrator’s passport into the peasant society of Kent in 1381.

At several points in the narrative, Will Green generously overlooks the dreamer’s natural awkwardness in this unfamiliar society, usually with a friendly jest: “Certes, brother, thou hast not been a lord’s carver” (223). Indeed, he seems to regard the dreamer, as John Ball does later, as something of a heavenly messenger, and not just for his strange assertion that “I am my own master” (220). How, after all, *does* the dreamer know the countersign, “The king’s son of heaven shall pay for all” (220)? And how does he know the rebellious thoughts of the men of Essex, since that place is not part of his dream? All these things may be explained away by dream-psychology, for a dreamer may take for granted things in a dream which would be utterly unknown or inexplicable in real life. I prefer, however, to find the answer in Morris’s creation of the dreamer as something of an autobiographical personage.

The narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* seems to be as well-read as Morris himself, and shares some of his life-experiences, chief among them his loves of architecture and of story-telling (“I am in sooth a gatherer of tales,” 223). The “vision of grey-roofed houses and a long winding street and the sound of many bells” (223) which comes over the dreamer when Will Green mentions Oxford may be a reference to fourteenth-century Oxford, but it is just as likely to be the nineteenth-century Oxford that is described so generally, and the bells may be a particular experience of Morris’s own. Each time the dreamer betrays such intimate knowledge of the affairs of fourteenth-century England, he demurs “I knew not how...” (222), except once, when the narrator tells the folk in the

tavern an Icelandic tale, and betrays to the reader that it was “long familiar to me” (224); this is a hint that the dreamer has some existence outside his dream in which he has a substantial body of knowledge about the Middle Ages. Every bit of the dreamer’s medieval knowledge, down to the rhyming sign and countersign of the rebels, borrowed from John Ball’s letter in Walsingham’s chronicle (Holzman, “Encouragement and Warning of History” 103-4; Dobson 381; Sisam 161), may be explained away as the knowledge of one who was immersed in the history, literature, and architecture of the Middle Ages, and who saw his knowledge as partaking of the literary and artistic traditions of that epoch. The most likely candidate for the role of dreamer, according to this evidence, is William Morris himself.

As Spearing points out, self-creation is an important aspect of the medieval dream-vision, and Chaucer’s Geffrey is only the most prominent fourteenth-century example of a semi-autobiographical (if slightly self-deprecating) dreamer. The bringer of tidings in this particular vision is evidently a type of Morris, and is part of a process of self-creation which would reach maturity in the creation of William Guest in *News From Nowhere*. The narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* is, like many of the dreamers in fourteenth-century poetry, uncomfortably out of place in his dream (although, in fact, he is not quite so uncomfortable as William Guest would later be). Before John Ball’s first speech at the cross, for example, the narrator has to be aided in finding a place near to the oration since, Will Green tells him cheerfully,

thou art tall across thy belly and not otherwise, and thy wind, belike, is
none of the best, and but for me thou wouldst have been amidst the

thickest of the throng, and have heard words muffled by Kentish bellies
and seen little but swinky woollen elbows. (227)

There were indeed giants in those days! Similarly, the dreamer views the battle at the township's end from a safe but hardly glorious position near Will Green's feet. The intention, of course, is comic, like the slapstick between Africanus and the dreamer at the gate in *The Parliament of Fowls*, and serves to further that impression of the narrator's naïveté so familiar to us from studies of the fourteenth century dream-vision. On another level, however, it serves to underline the narrator's isolation from the world of his dream. There is never any doubt that the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball*, like the jeweller in *Pearl*, is ultimately fated to return from the visionary landscape to his mundane existence.

Although the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* is characterized as “stammering” (261) and “shy” (263), as befits his outsider status in the world of fourteenth-century Kent, he is at the same time surprisingly comfortable in his strange surroundings. After all, the Middle Ages were not foreign territory to Morris; as J. A. W. Bennett remarks, “Morris certainly read widely in our medieval poetry” and “the most marked result was that he medievalised *classical* story – in a thoroughly medieval way” (364).⁷ That is, Morris had not only devoured a vast number of books from and about the Middle Ages (especially among the primary texts), he had internalized the information in them to the point that in his dream-vision he can mingle freely with these folk of another era. For example, he is quick to note that the rosary at John Ball's waist would be called a “pair of beads” (228),⁸ rather than by its modern name; he recognizes by the figure of St. Clement

over a door that a blacksmith is housed therein (218); and in the tavern he tells a tale of Iceland that would be outlandish but not anachronistic to English peasants of the time (224). The one thing he could not have learned from Chaucer, Froissart, or from an illuminated book is how to carve meat according to the fashion of 1381 and, accordingly, he fails in this (223).

The dream-vision form also requires, in addition to the guide and the architectural wonders, an authoritative figure, a role filled at first by the humble and unpretentious John Ball. From John Ball the dreamer learns, first and foremost, the lesson of fellowship; but the priest is also his window into the Middle Ages, explaining, for example, the medieval attitude toward death (263-6), and the varying forms wage-slavery can take in the feudal era:

I know a thrall, and he is his master's every hour, and never his
own; and a villein I know, and whiles he is his own and whiles his lord's;
and I know a free man, and he is his own always; but how shall he be his
own if he have nought whereby to make his livelihood?... Wonderful is
this thou tellest of a free man with nought whereby to live! (272)

Not all the wonders that the dream-vision has to offer are heartening, or even pleasant. As is apparent from this passage, it is not the feudal system of the fourteenth-century that is the primary concern of *A Dream of John Ball*. In true medieval fashion, this vision of the past holds up a *speculum*, a mirror, to a modern society not flattered by the comparison because of its hypocritical attitude toward the worker. At least in those days, according to John Ball, a thrall knew he was a thrall and was not deluded into thinking

himself “free.” The sentiment is rather like Carlyle’s in *Past and Present* when he reminds his reader of Walter Scott’s “Gurth born thrall of Cedric” who “seems happy, in comparison with many a Lancashire and Buckinghamshire man, of these days, not born thrall of anybody!” and concludes that “Liberty when it becomes the ‘Liberty to die by starvation’ is not so divine!” (211). Morris’s “free man with nought whereby to live” might be lifted almost wholly from this passage were it not for Carlyle’s avowal that “Cedric *deserved* to be his master.” Carlyle’s assertion of the necessity of responsibility on the part of the aristocracy for those below was replaced in Morris’s thought by the horizontal notions of fellowship and of responsibility for one’s neighbour.

The narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* is unique among dream-vision narrators in that, in addition to learning from the authoritative figure of the dream, he has something to tell him as well. In fact, the narrator may well be the authoritative figure of John Ball’s own dream-vision, a fellow come from the future to give encouragement and warning as befits the enigmatic dream (that is, the *somnium*), and to explain reluctantly, after the fashion of the *visio* or the *oraculum*, the fate of the revolt (269). The narrator’s knowledge could, if this were a simple tale of “time-travel,” prove invaluable to the rebels. However, such an adventure-story is not what Morris has in mind; he is not planning to attempt an alternate history after the fashion of speculative fiction.⁹ Morris is more interested in the place of the rebels in history, and the relationship of their goals to those of his own revolutionary fellowship. As will become apparent, the narrator returns to John Ball not to save the rascal hedge-priest’s life, but to hold out to him a “little

glimmer” (284) of that hope which Ernst Bloch would later characterize as essential to creative and political striving.

Accordingly, the dialogue between the narrator and John Ball, although it begins as a discussion of the significance of death, becomes (since the revolutionary struggle is greater in scope than any one life) a discussion of history. At first, the historical dialogue hinges upon the great differences between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries (epitomized by the title of Chapter Nine, “Hard It Is For The Old World To See The New”). John Ball plays here the role of the medieval mirror, held up that the nineteenth century may more clearly see its own warts: no one, he says for example, is “so great a fool as willingly to take the name of freeman and the life of a thrall as payment for the very life of a freeman” (273). In the dialogue’s final passages, the narrator sets forth an organic concept of history (epitomized by the title of Chapter Twelve, “Ill Would Change Be At Whiles Were It Not For The Change Beyond The Change”) in which fellowship endures and continues to strive for social change in accordance with Bloch’s later principle of hope.

The conception of history in the final passages of *A Dream of John Ball* owes something to the Marxist one: the narrator, for example, speaks of his confidence in the inevitability of change (285-6). Engels, indeed, had made a study of the German peasant revolts of the sixteenth century. In it, he had tied the heresies which characterized that revolt to an

absolutely propertyless faction [which] questioned the institutions, views and conceptions common to all societies based on class antagonisms. In

this respect, the chiliastic dream-visions of early Christianity offered a very convenient starting-point. On the other hand, this sally beyond both the present and even the future could be nothing but violent and fantastic, and of necessity fell back into the narrow limits set by the contemporary situation. (*The Peasant War in Germany* 46)¹⁰

There seems to be a foreshadowing in this passage of Morris's "change beyond the change" ("beyond both the present and even the future"). Even Morris's concept of an organic society is prefigured here (in Engels's "narrow limits set by the contemporary situation"), albeit darkly and without the important link to art; for, as Herbert Read notes, in Marx and Engels "there is no recognition of art as a primary factor in human experience" (14). Finally, Morris seems to accept Engels's assertion that the rebellious peasants were seeking a change which quite simply was not within the realm of possibilities for their time and place: his narrator tells Ball of the latter-day revolutionaries that "their remedy shall be the same as thine, though the days be different" (276).

Engels, however, would not have agreed with Morris that "their remedy shall be the same," since Engels is trying to insinuate that the rise of capitalism was at this point *inevitable*.¹¹ Earlier in the same passage he claims that "the anticipation of communism nurtured by fantasy became in reality an anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions," while Morris took precisely the opposite tack in "Socialism From the Root Up," that the guilds were in fact "corrupted into privileged bodies" (506). It seems clear from *A Dream of John Ball*, as well as from "The Revolt of Ghent" and other of Morris's

writings on medieval history for *Commonweal*, that Morris saw in the rise of the artisan guilds during the later Middle Ages the potential for a very real change in the makeup of society. In setting the scene for the 1381 revolt, Morris describes how

the lords had bethought them: “We are growing poorer, and these upland-bred villeins are growing richer, and the guilds of craft are waxing in the towns, and soon what will there be left for us who cannot weave and will not dig?” (*Dream* 222).

To him, the guilds were very close to the model of co-operation (and, of course, craftsmanship) that he desired for society, and he very specifically links them here with the revolutionary aims of the peasants. Engels, though, seems to have associated the guild-burghers with the feudal lords (46), and here Morris’s sympathy seems more in tune with his friend, the anarchist-communist Peter Kropotkin.

In that chapter of *Mutual Aid* entitled “Mutual Aid in the Mediaeval City” Kropotkin claims that “many aspirations of our modern radicals were already realized in the middle ages” and that “the immensity of progress realized in all arts under the medieval guild system is the best proof that the system was no hindrance to individual initiative” (*Essential Kropotkin* 192, 193). Kropotkin, like Morris and unlike Marx and Engels, recognized the primacy of art as a factor in human existence. As well, Kropotkin, in considering the rise of the medieval cities, claimed that “each of them was a natural growth in the full sense of the word – an always varying result of struggle between various forces which adjusted and re-adjusted themselves in conformity with their relative energies, the chances of their conflicts, and the support they found in their

surroundings" (188). Such a view is remarkably similar to the organic tradition of an art of the people that Morris found in the Middle Ages, to Morris's equally organic conception of history, and to the dream-vision genre which was open-ended and (generally) dialectic rather than authoritarian.

The most dialectic of fourteenth-century dream-visions – that is, the one in which the dreamer is involved the most in conversation, and not as a spectator or an empty vessel to be filled by the wisdom of true or false authority figures – is Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. The narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* makes several attempts at offering advice to the Black Knight ("by my trouthe, to make yow hool / I wol do alle my power hool," lines 553-4), although the knight's despair ultimately gets in the way of any true solutions. The hint is there, however, that the dreamer can play an active role, and Morris seizes upon it for *A Dream of John Ball*, wherein the dreamer and John Ball ambiguously play the authoritative figures of each other's dreams. Each is capable of answering, but only to a certain extent, the other's questions.

From the past, Morris desired a model for socialist co-operation and for a popular artistic tradition, as well as, perhaps, an affirmation that his conjectures on this half were correct. The narrator of *A Dream of John Ball*, like his counterparts in the fourteenth-century dream-vision, has a certain question he is grappling with. It begins with the trope of the "architectural dream," as the narrator discovers that the objects he sees in the medieval village satisfy his desire to find an "art of the people" (and satisfy Morris's dictum, "have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or perceive to be beautiful," "The Beauty of Life," *Collected Works* 22: 76). John Ball's speech at the

cross, the moment in which the priest speaks with the most confidence (or, in which he is most authoritative), provides the narrator with a model of co-operation, or “fellowship.”

From the future, Morris’s John Ball asks some foreknowledge of events (“how deemest thou of our adventure?,” 267); and when the dreamer’s foretellings have disappointed him he requires, above all, some reason for hope (“Canst thou yet tell me, brother, what that remedy shall be, lest the sun rise upon me made hopeless by thy tale of what is to be?,” 284). The narrator can speak with confidence about the history he knows so well, but the only prophecies he can make are of the ultimate failure of the rebellion, and of the paradoxical “free” un-freedom of his (and our) own times. Hope, however, he can offer, and he couches it in John Ball’s own terms: “the Fellowship of Men shall endure, however many tribulations it may have to wear through” (284).

In the first half of *A Dream of John Ball* the narrator takes on the role of the dreamer and John Ball the role of the authoritative figure. The tumult which greets the priest before his speech at the cross, and the ensuing hush (228), for example, are reminiscent of the deference shown to Nature in *The Parliament of Fowls* (line 617). John Ball’s approach is as solemn as that of any figure “of grete auctorite” in the corpus of fourteenth-century dream-visions, and indeed he has “the sternness and sadness of a man who has heavy and great thoughts hanging about him” (229). His demeanour, however, is “kindly” and his face “not very noteworthy;” there is little of arrogance about him, as befits one who believes in the fellowship of all. Most intriguing of all is the description of his eyes, “at whiles resting in that look as if they were gazing at something a long way off, which is the wont of the eyes of *the poet or enthusiast*” (229, my

emphasis). Such a description of John Ball serves to underline the identification of John Ball with Morris himself that E. P. Thompson has noted (425); Morris was, after all, a poet, and certainly zealous in the cause of socialism. Moreover, if we take “enthusiast” in its sense of “mystic” or “visionary,” this description hints at the reversal of roles which will take place halfway through the work, when it begins to appear that the dream-vision is taking place for the instruction and encouragement of John Ball.

In the second half of *A Dream of John Ball*, the priest quietly relinquishes his authoritative voice (after the short discussion of his outlook on death, 263-6), and meets his own authoritative figure – the narrator – in a private corner of the church, rather as the *Pearl*-poet meets the pearl-maiden alone at the foot of “a crystal clyffe ful relusaunt” (line 159). It is a remarkable twist on the dream-vision convention that the narrator should, if even for part of the dream, play the role of the authoritative figure. He is a reluctant one at first, since the news he has is of the rebellion’s failure. He warms to his task, however, when the conversation begins to turn upon the difference between the Victorian and medieval eras, and there are even times when he seems to relish his role. “And now,” proclaims the narrator, “hear a marvel: whereas thou sayest these two times that out of one man ye may get but one man’s work, in days to come one man shall do the work of a hundred men” (278). As a visitor from five hundred years in the future, the narrator can describe wonders both technological and social which surpass the wildest fancies of the fourteenth century dream-vision, and which are all the more remarkable for being true.

Neither figure is completely satisfied as a dreamer nor completely authoritative as a teacher: “sorry and glad have we made each other,” says John Ball (286). For John Ball, disappointment lies in the fact that his every attempt to understand the marvellous advances of the coming centuries results in a paradoxical frustration of his desire to see some gain in social equality resulting from them. The narrator promises marvels but delivers only a “harvest of riddles” (279). The narrator’s (Morris’s) disappointment lies in the ending of the architectural dream (“a great pain filled my heart at the sight of all that beauty” 287) and in the return to the sordid nineteenth century.

Each speaker has something to learn and something to teach, as befits both the dream-vision’s use of authority and the very nature of the socialist dialogues. Moreover, each respects the other, and recognizes the value of what he is being told, in accordance with the socialist precept that all are equal. By all accounts, Morris put his egalitarian ideals into practice: Fiona MacCarthy paraphrases Philip Webb as noting of one of Morris’s lectures that “the working men in Morris’s audience had seemed pleased at being addressed as adult men and not as children” (MacCarthy 383). This mutual relationship extends itself to Morris’s conviction that the denizens of the Middle Ages had a real flesh-and-blood existence outside of the idealized pages of illuminated manuscripts and histories; accordingly, he has John Ball comment on the narrator that “thou art alive on the earth, and a man like myself” (268).

That is not to say that the narrator and John Ball are not engaged in a mutual process of self-creation, in accordance with Spearing’s notion of the dream-vision narrator’s devising his own persona. As John Ball tells the narrator, “thou hast been a

dream to me, as I to thee" (286); and it is certain that Morris (who is, after all, the thinly-veiled figure behind the mask of the narrator, and the author of the story) *created*, as well as found, his medieval socialist precursor. The two seem to be constantly engaged in finding each other, from the moment in the church when, on the occasion of their inability to see eye to eye regarding the fate of the soul after death, John Ball says "there seemeth something betwixt us twain as it were a wall that parteth us" (265). That wall never seems truly to go away, but grows and shrinks by turns: when he begins to prophesy the failure of the rebels, the narrator wonders that "somehow I could not heed him as a living man as much as I had done" (269), even though he had a few minutes previously taken him by the hand (264).

In general, despite the talk of "walls" between them, the two activists seem to have found fellowship with each other within the confines of their common dream-vision as well as in their having a common dream (of equality and social change). The narrator, for example, speaks of John Ball as "the man himself whom I had got to know" (278), and John Ball's last words to the narrator emphasize the kinship between the two still more fully:

since we have been kind and very friends, I will not leave thee
without a wish of good-will, so at least I wish thee what thou thyself
wishest for thyself, and that is hopeful strife and blameless peace. (286)

Here again we see the theme of fellowship and, what is more, the close association of the narrator (Morris) with John Ball: "I wish thee what thou thyself wishest for thyself." Above all, the theme of hope is underlined once more.

“Now verily,” says the priest, “hath the Day of the Earth come, and thou and I are lonely of each other again” (286). Our revels now are ended, so the pattern goes, and we both return to our mundane everyday existence, bearing what we gained from our vision. But John Ball’s statement is an intriguing one for the dream-vision’s reader: if the Day of the *Earth* has come, where were the two over the course of the nocturnal vigil in the church? It cannot be heaven, since Morris has gone to such great pains to convey the impression of John Ball and the narrator as men of flesh and blood; and it certainly takes place outside the everyday world of the two dreamers. The vigil seems to partake of both heaven and earth, of the ideal and the concrete, just as we found the earthly paradise of the fourteenth-century dream-vision to do.

In the dialogues of *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris is not concerned so much with evoking a marvellous earthly paradise in the sense of a “garden dil[i]table,” such as is described in *The Romance of the Rose* (tr. Chaucer, line 1440), as with pointing the way to a socialist ideal. He is as concerned with a social earthly paradise as with an architectural one. When, for example, the narrator tells a tale of Iceland (a place which had always been one of Morris’s ideals of community) to the folk at the Rose, one of his listeners answers: “Yea, in that land was the summer short and the winter long; but men lived both summer and winter; and if the trees grew ill and the corn throve not, yet did the plant called man thrive and do well” (224). The short summers and long winters of Iceland are a far cry from the blissful transcendent realms described in *Pearl* or *The Romance of the Rose*, but Morris still sees that society as ideal for its sense of fellowship and co-operation. In spite of the good weather for the duration of the dream’s action,

Morris's practical nature will not allow him to imagine a world with no "grevance ther of hoot ne colde." Although Lyman Tower Sargent characterizes the ideal life "when ye lack masters" that John Ball predicts in his speech at the cross as "an idealized peasant society with a touch of the golden age or the arcadia" (Sargent 66), the passage he quotes does not fail to acknowledge the possibility of times "when the seasons are untoward, and the raindrift hideth the sheaves in August" (*Dream* 237).

The architectural marvels of the town and church awe the narrator as well; when the narrator sees the church, which "quite ravished my heart with its extreme beauty, elegance, and fitness" (218), his reaction is like that of the *Romance of the Rose's* narrator, who is moved to exclaim of the garden "wel wende I ful sykerly / Haue ben in paradise erthly" (tr. Chaucer, lines 647-8). Certainly the narrator's architectural dream is a pleasure to him, coming as he does from the sordid nineteenth century, but it is meant to move the reader toward a sense of the possibilities inherent in an art of the people rather than toward the return of some mythical golden age of medieval art. As Morris says in his *Anti-Scrape* lectures and reiterates in his lecture "Architecture and History," it is impossible (and not even desirable) to bring back medieval art and architecture precisely as it was executed in the fourteenth century; and after all, one of the prominent characteristics of the church is its "fitness."

When John Ball asks the narrator if he comes from "the King's Son of Heaven," the answer is negative (268). The world of the dream in *A Dream of John Ball* seems to be a world between heaven (the marvellous, the ideal) and the everyday (the human, the mundane), just as the concept of the earthly paradise recalls the interpenetration of flesh

and spirit which Lynch recognizes in the dream-vision: “the relationship between [the dreamer’s] corporeal and spiritual natures” (52). The earthly paradise as it appeared in the fourteenth-century dream-vision seemed to occupy a place between earth and heaven, partaking of both yet attaining to neither. It was an ideal, rather than an actuality. None of Morris’s works dealing with the earthly paradise describe the *attainment* thereof. This, too, is in keeping with the spirit of the medieval visions. As Morris’s wanderers found in *The Earthly Paradise* and as the jeweler discovered in *Pearl*, the earthly paradise is unattainable for mortals in any permanent sense.

The earthly paradise exists, then, in Morris’s works, as something to be striven for. It is tied to a principle of hope very like Ernst Bloch’s: the “hopeful striving” which John Ball evokes as the essence of his and the narrator’s philosophy partakes both of the ideal (Bloch’s “beyond,” linked in medieval terms to the heavenly world of spirit) and the earthly (Bloch’s “what is,” the everyday world of striving mortals). Like the wanderers in Morris’s earlier work *The Earthly Paradise*, the socialists he describes in *A Dream of John Ball* are involved in a continuing process of venturing beyond: “if they have tried many roads towards freedom, and found that they led nowhither, then shall they try yet another” (*Dream* 276). Carole Silver remarks of the Prologue to *The Earthly Paradise* that

Morris’s use of the idea of perfect lives and perfect lands is tinged with irony, for he stresses the destructive aspects of man’s quests for them. To strive to build the age of gold in one’s own land is right; to seek escape from home and duty is to be doomed to waste and failure. (*Romance* 58)

It was an attitude which would remain with Morris into his later years of social activism, and it exonerates Morris from the charges of dreamy escapism which have dogged his writing since his death.

Moreover, it follows that each person's envisioned earthly paradise is unique to that individual, a fact which will have crucial significance to our discussion of *News From Nowhere*. The "wall" which exists between the narrator and John Ball is partly that of the great gap in time and social norms between the eras of Victoria and Richard II; but it is also the gap between two individuals, neither of whom, no matter how like-minded, can have precisely the same ideal as the other. Morris chooses to emphasize the similarities between his vision of an ideal world (or, in this case, of striving toward an ideal world) and John Ball's vision. The concept of "fellowship" is meant to underline the notion that, in spite of any differences of socialist doctrine or of ultimate goals, the rascal hedge-priest and the Victorian street-orator have certain aims (or "dreams") in common. Such a call for co-operation would have appeared quite pointed in a movement which had been perpetually dogged by internal strife from its inception in 1881.

The dream-vision was, as I established in my previous chapter, a non-restrictive convention in spite of its didacticism; or, rather, its didacticism was of a non-restrictive nature. The dream-vision allowed for fantastic events, characters, and architectures; it made authoritative statements which were not meant as "final words" on the subject, but were rather part of an ongoing dialectic; most importantly, like allegory it pointed toward an ideal which the reader was relied upon to discover actively. Although Morris believed he had a very important message to convey, like his master Chaucer he was under no

illusions about the definitive nature of his message. When John Ball tells the narrator that “scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of the days beyond thine to tell what shall be, as thou hast told me, for I know not if that shall help or hinder thee” (286), he is not only anticipating the yet-to-be-written *News From Nowhere*, he is underlining the ambiguous nature of the dream experience as Morris and the fourteenth-century dream-poets saw it. The vision described in *The Parliament of Fowls*, after all, only made its dreamer desirous of dreaming more (“I hope, iwis, to rede so, somday, / That I shal mete some thyng for to fare / The bet,” lines 692-4). Whether Ball’s and the narrator’s dream-vision is ultimately to be a help or a hindrance, its “true” nature is purposely as elusive as the earthly paradise, so that Morris’s socialist “hopeful striving” appears to be analogous to the medieval art of interpreting allegories and dreams.

¹ Michael Holzman, in "The Encouragement and Warning of History," takes Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax's "Socialism From the Root Up" as an important intertext for *A Dream of John Ball*, and argues that Morris's dream-vision was "clearly an effort to teach the value of history to socialists, in opposition to the position of historical inevitability taken by their opponents" (99). This is true but insufficient: this dream-vision also embodies Morris's hopes for socialist fellowship as well as his belief that the art of the Middle Ages was a popular one.

² Dobson remarks in his anthology of contemporary and later writings on the 1381 revolt that "most of the speeches [Froissart] assigns to historical characters must be fictitious" (187) and that "the famous sermon which Froissart put into the mouth of John Ball has had an effect on his modern readers quite the opposite of what the author can have intended" (369). This speech and the incriminating letters of John Ball to his fellow rebels quoted by the chronicler Walsingham (Dobson 380-383, Sisam 161) constitute Morris's most important primary sources for his character sketch of the fourteenth-century priest. It is also pertinent to remark here upon Morris's characteristic reliance upon primary sources for his knowledge of the Middle Ages. He does make use of works of "modern or critical history" such as Thorold Rogers but makes it clear in his letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* with his list of favourite books that he prefers "works of art" to such "tools" (*Collected Works* 22: xii).

³ Among the other flaws Grennan finds in Morris's historical understanding is his glossing over the special privileges of the historical peasants of fourteenth-century Kent: "Their grandparents had *not* been villeins and a *return* was therefore impossible...."

Perhaps Morris's wish to generalize, to use the revolt as a lesson, caused him to ignore what he must have known: the highly political nature of Kentish aims" (105).

⁴ "Fellowship" is a theme to be met with in medieval authors as diverse as Langland (Satan "fel fro that felowshipe," *Passus I*, line 113) and Malory ("whan sir Mordred saw Launcelot, than he lefte their felyship," 287); it is significant that the privation of it usually betokens misfortune. As Morris says, "fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death" (*Dream* 230).

⁵ This bowl, Grennan notes, is "an actual medieval vessel. It is an illustration in a book Morris undoubtedly read [in fact, it was one of his favourite source-books], John Henry Parker's *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England*, Oxford, 1853. There it is fully described and its legend given. See Vol. II, p. 58" (Grennan 158n). It is typical of the solidity of Morris's medievalism that a small detail in one of his fictions should have an actual historical example.

⁶ Incidentally, in August of 1887 Morris received from William Bell Scott a copy of the *Kingis Quair* that Scott had illustrated himself and printed privately for his friends. From Morris's letter of thanks to Scott for the volume, it appears that Scott had sent a number of his etchings for the poem on to Morris some time before (*Letters* 2: 685). This particular dream-vision may have been before Morris in a very visual form during the writing of *A Dream of John Ball*

⁷ *The Life and Death of Jason* and the classical tales of *The Earthly Paradise* are not the only evidence supporting Bennett's claim. Edward Burne-Jones's woodcut for *Troilus and Criseyde* on page 482 of the Kelmescott *Chaucer* portrays Troilus mounted

(as no soldier would have been in Homer's day), riding past Criseyde with his shield full of arrows. The scene is truer to the spirit of Benoit de St. Maure, Boccaccio, or Chaucer than it is to Homer: the only Grecian touches are Troylus's greaves and the plumed helmet that hangs down his back.

⁸ The prioress in *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, bears "Of smal coral aboute hire arme ... / A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene" (lines 158-9).

⁹ Morris does, of course, have some idea in mind of what he believes society would ideally have been like had uprisings such as those in England in 1381 been successful. He saw, for example, in the ascension of the guilds and the free cities of Flanders the model for a new co-operative society based on artisanship.

¹⁰ Engels's mention of the "chiliastic dream-vision" refers, not to the fourteenth-century dream-vision, but rather to the earlier tradition of the apocalyptic vision, of which the book of Revelations and Paul's second address to the Corinthians contain examples (Spearing 12-13); the Old English *Dream of the Rood* also falls into this category. However, the two genres are not so easily separated: *Pearl* contains elements of the chiliastic vision, and the apocalyptic frescoes in the church in *A Dream of John Ball* are Morris's nod to the earlier tradition.

¹¹ The rise of capitalism is here analogous to and indeed simultaneous with the break in Morris's golden chain, a neat convergence of art and history entirely in tune with Morris's theories.

Chapter Four

A Hopeful Dream of the Future

Where *A Dream of John Ball* sends the narrator back to the fourteenth century to hold out hope for a leader of the Peasants' Rebellion and to experience fellowship firsthand for himself, *News From Nowhere* sends the dreamer, William Guest, to the twenty-second century to experience an epoch of rest after the establishment of Communism and the disappearance of the state. The society he finds there is the manifestation of Morris's own hopes for art and society. The communism described in *News From Nowhere* reflects Morris's ideals of labour and an "art of the people" – the golden chain of the organic tradition has indeed been taken up again – but, as was apparent in Morris's earlier works, the true attainment of an earthly paradise is never possible, no matter how idyllic the gardens of medieval Kent and future Nowhere may at first appear.

It has generally been accepted that Morris wrote *News From Nowhere* in response to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, a utopian novel of a future centralized and highly technological society that helped to draw attention to the cause of socialism on both sides of the Atlantic. The passage at the end of *A Dream of John Ball* in which John Ball conjectures "some dream of the days to come beyond thine," on the other hand, seems to hint that Morris had had a utopian literary project in mind for some time (Silver 143). Michael Holzman has also claimed that *News From Nowhere* was written as "a major (and last) statement concerning the Anarchist faction that had taken over control of his League" ("Anarchism and Utopia" 593). Holzman finds ample

support for his claim in the pages of *Commonweal* over this period, but it does appear from Morris's review of *Looking Backward* that *News From Nowhere* was a direct response to Bellamy's work. Moreover, as will become evident, Morris makes several statements in *News From Nowhere* which are more anarchist than Marxist in their objection to state centralization and in their acceptance of variety of opinion, so that his work can also be read as a statement of communist-anarchism.¹

Morris's review of *Looking Backward*, published in *Commonweal* on 22 June 1889, anticipates in many ways *News From Nowhere*, itself published in *Commonweal* from 11 January to 4 October 1890. Morris's objections to *Looking Backward* are manifold. For instance, Bellamy's book represents to him "State Communism, worked by the very extreme of national centralisation" (504) and is essentially urban-centred (505): in a letter to J. Bruce Glasier dated 13 May 1889, Morris remarks that "I wouldn't care to live in such a cockney paradise as he imagines" (*Letters* 3: 59). Also anticipating his own utopian work, he notes that *Looking Backward* is "unhistoric and unartistic" (502). *News From Nowhere* places the epoch of rest in an historical context, describing the change beyond the change and hinting at a change beyond that: unlike Bellamy, Morris is careful to give *Nowhere* a past, a present, and a future. Morris also responds strongly to the "unartistic" nature of Bellamy's work, characteristically tying joy in art to joy in labour in his own utopia. In *Looking Backward*, for example, Dr. Leete explains to the narrator that in this utopian society

there is recognized no sort of difference between the dignity of the different sorts of work required by the nation. The individual is never

regarded, nor regards himself, as the servant of those he serves, nor is he in any way dependent upon them. It is always the nation which he is serving. (157)

Although Morris would agree with the recognition of the “dignity of the different sorts of work” here, work is regarded in *Looking Backward* more as a necessary evil than a joy, and is doled out by an all-powerful “nation” to which the worker is, in fact, subservient. Happiness consists in not having to work more than absolutely necessary, and in having the material accoutrements of a comfortable middle-class existence. Marie-Louise Berneri might well be summing up *Looking Backward* when she points out that “nineteenth century utopians ... fell little short of calculating individual happiness in terms of pieces of furniture, articles of clothing or the number of courses at each meal,” and cites *News From Nowhere* as nearly the sole exception (210). To this state of affairs Morris opposed a society in which, as the elder Hammond puts it,

all work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done ... ; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable *habit* ... ; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists. (*News* 92)

Morris also includes with his criticisms of *Looking Backward* some insights into his attitude toward the utopian genre. His statement, for example, that “the only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author” (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 502) hints at the autobiographical reading of Morris’s dream-

vision that has so delighted scholars such as Roger Lewis (57) and Carole Silver (141-2). More importantly, he notes that one of the dangers of the utopian work is that readers “will accept it with all its necessary errors and fallacies (which such a work *must* abound in)” (502) as a “Socialist bible of reconstruction” (507). Morris’s recognition of the “errors and fallacies” inherent in one writer’s interpretation of the ideal society prefigures the non-authoritative stance of his own utopian dream-vision. If the goal of the Socialist League was the education of genuine convinced socialists, then those socialists would be convinced, not by being browbeaten, but by engaging with the ideas that Morris and others portrayed in such works as *News From Nowhere*. The readers’ responses did not necessarily have to be approbation: like the anarchists, Morris recognizes that unanimity is not only difficult to obtain, but may even be unnecessary. “[V]ariety of life,” he says, “is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition” (507). *News From Nowhere* would, like the medieval dream-vision, recognize its own fallibility and point the reader toward one writer’s ideal rather than make an unshakeable pronouncement.

If the vision in *News From Nowhere* is to the nineteenth-century narrator William Guest what *A Dream of John Ball* was to the fourteenth-century priest John Ball, the reader is left wondering whether the vision described in *News From Nowhere* is a “help or a hindrance” to its dreamer. As in *A Dream of John Ball*, the answer remains enigmatic. The dreamer’s isolation from his dream is frustrating but is ultimately recognized as appropriate, since the earthly paradise is an ideal to be striven toward, not given gratis. *News From Nowhere* is similar in this respect to the fourteenth-century *Pearl*, with its narrator’s failed attempt to attain Paradise and subsequent recognition that

he must remain in the corporeal world for the duration of his life. Once again, the ideal earthly paradise seems to stand outside the text. Despite the pastoral world, or dream-vision garden, that is seemingly evident in *News From Nowhere*, the new society is far from perfection. There is plenty of dissent, for example (the denizens of Nowhere are unafraid of stating their opinions, even reactionary ones); the passions have not ceased to cause unhappiness among lovers, even in a world where possession has been abolished insofar as such an abolition is possible; and, perhaps most importantly, history has not ended.² Even the denizens of this “epoch of rest” are part of a changing world, which is underlined in the text by references to the next generation and to the continuation of history; Nowhere is an organic society. This vision of the future, like many of the fourteenth-century visions, points beyond itself to an ideal which only perpetual striving – venturing beyond – can hope to attain to. The process of striving toward the ideal is constant and organic, while the attainment of the ideal itself is always in doubt (and, as will be seen, may not in fact be possible, or even necessary).

The framing fiction of *News From Nowhere* is the dream-vision’s familiar one of sleep followed by the journey, the education of the dreamer, then waking. The dream-vision convention that the narrator be wrestling with a certain problem is clearly alluded to in the prolegomenon of *News From Nowhere*. Here the narrator begins, not by struggling within himself (“Fulfilled of thought and besy hevynesse,” *Parliament of Fowls*, line 89), but in “vigorous” debate with a group of fellow socialists. The debate hinges upon “the future of the fully-developed new society” which is in turn to be the subject of the imminent dream-vision, just as the narrator of *Pearl* pines for his pearl

before dreaming of her. The socialist discussion itself prefigures the decision-making processes of Nowhere, wherein dissent is not only possible, but probable, and the emphasis is not on coercion (the work-gangs of Bellamy) but on persuasion. Morris recognizes, in a fashion more anarchist than Marxist, the difficulty of unanimity among any group of people: "there were six persons present, and consequently six sections of the party were represented."

Only after the discussion does the direction of the struggle shift in Chaucerian fashion inward, as the narrator rides home on the underground where

he, like others, stewed discontentedly, while in self-reproachful mood he turned over the many excellent and conclusive arguments which, though they lay at his fingers' ends, he had had forgotten in the just past discussion. But this frame of mind he was so used to, that it didn't last him long, and after a brief discomfort, caused by disgust with himself for having lost his temper (which he was also well used to), he found himself musing on the subject-matter of discussion, but still discontentedly and unhappily. "If I could but see a day of it," he said to himself; "if I could but see it!" (*News* 3-4)

This may be taken as a fairly autobiographical passage, given Morris's own distaste for much of modern machinery (the underground railway is characterized as "that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity") and his wry admission that losing his temper was a thing he "was also well used to." Such admissions of personal foibles also serve to underline the basic humanity of the narrator of *News From Nowhere*: he is, the speaker

seems to be saying, as humble a narrator as Chaucer ever represented in his poetry, and as given to blunders of speech as any “Geffrey.” Moreover, he is dissatisfied with the nineteenth-century society in which he lives, as his reluctant acceptance of the “habit” of the underground railway shows. His later juxtaposition of rural and urban landscapes (“he could scarce bring to his mind the shabby London suburb [Hammersmith] where he was, and he felt as if he were in a pleasant country place,” 4) sheds more light upon the sources of his discontent, which is an aesthetic and practical rejection of “civilisation,”³ with roots in the Romantic worship of nature.

The narrator and his reactions to his “surprising adventures” (5) play an important role in the events of *News From Nowhere*, partly in his delight in the wonders of the dream-vision and partly in the new society’s sympathy with his own ideals, but still more in the continual contrast of his nineteenth-century society with the communist world of his dream. In this he parallels the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball*, who often seems also to be embarked on the enterprise of contrasting two eras of history. In fact, if John Ball’s hint that the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* may eventually experience “some dream of the days to come beyond thine” really does refer to the as yet unwritten *News From Nowhere*, then the narrators of Morris’s two socialist dream-visions are, in fact, the same person. Certainly, both are active Socialists, both live in Hammersmith, and both have a deep appreciation of architecture and artisanship. There is something of the same continuity among the narrators of Chaucer’s dream-visions: Spearing, for example, describes Chaucer’s works as a “series of related dream-poems” (48).⁴ In the woodcuts of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, Morris and Burne-Jones seized upon this apparent continuity,

portraying Chaucer as a ubiquitous hooded figure taking note of and even taking part in the events he narrates.

William Guest's isolation from the world portrayed in his dream is still more pronounced than the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball*'s isolation from fourteenth-century Kent. In *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris envisions himself (or the dreamer) from the outset clothed in the garments of the age, and his narrator has obviously learned enough in abstract terms from the histories, poetry, and crafts of the time to integrate himself to a certain extent in the society. Even though he feels on occasion "as if I did not belong to them" (257), the sights and sounds of medieval Kent are "beautiful indeed, yet not strange, but rather long familiar to me" (259), whether from the narrator's reading, from his work, or (as the text hints) because the natural world (and even the hierarchy of society and the fellowship of idealists) has not changed overmuch in some places, even after five hundred years.

In Nowhere, however, the guest is continually conscious of his "shabby" clothes and of his outsider status – he might as well be, as he says, "a being from another planet" (54). When Dick and Clara return to Hammond and Guest, for example, Dick comments that

I was half suspecting ... that you would presently be vanishing away from us, and began to picture my kinsman sitting in the hall staring at nothing and finding that he had been talking a while past to nobody.

Guest's response underscores the isolation he feels and upon which Dick has so unfeelingly remarked:

I felt rather uncomfortable at this speech, for suddenly the picture of the sordid squabble, the dirty and miserable tragedy of the life I had left for a while, came before my eyes. (135)

This phantasm prefigures Guest's final vanishing at the end of the vision, as do old Hammond's next words: "perhaps our guest may some day go back to the people he has come from, and may take a message from us which may bear fruit for them and consequently for us," that "message" being hope. Guest's reaction to Dick's words – his unhappy vision-within-a-vision of "the life he had left for a while" – makes clear his role over and above that of the dreamer-narrator. He serves to remind the others of life before the change: Dick says that "already I feel as if I could understand Dickens the better for having talked with him" (135). William Guest is the unwilling foil for a happy and creative epoch and, like the narrator of *Pearl*, a temporary guest in paradise.

The happiness of the epoch of rest is most evident in the person of the younger Hammond, Richard. The age seems made for Dick, who is not particularly bookish, has few great talents (although, like his fellows, he dabbles in many areas of artisanship), and for whom the greatest of summer pleasures consists in boating up the Thames to bring in the hay. Throughout the journey he remains sublimely unaware of any of the tensions caused by, for example, the anachronistic blunders of their time-travelling guest or the jealousy Clara feels at the arrival of Ellen. It is Dick who, more than any of the other characters of *News From Nowhere*, embodies the age's freedom from care, that pervasive "un-anxiousness" upon which Guest remarks so soon after his arrival (18). Ellen is given to occasional doubts and worries for the future of the society, old Hammond is content

among his books, Boffin is a dabbler in reaction, and even Clara wishes at one point that “we were interesting enough to be written or painted about.” It is significant that the fate of Clara’s comment is oblivion: “Dick answered her with some lover’s speech, impossible to be written down, and then we sat quiet a little” (103). This exchange is a hint (and there are others – see page 207, for example) that Dick is impatient of anything which intrudes upon his idyll. His tacit reprovals of Clara here and of the “grumbler” on page 150 may be symptomatic of the power of peer pressure in a supposedly free society – what George Woodcock describes as “the serpent of public opinion which Orwell detected as one of the inhabitants of the anarchist paradise” (206).

Despite his subtle squelching of dissent, Dick does embody the unanxiousness and the generosity of the age. He represents communism internalized – the “second childhood” which old Hammond defends in his conversation with Guest – and as such he provides the dreamer with an ideal guide through the new society. The dreamer’s sojourn in Nowhere begins and ends with a bath in the Thames, at both of which Dick is present. Dick is the first of the inhabitants of Nowhere to meet the guest, and the last to see him before he disappears unnoticed from their lives. From start to finish, he does his best to enjoy Guest’s company, and to entertain him (e.g. 103), but he consistently fails to understand him as Ellen or Hammond do, each in their own manner. Dick’s role is partly that of the guide in the dream-vision tradition: to lead Guest to Hammond and Ellen, acclimatizing him along the way. More than that, however, he represents the unanxious essence of Nowhere.

If in the schema of this dream-vision Dick is the guide, old Hammond and Ellen are the authoritative figures of *News From Nowhere*, and each plays a different role in the dreamer's education. Hammond, the historian, aids Guest in learning the practical details of the new society, and places it in a historical perspective for him. Ellen, the forward-thinker and lover of nature and beauty, also serves to place the society in a historical perspective, embodying its hopes and fears for the future.

The greater part of the socialist dialogues in this work take place between Guest and the garrulous and knowledgeable elder Hammond. These dialogues take more or less the same form as those in *A Dream of John Ball*, earnest disquisitions into the customs and history of the communist society (epitomized in the titles of Chapters 14 and 18, "How Matters Are Managed" and "How The Change Came"). The customs of the socialist society are, of course, reflective of Morris's own attitudes toward work and art. Nowhere's citizens, being free to work as they please, naturally turn out items of remarkable beauty, "like the best kind of Japanese work, only better" (37). The superlatives that were unanimously heaped upon items found in the medieval romance and dream-vision now find their way into Morris's forecast of the superb craftsmanship which will arise among an "art of the people." Morris explains away the problem which has historically caused the most difficulties for socialists – that of the incentive to labour in a communist society – by representing in Hammond's speech and elsewhere in *News From Nowhere* the pride that the free artisans of this society take in their work and by their nearly-unconscious awareness that everything they do contributes to the common weal. Once again, this utopia appears to be the expression of its author's temperament:

Morris simply assumed that everyone would enjoy and feel pride in creative work as much as he did.

Enlightening and straightforward as Hammond's words are on the subject of "How Matters Are Managed," it is the practical illustrations of joy in art and labour – fellowship among builders and haymakers – that are convincing throughout *News From Nowhere*, rather than the dry socialist dialogues on the subject which comprise the interview with the historian.⁵ The most important information old Hammond has to offer, and the information that cannot be proffered by anyone else (or by any event) in the text, is the historical *context* of the "epoch of rest." Hammond can place the age in context with regard to its past, but it is left to Ellen to embody the "future of the fully-developed society" (3) which was the catalyst for the vision. Guest hears from Hammond the story of the "Change Beyond the Change" that had been held out as cause for hope in the last chapter of *A Dream of John Ball*, but only upon the appearance of Ellen does it become clear to the reader that the current society is by no means a perfect or final one, and that the advent of the revolution does not signify the end of history. As Silver recognizes, "since lack of change implies death, Morris indicates that Nowhere will inevitably alter as it grows" (*Romance* 150).

At times history does appear to have ended, and the denizens of Nowhere to be living in an Eden – a garden in which, since all bodily wants and needs are taken care of, happiness is presupposed. Hammond says of Dick and Clara that "the last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place, is history enough for them" (54). The past, for those who are unpressed by want and consequently unanxious, is of as little

moment as the future. Guest's objection, under his breath, is that such an attitude verges on complacency; it is unthinking, a "second childhood" (102) in the derogatory nineteenth-century phrase. The argument is a valid one: what sort of intellectual or philosophical growth is possible where there is no "venturing beyond?" This is Bloch's objection to utopia as well: "No fresh questions, no different countries appear in the margin any more, the island, although a future one itself, is largely insulated against the future" (*The Principle of Hope* 2: 478).⁶ Hammond's answer is that

"for my part, I hope it may last long; and that the world's next period of wise and unhappy manhood, if that should happen, will speedily lead us to a third childhood: if indeed this age be not our third. Meantime, my friend, you must know that we are too happy, both individually and collectively, to trouble ourselves about what is to come hereafter." (102)

The vision of history here is cyclic, and has its roots in mythographers such as Hesiod.⁷ Importantly, it does not deny the possibility of change, although Hammond seems to imply that any dramatic change will probably be for the worse. The next "unhappy manhood" of the world denotes, of course, a state of competition having resupplanted mutual aid, but it may also refer to the unhappiness of philosophers who cannot be content with the state of things as they are. It is essentially a defense of the sublimely unanxious Dick and all that he stands for.

What is a golden age for Hammond, however, is an age of silver or even of bronze for Ellen's grandfather, the "Praisers of Past Times" of Chapter 22. The inclusion of such a disputatious character in a utopian work indicates the advanced nature of

Morris's thinking. The freedom to dissent here seems to be as intrinsic a part of the communist society as freedom from want and freedom of artistic expression. Beyond simply including a would-be reactionary in his utopia Morris has gone to some lengths to imagine the nature of his objections to the society in which he lives. The "grumbler," as Dick calls him, says that he has

read not a few books of the past days, and certainly *they* are much more alive than those which are written now; and good sound unlimited competition was the condition under which they were written I cannot help thinking that our moralists and historians exaggerate hugely the unhappiness of the past days, in which such splendid works of imagination and intellect were produced. (149-50)

It is significant that his words cause Dick more consternation than they cause anyone else – "Clara listened to him with restless eyes, as if she were excited and pleased; Dick knitted his brow, and looked still more uncomfortable, but said nothing" (150) – and significant moreover that Dick is too polite (or too busy being unanxious) to enter into a dispute with him.

The task of answering the grumbler falls to this dream-vision's other authoritative figure, Ellen. Her answer is partly couched in an appreciation of nature which is a survival of Romanticism (pointing outside to the garden, she exclaims "look! these are our books in these days"), and more fully in Morris's own practical and material view of the world. "When will you understand," she asks, "that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too

much?" Creativity is measured by its having arisen out of artistic freedom, for "in the beautiful buildings that we raise up all over the country ... a man can put forth whatever is in him, and make his hands set forth his mind and his soul" (150). Morris saw the organic tradition of art as a democratic one which was only capable of complete fulfillment in an egalitarian and communist society.

Ellen understands the past in general terms as well as Hammond does, and understands the future a good deal better; where Hammond is old and inactive, content with the society as it stands in its "second childhood," Ellen is young, curious, and active. Tom Middlebro' reads Ellen as "a forecast of the next age, which will be more vigorous, more intellectual, and more willing to absorb the best from the past" (9). Middlebro' offers little textual support for this assessment of Ellen's character, but her statement about teaching her children ("I cannot help thinking that just as they might be like me in body, so I might impress upon them some part of my ways of thinking," 194) seems to support the notion that she will have an effect on following generations. With her "impatience of unreasonable restraint" (213), it is also obvious that Ellen is an activist and a free thinker, and does not assume the epoch of rest's endurance as readily as Dick and Clara do.

Ellen's attitude toward the past, however, is not so straightforward as Middlebro' suggests. Certainly she is willing to recognize *some* virtue in past times; she admires Kelmscott Manor, for example, describing it as "lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created" (201). She learns much from Guest, as well (another case of the authoritative figure's being a learner as well as a teacher in Morris's dream-

visions). However, her interest in the past seems to concentrate on avoiding its mistakes, in accordance with Santayana's dictum. Ellen says that

I should be quite content to dream about past times, and if I could not idealise them, yet at least idealise some of the people who lived in them. But I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past – too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men like Hammond. Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid.
(194)

Ellen's words are an antidote to the complacency inherent in Dick's happiness and in old Hammond's attitude toward "what is to come hereafter." In a world which is beautiful and comfortable, it is too easy to assume that any change will be for the better. Behind Ellen's words lie the same trend toward constant rethinking that is inherent in Bloch's "venturing beyond" and in the anarchist rejection of any static State (including the Marxist "great People's State" that Bakunin recognized and excoriated in "Marx, The Bismarck of Socialism," 84). That is, her attitude toward the past is essentially tied to her attitude toward the future: only the best should be kept, the worst avoided.

Morris himself felt a similar ambiguity toward the past, especially after he embraced socialism; he was under no illusions, for example, regarding the social realities underlying the art of the Middle Ages he knew and loved so well. In 1883 he wrote to

Andreas Scheu that he found Norse literature to be “a good corrective to the maundering side of medievalism” (*Letters 2: 229*), by which he meant the languorous world of chivalry and romance that had earlier influenced him and which prevailed in Pre-Raphaelite art. To the aristocratic complacency of the *Romance of the Rose* and of Malory he characteristically opposed the vigorous democratic society of the Icelandic sagas and the Alþing.⁸

The solidity and practicality of Morris’s thinking on the subject of how the change is to come about and what effect the new society will have on people’s everyday lives is refreshing, and is typical of his realistic attitude toward work and toward historical change. Once again, his reputation as an *escapist* “dreamer of dreams” is belied. May Morris scathingly describes certain readers’ reactions to *News From Nowhere*:

The only real complaint against *News From Nowhere* was that instead of a Celestial City in a new heaven on a new earth it gave us London and the Thames from Hammersmith to Kelmscott, with dustmen and harvesters and watermen and housemaids at their common rounds and daily tasks as usual. Even a murderer was introduced as still possible. The disappointment caused by this was the measure of the inability of most people to conceive that life could be happy if it were real. (*Artist, Writer, Socialist 1: 505*)

What of the earthly paradise, then, the “vision of summer” by which Jeffrey Spear (230) characterizes Morris’s socialist dream-works? *News From Nowhere* seems to offer the

reader the dream-vision garden not only at one point in the dream, but throughout. "To me," says Guest, "you seem to be living in heaven compared with us of the country from which I came" (152). Just as the medieval dream-vision juxtaposed the fleshly and the transcendent, the dream-vision garden of Nowhere is continually contrasted with the familiar bricks and smoke of the nineteenth century. What was

a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens,
surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters
of the workshops ... is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing
is spoilt. (72)

The reference to waste and spoil underscores Morris's conviction that the natural world does not exist to be looked upon or exploited, but to be appreciated: maintained, cultivated, and carefully husbanded. A garden Nowhere may be, and a golden age (at least to some), but in Morris's ever-practical outlook that garden still requires tending. The acknowledgement of work is ever in the background of even his most Arcadian statements.

The earthly paradise of Nowhere is by no means perfect, and this pragmatism is part of the work's appeal. While it is true that it does not rain for the duration of Guest's sojourn in Nowhere, it would be wrong to imply that Morris has manipulated the weather to lend further appeal to his arcadia. At Kelmscott Manor, for example, the hot weather becomes "sultry and oppressive" (208), foreshadowing the vision's imminent end. Earlier, the grumbler points out that "when the waters are out and all Runnymede is flooded, it's none too pleasant." Of course, Dick immediately turns that complaint to

approbation – “What a jolly sail one would get about here on the floods on a bright frosty January morning” (148) – but the point has been made that Nowhere does not altogether lack for inclement weather. Carole Silver’s statement that “The earth itself has been improved as man has been perfected” (*Romance* 148) is true on what we would today call the “ecological” level (there are salmon in the Thames and no smoke rises from the factories), but its truth lies in humanity’s changed attitude toward nature, typified more by Dick’s exultant reaction to the idea of high water than by any real or perceived improvement in the weather itself. That attitude is also indicative of Morris’s practicality. As Paul Meier puts it, “The glorious June weather of *News From Nowhere* by no means excludes the frosts of winter, nor is it the climate of a humanity wallowing in indolence: it is a month for haymakers and builders” (2: 567).

Although in many ways ideal, the society of Nowhere is no more Edenic than its weather is; as May Morris avers, *News From Nowhere* shows real life as well as happy life. It is, once again, the fusion of the real and the ideal embodied in the notion of the “earthly paradise,” which in turn is mirrored in the dream-vision’s admixture of the fleshly and the transcendent. Morris imagines a dynamic future society in which history has not ended, in which there are still disagreements and dissent, and, although property no longer causes contention among people, the “passions” still exist and cost lives. The existence even of ill-health in Nowhere (174) also attests to Morris’s desire to make his future society as real-seeming as possible. The ideal happiness of the citizens of Nowhere consists in their love of creative work and their consequent creation of a

popular art in its truest sense, in the extinction of want, and above all in their freedom to act as they choose.

It is hard to imagine the society of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* allowing such grumblers as Ellen's grandfather, or tolerating such writers of "reactionary novels" as Boffin. About Bellamy's utopia there hovers a determined air of denial that anyone could possibly find anything wrong with the society described therein; as Berneri puts it, "the Utopian State is essentially static and does not allow its citizens to fight *or even to dream of a better utopia*" (7, my emphasis). For Morris, however, the idea of dissent is essential, both for purposes of freedom and for purposes of happiness. If Boffin were to be barred from writing – by the unanimous censure of the mote, for example, or by the simple matter of peer pressure (the serpent of public opinion) – then he would be not only unfree, but unhappy. Moreover, if the society is truly unhealthy in some way, criticism of it is bound to lead to its betterment; if the society is healthy, criticism of it cannot harm as long as the society is confident, as Ellen's hopes and fears for the future indicate.⁹ Nowhere appears to be a particularly healthy society, and therefore has no need for censorship.

In a world where property no longer exists, Morris claims, "crime" as we know it in a capitalist society has also ceased to exist. Hammond devotes some time to explaining the manner in which violence and crimes of passion are dealt with in Nowhere: "in a society where there is no punishment to evade, no law to triumph over, remorse will certainly follow transgression" (83). Morris's inclusion of an object lesson on this score – Walter's story of the accidental slaying of the jealous rival (166) – has

been the subject of much comment. Certainly this particular transgression is not likely to raise knotty questions of culpability: as Dick says, “it was the right man that was killed and not the wrong” (166), and the slayer shows great remorse. But the mere fact that Morris included murder as well as dissent and illness in his ideal society shows, as May Morris points out, his desire to portray real life in his utopian work.

Walter’s story is, in fact, not the only crime of passion in *News From Nowhere*, for Dick briefly alludes to another such “mishap” early on in the story, commenting that “love is not a very reasonable thing, and perversity and self-will are commoner than some of our moralists think” (35), a statement that in turn underlines the multiplicity of opinions on every topic which seem to proliferate in *Nowhere*. It is true that, as Silver comments, “the people of *Nowhere* cannot always deal with eros” (151); it is also true, however, that they acknowledge the existence of the irrational and even of unreasonableness in a much fuller and healthier manner than do Morris’s Victorians or even Bellamy’s state-subsumed Americans of the year 2000.

The “variety of life” under communism which Morris called for in his review of *Looking Backward* is present in *News From Nowhere*. Although, as Holzman remarks, “there are moments when it appears that in this story there are only projections of William Morris to serve as characters” (“Anarchism and Utopia” 593), it is only natural that, as in *A Dream of John Ball*, the author share some traits of personality and temperament with his authoritative figures. Like the elder Hammond, he is versed in history; like Ellen, he has no illusions about the past. Morris shares with Ellen a joy in nature that is both Romantic and practical, and with Hammond a love of learning and of

books. Old Hammond even shares more than a few physical characteristics with Morris ("his face ... seemed strangely familiar to me; as if I had seen it before – in a looking-glass it might be," 53). Not the least of these characteristics is a quick temper, which precipitates an outburst for which Hammond apologizes with the words "I always fancy myself as living in any period of which we may be speaking" (63), that trait which Bennett recognized in Morris. The rapport, even intimacy, which is so quickly established between Guest and Ellen, however, seems to hint that it is Ellen who most completely embodies Morris's hopes for the future – for the change beyond the change and the changes beyond that. Several times Ellen speaks the narrator's mind before he has completely framed his thought, "as if she read me through and through" (203). May Morris points out that in the last pages of *News From Nowhere* "The interest centres round Ellen in whom you have felt from her first appearance that the traveller from the old unrestful land has met his Soul transfigured in this vision of a fulfilled and happy life" (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 1: 505). Ellen represents the introspection and the concern for posterity that the two Hammonds (especially the younger) lack, as well as the instinctive love of nature and beauty ("The earth and the growth of it and the life of it," 202) that is tied to Morris's conception of a healthy society and an organic art of the people.

Ellen is certainly the central figure in the latter part of *News From Nowhere*, but each of the other characters also embodies in some degree the happiness Morris himself would find in the communist society he describes, were he born to it. If Ellen represents Morris's belief in change and his pure enthusiasm for nature and beauty and Hammond

represents Morris's social theories and love of learning, Dick represents no less Morris's desire to have plenty to do. Carefree and busy, Dick stands for Morris as he imagined himself freed from the anxieties of business and the infighting of the socialist movement in the 1880s. Even Boffin may represent an aspect of Morris, for in his writing of "reactionary novels" in which he is "very proud of getting the local colour right" (22) there is a parallel to Morris's own frequent use of classical and medieval settings and sources for his poetic works.

The narrator William Guest plays an integral role in the allegorical schema of *News From Nowhere* without precedent in medieval dream-poetry, for he represents above all the sheer isolation of the nineteenth-century Morris from the happy and creative world he envisions – an isolation which Hammond guesses at, but only Ellen truly recognizes. By way of contrast, dreamers in the tradition of the fourteenth-century dream-vision do not usually figure as allegorical figures themselves (other than as a type of "Everyman"), but are mere foils for the greater truth at which the vision's allegory aims. In his discussion of *The Legend of Good Women* Spearing characterizes the narrator of the fourteenth-century dream-vision as "a person of no importance in his own dream, fiercely rebuked by the authoritative person who confronts him" (106). The medieval dreamer tends to act the part of an interviewer "playing dumb" to draw out the true thoughts of an interviewee (the authoritative figure). This is especially true of the dialogues in *Book of the Duchess*, in which the dreamer fails to understand the nature of the black knight's loss until that dream has nearly ended. In *Pearl*, too, the narrator's

“unavysed” (line 292) statements give the pearl-maiden her cue to expound upon points of religious doctrine and upon the nature of the divide between life and death.

Pearl is the medieval dream-vision the most similar in tone to *News From Nowhere*. The narrator’s isolation from the events of his dream, always notable in Chaucer’s dream visions and in *A Dream of John Ball*, is still more pronounced in *Pearl* and *News From Nowhere*. In *Pearl*, this isolation is so literal that the jeweler is separated from the pearl-maiden and the promised land beyond her by an uncrossable stream:

Byȝonde þe broke, by slente oper slade,

I hope þat mote merked wore,

Bot þe water watȝ depe; I dorst not wade,

And euer me longed a more and more.

(“Beyond the brook, by slope or vale, I saw the suggestion of a city; but the water was deep, and I durst not wade, and ever I longed more and more.”) (lines 141-4)

The city hinted at here is shown more fully to the dreamer in stanza 82; it is the New Jerusalem of St. John, part and parcel of the “chiliastic dream-visions of early Christianity” that Engels characterized as a starting point for the levelling sentiment of the peasants’ revolts. The pearl-maiden calls the city the object of souls’ striving, “þe borȝ þat we to pres / Fro þat oure flesch be layd to rote” (“the city toward which we press, from the moment our flesh is laid to rot,” lines 957-8).

Pearl is the vision of a life after death and of the pearl-maiden's having attained happiness there, through which the narrator is meant to come to terms with the death of his loved one. In the end the jeweler does understand the Christian comfort he is meant to receive from that knowledge. En route to his enlightenment, however, he tends to act the part of the naïve narrator so familiar to us from the dream-vision convention, to the point that the exasperated pearl asks, "why borde 3e men? So madde 3e be!" ("why do you men jest so? You are mad!", line 290) The jeweler ignores her caveat "to passe þys water fire – / þat may no joyfol jueler" (line 300), and his plunge into the stream precipitates the end of the vision.

The narrator's desire to take part in the harvest feast at the end of *News From Nowhere* may be read as similar presumption. Guest cannot take part in this ultimate celebration of fellowship among the inhabitants of Nowhere for the simple reason that he is not one of them. He is not ostracized by the others, for such an ostracism would be entirely out of character for a society in which "if [Dick] were not 'kind,' as you call it, to a perfect stranger he would be thought a strange person" (55). Rather, this dream-vision narrator recognizes his own isolation, and has recognized it from the outset, although that knowledge makes it no less distressing. His exclusion from the company is accompanied by a "pang ... as of some disaster long expected and realized" (209), and the reason for his exclusion is part of the didactic intention of the work. There is no question of the author's allowing the dreamer to take part in the feast before he is returned to everyday life. As Barbara Bono puts it,

the conclusion of the work shows the dreamer being gently excluded from this complex unity as his dream dissolves into the harsh reality of modern London. It explains in a more affecting manner than any of Morris's formal discursive statements the organic nature of life and art as he envisioned them, and the alienation from this ideal which he, as well as every other modern man, suffered. (58)

News From Nowhere, then, shares with *Pearl* the vision of an ideal, followed by the dreamer's abrupt severance from the dream when seemingly on the brink of attaining unity with that ideal. In accordance with what Kruger calls the "middle vision," Morris's dream-vision explores the relation of the present capitalist "real" to the future communist "ideal" by means of the dreamer's isolation from his dream. Just as *Pearl* takes place in a world between the everyday and the transcendent (symbolized by the last stanza's reference to the sacrament), *News From Nowhere* juxtaposes the real and the socialist ideal. When Ellen, for example, comments on Guest's "never-ending contrast between the past and this present" (203), she means by "the past" Morris's unhappy Victorian era. The dreamer, however, already subconsciously feeling the pull back to the "real" nineteenth century, agonizes that "I was saying to myself, the past, the present? Should she not have said the contrast of the present with the future: of blind despair with hope?" (204).

Where *Pearl* offers the dreamer comfort in the Christian certainty of an existence after death and in the patient acknowledgement of one's own fate, at first there seems to be no such reassurance for the narrator of *News From Nowhere*. The communist society

of which he has dreamt may be attained to, but not in his lifetime, and for the socialist who has denied the possibility of an afterlife, such news is cold comfort indeed. In spite of the dreamer's bleak tone, however, *News From Nowhere* and *Pearl* share a sense of optimism at their conclusions. True comfort comes in Morris's work in the form of the narrator's thoughts upon waking, as is conventional in the medieval dream-vision, and here the narrator imagines Ellen's look signifying to him "Go back, and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle" (211). Because Ellen represents here Morris's hope for a communist society in the future and has previously represented the future of *that* society, her words are doubly poignant for the narrator.

True to the dream-vision convention, the final passage of *News From Nowhere* offers the reader some clues to the day-to-day significance of the vision itself. First and foremost, of course, is the notion that this *somnium* both offers hope and represents a state of affairs to be hoped and striven *for*, that taken as a whole it is an exhortation to "Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness" (211) described in the vision itself. Secondly, the epilogue reinforces the fact that the epoch of rest has not yet arrived; simple as this may seem, it is the underlying significance of the dreamer's isolation from his vision, for it implies active struggle toward change. The narrator imagines Ellen saying "you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you" (210). This isolation of the nineteenth-century present from the hoped-for future in turn emphasizes the necessity of real exertion to bring the future society about, "with whatsoever pain and labour needs

must be.” It is a mistake to consider William Morris an escapist “dreamer of dreams,” for he never claimed that change would come about easily, and toiled as hard as any of his socialist comrades in that cause.

¹ Since the landmark attempts by E. P. Thompson and Paul Meier to deny the imputation of anarchist tendencies to Morris and to reclaim him for Marxism, scholars of Morris's work have tended to seek equilibrium between the interpretation of Morris as a communist-anarchist and of Morris as a Marxist, although works such as Lyman Tower Sargent's "William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition" (1990) still crop up occasionally. Several recent articles also continue the enterprise (begun by James Hulse in *Revolutionists in London*) of the comparison and contrast of Morris's social theories with those of Peter Kropotkin: see especially Florence Boos, "News From Nowhere and Garden Cities," and Ruth Kinna, "Morris, Anti-Statism, and Anarchy."

² Few readers have remarked on the presence of dissent in *Nowhere*; Alexander MacDonald is one exception. He writes that

News From Nowhere is so pleasantly arcadian that some have described it as bland or even boring. It isn't. Although on the surface we find order and rationality, beneath the surface are darker, irrational, and potentially destructive forces. These darker elements are suggested by the animated disagreements which turn to grumbling, by obstinate refusals to join the common work program, and by report of a violent murder. (22)

³ "Civilisation" is here taken in its original sense of "the city" as well as in its evocation of the sordidity of capitalism. *News From Nowhere* returns again and again to this anti-urban theme: "What!" asks Hammond on page 62, "Are we still civilised?"

⁴ So easy is it to conflate Chaucer's dreamers that Stephen J. Russell at one point even refers to the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* as "Geffrey" (127), although this is the name of the narrator of *The House of Fame*.

⁵ It is unfortunate that Morris does not include a practical illustration of the decision-making process – the mediievally-named "mote" – in his utopia.

⁶ Woodcock puts it more succinctly: "Utopia is conceived as a perfect society, and anything perfect has automatically ceased growing" (24).

⁷ Grennan traces Morris's attitude toward cyclical history, concluding that he came ultimately to a cyclical view of progress in which "the seeds of death [are] present at the height of any civilization" although they "yet carry with them the possibilities of new life in a new order" (53). This is exemplified in Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic:"

Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent. The foxglove blossom—a third part bud, a third part past, a third part in full bloom—is a type of the life of this world.

(*Stones* 2: 188).

Morris's acceptance of the existence of imperfection in a popular art is also presaged in Ruskin's words.

⁸ Chandler claims that "in many of [Morris's] stories, the founding or reinstitution of a parliament, or 'mote-stead,' by freemen is the climax of the story" (229); but Morris the socialist was notorious for his opposition to parliamentary means of achieving the new society, viewing it as mere "palliation" (e.g. "Where Are We Now?" *Artist, Writer, Socialist* 516). Moreover, a "mote" is not the same thing as a "parliament," involving as

it does direct participation by all. The Magna Carta, surely foremost among the medieval symbols of the parliamentary strain of English medievalism – Chandler’s “Whiggish celebration of the antiquity of British freedom” (2) – goes entirely unmentioned in Morris’s description of the travelers’ stay at Runnymede (*News* 147-159).

⁹ In “The Society of the Future,” Morris writes:

But perhaps you may think that Society being thus happy and at peace, its very success would lead it to corruption once more? Yes, that might be if men were not watchful and valiant; but we have begun by saying that they would be free, and free men are bound to be watchful and valiant. The world will be the world still, I do not deny it; but such men as I have been thinking of will surely be fitter to meet its troubles than the dwellers in our present muddle of authority and unconscious revolt. (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 467)

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